

Introduction to Song of Solomon

Where is it in the Bible?

Song of Solomon, also called Canticles or Song of Songs, is the twenty-second book of the Old Testament in Christian Bibles and comes between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. In Hebrew Bibles, it is the fourth book in the last section, the Writings or Kethuvim, and comes between Job and Ruth.

What is it about?

Song of Solomon is a collection of poems which celebrate erotic love between a man and a woman. Because of this, it has always been a controversial part of the biblical corpus. In spite of the fact that God is not mentioned in the book, Jewish rabbis have interpreted it as an allegory about the love of God for Israel. In Christian tradition, it is seen as representing Christ's love for Christians and the Church. "Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century C.E.) composed eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs along these lines."¹ It can also be read literally as a celebration of the gifts of human love and sexuality which come from God.

Who wrote it?

The book has traditionally been attributed to Solomon, not only because of the title but also because of 1:1 and several other references in book to Solomon and to a king. However, as with Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew in the book indicates a date later than the Solomonic period, and the author is unknown.

When was it written?

If Solomon's authorship is rejected, dating Song of Solomon is difficult since there are no contextual clues. The language used in the book suggests that was written after the Babylonian exile and may be as late as the Hellenistic period.

How is it structured?

- I. Title (1:1)
- II. The Lovers (1:2-2:7)
- III. The Woman Seeks Her Beloved (2:8-3:11)
- IV. The Man Praises His Beloved (4:1-5:1)
- V. The Woman Searches for Her Beloved (5:2-6:3)
- VI. They Delight in Each Other (6:4-8:4)
- VII. Conclusion (8:5-14)

¹ Fred Gaiser and David Stewart at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=42>

What are some things to look for?

- **Compliments? Really?** Song of Solomon is full of things no one would want to say to a sweetheart these days. A few examples
 - “Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus” (7:4b)
 - “Your hair is like a flock of goats” (4:1c)
 - “Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes” (4:2a)

Expressions like these are difficult to translate in different times and cultures, although the purpose of comparing the beloved to something valuable or beautiful is the same.

- **Marriage and Sexuality:** Although both the Jewish and Christian allegorical interpretations are supported by the text, many modern scholars see Song of Solomon at its basic level as a celebration of human love and sexuality as part of God’s good creation. Its point of view is radically different from that found in the biblical laws where the institution of marriage is extolled. In contrast, it does not seem that the couple in Song of Solomon since they seem to be sneaking around looking for each other (5:2-7). But their love is marked by faithfulness and mutual respect.