

LECTURE 43
SONG OF SOLOMON OVERVIEW
WISDOM FOR LOVING

INTRODUCTION

1. Name

The Hebrew title is translated “The Song of Songs” meaning the song *par excellence*, or the most excellent of songs. The title adopted by the Vulgate is, “Cantum Cantorum,” hence the alternative English title of “Canticles.”

2. Purpose

To celebrate and commend love in human and divine relationships.

3. Theme

Loving and being loved. “Love the flame of Yahweh.”¹ “Love as strong as death.”²

4. Key verses

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine (Song 1:1).

Yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend (Song 5:16).

5. Key truths

- God gives love between a husband and wife.
- God gives love between Himself and His Church.

I. AUTHOR

A. TRADITIONAL VIEW

The title of the book attributes the Song to King Solomon. Though the Hebrew particle *le* does not always indicate “of,” (i.e., belonging to), but can also mean “to” or “for,” the most natural interpretation is that the Song was actually composed by Solomon.

1. Arguments

- a. The use of the preposition *le* (“to”) is the most convenient way of expressing possession or authorship in Hebrew, especially where the same author may have composed many other works.
- b. Solomon was sufficiently gifted with the necessary wisdom to write this book (1 Ki.3: 12).
- c. The name of Solomon is mentioned six times in the book (1:5; 3:7; 3:9; 3:11; 8:11; 8:12).
- d. The interest in flora (21 varieties found in the Song) and fauna (15 species of animals found in the Song) fits Solomon (1 Ki.4:33)
- e. The geographical references favor a date prior to the division of the kingdom in 930 BC. The author indiscriminately mentions localities in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, suggesting that they all belonged to the same political realm. The favorable mention of Tirzah in the North and Jerusalem in the South together in the same verse is highly unlikely after 930 BC as Tirzah was the capital of the breakaway Northern Kingdom. Even after the return from exile, no Southern Jew would speak favorably of areas which were then

¹ D Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 199.

² G Crossley, *The Old Testament Explained and Applied* (England: Evangelical Press, 2002), 497.

under the control of the Gentiles and Samaritans. Tirzah was a very beautiful city even before it became the capital of the North.

- f. The historic view of both the Jewish and Christian churches supports Solomonic authorship
- g. If Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes is accepted, then similarities between its vocabulary and syntax and that of the Song's would suggest that Solomon was the author of both.
- h. The book shows many examples of royal wealth and luxury.
- i. Solomon wrote 1005 songs (1 Ki.4:32-34)

2. Problems

- a. How does the love described in this book fit the picture presented in the historical books of a Solomon with many wives?
- b. Why does the book seem to look at Solomon from a distance (3:6–11 ; 8:11–12)?
- c. How is the rebuff of Solomon in 8:11–12 to be explained?

These problems have caused some conservative scholars to argue for only a partial Solomonic authorship as in Proverbs. Other conservatives think the book is anonymous, but comes from the Solomonic period or shortly thereafter.

B. CRITICAL VIEW

1. Argument

- a. Some critical scholars allow some genuine Solomonic material in the Song. However, they argue that the references to a northern locality in the narrative are evidence of a later redaction.
- b. The Hebrew reflects much later foreign influences, which would point to the Persian period or maybe even the Greek.
- c. Solomon does not appear in the best light in the song, which might suggest the song was composed by a northern writer who resented Solomon's policies of heavy taxation and forced labor.

2. Answer

- a. The later "Northern" redaction is speculative and unsupported by evidence.
- b. In the lecture on Ecclesiastes we saw that the evidence no longer supports late dating based on linguistic considerations. International trade contacts with many foreign countries may also explain the presence of words more closely associated with these areas.

There is no sufficient reason to deny that this book in its entirety was written by Solomon himself. The number of the so-called signs of lateness in the text has been shrinking of late with the discovery of contemporary extra-biblical poetic materials. Certain features of the text which once were regarded as a sure sign of a postexilic date are now known to have been common features of poetry at least as old as Solomon. For example, the forms indicating Aramaic influence have traditionally been assigned to the postexilic period when Aramaic was the international language. Now, however, scholars realize that Aramaic influences on the Israelites predate Solomon by centuries.³

- c. There is no reason why Solomon would have to portray himself as a perfect character in every respect.

³ J E Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), Electronic Edition.

II. DATE

Earliest Date: The lack of historical references in the book make dating difficult. As to when Solomon wrote the Song, it is impossible to be dogmatic. It may have been written early in his life (965 BC) before his backsliding or at the end of his reign, when he had learned the lessons of his backsliding.

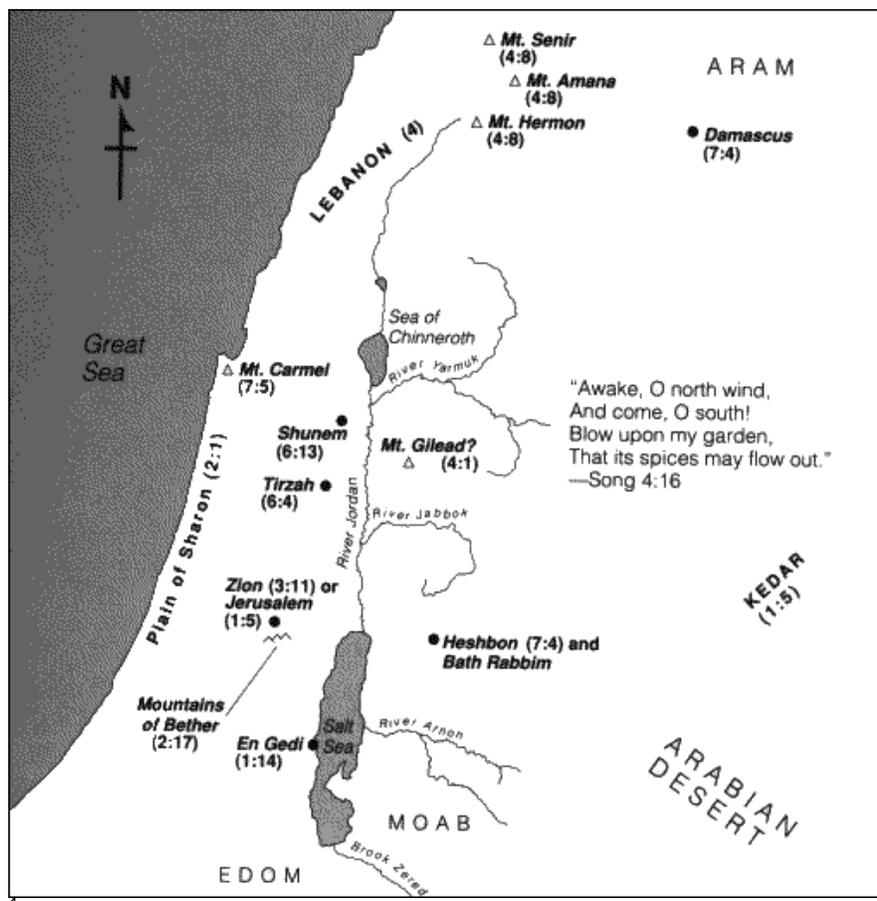
Latest Date: For Solomonic authorship, the latest date would be just before his death. For non-Solomonic authorship the latest date ranges from pre-exilic to post-exilic.

III. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

There is very little information in the book of a historical nature. Many have tried to take the available information and construct a historical narrative built around one of Solomon’s marriages. However, it seems that the historical detail is deliberately sparse in order to make it a book suited to all peoples in all places, at all times. The geographical details we shall mention briefly.

1. Geography

Fifteen geographic locations are mentioned, from Lebanon and Syria in the north to Egypt in the south. The term “Shulamite,” identifying the king’s lover may be derived from the town of Shunem which was southwest of the Sea of Galilee in the tribal area of Issachar.



IV. LITERARY ANALYSIS

1. Comparative Outlines

⁴ Nelson’s complete book of Bible maps and charts (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Electronic Edition.

Like Ecclesiastes, the Song has frustrated most who try to find a structure in it.

The Song takes a single romance and turns it around and around like a gem, displaying all its facets. The reader finally sees the gem as a whole, and the order in which the facets were shown does not much matter.⁵

Two suggested outlines are found below.

Deilitsch	Nelson
Mutual affection of the lovers (1:2–2:7)	Beginning of love (1:1–5:1)
Mutual seeking and finding of the lovers (2:8–3:5)	Falling in love (1:1-3:5)
Fetching of the bride, and the marriage (3:6–5:1)	United in love (3:6-5:1)
Love scorned but won again (5:2–6:9)	Broadening of love (5:2–8:14)
The Shulamite as the attractively fair but humble princess (6:10–8:4)	Struggling in love (5:2-7:10)
Ratification of the love covenant in her home, (8:5–14)	Growing in love (7:11-8:14)

2. Chiasm

In this chiasmic structure, the themes are gradually unfolded, there is a central pivot point, then the themes are repeated in reverse order.

a. Dorsey's Chiasm⁶

a Opening words of mutual love and desire (1:2 – 2:7)

b Young man's invitation to the young woman to join him in the countryside (2:8 – 17)

c Young woman's night-time search for the young man (3:1-5)

CENTRE: their wedding day (3:6 – 5:1)

c' Young woman's night-time search for young man, speeches of admiration/longing (5:2 – 7:11)

b' Young woman's invitation to the young man to join her in the countryside (7:12–8:4)

a' Closing words of mutual love and desire (8:5-14)

b. Cragg's Chiasm⁷

a Anticipation (1:2-2:7)

⁵ C H Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), Electronic Edition.

⁶ D Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 200.

⁷ L Ryken and T Longman III (Editors), *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 293.

b Found, and Lost—and Found (2:8-3:5)

CENTRE: Consummation (3:6-5:1)

b' Lost—and Found (5:2-8:4)

c' Affirmation (8:5-14)

The match is not *strictly* exact, but it is extremely close, frequently even to the point of mirroring unusual vocabulary or inverting specific imagery.⁸

c. Dumbrell's Chiasm⁹

Dumbrell sees the song as forming seven cycles or poems.

(i) The end points of these seven cycles are marked by refrains or concluding lines (2:6-7, 16-17; 3:5; 4:16-5:1; 7:11; 8:3-4, 14; the refrain at 6:3 is exceptional).

(ii) Scene shifts (the book has six) announce the beginning of each new cycle (2:8; 3:1; 3:6; 5:2; 7:12; 8:5).

(iii) The seven constituent units form a very obvious chiasm, the center of which is 3:6-5:1, the wedding scene, which contains the book's dramatic high point (4:16-5:1)

(iv) The sequences – lover separated, expression of desire, lovers united – are used throughout the book as the pattern of all the cycles, except the last.

a Introduction: Love and desire (1:1-2:7)

b The man's invitation (2:8-17)

c The woman's dream (3:1-5)

CENTRE: The wedding (3:6-5:1)

c' The woman's search (5:2-7:10)

b' The woman's invitation (7:11-8:4)

a' Conclusion: love and desire (8:5-14).

3. Genre

All scholars recognize that the Song belongs to the overall genre of Wisdom literature (which usually focuses on basic human experiences). Most have also gone on to classify it as poetry because of its use of rhythm, parallelism, emotive language, etc. Some, however, have gone even further in genre analysis and some of these theories will now be examined.

a. A Love Poem

Scholars have found love poems in both Egypt and Mesopotamia (from about 1100 BC) which have many similarities with the Song, and can only be interpreted as extolling love between men and women.

Like other examples of the love-poetry genre, the Song shares such common motifs as nature imagery (horses, gazelles, goats, foxes, doves, gardens, apples, pomegranates, nuts, vines, palm trees, groves, mountains, pools), specific descriptions of the physical attractiveness of the lovers

⁸ L Ryken and T Longman III (Editors), *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1993), 291.

⁹ W J Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 279.

(hair, cheeks, breasts, thighs, feet, hands), perfumes (aloe, frankincense, cinnamon, nard, myrrh, saffron), ornaments (jewellery, necklaces, gold, silver, precious stones of various types), and such terms as prince, king, queen, lover, shepherd, and beloved. These are all common coin in love poetry.¹⁰

This, of course, lends support to the literalistic theory which is critiqued below. However, it is difficult to see how the Jews would accept such a composition into the canon of Scripture.

b. An Anthology of Songs

Some see the Song as an anthology of love songs which were sung over a period of days at Syrian or Egyptian wedding feasts, when the beauty of the bride and the qualities of the couple would be extolled and they would be treated like king and queen for the day. Some scholars find up to 31 separate songs in the Song and most scholars attribute only some of them to Solomon.

However, there is no literary evidence for the genre in Israel. Also the Song's closely connected structure would argue against it being a collection of originally independent songs.

A very strong case can be made that the Song was written as one poem. Individual units can stand alone, that is true; but these units have been very carefully arranged in a way that precludes regarding them as a haphazard collection. This book gives every indication of a single hand at work, and that was the hand of a master craftsman.¹¹

The unity of the book is evidenced in (1) the continuity of theme; (2) a chainlike structure binding one part to the preceding; (3) the title, which though perhaps not originally part of the book, nonetheless gives an ancient view that this book was a single composition and not a composite; (4) the absence of any headings to mark off the individual units; (5) the appearance of the same adjuration formula three times (cf. 2:7 ; 3:5 ; 8:4); and (6) the appearance of the same leading characters throughout.¹²

Again, it is difficult to see how the Jews would sanction the canonization of secular love songs in the canon.

c. A Drama

Some believe that the Song was to be read like a drama with speaking parts for different characters. Although a number have endorsed this view, drama was almost unknown in the literature of the ancient Near East. Also, the various speakers are not clearly identified in the text.

d. A Satire

Some have regarded the Song as pro-Northern Kingdom, anti-Solomon satire showing how even the renowned womanizer with all his royal enticements was frustrated by a young Northern girl.

This interpretation requires non-Solomonic authorship and the three lover scenario. It is difficult to see how a book with this purpose would be canonized by the Old Testament Church.

4. Canonical Context

The Song was one of the books whose canonization was debated because of the absence of God's name and the emphasis on physical beauty and intimacy.

Factors in its favor were that the Song was connected with Solomon who had been gifted divine wisdom, and that it had been preserved throughout Israel's turbulent history.

¹⁰ L Ryken and T Longman III (Editors), *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1993), 288.

¹¹ L Ryken and T Longman III (Editors), *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1993), 291.

¹² J E Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), Electronic Edition.

In the Hebrew Bible Song is normally placed first in the collection of five small scrolls called *Megilloth* (“Scrolls”) and is followed by Ruth. The *Megilloth* are part of the *Kethubhim* (“Writings”), the third great division of the Hebrew Bible. The five *Megilloth* were read during the year at special festivals. The Song was assigned to be read at Passover.

V. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The theological themes we see in the song depend upon our view of it. We shall consider three different views.

1. Literal interpretation

a. The Two Lovers Interpretation

The book is a description of physical love between two lovers and probably is historically rooted in one of Solomon’s weddings. It celebrates human sexuality and describes the lovers’ feelings, desires, concerns, hopes and fears.

The plot centers on the love between the king and the woman. The woman is usually pictured as a beautiful rustic maiden. She has captured the heart of the urbane and sophisticated king. He is helpless before her. The story progresses from their initial meeting and expressions of affection to marriage (often associated with 3:6-5:1). The relationship is troubled following the marriage, but at the end (8:5-14) their bond is deep and committed. Thus the Song has a unified plot that recounts the purifying love shared by Solomon and the Shulammitte. It narrates Solomon’s move away from the wickedness of polygamy and sophisticated love toward the monogamy and simple love of a country girl.¹³

Those who take this view focus largely on the physical side of marriage.

The beauty and worth of the sexual love that this book celebrates are rooted in the ordinances established when God created human beings, male and female, in his image (Ge.1:27; cf. 2:19-25). Sexual love is at the heart of God’s ideal order for the world and for the human race.¹⁴

Others who take this view, however, do widen the purpose beyond the physical to encompass the whole marital relationship.

If we can agree that a book that celebrates virtuous love between man and woman deserves a place in the canon of Holy Scripture, then we will have no difficulty with interpreting the Song in its literal sense. The creation of mankind as male and female and their sexual relationship were part of the original order and not a post-Fall alteration. Paul’s view of marriage was that it mirrored a much higher sphere of relationships, that between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:21-33), and John described the consummation of redemption as the “marriage of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:7-9). The Scriptures elevate the love relationship between husband and wife, and we should not disparage a book that presents such ideal love, nor ought we to indict those who choose on sound exegetical grounds to interpret the Song literally and stop short of seeking a deeper meaning, even though this option may not be viable for us.¹⁵

E J Young takes the literal view, although later he seems to endorse the typological view when he says:

The eye of faith, as it beholds this picture of exalted human love, will be reminded of the one love that is above all earthly and human affections – even the love of the Son of God for lost humanity.¹⁶

¹³ R Dillard and T Longman III, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 258.

¹⁴ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1050.

¹⁵ C H Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), Electronic Edition.

¹⁶ E J Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1953), 355?

Problems with this literalistic view are:

- (i) Sexual love is only one aspect of the love of a husband for his wife, and not the important one as far as the gospel is concerned, but the self-giving of the husband for his wife.
- (ii) Some of the physically descriptive passages are difficult to relate to mere sexual relationship (7:1-9). This would suggest that there is a higher and deeper meaning to be sought.
- (iii) The term “my sister, my spouse,” which could be translated, “my sister-spouse,” occurs in 4:9, 4:10, 4:12 and 5:1. The difficulties of interpreting this in a sexual way should caution us against the “human sexuality” approach.

The union between Christ and his people is one combining the purest and noblest characteristics of both the unions just mentioned, separated from every thing earthly and sensual, having the ardor of affection and the oneness of the marriage relation, with the purity and sacredness of a brother’s and sister’s love.¹⁷

- (iv) If the lover is Solomon, the husband of 700 wives and 300 concubines, it is difficult to see how he could be used as an example of pure marital love with the divine sanction.

b. The Three Lovers Interpretation

The literal interpretation sometimes introduces a third figure, the Shulamite’s shepherd fiancé back in Shunem. So, there is Solomon, the Shulamite maid, and her true love, the shepherd lad. The suggested storyline is that Solomon was the “rich villain” who enticed the maid away from her true love, the shepherd lad. However, she realized that she is not going to be happy there, and returned to her true love, the shepherd lad.

Defenders of this view attempt to assign the Song’s warm expressions of love to the shepherd and the more stiff and formal speeches to the king.

However this results in arbitrary, awkward and highly speculative divisions of the material. Material is sometimes divided between the two males without any indication in the text that the speaker has changed.

2. Allegorical interpretation

First of all we must distinguish between allegory and allegorizing. Allegory finds a deeper or hidden meaning in a non-historical narrative. Biblical examples are Judges 9:8–15; Isaiah 5:1–7; Ezekiel 16; 17:1–10; 23. Allegorizing may be based upon a historical event and usually takes place in the mind of the interpreter even when it was not so intended by the author. A biblical example is Galatians 4:21–31.

The allegorical interpretation of the Song may take the form of either the two or three character interpretation (see above).

a. Two Lovers Interpretation

There are two characters, Solomon and the Shulamite, who represent God and Israel, or Christ and the church. The Song on this interpretation becomes an exposition of the believer’s relationship with the Lord.

b. Three Lovers Interpretation

In this interpretation, the Shulamite is the Church, the Shepherd is the Lord, and Solomon is the world. The Song therefore, describes the backsliding of the Church away from Christ, her true love, her unhappiness and her return to Christ, her true love.

¹⁷ J Burrows, *Commentary on the Song of Solomon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), 370.

Some of the difficulties with the “Three Lovers” interpretation were mentioned above. In addition, the allegorical “Three Lovers” interpretation portrays Solomon as the “World,” whereas elsewhere in Scripture he is depicted as a type of Christ (Ps.72; Matt.12:42).

c. Criticisms of the Allegorical Interpretation

- (i) Nothing in the book suggests that it should be spiritualized in this way.
- (ii) The allegorical interpretation arose as a result of a wrong view of human sexuality. Christian teachers inherited from Greek philosophers, the idea that the body was evil and so sexual abstinence was a virtue which could not be squared with the Song’s celebration of sexual love.
- (iii) When a more biblical view of human sexuality began to surface in the mid-nineteenth century, the tide began to turn against allegorical interpretations.
- (iv) The allegorical interpretation lends itself to highly speculative and fanciful interpretation.
- (v) The book seems to suit a historical period early in Solomon’s life
- (vi) Solomon was not a suitable person to represent Christ (1 Ki.11:4)

There is no justification for allegorical interpretation unless there is first of all an allegory to be interpreted, and there is no evidence to show that the Song of Solomon is an allegory. In other words, the arguments generally used to support the allegorical interpretation are really irrelevant.¹⁸

d. Defense of Allegorical Interpretation

- (i) Psalm 45 and Isa.51:1-17 contain several different analogies between human married love and God’s relationship to His people.
- (ii) The marriage relationship was viewed by the prophets as bearing an analogy to Jehovah’s position toward Israel (Isa. 54:6 ; 61:10). Correspondingly, they regarded apostasy as constituting adultery or whoredom (Jer.3:1; Ezek.16, 23; Hos.1–3).
- (iii) The book is full of symbolism.

The maiden is compared to a flower (2:1–2), the beloved shepherd to an apple tree (2:3), the charms and joys of love to fruit (2:3), wine (1:4; 5:1; 7:2), and a vineyard (8:12). The maiden’s resistance to the advances of her lover is compared to a sealed fountain (4:12) and a high wall (8:9), and the lover’s invitation to enjoy love is symbolized by a call to enjoy the vineyard (2:15), the fountain (4:15), and the garden (4:16). Such extravagant symbolism tends to push the interpreter in the direction of allegory or typology, because the richness of the symbols seems difficult to exhaust by means of a literal interpretation.¹⁹

- (iv) Just because Solomon is a type of Christ in some aspects of his life, it does not follow that he has to be perfect.

e. Conclusion

Bullock sums up the current situation well:

To abandon the allegorical method altogether and rule it invalid might constitute one of the many exegetical manipulations of the Western mind that superimposes our psychological and literary structures upon the ancient oriental writer. Although our attitude toward the method may legitimately be one of caution, modern biblical hermeneutics should give no place to exegetical snobbery, nor are we in a position to look down upon the absorbing and passionate love for God that has

¹⁸ E J Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1953), 325.

¹⁹ C H Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), Electronic Edition.

characterized the saints of Israel and the church who had fed upon the allegorical meaning of this book.²⁰

3. Typological interpretation.

It is not always easy to make a clear distinction between the above “allegorical” interpretation and the “typological” interpretation. Allegorical interpretation includes some typology (Solomon is a type of Christ, the Shulamite is a type of the church), and often typology slides into allegory. The difference between allegory and typology has been described in the following way:

Whereas allegory denies or ignores the historicity or factualness of the Old Testament account and imposes a deeper, hidden or spiritual meaning on the text, typology recognizes the validity of the Old Testament account in its own right, but then finds in that account a clear, parallel link with some event or teaching in the New Testament which the Old Testament account foreshadows.²¹

This distinction might be a bit severe. However, the essential point is clear. An allegory is a fictional account written to convey symbolic meaning. Typology has a real history at its foundation which God uses to teach his people spiritual lessons. In this case there was a real historical relationship between Solomon and the beautiful Shulamite. This special woman was used by God to teach Solomon the value of monogamous love. The author intends this to represent the love between God and Israel, Christ and His Church.

But because Solomon is a type of the spiritual David in his glory, and earthly love a shadow of the heavenly, and the Song a part of sacred history and of canonical Scripture, we will not omit here and there to indicate that the love subsisting between Christ and His church shadows itself forth in it.²²

Another feature that distinguishes the typical from the allegorical view is that the typical interpretation does not follow the analogy into all the small details but only in the main outlines.

Allegory is basically a literary **type** which is consciously used by the **author**, whereas typology is a **method** used by the **interpreter**.

4. Moral Problem

Some have alleged that the Song approves of premarital sexual encounters of the most intimate kind. It is thought by many that a marriage between Solomon and the Shulamite is described in 4:16–5:1. However, the first three chapters seem to describe two lovers who already were physically intimate with each other (1:12–17; 2:3–6).

- a. Some have responded to this by denying that the book follows a strictly chronological sequence. Instead, the whole book is a literary chiasmus (see Dorsey’s outline above). The events are not to be understood sequentially, but rather they pivot around the literary climax of 4:16-5:1.
- b. Others have argued that the book must be interpreted within the context of the law of God which forbids any pre- or extra-marital intercourse.
- c. The passages may simply reflect sexual longing .
- d. The Shulamite regards herself as a model of chastity and virtue (8:8–10).
- e. The metaphors used of the Shulamite in the book point to her virtue and chastity.

5. Purpose of the book

a. Literal Interpretation

²⁰ Ibid., Electronic Edition.

²¹ Carr, 24.

²² Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* , p. 6.

The Singer's Message: Extol and enjoy love between the sexes in all its various dimensions

One theme is found throughout: love – pure, sensuous, youthful, passionate love. The immediate purpose of the Song is to bear testimony to, and thereby applaud, the steadfast loyalty of one maiden for her beloved. The ultimate purpose is to put God's seal of approval upon the genuine love between the sexes.²³

The book's primary aim is not to portray the relationship between God and his people, but rather to extol sexual love between a man and a woman. However, such a message is as important today as it has ever been. Both society and the church have often perverted human sexuality, so it is important to be reminded that sex within the parameters of marriage is a God-given gift.²⁴

b. Allegorical Interpretation

The Singer's Message: Let this fictional ideal of love teach you about the reality of love between God and His people, Christ and His Church.

The Song is a representation of ideal love between fictional characters which symbolizes the love between God and His people, Christ and His Church.

c. Typical Interpretation

The Singer's Message: Let the highest experience of human love teach you about the highest love of all, between God and His people, Christ and His Church.

What this book indicates about physical love teaches believers something about the proper relationship of God and man. Belief in God in the biblical sense, is like a commitment of the whole self to another...The theme of Canticles is the love of Solomon for his Shulamite bride and her deep affection for him. This love affair is understood to typify the warm, personal relationship which God desires with His spiritual bride, composed of all redeemed believers who have given their hearts to Him.²⁵

While the primary reference is to human sexuality, the book does teach us about our relationship with God. Although God is never mentioned by name in the book, the marriage metaphor is a strong one in the Old Testament. God has a covenant with his people much like the marriage covenant. It promises and requires exclusive allegiance. When Israel commits adultery against the Lord, they in effect seek to divorce him (Ezek.16, 23; Hos.1-3).²⁶

VI. NEW TESTAMENT ANALYSIS

The New Testament speaks of the believer's relationship to Christ as a marriage; both in this world (Eph.5:22f) and also the world to come (Rev.19:7,9).

There has been a long tradition of relating this book to Christ by drawing analogies between the experiences of the two lovers and the experience of Christ and his church. In fact, the image of God as the husband and of his covenant people as his wife is also found in the Old Testament (e.g., Jer 2:2; Hos 2:14-20). Because Christ claims the church as his bride (cf. Eph 5:22-33), one legitimate application of Song of Songs is to realize that the love described in the book is in many ways similar to the love that Jesus has for the church (e.g., this is the predominant use of the Song of Songs in the Westminster Standards). At least three central dimensions instruct modern readers about the

²³ G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

²⁴ R Dillard and T Longman III, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 264.

²⁵ G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

²⁶ R Dillard and T Longman III, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 265.

nature of this love: self-giving, desire and commitment. Jesus delights in us and gives himself to us in love. He desires us wholly for himself, and he feels deeply both the pain and pleasure of his relationship with us. Christ gave his very life for the church and even now devotes himself to her good as a loving husband. The church looks to Christ for protection and affection; she honors him for his wondrous care and seeks his glory every day. Both Christ and the church long for the day of their final union, the day of the great wedding feast at Christ's return (Rev 19:7,9).²⁷

VII. THE MESSAGE OF SONG OF SOLOMON

Original Message: Enjoy God's gift of love in every relationship, but especially in relation to Him

Present Message: Enjoy God's gift of love in every relationship, but especially in relation to Christ.

²⁷ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1050.