

SONG OF SONGS: WILD AND CRAZY LOVE SONGS

(Danny Hays in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*)

Those who assume that the Bible is either boring or prudish are in for a real shock when they read the Song of Songs carefully. This book is a collection of mushy love songs in which a man and a woman sing joyfully and intimately to each other. This couple, who apparently marries in the middle of the book, also celebrates their sexuality, praising each other for the joy and pleasure each counterpart brings to the relationship. This is a steamy, R-rated book.

What Is the Setting for Song of Songs?

The opening verse in the book serves as a title, “Solomon’s Song of Songs.” Although some scholars argue that this book was probably written long after Solomon, the church and the synagogue have traditionally accepted Solomonic authorship. Yet while it is perhaps correct to see Solomon personally involved in developing this “song,” it does not mean that this love story is necessarily autobiographical of Solomon. First Kings 4:32 declares that Solomon composed 1,005 songs. The title “song of songs” means “the best song,” implying perhaps that this praise of sexuality in marriage was the high point of his song-writing endeavor.

But how was such a racy book to be used in the life and worship of Israel? Some scholars have suggested that Song of Songs was to be read at weddings as part of the wedding ceremony. This is possible, but there is no real conclusive evidence for this. Most likely it is best to understand this book as part of the wisdom literature, as indicated by its location in the canon. The Wisdom Books address how one is to live wisely, touching on topics such as work, family, friends, wealth, and misfortune, among others. Clearly the role of human sexuality is a very important component of living. One’s intimate relationship with their spouse is one of the most foundational and critical relationships in their lives. To be truly wise, one needs to know how to love their spouse properly. The Song of Songs gives us guidance in this area of life.

What Is at the Heart of Song of Songs?

In Proverbs 1–9, remember, the father warns his son repeatedly to be on his guard against adultery and to avoid the temptations of loose women. Regarding marriage, the book of Proverbs gives some basic sound advice. First, on the negative side, it cautions us against marrying someone who nags or is quarrelsome (Prov. 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15). Second, on the positive side, it advises us to marry someone of stellar character (Prov. 12:4; 31:10–31). This is good, sound, logical (wise) advice. But it is not enough. The quiet, reserved, prim and proper demeanor of Proverbs toward one’s spouse is fine and appropriate for public life. Song of Songs, however, tells us that things need to change when the couple is home alone and the lights go out. Now a truly “wise” man is to be madly in love with his wife. Both he and his wife are to enjoy a rather wild and crazy love for each other. The rational, determined, and reflective



philosophical approach to life (i.e., Proverbs) now gives way to sensuality. The calm, careful, and reserved speech of the wise one in Proverbs now gives way to mushy, sappy love whisperings in the ear of one's spouse.

At various times throughout history Christians have interpreted Song of Songs as an allegory about Jesus Christ (the beloved) and his bride, the church. But this understanding is difficult to sustain if one reads carefully. Practically all scholars today concur that this is a book celebrating human sexuality.

The Song of Songs is really a series of short songs that a man and a woman (called the Shulamite in 6:13) sing to each other. Occasionally a group of friends chime in. This account is probably an idealized account of newly married lovers, written or collected by Solomon, but not necessarily autobiographical of Solomon, who had one thousand wives.

These statements by the man and the woman (she does most of the talking) are extremely mushy and corny, but of course this is true only to us as outsiders. To those couples who are madly and wildly in love, corny and mushy intimacies are quite wonderful.

The Song of Songs can be roughly outlined as follows:

- The Courtship (1:1–3:5)
- The Wedding (3:6–5:1)
- The Honeymoon (5:2–8:14)

What Makes Song of Songs Interesting and Unique?

- The Song of Songs contains very colorful and fairly explicit poetic language about a husband's and wife's affection for each other.
- In contrast to Proverbs 1–9, which warns against illicit sexual activities.
- Song of Songs celebrates sexuality within marriage. Song of Songs has a courtship, a wedding, and a honeymoon.
- Song of Songs corrects the misnomer that in the Bible the purpose of the physical relationship in marriage was merely to produce children. Song of Songs does not mention children at all, but has lots to say about love.

