

Song of Songs Introduction

TITLE

The title comes from the first two words of the book in Hebrew are **sir hassirim** (“song songs”)

- This is the same Hebrew word used twice, but the difference is the first one is singular (**sir**) and the second one is plural (**hassirim**).
- The repeated word makes the phrase a superlative, which means it is greater than any other possible level. In the English superlatives are typically formed with the suffix **-est** (e.g. *strongest, tallest*) or by using the word **most** (*most ancient, most talented*).
- Two other examples in the Hebrew text are:
 - Exodus 29:37 – “Holy of Holies”
 - Deuteronomy 10:14 – “heaven of heavens”
 - Genesis 9:25 - “servant of servants”
 - Ecclesiastes 1:2 – “utterly meaningless”
- Thus, this book could be titled “The Best Song” or “The Song at the Top of the Charts”
 - In fact Luther’s German translation and all German translations since call this book Hoheleid which means “the best song.”

Other titles that are used include:

- Song of Solomon
 - Comes from the subscript that follows the first two words:
 - ***sir hassirim ser lislomoh***
 - The subscript is made of ser and a preposition (**le**) attached to Solomon’s name (**slomoh**)
 - The preposition le can mean:
 - To
 - By
 - Concerning
 - Or, be referring to the book “Song of Songs” as “Solomonic” in character along with other Solomonic writings: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and other wisdom literature.
- Canticles
 - Comes from the Latin Vulgate’s title of this book **Canticum Canticorum** which again means, Song of Songs.

Date

- Actually unknown
- Easy answer would around 950 BC
- There are no real proofs for a 950 BC date, and no reason why it could not have been collected later.

Megillot Scrolls

- Megillot Scrolls are five books associated with a Jewish feast.
- Ruth 0
- Lamentations –
- Ecclesiastes –
- Esther –

- Song of Songs – is read on the eighth day of Passover. The association with Song of Songs with Passover is likely due to the allegorical approach to the book that began after the return from exile. One allegorical approach is to begin the Song associated with the Exodus and continue until the Messiah comes.

Authorship

- Tradition always connects the Song of Songs with Solomon either as the writer or the one to whom the song was dedicated to by a court musician.
- The tradition of the Rabbis is that Solomon wrote three works during his life:
 - Song of Songs in his youth
 - Proverbs in his middle age
 - Ecclesiastes as an old man
- Defense for Solomon as the author of Song of Songs:
 - The Song refers to wealth and international trade which match the reign of Solomon
 - The natural way to read the superscript could be argued is "...by Solomon"
 - Solomon was known for "love" and/or sex
 - 1 Kings 4:29-34 refers to Solomon's writing and says "his songs numbered a thousand and five."
- Rejection of Solomon's authorship:
 1. Some would say too much of the language and words are from the Persian and Greek period. But, this is not a solid argument:
 - We do not know the necessary details of how the Hebrew language developed.
 - The old concept that the Song had Aramaic phrases, which is said to have entered the Hebrew culture during the exile, was proven wrong with the discovery of Aramaic dated around 1000 BC. Even David had contact with the Aramaic according to 2 Samuel 8:5-8.
 - It is possible that our Hebrew text had been updated over the 1,000 year period between Solomon and the Masoretic Text which developed around 200-400 AD (our earliest fragment is 900 AD)
 2. The topic of the Song is that of a one-woman man and a one-man woman. This is not Solomon's experience.
 3. Solomon is mentioned by name in only three verses, and he is NOT the one writing or talking.
 - a. 1:3 – Solomon's tents are described
 - b. 3:6-11 – Solomon's wedding is described
 - c. 8:11-12 – Solomon is ridiculed for buying love. (A set of verses most likely not written by Solomon.)
 4. All of the Wisdom books may have had multiple authors referred to as "the wise men" (Proverbs :22:17; 24:23; 30:1; 31:1; 1:1; 10:1; 25:1 and Ecclesiastes written by Qohelet)

An Anthology of love poems

- **an-thol-o-gy** /an'THäləjē/ - noun – a published collection of poems or other pieces of writing.
- An **anthology** is a collection of literary works chosen by the compiler. It may be a collection of poems, short stories, plays, songs, or excerpts.

A Woman Author?

- Reasoning to support the idea:
 - a. In the Song a woman is speaking in 61 ½ of the 117 verses.

- b. Some parts of the Song are so heavy with the woman's attitude, voice, emotion, etc. that they could only have originated from a woman. (1:2-6; 3:1-4; 5:1-7; 5:10-16)
- c. The Bible mentions woman singers (2 Sam. 1:20; 1:24; Jer. 9:17, 20; Ezekiel 32:16) and records the songs of woman singers (Judges 5; 1 Samuel 18:6-7)
- d. *"The Song was composed in honor of King Solomon by a young woman, daughter of a nobleman who was brought to his court in order to adorn his parties by her singing....What would be more natural than for Solomon, the great woman-over, to ask one of the female singers of his court to gather for him the best of current Israelite love poetry?"* – a quote from S. D. Goiten in "A Feminine Companion to the Song of Songs, 1993)

Wasfs

- Wedding songs sung by the bride to her groom and, also, by the groom to the bride.
- These songs exclaim the partner's splendor, beauty, perfections, etc. as seen in the eyes of their lover.
- Found in the Song at 4:1-7, 10-15; 7:1-6

Characters

- What the book is not:
 - The book is not a drama. There is no plot.
 - There is no narrator.
 - This is not a musical.
 - The story does not progress and the song is not in any chronological order
 - The characters remain consistent, yet may not refer to the same people each time they appear.
1. The Woman
 - The dominant character in the book
 - Speaks more than the man.
 - The man is speaking of her often
 - She is young (according to cultural standards she'd be 15-21 years old)
 - i. Sometimes not married
 - ii. Sometimes recently married
 - She initiates the relationship
 - She desires to be with the man and pursues him overcoming interference, warnings, threats and cultural taboos. (3:1-5; 5:2-8)
 - She is modest (1:5-6; 2:1) in her own eyes, but the man thinks she is a magnificent specimen of a woman (
 - The man calls his woman:
 - i. Most beautiful of women (1:8)
 - ii. Darling (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2)
 - iii. His bride (4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5:1)
 - iv. His sister (4:12; 5:1, 2)
 - v. His dove (5:2)
 2. The Man
 - Describe by both the man and the woman
 - He is called king (1:4; 1:12; 7:5)
 - He is called a shepherd (1:7)

3. The Women

- There is a group of women who appear to speak and to be spoken to. They are called:
 - i. Daughters of Jerusalem (1:5)
 - ii. Daughters of Zion (3:11)
 - iii. Young women (1:3)
- The Women are:
 - i. From the city
 - ii. Inexperience
 - iii. Naïve
 - iv. Young
- In the Song this group women are learning from the woman or they contrast the woman.
 - i. The Women are the backup singers who ask the woman questions to keep the woman talking (singing) and they respond to her statements
 - ii. Contrast:
 1. Jerusalem vs. country girl
 2. Soft white skinned vs. darkened skin from working in the fields

4. Family Members

- Brothers
 - i. 1:5-6 – at the beginning
 - ii. 8:8-9 – at the end
 - iii. The brothers protect the woman's sexuality
 - iv. The brothers negotiate her marriage
 - v. The brothers may be in the place of the father so the woman isn't seen as being disrespectful to her dad
- Mother
 - i. 3:4, 11
 - ii. 6:9
 - iii. 8:1
- Father – is not mentioned. Likely, because the woman is not planning on following his guidance (represented by the brothers) and this would be too rebellious for the culture.

History of Interpretation

- Two major options for interpretation: Is the Song allegory or is the Song natural love poetry? Is the book about human sexuality or about God's relationship with humans.
- The genre of the writing needs to be determined. The Song could be:
 - Allegory
 - Love poetry
 - Drama
 - Cultic Poetry
 - Psychological poetry
 - Wisdom
- 100 AD Rabbi Aqiba was in the midst of a dispute between the songs meaning and concerning the place and use of the Song of Songs. Aqiba said:
 - "God forbid! – no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs that he should say that it does not render the nads unclean, for all the aes are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."

- Rabbi Saadia said, “Know, my brother, that you will find great differences in interpretation of the Song of Songs. In truth they differ because the Song of Songs resembles locks to which the keys have been lost.”
- We do not know how the original audience understood the Song.
- We do not know who the original audience was.
- By 100 AD Rabbi Aqiba is 500-1050 years away from the original setting and it does not appear anyone knows at that time.

Allegorical

- 100 AD Rabbi Aqiba is interpreting the Song allegorically
- Allegorical was the way the Jews and the Christians handled the Song until the 1800's
- A dictionary definition of allegory is: When the events of a narrative OBVIOUSLY and continuously refer to another simultaneous structure or events or ideas, whether historical events, moral or philosophical ideas, or natural phenomena.”
- The above definition rules out allegory as a form of proper interpretation of the Song.
- HISTORICAL ALLEGORIES
 - Jewish: the man = God; the woman = Israel
 - 700-900 AD the Targum presents the Song as a redemptive history of Israel
 - The Song was also part of a collection of 10 songs that began with Psalm 92 and continued through Isaiah 20:29 that covered Adam until the release of the exiles
 - “The woman, Israel begins by begging the man, God, to kiss her. Israel desires relationship with God. She praises his reputation and asks him to take her into his private room. The bedroom is Palestine, the Promised Land. This opening unit then refers to Exodus from Egypt. The kissing itself is the giving of the Law and therefore refers to the revelation of God at Sinai. However, in the wilderness they also sinned by worshipping the golden calf. The girl’s confession of blackness is an acknowledgment of this sin of idolatry”and on and on and on. (From NICOT by Longman, p. 25)
 - IMPORTANT: Other historical allegories are similar but NOT the same.
- PHILOSOPHICAL/MYSTICAL ALLEGORIES
 - Follow Aristotle thinking and parts of the soul are the characters, etc.
- CHRISTIAN ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION
 - Christians followed the Jews in allegorical interpretation
 - The Man = Jesus; The Woman = Church
 - 200 AD Hippolytus (bishop of Rome) gives us our first example of Christian interpretation. He says the two breasts of 4:5 are the Old and New Testament
 - One commentator says: “If two allegorizers ever agree on the interpretation of a verse it is only because one has copied another.”
 - Origen (185-253 AD), in Alexandria,
 - held to the current belief that a good, spiritual Christian would denigrate the flesh, and mainly sexuality.
 - Origen castrated himself to overcome the fleshly, evil sexual desires of the flesh.
 - Then, Origen “castrated” sexuality from his allegorical interpretation of the Song.
 - Origen thought like a Greek philosopher (he studied and taught Greek philosophy) which followed Plato (Neoplatonism) in separating the body from the soul. The body was simply an earthly, worldly container for the immortal soul.
 - There was NO WAY Origen could even begin to accept the Song as anything pleasurable or physically sensual.
 - Origen (182-254 AD) met with Hippolytus (170-235 AD) in 215 AD.

- Origen eventually moved to Caesarea in Israel and debated with Rabbi Yohanan about these allegorical interpretations:
 - The two breasts and the wine. Origen held that the wine was good teaching from the Law and the Prophets and the milk from the breasts was the teaching of the Bridegroom, Jesus.
 - Yohanan refuted Origen by saying the wine was the written Torah and the milk was the oral Torah
- This is funny and comical, except for the fact that Origen set the standard for interpretation on the Song until the Middle Ages.