

THE SONG OF SONGS
or
SONG OF SOLOMON

GENRE

The Song of Songs / Song of Solomon (SOS) is **Poetry**, specifically, **Love Poetry**.

Many love poems have been discovered in the Ancient Near East (ANE): Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon and Sumeria. They show marked similarities to SOS, often using many of the same metaphors, phrasing, etc.

The literary descendants of these poems are often used at weddings or wedding feasts. Therefore, it is possible that the ANE love poems like SOS had a similar function. *It may also have been used as a “marriage manual.”*

Almost everything in SOS should be viewed as figurative or symbolic of things related to human love and sexuality, including the characters.

AUTHORSHIP ...

Solomon? – It is possible that Solomon wrote some but not all of it.

1. The attribution may simply mean “Solomonic” / Solomon-like.
2. Attributing works to famous men or authors was accepted practice.
3. The same attribution in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes definitely did not apply to the whole of those two books.
4. Solomon’s profligacy was the opposite of the devotion in the SOS.
5. His name is mentioned only 3 times, and then as a stylized object and not as the composer.
6. In 8:11-12 he is ridiculed, not something he would do as author.
7. “King” does not refer to any particular person. Like “shepherd,” “king” was a common term of endearment. (*Like we say “princess.”*)

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A WOMAN AUTHOR? ...

Given the intimate experiential familiarity expressed in the young woman's words in SOS, some scholars believe that a woman wrote at least those portions of the Song.

If that is not the case, then the male author(s) had almost certainly conversed with women regarding their experiences of romantic, emotional, sexual love.

COMPOSITION

There are basically two possibilities:

1. SOS is a drama or dramatic poem, written to exalt the love between a man and a woman, particularly the sexual aspect of that love.
2. SOS is a collection of love poems or songs, written over a period of time and then collected and edited into one long song.

Many linguistic factors make Option 2 the most likely.

While Solomon *may* have contributed some of the original portions of the Song, it is NOT believed that he wrote the entire book.

INTERPRETATION

Late Jewish and early Christian embarrassment and uneasiness with human sexuality and the highly erotic nature of SOS led most to create allegorical interpretations with the lovers representing God and Israel, or Christ and the Church. (*see page 110 of your text.*)

This is essentially impossible. There is **zero** indication in SOS that it is an allegory. No allegorical indicators are present, and no OT or NT writer ever treats SOS as an allegory. **SOS is not an allegory.** *SOS is not about God and Israel or Christ and the Church.*

Allegorical interpretation is no longer considered a proper way of interpreting any part of Scripture except where a text is explicitly designated allegorical.

INTERPRETATION

Nowhere in Scripture are erotic images used to portray the relationship of God to his people, or of God to any individual.

Everywhere in Scripture the erotic relationships of the false gods and goddesses and erotic practices associated with their worship are condemned.

Everywhere in Scripture the greatest care is taken to portray God as Spirit until the incarnation of the Son. Nowhere in Scripture is God's relationship with us portrayed in allegorical or typical manner that evokes physical union or romantic, erotic emotions.

The New Testament does not refer to the SOS.

The most that we can possibly say is that since Scripture elsewhere depicts God's relationship with his people as a marriage, we can look at what the Bible says about the marriage relationship in any Bible passage for potential *principles* about our relationship with Christ.

When we look at SOS we see their love displayed in a passionate, devoted, uninhibited way. By analogy we might then say that *if* human love and marriage are supposed to be like this, *then* similar *principles* of devotion and passion should mark our relationship with Christ.

Knowing how to properly interpret SOS not only provides Christians with a God-ordained healthy understanding of human sexuality, *but also prevents some of the crazy doctrines promoted by allegorical interpretation.* (Such as IHOP's Bridal Paradigm)

SOS is filled with images and metaphors from nature, culture, and architecture. **Nature is exalted. Our physical bodies and the material world are celebrated.** *In the SOS, we return to Paradise.*

Many of the metaphors used in SOS are used elsewhere in Scripture or in surrounding ANE cultures as euphemisms, symbols, and double entendres for **sex, sexual lovemaking, and sexual organs.** *Therefore, that is how the authors and original readers would have understood them.*

Most of the remaining images are used to describe not only places or things associated with the lovers encounters and love, but also serve as still more allusions to their bodies and their passion.

The SOS is one long series of celebrations of nature, human love, the human body, and human sexuality.

By using images from Creation and from the Garden so pervasively, the authors are clearly intending to teach that in the sexual relationship we return to Paradise. (your textbook, page 112)

The SOS teaches that “ ... wives should derive the same pleasure and fulfillment that their husbands do from sexuality. ... SOS celebrates the woman’s enjoyment and full participation in sexuality on equal terms with her lover. ... The book celebrates sexual desire and enjoyment for its own sake without suggesting that procreation is the primary purpose for sexuality.” (*see page 111 of your text*)

The SOS is not an allegory, and none of the metaphors or other language in the SOS are types of Christ or the Church. Nor does the SOS point forward to Christ in any way. WE have to, by analogy, discern principles about marriage from this poem that we can then apply to our relationship with Christ, just as we would do from any biblical passage touching on marriage.

Essentially all modern scholarship agrees with this assessment. *The SOS has nothing directly to do with Christ or the Church.*

The SOS is one long series of exaltations of nature, human love, the human body, and passionate, uninhibited human sexuality in marriage.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SONG of SONGS

- A** Opening words of mutual love & desire (1:2-2:7)
- B** Young Man's invitation to the Young Woman (2:8-17)
- C** Young Woman's nighttime search for the Young Man (3:1-5)
- D CENTER – Their Wedding Day (3:6-5:1)**
- C'** Young Woman's nighttime search for the Young Man (5:2-7:11)
- B'** Young Woman's invitation to the Young Man (7:12-8:4)
- A'** Closing words of mutual Love and Desire (8:5-14)

The chiastic focus of the SOS: The sexual consummation of their love.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

TERSENESS ...

Like other poetry, Hebrew poetry is marked by terseness: The brevity of its phrases or clauses, use of ellipsis, lack of conjunctions.

“Set me like a seal on your heart,
like a seal on your arm.”

*(Ellipsis: “Set me” is assumed but
not repeated.)*

“Draw me after you; let’s run!

The king has brought me into his bedroom.”

Fewer words leave room for ambiguity and imagination.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

CHARACTERIZATION ...

The characters in SOS are generalized personifications who fill particular roles. They do not refer to specific individuals.

The characters are personifications: Generalized archetypes with whom readers and listeners can identify. We recognize ourselves, other people, and real life in that character, that personification.

The woman / lover is called “Sister,” a common term of endearment. She is NOT a biological sister.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

CHARACTERIZATION ...

THE WOMAN ...

As in other ANE love poetry, she speaks almost exactly twice as much as the man. A very consistent pattern in this genre.

Once again here is another marker identifying the Genre: it is ANE love poetry. It is NOT allegory.

The women in ANE love poetry speak twice as much as the men. This is the case here in SOS.

She initiates the sexual / romantic relationship and directs much of it.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

CHARACTERIZATION ...

THE MAN ...

Generic. Young, virile, desirable.

King & shepherd are not literal. They are common terms of endearment.

THE WOMEN ...

“City girls, young and naive, inexperienced in matters of love.”

They are a literary device to serve as 1) a sounding board for Q&A on love; and as, 2) Contrast for the rural Shulamite (foils for her).

BROTHERS ... They serve in the place of the absent Father to protect and supervise the Shulamite girl.

(Again, these are all generalized personifications to tell a story.)

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

PARALLELISM ...

Repetition: Subsequent line or lines say the same thing in a different (but parallel) way or to develop or contribute to the thought of the first colon (line).

Three basic kinds of parallelism:

1. Synonymous – development by repetition, close similarity
2. Antithetical – development by contrast or opposites
3. Synthetic – development by enhancement, complementarity

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

PARALLELISM ...

Synonomous ...

“My head is full of dew,
my hair with the drizzle of the night” (5:2)

Like most of the song, this can and should be read on two levels.

The top level can be read as straightforward parallelism, with a plain sense meaning.

At the same time, “head” is definitely a euphemism for the male phallus and dew a metaphor for his fluid.

“Hair” either elaborates “head” or is a euphemistic description of the immediate result of consummation.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

IMAGERY ... Figurative language, word-pictures.

Metaphor – A concrete image used to describe something else. Evokes comparison, insights, feelings. Meant to be unusual, memorable, evocative.

“Your eyes behind your veil are doves.” (4:1a)

Simile – Uses the word “like” and could be taken more literally.

“Your hair is like a flock of goats ...” (4:1b)

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

IMAGERY ... Figurative language, word-pictures.

Euphemism – A pleasant/inoffensive word for a potentially unpleasant/offensive/taboo word. Example: Passed/died, Sleep/death.

Most Hebrew euphemisms were used to avoid explicit naming of ...

1. Death
2. Sex, anything having to do with sexuality (sexuality is holy)
3. Distasteful things
4. God, because of his holiness

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

IMAGERY ... Euphemisms / Metaphors ...

Examples of the real object and of the metaphor / euphemism used to mean that object without actually naming it ...

REAL OBJECTS

EUPHEMISM / METAPHOR

1. Male sexual organs – Hand (Isa 57:8), Leg (Isa 7:20), Thigh (Gen 24:2), etc.
2. Female sexual organs – Navel (SOS 7:3), Belly (7:3), Mouth (Prov 30:20), Tongue (Isa 57:4), etc.
3. Sexual intercourse – lie with, love, know, come, enter; grind (Job 31:9-10), Plough (Jdg 14:18), Eat (Gen 39:6), etc.
4. Woman (sexually) – Garden (SOS 4:12), Vineyard (SOS 2:15), Spring (SOS 4:12, Prov 5:18), Cistern (Prov 5:15), etc.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

The SOS is *filled* with combinations of parallelisms, metaphors, euphemisms, double entendres, and other poetic literary devices.

SOS 4:3 ... Euphemisms / Metaphors

3a1 “Your navel is a rounded bowl,
3a2 which does not lack mixed wine.
3b1 Your belly is a heap of wheat,
3b2 bordered with lilies.”

Real Objects

... (*her sexual organ*)
... (*what it contains*)
... (*her sexual organ*)
... (*what grows around it*)

3a1 – 3a2 ... Euphemism – Navel. Metaphors – Rounded bowl, mixed wine.
3b1 – 3b2 ... Euphemism – Belly. Metaphors – heap of wheat, lilies.

3a1 and 3a2 – Synthetic Parallelism. 3b1 and 3b2 – Synthetic Parallelism.
3a and 3b – Synonymous Parallelism.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

All of SOS is concerned with the persons, aspects, emotions, techniques, and locations of physical lovemaking. The allusions are far too numerous to list. Good commentaries should be consulted. A very partial list of these euphemisms and metaphors used throughout SOS would include ...

ESPECIALLY NOTE that everything is described using the images of Paradise.

Shade, fruit, apple tree, apple – erotic symbols, related mostly to the male, mostly to his sexual anatomy, especially during lovemaking.

Garden, vine, pomegranates – erotic symbols, related mostly to females, mostly to her sexual anatomy.

Raisin cakes, apples, mandrakes – aphrodisiacs, strength for passion .

Gazelle, stag – sexual virility, related to the male.

Lovesick – passionate emotional and sexual longing.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

(Euphemisms / metaphors continued ...)

Honey, milk, wine, fruit, sweets, dew, blossoms, palms, vineyard, wetness, water, a spring, rivers of water, life – aspects of their bodies, the smell and taste of their perfumes and of their mouths, bodies, and organs, and of what they produce during arousal, then during lovemaking, and then at the consummation.

These metaphors are also included when describing the lovers' actions ...

2:6 – “His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me.” *(This is very common and explicit in ANE love poetry. Embracing the woman's sexual organ is always intended.)*

4:11 – “...honey and milk are under your tongue...” – Deep, full kissing.

4:16 – “Let my beloved come into his garden.” – Penetration (Gen 16:2)

7:8 – “...climb the palm trees...” – Reach the consummation.

LITERARY STYLE, SYMBOLS, AND DEVICES ...

(Euphemisms / metaphors continued ... The lovers' actions continued ...)

All senses are fully engaged in the passionate pleasure of love – Sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell.

The full range of male/female sexual foreplay and consummation is endorsed.

All of this and more is found in the other ANE love poetry as well. Again, this is how we know what the Song of Songs is: It contains all the markers, the characteristics, found in other love poetry of the ANE cultures that surrounded Israel.

Hebrew literature, especially poetry, uses many other euphemisms and metaphors for even more detailed aspects of the human body parts and also of activities related to sexuality.

CONCLUSION

God is affirming and celebrating the goodness of sex within marriage as a gift from God to humanity. Sex is affirmed in this manner for its own sake, for the joy and pleasure of the sexual relationship, without regard to procreation (having children).

Sex is holy, good, clean, clearly to be enjoyed as often as is physically possible. God gave his people this beautiful love song so that we could understand his view and intention regarding sex, so that we would make that our view and our intention as well.

With its pervasive imagery of nature and of the Garden, the Song of Songs calls back to Creation, to the Garden, when man and woman were naked and unashamed, created for each other and for God, walking with God in his good creation.

CONCLUSION

In the Song of Songs God tells us that the closest we get to Paradise in this life is in the fully devoted love of a man for a woman expressed in sexual passion. He sets this beautiful song of love in the midst of his Garden, his beloved creation. God places man and woman as the very centerpiece of this Garden. *When their covenantal love flashes forth in sexual passion, they approach the Holy of Holies, the fiery Presence of God.*

**SOS 8:6 “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.” (ESV)**

The SOS is one long series of exaltations of creation, of human love, the human body, and passionate, uninhibited human sexuality in marriage.

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