

Study No.17

Song of Songs



Timeframe of events:

c.930 B.C.

Summary: The Song of Songs (meaning “The Greatest Song”) is also variously known in English as The Song of Solomon, The Song, Canticles and other variations of these titles. As the name would suggest, it was first penned as a song, though its original melody has long been lost. Without music, in our Bibles it reads as a poem, or a series of poems, with different characters conversing with each other throughout, especially people complimenting others on their beauty.

Love, faithfulness and devotion are themes found throughout this book, which is rich in imagery and metaphors. The Song is associated with Solomon, though it seems that it was probably not written “by” him, as some English titles suggest, but was more likely “about” him, Solomon himself being one of the main characters. An exact interpretation of every verse and phrase is difficult to establish with confidence, but the approach taken in this study is that there are three main characters: King Solomon, a young lady, and a shepherd to whom the lady is espoused. Broadly speaking, the true dedication between the lady and the shepherd is seen in contrast to the “love” of King Solomon – which, while materially tempting, was fickle, short lived, self-serving, and ultimately not very meaningful.

Main Reading / Listening



Read and/or listen to the following passages at least once. Twice is better for taking it all in!

As a minimum, please read or listen to: Song of Songs ch.2
To read or listen to the entire Bible systematically, this week’s passages are:

Song of Songs (8 chapters).

Read in at least two different versions if possible.

✔ What is Fact? ✔

? What is Questionable? ?

There are many different interpretations about The Song of Songs. By familiarising ourselves with the **facts** first (this page), we will at least have a basis from which to explore those areas that are **open to question** (see pages 3 and 4).



Facts about The Song of Songs



- It is called a “song” (1:1), so it would have originally been sung.
- It is preserved for us today in poetic form, so it is helpful to bear in mind some of the features of Hebrew poetry (e.g. lines that “rhyme” with each other in ideas, emotion-laden, not to be read too quickly, etc.)
- The Song has an association with King Solomon, who is mentioned by name seven times (1:1,5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11,12).
- Several attributes of Solomon and his reign are mentioned (e.g. his royalty in 3:7-11; his harem and many queens in 6:8,9). These are consistent with what we read about him in 1 Kings 1-11 and 2 Chronicles 1-9.
- Love between men and women features strongly (e.g. 1:2-4; 6:4; 7:6; etc.)
- The Song is comprised of several different sections with different settings (e.g. 1:4; 3:6; 8:13,14; etc.).
- There are different characters who converse with each other (e.g. 1:2-4).
- The Song was first written in Hebrew. However, the allocation of certain verses to certain speakers (e.g. “Lover”, “Beloved”, “Shulamite”, etc.) in many Bible editions does not form part of the original inspired text and is open to question – see pp. 3,4.
- There is a lot of imagery particular to the culture of the time. This is especially true of the many references to agricultural and Eastern societal features. The imagery and the plot paint a scenario quite unfamiliar to most Western culture modern-day readers (e.g. 2:3,4; 4:1,2; 6:8,9; etc.).
- The Song was God-inspired, because it is included in “The Scriptures” referred to by both Christ (e.g. Luke 24:44) and by Paul, who wrote that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God ...” (2 Timothy 3:16). These include The Song, which was part of the Tanach, the collection of Hebrew Scriptures we commonly call the Old Testament.
- The Song is “profitable” for us to read (2 Timothy 3:16).

? There is a wide range of opinions about ... ?

- **How many main characters feature in The Song, and exactly who is speaking in each verse.**

A quick comparison of a few Bible translations will show that they generally do not even ascribe the same characters to each verse, and the names and roles of the characters varies greatly. Your Bible may have names such as “Beloved”, “Lover” “Shulamite”, etc. interspersed throughout the text. These indicate who the translators think is speaking in each case. However, this is quite open to debate. For instance, in the NKJV 2:14 is ascribed to a woman, but in the NIV the same verse is set forth as being spoken by a man. Obviously, this has a major bearing on how we might interpret the book!

The main reason for this is because the original Hebrew text did not allocate characters to each verse. Translators have generally taken note of grammatical features, such as gender (masculine, feminine or “common” – i.e. words that could be either masculine or feminine) and number (i.e. 1st person – “I”/“we”; 2nd person – “thou”/“you”, singular or plural; 3rd person – “he” “she” “they”; etc).

This provides a huge challenge for the reader when each Bible edition is quite different – and that’s before we even start to discuss the myriad of interpretations amongst Bible commentators.

- **Solomon’s role.**

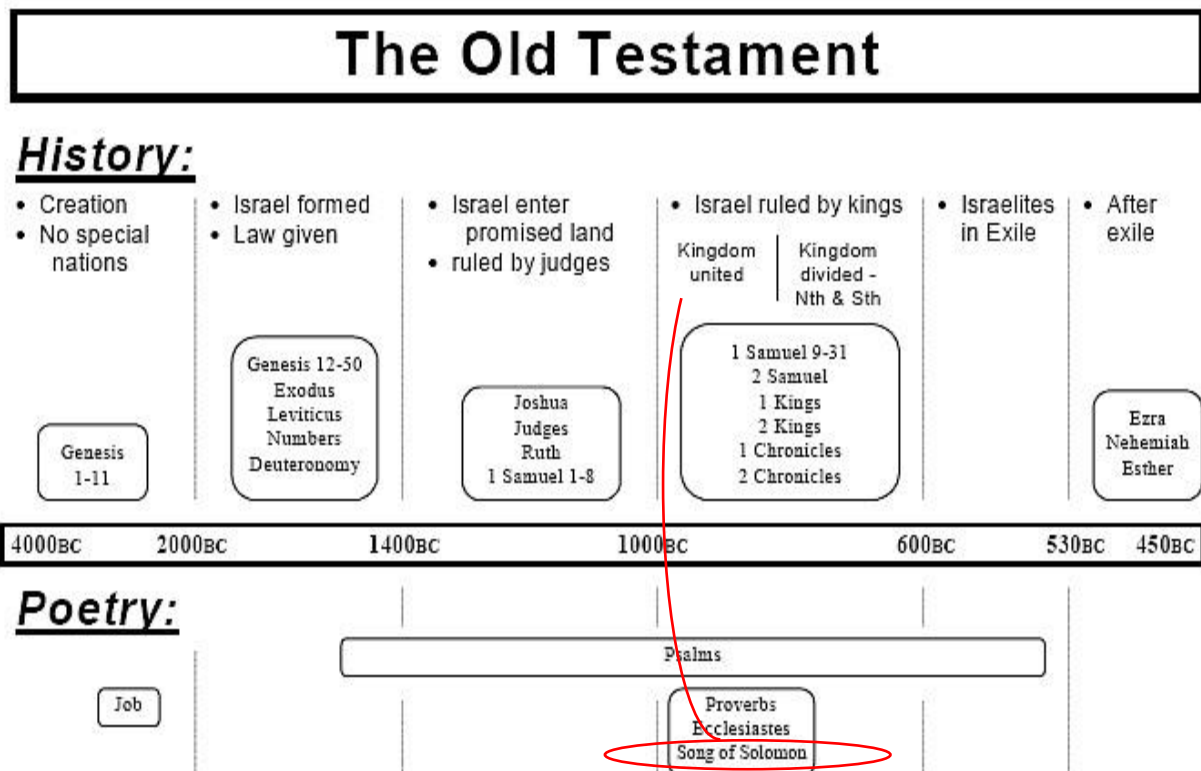
The title verse in 1:1 tells us that we are about to read “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s”; some Bibles even have “Song of Solomon” as the title. This would imply that Solomon was the author. However, in the Hebrew original, the name Solomon has a *lamedh* prefix (the Hebrew equivalent of the English letter “L” attached to the front of Solomon’s name), just as it does in the title of Psalm 72. This can variously be translated as “of”, “to”, “for” or “concerning” Solomon.

- **The main message of The Song, and what the Christian can learn from the Song.**

Some varying interpretations suggest that The Song:

- is about God’s love for Israel
- portrays the love and fidelity of the Virgin Mary
- shows Christ’s love for the Church
- is a guidebook for Christian love
- demonstrates four different kinds of love relationships
- is a tale of the devotion of two young lovers to each other, despite the tempting advances of King Solomon.

The common thread amongst these are the ideas of love, faithfulness, and devotion.



Song of Songs

Main scenes and summaries

This article presents one suggested interpretation of the Song of Songs.

It is conceded that some of the details are open to debate.

See “Song of Songs – Pronouns Parsed” for further analysis.

This may be found at www.systematicbiblestudy.com

The plot: As presented over the next few pages, the story centres around three main characters: **King Solomon, a young lady, and a shepherd** (several extra characters play lesser roles). Essentially, a young lady finds herself reluctantly part of King Solomon’s harem in a palace at Jerusalem. However, she already has a lover in the countryside, a shepherd.

The story tells of two contrasting scenarios: On the one hand, we witness King Solomon’s advances to the young lady whilst actively pursuing relationships with many other women. On the other hand, we see the much deeper and substantial commitment between the young lady and her shepherd lover. Despite the access to vast material riches and pleasures by pleasing the king, the young lady subtly repels the advances of Solomon and remains committed to the shepherd, the true love of her life.

[1:1 Title and introduction]

ACT ONE 1:2 – 3:5

Scene: Within King Solomon’s palace harem chambers, Jerusalem.

1:2-4 Setting the scene. Present are King Solomon, the ladies of his harem (the “Daughters of Jerusalem”), and a young lady who is one of the central characters of the song. To show us what was probably a typical scene, one of the harem addresses her companions whilst flattering Solomon, with the harem in turn interjecting and flattering Solomon (“we will...”).

1:5,6 After this, we hear from a young lady, probably the latest addition to the harem.

1:7,8 Despite her “duty” to also flatter King Solomon in this setting, the young lady imagines herself conversing with a young shepherd, a peasant who was the lady’s true love before she was taken from the countryside to Jerusalem to be part of Solomon’s harem.

1:9-17 Solomon now turns his attention to the young lady amidst the harem in the chambers. He flatters her, and she tolerates his flattery. However, her heart is really devoted to her true lover, the peasant shepherd.

2:1-7 Solomon falls asleep at this point, and the young lady begins to address her companions in the harem. She charges them not to “stir nor awake love until it pleases”. Some translations read something like “stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please”; hence there is uncertainty as to whether this refers to not stirring a person (probably Solomon) or love itself. Similar requests are found in 3:5 and 8:4.

2:8-3:5 She then tells the harem about the shepherd, her true love. She describes him and tells a story about him: One day he snuck up to the palace, peered through the lattice and spoke to her. At night, she looked for him, but he had gone, so she snuck out and eventually located him. She may have taken him back to her family home in the country, as well, though this is not clear. The phrase, “stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please” (or its variant) is spoken again.

ACT TWO 3:6 – 5:1

Scene: Just outside King Solomon’s palace, perhaps a few days or weeks later.

3:6-11 King Solomon returns home to Jerusalem from business in Lebanon, a country to the north of Israel but under Solomon’s control at the time. An unknown official heralds Solomon’s return to Jerusalem and orders that the harem go and greet him.

4:1 -5:1 With Solomon is another newly acquired wife, whom he has married whilst in Lebanon. Solomon flatters his new wife with compliments (4:1-16a), she warms to his advances (4:16b), responds to her likewise (5:1a), and then invites his companions to celebrate the occasion (5:1b).

ACT THREE 5:2 – 6:3

Scene: Later, in the palace harem chambers.

5:2-7 The young lady relates a story to the harem similar to that in 2:8-3:5, in which the shepherd sneaks up to the palace at night to see her again, and when she goes to open the door to meet him, he is gone and she again sneaks out to look for him. However, this time she is caught by night watchmen who beat her.

5:8,9 The women of the harem ask what is so special about the shepherd.

5:10-16 The young lady tells the harem what she finds attractive about him.

6:1 The women of the harem express a desire to see him, too.

6:2 The young lady responds to them.

ACT FOUR 6:4 – 8:4**Scene: Later, in the palace harem chambers.**

The exact identity of the male speaker is unclear. Most likely, the speaker is King Solomon, and this scene probably takes place in a private chamber away from the harem.

There is a possibility that the male speaker is the shepherd, and the location unknown, though some of the language and imagery in this speech closely resembles Solomon's speech in 4:1-16. For example: being overwhelmed by the lady's eyes (compare 6:5 here with 4:9 earlier); the comparison of her teeth to sheep (compare 6:6 here & 4:2 earlier); the comparison of her hair to a flock of goats (compare 6:5 here with 4:1 earlier); etc.

6:4-12 Solomon expresses his love for the young lady. The speech mentions 60 queens, 80 concubines and virgins without number (6:8), a reference to Solomon's bevy of women.

6:13 A brief aside back in the harem chambers. The harem calls out in hope for the return of the young lady. An unknown speaker (perhaps one of the harem minders?) asks the women of the harem what they see in the young lady. *[This verse contains the only occurrences of her being referred to as a "Shulamite" in the entire text of the song.]*

7:1-9a Back in the private chamber, Solomon continues his flattery. Some of the language is similar to that of Solomon's speech in 4:1-16 (e.g. breasts like two fawns 7:3,7,8 cp 4:5; neck like a tower 4:4 cp 7:4).

7:9b,10 Possibly an aside by the young lady. Solomon has just told her that she is like the best wine; she takes that image and thinks of the shepherd whom she really loves.

7:11-13 Solomon invites her to go to the countryside with him.

8:1,2 The young lady subtly repels Solomon's advances

8:3,4 Solomon falls asleep and the young lady once again requests that the harem "stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please".

ACT FIVE 8:5-14**Scene: Later, at the shepherd's home in the countryside.**

8:5a In contrast to the question in 3:6 about who this was coming out of the wilderness (the answer there being Solomon returning to his home in Jerusalem), this question by the shepherd relates to the young lady returning to her true love in the countryside.

8:5b-7 The young lady speaks of her commitment to the shepherd

8:8,9 The shepherd's brothers (or possibly other local villagers?) speak of their role in protecting their young sister, still a child, should she, in years to come, find herself in the same position as the young lady (i.e. being seconded to be part of the king's harem).

8:10-12 The young lady alludes to how she resisted Solomon's advances and kept her virginity in the process.

8:13,14 The young lady requests an audible signal from a local acting as a lookout, so that the young lady and the shepherd do not get caught together. The song concludes with her urging the shepherd to flee the scene, lest he be apprehended.

Alternative interpretations worth considering may be found in:

“The Greatest Love Song” by Brian Sherring

“Song of Songs – An Alternative View” by Sylvia Penny

Song of Songs *“Commentary”* by Dr. C. D. Ginsburg,
as quoted in *The Companion Bible*, p.921.

Enhancing your reading:

Attempt one or more of the following tasks for a better appreciation of the subjects covered by the main readings for this study.



- Jot down any questions arising from this study’s readings. Ask someone else for help, or conduct your own research to try and answer these questions.

- Note any passages, verses, themes or lessons that have stood out to you from this study’s readings. Write down or verbalise your reasons.

- Read or listen to these other Bible passages that relate to the content of this week’s readings, especially regarding faithful devotion in the face of lucrative temptation:

Ephesians 4:14; 6:13; Philippians 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:14.



For much deeper study:

Read or refer to the following article and audios. Some are available on www.systematicbiblestudy.com, and most are available in hard copy or electronic formats, online and offline:

- Companion Bible commentary on 1:1 (p.922)
- YouTube: “Song of Songs – Orchestrated New King James Version” - a sensitive dramatized reading of the text, with different voices portraying various parts.
- YouTube: “Song of Solomon” (S090), audio message by Ernest Streets

Consider and discuss the following questions:



- 1) What is Solomon’s connection with this book? (1:1,5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11,12)
- 2) Who would have sung this song in ancient times?
- 3) Who sings it regularly today? At which occasion is it usually sung? Why?
- 4) What is meant by the term “song of songs”? 1:1
- 5) How many different main character roles do you think there are in this song? Give reasons for your answer.
- 6) How do we know that this book should be considered to be God-inspired Scripture? Luke 24:44; 2 Timothy 3:16
- 7) Attempt to describe the plot of The Song in just two or three sentences.
- 8) Who are the “Daughters of Jerusalem” / “Friends” in 1:4?
- 9) How is the phrase about a flock of goats (4:1; 6:5) a compliment?
- 10) What are some of the difficulties faced when reading The Song of Songs?
- 11) What can we establish as facts about The Song? Why is it important to keep these things in mind?
- 12) Of what value is The Song to modern Christians today?