

SONG OF SONGS

Approximate date: 900s B.C.E. (Right, some conservative-moderate); 700s-600s B.C.E. (some conservative-moderate); 500s-300s B.C.E. (Left)

Purpose: to speak of the love of a bridegroom and bride

Author: Solomon or a patron directed by him (Right, some conservative-moderate); anonymous (some conservative-moderate, Left)

Location of author: Land of Israel or Jerusalem (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel, Jerusalem, and/or Babylon or Persia (Left)

Target audience and their location: people of Israel, later people of Judah (Right, conservative-moderate); Southern Kingdom returning or returned from Babylon (Left)

People:

“beloved” (or Shulammitte), “lover,” friends

People mentioned:

Solomon, David

Places mentioned:

Jerusalem, Kedar, En Gedi, Sharon, Lebanon, Zion, Mount Gilead, Amana, Seir, Hermon, Tirzah, Mahanaim, Heshbon, Bath Rabbim, Damascus, Mount Carmel, Baal Hermon

Key Themes:

a series of “exchanges” between the Shulammitte woman and her lover / a summary on the power of love between a man and woman

Key Scriptures: Song of Songs 2:7; 3:1; 6:3; 7:1-9 / **The wedding day** (1:1-2:7);

Memories of courtship (2:8-3:5); **Memories of engagement** (3:6-5:1); **A troubling dream** (5:2-6:3); **Praising the bride’s beauty** (6:4-7:9); **The bride’s tender approval** (7:10-8:4); **The power of love** (8:5-14)

Theological Summary: The correct Hebrew title of this book of the Tanach is *Shir HaShirim* (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים) or Song of Songs. While many are agreed that Solomon is somehow related to this “song,” Song of Songs is the more correct title. Songs of Songs is placed among the *Megillot* in Jewish tradition, commonly being read during seasons such as Passover or *Sukkot*. In Roman Catholic tradition, this book is commonly referred to as Canticles, derived from the Latin Vulgate’s rendering of *Shir HaShirim* as *Canticum Canticorum*.

Song of Songs 1:1 ascribes authorship to Solomon by name, and he is referred to frequently throughout the text (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12), with other verses making reference to “the king” (1:4, 12; 7:5). Whether Solomon was the actual author or composer of Song of Songs has been debated, as some Jewish tradition ascribes authorship to the men of Hezekiah (b.*Bava Batra* 15a).¹

In favor of Solomonic involvement are references to places throughout the text that were a part of Solomon’s kingdom.² Conservatives generally accept Solomonic authorship or some kind of Solomonic involvement, as Solomon is attested as having been responsible for 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32).

Liberals tend to date Song of Songs to the Persian period, and widely consider it to be a post-exilic work, possibly composed as late as 250 B.C.E. They often assert that Song of Songs is a selection of poems joined together,³ and any kind of perceived unity in the text is likely the result of considerable redaction. This is often done so because of the usage of Persian words in Song of Songs, as well as a single Greek term⁴ in its Hebrew text, causing liberals to conclude that the book must be from a later period. Conservatives usually respond to this by saying that Solomon had interactions with other cultures (1:9; cf. 1 Kings 4:31, 33), with a few suggesting that the foreign loan words are from much earlier and are actually Sanskrit.⁵

Dating Song of Songs to the Tenth Century contemporary to the reign of Solomon is not impossible. The distinct references to Tirzah and Jerusalem places the text, or at least a proto-text, some time before King Omri (1 Kings 16:23-24). It is notable that not all conservatives are convinced of a Tenth Century B.C.E. composition for Song of Songs because of the amount of loan words used in the book. Some conservatives advocate that the text reached its final form during the Hellenistic era.⁶ Ultimately, however, no one can know with certainty the date for Song of Songs, similar to how no one can know the exact date for all of the Psalms.⁷

No significant controversy has ever surrounded Song of Songs’ canonical status,⁸ as it has been widely valued in Jewish tradition (m.*Yadayaim* 3:5).⁹ In fact, fragments of Song of Songs were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls,¹⁰ indicating that the Qumran community had some kind of regard for it.

Interpreting Song of Songs properly has been an interesting phenomenon in theology over the centuries. Today, scholars expel a great deal of time comparing Song of Songs to

¹ “Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Qohelet” (b.*Bava Batra* 15a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

² Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1049.

³ Roland E. Murphy, “The Song of Solomon,” in *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 943.

⁴ N.K. Gottwald, “Song of Songs,” in *IDB*, 4:421; F.B. Knutson, “Canticles,” in *ISBE*, 1:608; Carl E. DeVries, “Song of Songs, Song of Solomon,” in *NIDB*, 956; Dennis F. Kinlaw, “Song of Songs,” in *EXP*, 5:1209.

⁵ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1050; Knutson, “Canticles,” in *ISBE*, 1:608.

⁶ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1052; Knutson, “Canticles,” in *ISBE*, 1:608.

⁷ Roland E. Murphy, “Song of Songs, Book of,” in *ABD*, 6:150.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “All sacred scriptures impart uncleanness to hands. The Song of Songs and Qohelet impart uncleanness to hands...” (m.*Yadayaim* 3:5; Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 1127).

¹⁰ Frances Landy, “Song of Solomon,” in *EDB*, 1243.

other forms of Biblical composition, notably the Wisdom books and apocryphal genres. Likewise, Proverbs is frequently examined to gain insight for Song of Songs' more difficult sayings. Other literature that is often consulted includes Egyptian and Babylonian love songs.¹¹ The contemporary debate surrounding Song of Songs primarily concerns its original literary type and function.

Historically, both the Jewish and Christian traditions have allegorized the Song of Songs.¹² "There is extraordinary agreement between both Jewish and Christian tradition on this point" (*ABD*).¹³ Some have suggested that this tendency came as the direct result of Hellenistic influence on both the Synagogue and the Church, with views of the body being sinful.¹⁴ Any reference to lovers cannot be the original intent of Song of Songs, so instead the Synagogue widely considered it to be a love story between God and Israel. The Targum on Song of Songs follows suit, interpreting the text allegorically, with it generally being followed as such in various celebratory fashions. Song of Songs was used by the Zionist movement, for example, to consider the Paradise of Zion.¹⁵ Christian tradition has followed suit and has widely interpreted Song of Songs as representing a love story between Christ and the Church.¹⁶

It is speculated that this view of Song of Songs was introduced *after* the book was accepted in the Biblical canon. More likely Song of Songs played a more prominent role in Ancient Israel's culture¹⁷ and had less spiritual ideas in mind than were attributed later.

More modern interpretations of Song of Songs lean toward the book being some kind of love story involving Solomon and one of his wives, or more literally the maiden for her shepherd lover resisting the appeal of Solomon.¹⁸ Some are undecided as to what the involvement of Solomon or the woman actually is, believing that we should not force some kind of "story" onto the text and simply view it as love poetry.¹⁹

Theologically speaking, Song of Songs hardly affects any major Biblical doctrines—but it does profoundly affect how one looks at human sexuality. A great deal of teachers today, both Jewish and Christian, wishing to rejuvenate a healthy view of sex from the Bible, give significant attention to Song of Songs. A consensus of interpreters agree "that the Song of Songs has to do with human love in the literal historical sense" (*IDBSup*).²⁰ They point out that the Ancient Hebrews demonstrated a high degree of sexual morality compared to their neighbors.²¹ God certainly wants to restore a healthy and meaningful sex life to all His people,

¹¹ Roland E. Murphy, "Song of Songs," in *IDBSup*, 837; Murphy, "Song of Songs, Book of," in *ABD*, 6:151; Murphy, in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 943.

¹² Gottwald, "Song of Songs," in *IDB*, 4:422-423; Knutson, "Canticles," in *ISBE*, 1:606; DeVries, "Song of Songs, Song of Solomon," in *NIDB*, 956; Kinlaw, in *EXP*, 5:1202-1203.

¹³ Murphy, "Song of Songs, Book of," in *ABD*, 6:154.

¹⁴ Dillard and Longman, 261.

¹⁵ Elsie Stern, "The Song of Songs," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1566.

¹⁶ J.A. Balchin, "The Song of Solomon," in *NBCR*, 579; Knutson, "Canticles," in *ISBE*, 1:606.

¹⁷ Stern, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1565.

¹⁸ Balchin, in *NBCR*, 579.

¹⁹ Gottwald, "Song of Songs," in *IDB*, 4:420; Stern, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1564.

²⁰ Murphy, "Song of Songs," in *IDBSup*, 837.

²¹ Gottwald, "Song of Songs," in *IDB*, 4:425.

where one can explore the joys that He intends a heterosexual couple to have.²² The text of Song of Songs is somewhat provocative from this vantage point, as it is erotic with its references to various anatomical parts (4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:4-10; 7:1-9). Song of Songs asks couples today many questions that those of previous eras—particularly the Victorian Era—did not want to answer. Young people preparing to marry are now often encouraged to closely consider Song of Songs.

Your average Messianic teacher often does not examine Song of Songs. Those who have taken the time to do so will often avoid the references to sexuality and focus on more traditional allegorical interpretations. It is difficult for many in our ranks to break out of the Nineteenth Century Victorianism,²³ often because issues like sexuality are not able to be easily discussed. Song of Songs should certainly be a text examined in more detail for Messianic Believers who want a sound handle on sexuality, and what is acceptable for married persons having intercourse. But even if read figuratively, Song of Songs should cause us to have more intimacy with God.

Bibliography

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON SONG OF SONGS:

1. How easy, or how difficult, is it to read and interpret the Song of Songs?

2. What do you believe the intention of the Song of Songs is? To demonstrate the love a man and woman are to have for each other? Or, the love God has for His people?

²² Kinlaw, in *EXP*, 5:1207-1208.

²³ John W. Rogerson, "Song of Songs," in *ECB*, 474.

3. What important lessons might today's Messianic community learn by listening to the message of Song of Songs?

REFLECTION ON SONG OF SONGS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Song of Songs: