Song of Songs: Responses to Questions

*What part did Song of Songs take in the life of the Israelites? Was this associated with any certain time of the year or used in certain celebrations?*

It is read each year at Passover, on the basis of reading it as an allegorical account of God’s loving relationship with Israel over the centuries. But a rabbinic comment says, “He who trills his voice in the chanting of the *Song of Songs* in the banquet-halls and makes it a secular song has no share in the world to come”(Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:10; the Tosefta is a supplement to the Mishnah, from maybe the 200s AD). Presumably this indicates that the Song was used in this way.

*How did the Song get into the canon? It is surprising that something so plainly erotic could survive through many centuries of Christians who found sexual things to be vile and wrong.*

\*\*We don’t know anything about how books got into the Old Testament. It’s often said that the Song got in through being interpreted allegorically, but there’s no evidence for that idea. As with other books, it seems to me more likely that it grabbed people for its insight and truth about its actual subject. Maybe adding Solomon’s name then followed, and that pushed things in the same direction. People who were embarrassed by it could then interpret it allegorically, though not all allegorists took it that way for that reason—it was more that they wanted to discover things about their relationship with God.

*\*\*If this book was not actually written about our relationship with God, where else in Scripture is God portrayed as strongly as the role of lover? Is that an accurate portrayal of God?*

No, I don’t think there is. The poems are about an egalitarian relationship; God’s husbandly relationship with us is hierarchical. The underlying point here is that there is nothing wrong with allegorical interpretation if you like it (I don’t!) with two qualifications. One is the classic point that you must use allegorical interpretation to teach something that scripture does not teach literally somewhere. That’s the difficulty with the Song: scripture doesn’t indicate we have this kind of relationship with God. The other qualification is that it is dangerous to miss out on the literal meaning of a text.

*How is the Song related to Solomon?*

\*\*It’s an expression of Solomonic wisdom—that is, of the wisdom of which Solomon is the patron saint. It would have been good if Solomon had read it, because his story shows he was as clueless about love and sex as his dad.

*There are lots of theories about the book’s structure and divisions: is there any consensus about the structure is and how it fits together—which it doesn’t always seem to?*

\*\*You’re right about it being hard to see it fitting together, and therefore the safest things to do is see it as a collection of poems. You don’t then have to try to make them the picture of one couple’s relationship or make a story out of it.

*Why is this book in the Bible? What do we make of the fact that marriage and children are not mentioned in the Song? In light of high divorce rate, how could this book be utilized to strengthen relationships of those within the church?*

\*\*What is does is express an enthusiastic but realistic angle on romantic love, which thus complements the other angles on sex and marriage in the Bible, such as the link with marriage and children. So that’s presumably why it’s there. It thus counters the idea that romantic love is nothing to do with faith or that marriage has nothing to do with love and it encourages people to develop their love and sexual relationship, but also discourages the idea that love can take you back into the Garden of Eden. See further w.

*Is there any indication that the relationship in the Song of Songs was monogamous and in the context of marriage. Except for few uses of the word “bride,” I could not detect that this was true.*

\*\*There’s no indication that they are married—indeed the fact that they are apparently not living together suggests they are not. They look to me more like a couple on the way to marriage (note the use of the word “bride”), looking forward to its sexual consummation (in Israel sex outside marriage was banned). I find it hard to imagine the kind of enthusiasm expressed here as implying anything other than a monogamous relationship and a relationship that is going to be *the* one for life.

*It seems this type of text was pretty common in those days. It reminds me a lot of our study of proverbs, and the similar texts that were found in other cultures. How widespread and common were there? Was there a lot of cultural exchange between these various nations? Did one nation start this and inspire the others or did it slowly grow out of the various societies of those days?*

\*\*Yes, texts such as these were widespread, but so they are in many cultures; love and sex are pretty cross-cultural. So there would be no particular reason to see a direct between the Song of Songs and other poems within this tradition.

*How does Israel's covenant with Yahweh uniquely inform their ideas about love? How does this, in turn, inform Song of Songs regardless of whether or not it is an allegorical poem?*

\*\*I don’t see it affected them at all. What they do is sent romantic love in the context of a relationship with God.

*The imagery used to describe the physical features of the lovers seems a bit odd. Goats, ewes, nose like a tower? Not things one would associate with beauty.*

\*\*I guess imagery is culture relative. There is a Scottish poem beginning “My love is like a red, red rose.” What, is she red-faced? Does she fade quickly? Does she have thorns around her?

*Is it possible exegetically without crossing the proper lines of exegesis to use Song of Songs as an answer or source in debating against the homosexuality?*

\*\*I guess you could do so, but you might find it backfiring—a gay couple might say that it describes their relationship very well.

*I am struck by the emphasis on physical beauty throughout the Song. Are we to understand the physical attraction as an outgrowth of love for the beloved’s internal, characterological beauty? How might readers take these passages and apply them within a culture that overemphasizes physical beauty and attraction at the expense of respect, etc.?*

\*\*I don’t see any reason to think that appreciation for the person came before appreciation for the beauty. In our culture people sometimes fancy someone physically then move to appreciating the person, and sometimes it is the other way around. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was also so in Israel. I think the Song has both, so maybe it could help people in our culture not to get stuck at the physical.

*Do you think that women should take the woman’s role/actions in Song of Songs as an example or model to follow in relationships?  I have often heard the story of Ruth used as a model for girls to follow, but generally youth group leaders stay away from Song of Songs (understandably)…when is a story in the Bible to be taken as an example and when is it for another purpose?*

\*\*I’d rather say “can” than “should.” I don’t see the poems as designed to say what people should do, only to show what some people have (properly) done. It’s thus an encouragement to an egalitarian relationship, but not one to make old-fashioned people feel guilty. I don’t see much indication that Ruth is an example (a pretty tricky one in chapter 3!). Centrally, the Bible isn’t a book of examples. It’s a book about God’s involvement in our lives. So neither the Song nor Ruth are about ethics, but they are about life lived before God and in God’s world.

*I:5—Was the girl “black but beautiful” or “black and beautiful” or what?*

\*\*There has been ethnic bias in the translation of this verse. The word for “beautiful” has often been translated “fair” (e. g., 1:8), and “fair” implies that light skin color is the ideal. The phrase in 1:5 has been translated “black but beautiful,” but the conjunction *w* usually means “and,” so why not “black *and* beautiful”? And/or “black” may be understood to mean sunburned - making sure of no positive reference to being black, which might be designed to exclude the idea that you could be black and beautiful (my student Asha Ragin pointed out to me).

*1:5—What is the significance of the young women of Jerusalem?*

The woman is the dominant speaker in the poems, and they are her girl friends.

*2:7; 3:5; 8:4—Two questions on the exhortation not to awaken love.*

1. *Why is it mentioned twice? It would seem that desire awakens love involuntarily. So what sense does this make?*
2. *I feel that I would not understand to be careful and learn the importance of waiting till the right time for eros love to be displayed unless I had read Song of Songs so why do people question the need for this book? It has taught me to be patient and to not make these decisions just because I need to abide by rules, but because it is wisdom to wait, because in the waiting agape, self-sacrificial love and brotherly, friendship love is able to grow. What do you think?*

\*\*I know someone who wouldn’t date all the time she was at seminary because she wanted to focus on her program and the ministry she was preparing for. Then soon afterwards she did date, fall in love with, and marry a fellow-student. Admittedly there’s a paradox here. Yes, it’s hard to hold back feelings. But it may be important to do so. In the Song, if the couple are like people dating who will eventually marry (though marriage isn’t mentioned), it’s important to try not to let things race ahead—if you can….

*3:1-5—How do these verses relate to the rest of the poems?*

\*\*I take v. 1 to indicate that this poem recounts a kind of nightmare which brings out the fears and tensions in a developing relationship.

*3:7; 8:11—What does the mention of Solomon mean?*

I assume that this poem takes up the idea that lovers are a prince and princess to each other, that your wedding is when you asre king and queen for a day. And/or the poem is a more positive dream than the preceding one.

*4:9—What is the significance of the sister language?*

\*\*I guess it’s like modern lovers addressing each other as “baby”!

*5:2-8—What is going on here? How do these verses relate to the rest of the poem?*

\*\*As in 3:1-5, the opening suggests this is another nightmare. This time the watchmen are more hostile to a woman who (they think) has not business to be wandering the streets at night. Maybe they think she is a prostitute, though there are other indications of hostility from people in the poems, and it may just be an indication that sometimes people don’t approve of other people’s relationships for one reason or another.