

Song of Solomon - Introduction & Background

Title

The Hebrew title of the book is derived from the work's opening verse (1:1). This title is *Shir Hashirim*, which means "Song of Songs. The noun followed by its genitive plural is a Hebrew superlative. Similar constructions include the "Lord of Lords," the "King of Kings," and the "Holy of Holies." The use of this construction indicates that the book represents the greatest of Solomon's 1005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). The LXX entitled the book *Asma Amaton* and *Canticum Canticorum* is the Latin Vulgate's title. The English title *Canticles* (songs) is derived from the Latin title. Many English versions have also adopted the title Song of Solomon (NASB, ASV, RSV, NKJV) in order to acknowledge Solomon as the book's author (1:1).

Author

Critics argue that because the book was written in the post-exilic era, Solomon could not have written it. Thus, they interpret 1:1 as referring to a later collection of writings concerning Solomon rather than communicating Solomonic authorship. However, this interpretation may not be correct since the same construction is used in the ascription "Psalm of David." Most understand these Psalms as personal compositions of David.⁶ Moreover, arguments for a post-exilic date based upon Akkadian, Aramaic, and Greek terms found in the book are to no avail since such vocabulary was also fashionable during Solomon's time.

On the other hand, both the external and internal evidence points to Solomon as the book's writer. First, Solomon is mentioned within the book seven times (1:1,5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11-12). He is identified as both the king (1:4,12; 3:9,11; 7:5) and the groom (3:6-11). Second, Solomonic authorship was the traditional view until recently. Third, the book's internal description of its central character is reminiscent of what is known of Solomon elsewhere. Examples include the book's depiction of royal luxury (1:12,13; 3:6-11), imported goods, an expensive carriage (3:7-10), royal chariots (6:12), and 60 queens and 80 concubines (6:8; 1 Kings 11:3).

Fourth, Solomon is a likely candidate for authorship of the song since other Scripture indicates that he authored 1005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). Fifth, Solomon's knowledge of botany and zoology (1 Kings 4:33) is evident in the book's references to 21 species of plants and 15 species of animals. Sixth, the book could not have been written after Solomon's time since it fails to refer to the divided kingdom. It also refers to Tirzah and

Jerusalem (6:4) as the northern and southern kingdom when Samaria became the capital of the north after Solomon's era.

Date

If Solomon is accepted as the book's author then the book had to have been written during the Solomonic era (971–931 BC). The book could not have been written after 930 BC since that is the date of Solomon's death. Furthermore, the kingdom was divided in 931 BC and, as previously explained, the book gives no evidence of a divided kingdom. The book was likely written early on. Solomon seems to have composed his songs during the initial part of his reign (1 Kings 4:32). Also, given Solomon's monogamous commitment to his Shulammitic wife as portrayed in the book, it must have been written before his many wives turned his heart away from God. Scripture indicates that such apostasy happened when Solomon was old (1 Kings 11:4). All things considered, a date of 965 BC for the composition of the book would not be far from wrong. Thus, while Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon during his young marital years and the Book of Ecclesiastes toward the end of his life, he probably wrote the Book of Proverbs toward the middle of his life.

Recipients and Place of Writing

The specific addresses of the letter seem to have been the daughters of Jerusalem who are continuously referred to throughout the letter (1:5). More generally, "No addressees appear in the text, but in line with the wisdom literature in general it is safe to assume that all Israel (and later, the church) is the intended beneficiary." Because of Solomonic authorship, Jerusalem as the locale of the capital of Solomon's kingdom, and the book's continual references to the daughters of Jerusalem, the city of Jerusalem is the likely place of the book's composition.

Setting

Solomon entrusted his vineyard in Lebanon (4:8; 8:11) to a mother of two sons (1:6) and two daughters. These daughters consisted of the Shulammitic (6:13) and her little sister (8:8). Because her brothers did not appreciate her and forced her to work long hours in the vineyard, the Shulammitic had little time to take care of her physical appearance (1:6). In fact, her skin had become darkened as she worked under the sun (1:5) and tended the flocks (1:8). She became embarrassed regarding her physical appearance when a stranger arrived and demonstrated a romantic interest in her (1:6).

Although this stranger was Solomon, the Shulammitic mistook him for a common shepherd. After asking him about his flocks (1:7), Solomon won her heart (2:16) by speaking loving words to her (1:8-10). Solomon finally took the Shulammitic to Jerusalem as his bride (3:6-7). After their marriage and the consummation of the marriage (4:16—5:1), marital problems became evident when the Shulammitic dreamt of being separated from her husband (3:1-2; 5:2-6; 6:1) and expressed a desire to spend additional time with him (7:11-12; 8:1-2). These problems resulted in the royal couple's journey to the country at the

Shulammitte's behest (8:5). There they spoke of their love (8:6-7) and recommitted themselves to one another (7:12; 8:12,14).

Structure

Several structural clues must be kept in mind in order to fully appreciate the message of the Song of Solomon. First, scholars have discerned multiple structures for the Song of Solomon. Examples include F. Delitzsch's six acts consisting of two scenes each (1:1-8 and 1:9-27; 2:8-17 and 3:1-5; 3:6-11 and 4:1-5:1; 5:2-6:3 and 6:4-9; 6:10-7:6 and 7:7-8:4; 8:5-7 and 8:8-14), the Scofield Bible's thirteen canticles or songs (1:2-6, 7-8, 9-17; 2:1-7, 8-17; 3:1-5, 6-11; 4:1-7, 4:8-5:1; 5:2-6:3; 6:4-7:10; 7:11-8:4; 8:5-14), J. Barton Payne's three acts with each consisting of a differing number of scenes (1:1-2:7 and 2:8-3:5; 3:6-5:1 and 5:2-6:3 and 6:4-8:4; 8:5-14), J. Sidlow Baxter's seven idylls (1:1-2:7; 2:8-3:5; 3:6-5:1; 5:2-6:3; 6:4-7:10; 7:11-8:4; 8:5-14) and G. Campbell Morgan's structure consisting of marriage (1:1-2:7), betrothal (2:8-7:9), and united life (7:10-8:14). However, the structure that will be followed in this argument is the fourfold structure of courtship (1:2-3:5), wedding and honeymoon (3:6-5:1), marriage (5:2-8:3), and reflection and conclusion concerning marital life (8:4-14).

The first two units could also be classified as premarital and conjugal love while the last two units could be classified as continuing love. These four units have also been called falling in love, united in love, struggling in love, and growing in love. They have also been designated as courtship, wedding, problem, and progress. They have also been enumerated as fostering love, fulfillment of love, frustration of love, and faithfulness of love.

Second, others have noticed a progression revealed in the book from the beginning of love (1:1-5:1) to the broadening of love (5:2-8:14). Third, there are three speakers in the book. The first speaker is the Shulammitte who addresses the king as "beloved." Her place of origin is mentioned only once (6:13). Apparently, she was from the town of Shunem, which is located in the tribal area of Issachar southwest of the Sea of Galilee. The second speaker is Solomon. He addresses his bride (wife) as "love." The third speaker or speakers (chorus) are the daughters of Jerusalem who are likely the attendants of the Shulammitte. "It is not always clear who is speaking, but this is the likely arrangement: The bride: 1:2-4, 5-7, 12-14, 16-17; 2:1, 3-6, 8-17; 3:1-4; 4:16; 5:2-8, 10-16; 6:2-3, 11-12; 7:9-13; 8:1-3, 6-7, 10-12, 14. The groom: 1:8-10, 15; 2:2, 7; 3:5; 4:1-15; 5:1; 6:4-10, 13; 7:1-9; 8:4-5, 13. The chorus: 1:4, 11; 3:6-11; 5:9; 6:1, 13; 8:5, 8-9."

Genre & Hermeneutics

The interpreter's method of deciphering the Song of Solomon is largely dependent upon his view concerning the form that the song takes. Several forms have been proposed. First, some hold that the story represents a fictional account. However, the book gives the impression that its events actually transpired.

Second, others understand the book as an allegory. This genre ignores the book's historical information and instead sees these details as the mechanism by which a higher spiritual lesson is communicated. Thus, marriage is used to depict God's love for Israel or the church, the Shulammitte's dark skin (1:5-6) represents the church's sin, the cooing doves (2:12) represent the preaching of the gospel, and the myrrh that lies between the woman's breasts (1:13) represents the tabernacle's Shekinah glory between the cherubim or the advent of Christ between the Old and New Testaments. However, the weaknesses associated with this interpretive approach are so manifold that most scholars have abandoned allegorizing altogether. Such problems include the allegorists obvious attempt to escape the book's erotic import, the inability to determine whose higher spiritual interpretation is the correct one, the fact that wisdom literature is not typically allegorical, the necessity of finding a spiritual counterpart for every textual detail, the absurdity of paralleling Solomon and his harem with Christ, the reality of obvious employment of symbolic language when the husband and wife relationship is used elsewhere to refer to God's relationship to His people (Ezek 16; 23; Hosea 1-3), the fact that the book nowhere indicates that it is meant to be understood allegorically (Gal 4:24-25), and deviation from the literal, grammatical, historical interpretive method through radical de-historicization of the text.

Third, others embrace a typological approach. While not de-historicizing the text in the same manner as the allegorical approach, it attaches greater weight to an analogous NT event than it does the book's historical content. Thus, this approach ends up assigning another meaning to what the book's events mean in their historical context. Furthermore, there are no NT clues that Solomon refers to Christ or that the Shulammitte refers to Christ. Fourth, some see the story as a drama acted out between Solomon and his bride. However, the weakness of this view is that the basic features typically associated with a drama are absent from the book. Such features include character and plot development, climax and resolution, and lengthy speeches. Furthermore, the book is not easily organized into scenes. Also, drama was unheard of among the Hebrews.

Fifth, some approach the book as an anthology. They view its content as one of disconnected love songs similar to the disconnected content of Proverbs and Psalms. However, the logical flow of courtship, wedding, and maturation in marriage is evident in the book. Sixth, still others interpret the book as a pagan fertility cult liturgy. However, it is unlikely that the book would have ever been canonized given the pornographic nature of such liturgies.

It seems best to take the book in its normal, literal sense. Dillow, Glickman, Zuck, and Deere are all proponents of this approach. This method does not see the need to allegorize the text in order to escape its erotic content. While the book can still have a spiritual

meaning or application to the reader, this applicability arises out of a normal interpretation rather than at the expense of it.

Message

In an environment of ancient Near Eastern sexual perversion where God's prophets continually preached against Jewish covenant sexual violations, Solomon poetically describes his love relationship with his Shulammitte bride in its courtship, marriage, and maturation phases in order to extol the beauty of the marital sexual relationship as it was divinely intended.

Purposes

Solomon had several purposes in mind when he composed his book. First, Solomon wrote in order to set forth the primacy of marital sexual relationship. The writer felt that this institution needed to be defended given its sanctity as a pre-Fall institution (Gen 1:26-27; 2:24), its purpose of bringing physical pleasure to both marital parties (Prov 5:15-19; 1 Cor 7:3), and its ability to counterbalance the extremist tendencies of both asceticism and lust. Second, the book was written to reveal by way of analogy God's love for both Israel and the church.

Third, the book was written to develop the romantic relationship between a man and a woman from beginning to end. Thus, information is provided regarding the couple's progress before, during, and after marriage. Fourth, the book was written in order to celebrate Solomon's romance, marriage, and mature relationship with his Shulammitte bride. Fifth, the book was written to exhort the young maidens of Jerusalem to abstain from pre marital sexual relations (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) thus preserving the sanctity of the marital sexual relationship.

Theological Themes

Numerous theological themes recur throughout the Song of Solomon. First, the book emphasizes the sanctity of the marital bed (Heb 13:4) as the proper place for sexual relations. Second, the book reiterates the importance of abstaining from pre-marital sex. Third, the book explains that effort, commitment, and flexibility are necessary in order to make a marriage work.

Unique Characteristics

The book boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book places more emphasis upon the marital sexual relationship than any other biblical book. Second, the book represents a genre known as lyric idyll. This genre is epitomized by a lack of chronology, flash-backs and flash-forwards, repeated suspension of the story line while the audience views scenes from a different time perspective, and a chorus that routinely interrupts the main storyline to provide emphasis, warnings, or transitions. The fact that the book is written in this genre makes outlining it difficult.

Third, the book is characterized by abrupt changes in unidentified speakers. Fourth, the book is replete with metaphors, similes, parallelism, and oriental imagery. Fifth, the book contains 49 *hapax legomena*. Sixth, the book makes reference to 15 specific geographic locales.

Seventh, the book contains key images. These include "wine, the garden, the kiss, various spices and fruits, the countryside or pastoral metaphors." Eighth, the book is part of the Megilloth or one of the five rolls that were read on important Jewish days. The Song of Songs was read at Passover. Ninth, other than possibly two references (5:1; 8:6), the book fails to mention God's name.

Tenth, the book contains no references to prayer, worship, or piety. Thus, while the book is similar to the Book of Esther, which also fails to mention God's name, the Song of Solomon is even more remarkable than Esther, which at least mentions prayer, worship, and piety. Eleventh, the book is not quoted or alluded to in any other biblical book. Twelfth, the book's prurient subject matter along with the previous three characteristics caused it to be classified as part of the *anti legomena* or disputed writings.

Thirteenth, the name of Solomon's bride is never given throughout the duration of the book. The closest the book comes to identifying her is in 6:13 where she is called a Shulammite or from the town of Shulam or Shunem. Fourteenth, the book's events transcend common cultural *morés*. Such deviations are found not only in the book's portrayal of the royal and commoner marriage but also in how it does not follow arranged marriage customs.

Christ in the Song of Solomon

The book contains no direct messianic prophecies. However, because the church is called the bride of Christ (Eph 5:22-33), the passion and monogamy between Solomon and his bride conveys by way of application truths concerning Christ's relationship to His church. The book was written to convey God's love for His people since sexual imagery is used elsewhere to illustrate his relationship to Israel (Is 49:19; 54:5; Jer 2:2; Ezek 16; 23; Hosea 2) and the church (Eph 5:22-33; James 4:4; Rev 21:9; 22:17).

Outline

I. Introduction (1:1)

- (1) Title: superlative (1:1a)
- (2) Author: Solomon (1:1b)

II. Courtship (Song 1:2—3:5)

- (1) Bride expresses her adoration for her royal suitor (1:2-8)
 - (A) Bride exalts in her courting King (1:2-4a)
 - (B) Daughters of Jerusalem extol her love (1:4b)
 - (C) Bride bemoans her darkened appearance (1:5-6)

- (D) Bride desires to be near where her lover shepherds his flock (1:7)
- (E) Daughters of Jerusalem exhort the bride to go out shepherding so her lover will find her (1:8)

(2) Expression of love between the King and his bride (Song 1:9—2:7)

- (A) King extols his bride's beauty (1:9-10)
- (B) Daughters of Jerusalem promise to enhance the bride's beauty by creating jewelry for her (1:11)
- (C) Bride expresses her love for Solomon (1:12-14)
- (D) King praises his bride on account of her beauty (1:15)
- (E) Bride praises her handsome King (1:16—2:1)
- (F) King praises his bride on account of the supremacy of her beauty in comparison to the others (2:2)
- (G) Bride praises King due to his protective care (2:3-4)
- (G) Bride desires to consummate her relationship with her King (2:5-6)
- (I) Bride exhorts the daughters of Jerusalem to abstain from premarital sexual relations (2:7)

(3) Both lovers yearn for each other (2:8-17)

- (A) Bride describes her lover's desire for her (2:8-9)
- (B) Bride recalls the King's invitation for her to come to him (2:10-13)
- (C) King expresses his desire to be with his bride (2:14-15)
- (D) Bride expresses her desire to be with her lover (2:16-17)

(4) Shulammite bride's dream (3:1-5)

- (A) Bride's dream of not being able to find the King and then refusing to let them go after finding him (3:1-4)
- (B) Bride's concluding admonition to the daughters of Jerusalem to abstain from premarital relations (3:5)

III. Wedding (Song 3:6—5:1)

(1) Wedding procession (3:6-11)

(2) Consummation of the marriage (Song 4:1—5:1)

- (A) King speaks to his bride (4:1-11)
 - (a) He extols her beauty (4:1-7)
 - (b) He invites her to rest in his security (4:8)
 - (c) He explains how her beauty has enraptured him (4:9-11)
- (B) Marital lovemaking (Song 4:12—5:1)
 - (a) Bride's virginity compared to a locked garden (4:12-15)
 - (b) Consummation of the marriage compared to an open garden (4:16)
 - (c) Consummation of the marriage (5:1a)

(d) Writer's concluding blessing upon the consummation of the marriage (5:1b)

IV. The continuing marriage (Song 5:2—8:3)

(1) Resolution of conflict within marriage (Song 5:2—6:13)

(A) Conflict (Song 5:2—6:3)

(a) Bride rejects husband's sexual advances (5:2-4)

(b) Bride's change of heart is to no avail due to her husband's departure (5:5-6a)

(c) Lovesick bride seeks her husband (5:6b-8)

(d) Bride extols her husband's handsomeness to the daughters of Jerusalem (5:9-16)

(e) Bride finds her husband in his garden (6:1-3)

(B) Resolution (6:4-13)

(a) Husband praises his wife (6:4-9)

(i) He describes her beauty (6:4-7)

(ii) He describes her preeminence in comparison to the others (6:8-9)

(b) Bride acknowledges how she had initiated reconciliation and then was "swept off her feet" by her estranged husband (6:10-13)

(2) Maturation of love within marriage (Song 7:1—8:3)

(A) Husband describes his wife's beauty (7:1-9)

(B) Wife's desire for her husband (Song 7:10—8:3)

(a) Wife reinstates the couple's mutual commitment (7:10)

(b) Wife invites her husband on a trip where the couple's love can continue to blossom (7:11-13)

(c) Wife wishes she had grown up with the King (8:1-2)

(d) Wife desires the King's embrace (8:3)

V. Couple 's concluding instruction regarding the progress of love (8:4-14)

(1) Bride warns the daughters of Jerusalem against premarital sexual affections (8:4)

(2) Couple reminisces on how they originally fell in love (8:5-12)

(A) Solomon recalls his early potent love memories (8:5)

(B) Wife's contribution (8:6-12)

(a) Reaffirmation of the power of her love for her husband (8:6-7)

(b) Recollection of how her brothers protected her youthful virginity (8:8-9)

(c) Reaffirmation of her continued virginity until she met Solomon (8:10-12)

(3) Couple's concluding commitment to love one another (8:13-14)

(A) Husband continues to wait for his wife (8:13)

(B) Wife desires for her husband to pursue her (8:14)