

Commentary on the Song of Solomon

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April 10, 2011

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Eat Friends! Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers!

~ The Song of Solomon 5:1

Introduction

One of the most basic aspects of human existence is the male/female relationship and the associated issues—marriage, sexuality, parenting, and family life. The family always has been, and always will be the foundational building block of society; as goes the family, so goes the society, for better or worse. God is the designer of the human mind and body. He is the one who created sexuality and the one who gave us our sexual nature. We should therefore expect that He would advise us on how we should live.

The Bible is Christianity's source book for all of the issues of life. Some subjects are treated in much more detail than others, and many topics require elaboration and further study. Its content was written between 2,000 and 3,500 years ago, so we must consider how these ancient writings apply to our current culture, which is obviously very different from that era. But human nature has not changed, and the underlying principles stated in the Bible are timeless, applying to all people everywhere.

Male/female relationship issues are indeed addressed in many Biblical passages and tucked away in the middle of the Old Testament is a small book called the "Song of Solomon," which not only teaches, but truly celebrates romance and eroticism. This book has long been a classic, but throughout history, its content has been spiritualized and allegorized, and therefore its romantic and erotic nature has largely been hidden. This was done for a variety of reasons, but all of them boil down to a

discomfort with sexual expression. See the following internet resource for a full treatment of the reasons for this discomfort: [Religion and the Corruption of Eroticism](#)

The first chapters of book of Genesis tell the story of the creation of the world. After creating each element, God paused and proclaimed that it was “good.” It is my contention that the Song of Solomon is essentially an extension of the Genesis concepts of the intrinsic goodness of sexuality, along with advice to guide us in its proper expression, so that we may fully realize our potential as men and women and have satisfying and lifelong relationships with the opposite sex.

If God designed human beings to be sexual, and to be capable of eroticism and orgasmic delight in the appropriate context, who are we, and who any religious or government authority, to call these things bad or evil? Let us instead attempt to wash away all of the negative accretions that have tarnished and debased this important part of our essence and return to the Garden of Eden. That is what The Song of Solomon is all about.

Many have attempted to explain and comment on the Song of Solomon, but most of these commentaries are from an allegorical perspective, and have eliminated the romantic and erotic aspects, which I believe to be the book’s primary meaning. Therefore, the complete text of The Song is included below along with a commentary on its meaning.

Meaning and Interpretation

One of the most basic principles of Biblical interpretation is that the main meaning and significance of any text is found in the plain sense of what it says. If the Song is read without seeking any deeper meaning, it is obvious that this story/poem was written to celebrate romance and sex in the context of an appropriate relationship. The book is essentially a poetic continuation of the type of relational advice that Solomon wrote in his other books— Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Song, however, was written in poetry and figures of speech, because of the subject of this advice is romance, marriage, sexuality, and eroticism. In other words, Solomon wished to give very specific and graphic sexual advice, but to do it in a tactful and elevating manner, where it would be hidden from the young but understood and appreciated by adults. Sex and eroticism is meant only for mature adults.

Most of the Song consists of dialog between a man and a woman, and issues relating to their relationship. At first reading, the story seems somewhat strange and disjointed, rather like stream of consciousness writing. Another difficulty is that it is not always clear who the speaker is. This role switches back and forth between various individuals and groups, and it is not always possible to determine exactly who is speaking and who is being spoken to. But this can mostly be inferred from the context and content. For example, the line from chapter one, “may he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,” is obviously the woman speaking about or to the man. After the figures of speech are understood, and the text is considered, the story flows and makes much more sense.

Many others have attempted to comment on the Song of Solomon and develop a structure for it. Some have seen it as a drama or a musical play, others as an extended allegory, but virtually all of the older commentaries treated the book in spiritual and metaphorical terms, in which the male in the story (“the beloved”) represents God or Christ, and the female represents either the nation of Israel or the church. In contrast to these, the basis of my interpretation and commentary below is that the story is primarily an extended love and sex poem intended to provide guidance and advice for couples (a “romantic and sexual book of Proverbs” if you will), and it covers various stages and issues in a courtship and marriage relationship. It may well have secondary meanings with more theological overtones, but the primary meaning must be the main focus.

In addition to the differing interpretations of this book, there is also disagreement about the identity of the central male figure. The shepherd boy/man who is the “beloved” in the story is not identified. Many believe that that the male is Solomon himself, perhaps in an earlier and more innocent period of his life.

In my opinion, however, Solomon is not the lover of the woman in the story. He makes several appearances and perhaps tries to woo her in Song 1:4-2:7, Song 3:6-11, and Song 8:11. He flaunts his wealth and power, but she is in love with her “beloved” and remains true to him. Immediately after each mention of Solomon, the woman returns to contemplating her true lover and extolling his virtues. Therefore, in this commentary, Solomon is not the male of the story and instead represents a competitor of the man who is the beloved.

The identity of the girl/woman in the story is equally veiled. There is only one reference that further identifies her—she is designated as a “Shulammite maiden” in Song 5:13. This word is the feminine form of “Solomon,” which comes from the Hebrew word “shalom,” meaning “peace.” Therefore, the woman may have been one of Solomon’s maidens from his court, but not necessarily one of his wives or concubines.

Some have suggested that the woman in the story was Abishag, who was a beautiful Shunammite maiden (from the town of Shunem in the Galilee region). Perhaps the use of “Shulammite” to describe the woman was a play on words with “Shunammite.” Abishag became King David’s nurse and servant in the king’s old age, but not his sexual partner. She became further involved in royal politics after the death of King David, and it is possible that the background for the Song was Abishag’s subsequent love for a man other than Solomon.

Near the end of David’s life, Solomon’s brother Adonijah had attempted to be crowned as king, but he had not received his father David’s blessing. Adonijah organized a coronation party for himself, but his party was rudely interrupted by the shouts of another gathering hosted by King David to crown Solomon as king. All of Adonijah’s guests slunk away in fear and embarrassment. Adonijah later stupidly compounded his error by asking Solomon for permission to marry Abishag, the former royal nurse. A marriage to Abishag, who was a royal “concubine,” would have brought Adonijah closer the throne, and reflected his frustration that he did not receive the royal mantle from his father.

Solomon forgave Adonijah for his first indiscretion in attempting his own coronation, but not the second one of asking to marry Abishag. Solomon had seen his half-brother Absalom almost overthrow their father David’s kingdom, and he was not about to allow such a thing to happen again. Therefore, he ordered that Adonijah be killed.

There is no further mention of Abishag after the incident with Adonijah, but she may well have married another man. In his later years, Solomon was perhaps fascinated with Abishag’s love for this man and her rejection of the wealth and influence that could have accrued to her if she had been his wife and stayed in his court. Perhaps he was feeling jaded with all of his women—Song 5:8 indicates that he had sixty wives and eighty concubines at the time. In any case, if Abishag had married a man other than Solomon and was happy with him, Solomon could have been inspired by and used that relationship as the foundation for the story when he wrote it.

Some may ask, why would Solomon, the great king and expert on romance and sex and one of the wisest men who have ever lived, write a song/poem in which he was not “the beloved” and the central male figure? The answer lays, or may lay, in considering his life and his other writings, especially the

book of Ecclesiastes, which he probably wrote near the end of his life. Ecclesiastes has an overall tone of despair and regret. Solomon was a man who had seen it all, done it all, and still wasn't satisfied; the book explores his reaction, as well as providing clues to understanding the Song:

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” What advantage does man have in all his work that he does under the sun?

A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there again. Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along, and on its circular courses the wind returns. All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again. All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, “It is madness,” and of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?” I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had home-born slaves. I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

Thus, I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun. *Ecclesiastes 1:1-8, 2:1-11*

Solomon was distressed that he could not “get any satisfaction,” and his frustration was compounded by the fact that even though he had more resources than anyone else before or after him, he still wasn't happy. What else could he do? Once he had taken all of those women as wives and/or lovers, and had children by them, he was trapped by his own pride and libido. Despite his incredible wealth and power, like everyone else, he was stuck with the family he had, and with the situation which he himself had created.

As he considered his life, Solomon seems to have regretted some of his decisions, particularly concerning women, marriage, children and parenting. He had a huge harem, which is a common male fantasy—what could be better for a man than having many hot and nubile women who are all eager to

be his love and sex slaves? From 10,000 feet this would seem to be the ideal life, but the reality was quite different. The Bible doesn't give us any details, but based on what we know about other harems of history, Solomon had all of the same distressing and unresolvable problems: vicious cattiness, intense competition, lack of love, and high levels of jealousy and political maneuvering covered by deception. Often this led to civil wars and other forms of conflict between the progeny of the women, with the Biblical story of Absalom and Amnon discussed below (both of whom were Solomon's brothers) serving as a powerful example. A number of Solomon's women were political marriages from surrounding areas and came as part of treaties and peace agreements. Thus, they had little or no loyalty to Solomon, and possibly some were never able to sleep with him or even see him. These women were like birds in gilded cages, admired from a distance, but up close they were bitter and felt betrayed. Here is what the Bible does say about the end of his reign:

He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods, and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been... Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done.
1 Kings 11:3-6

One of the most significant verses in Ecclesiastes is in the last chapter, where Solomon says, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth before the evil days come; when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them,' and when the clouds return after the rain." Solomon undoubtedly wrote these words from a deep sense of personal crisis and failure – he was supposedly the wisest man on earth but had failed with his own family. The crises are not identified, but they were probably a combination of the intractable political, familial, and marital problems that took place at the end of his life, when he had the least amount of energy to deal with them — when the clouds returned after the rain. As Rose Kennedy said, "If you screw up your family, then not much else matters."

For all of his sexual variety, Solomon apparently did not have a woman who truly loved and cared for him, and therefore sex may have been purely copulation, where the relational elements—love, affection, and devotion—were entirely missing. Thus, he may well have written the Song as a catharsis, as the realization dawned on him after he had already married a number of women, that this was not the best way to live.

In my opinion, the unidentified male in The Song is "every man" and the female is "every woman." Looking at the book from this perspective, Solomon was trying to help people avoid the problems that he had experienced, and to provide wisdom and counsel as to how best to carry on a marital and sexual relationship for both male and female.

Sex has always been a subject of intense interest, but in contemporary society where it is used to sell many things, it is often thought of as being cheap, crass, shameful, trashy and mercenary. But the intent here is for a romantic and sexual relationship that is high and holy in addition to being intensely erotic. Is such a thing possible? It is my contention that this was God's intention from the beginning, and that the Song of Solomon was written to tell us how to achieve it.

See the paragraphs below for more information on the Song: Authorship of the Song of Solomon, The Life and Times of Solomon, and Secondary and Hidden Meanings, as well as the following internet resource: [The Redemption of Eroticism](#)

Individuals involved in the story

- The Woman – the Shulammitte maiden/girl/woman.
- The Man – the shepherd boy/man.
- King Solomon.
- The Daughters of Jerusalem or Zion – a group of other maidens/women, perhaps maids of the king, or his wives and concubines.
- Other groups (soldiers, citizens, queens, concubines, villagers, and guests).

Meaning of various terms used in the story

- Beloved – the man in the story.
- Come in to – sexual intercourse.
- Embrace – the man caressing and hugging the woman, and possibly penetrating her.
- Fountain, Spring, Well, and Water – the woman and her body, referring to her capability to refresh and renew a man.
- Fruit – yield, benefits, and food; “choice fruits” means satisfaction, including sexual satisfaction.
- Garden – the woman’s body, referring to the fact that she is beautiful, pleasant, and possessed by the man.
- Gazelle or Young Stag – A virile male buck who chases down and ruts with a doe, and a symbol for the male.
- Hind or Doe – A female deer, and symbol for the female.
- Little Foxes – problems, issues, and temptations that over time destroy a relationship.
- Love – in the context of this story this may mean sex, but probably refers to the total romantic and sexual relationship of the couple.
- Mountains and Hill – the high points on a woman’s body when she is lying on her back, i.e., her breasts and mons.
- Vineyard – the woman and her body, referring to her capability to satisfy a man in various ways.
- Wine – the actual drink as well as a symbol of total romantic/sexual satisfaction and fulfillment.

The above terms have obvious meanings when the text is considered. But other terms are less definitive and may not necessarily apply in the exactly the same way every time they are used. Furthermore, some terms may be meant in a literal rather than a figurative sense, and we have no definite way of knowing which one the author intended (perhaps Solomon was being deliberately coy). For example, the woman says at one point, “Sustain me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, for I am lovesick.” The “raisin cakes” and “apples” could refer to the literal foods, to a specific romantic or sexual activity, or both. The following list consists of speculative terms in the story, and possible meanings for them.

- Aloes – a spice, meaning unclear.
- Apples – possibly a reference to the male or the male member.
- Balsam – an ingredient in anointing oil, or possibly semen.
- Calamus – a spice, meaning unclear.
- Cinnamon – a spice, meaning unclear.
- Doves – a reference to the woman’s eyes, perhaps fluttering eyelashes like the wings of a dove.
- Figs and Fig Tree – meaning unclear.
- Frankincense – a spice, meaning unclear.

- Henna Blossoms – unclear, although women often used henna to decorate themselves both for beauty as well as for erotic enticement.
- Hill of Frankincense – probably the woman’s mons.
- Honeycomb and Honey – sweetness, meaning unclear.
- Lebanon – possibly fertility.
- Lily of the Valley—a common flower of the field, and may also refer to a crocus, meaning unclear.
- Lovesick – possibly aflame with sexual passion.
- Mountains of Myrrh – possibly the woman’s breasts.
- Myrrh – a spice; this word is used fairly often without a clear-cut meaning that can be applied to all instances. In some places it may refer to semen.
- Nard and nard plants – a spice, meaning unclear.
- Oils and Purified Oil – meaning unclear, although it may refer to the man or woman anointing the other in a romantic/sexual way.
- Pomegranate – possibly a symbol of female fertility and/or male virility.
- Raisin Cakes – meaning unclear.
- Rose of Sharon – a flower from the coastal regions of Israel, meaning unclear.
- Saffron – a spice, meaning unclear.



The Song of Solomon, painting by He Qi

The Song of Solomon

Chapter One

^{1:1} The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

The best Song of all the ones that Solomon wrote or collected (he supposedly wrote 1,005 songs and perhaps selected this as the best one to include with his other wisdom writings of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes).

^{1:2} “May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

The woman expresses her desire to her beloved to kiss her passionately. She may at this point be in the tents or the camp of Solomon, who has taken an interest in her, and she is dreaming of her man.

For your love is better than wine.”

She tells him or says of him, “Having a love relationship with you (probably also romance and sex) is better than anything else.”

^{1:3} “Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, your name is like purified oil; therefore the maidens love you.”

The woman compliments her beloved's appearance and heritage and tells him that other women are attracted to him also.

^{1:4} “Draw me after you and let us run together! The king has brought me into his chambers.”

Solomon is also attracted to the woman and has brought her into his tent to consider adding her to his harem. But the woman is more interested in her true love and expresses a desire for him to lead her and run away together.

“We will rejoice in you and be glad; we will extol your love more than wine. Rightly do they love you.”

The chorus (the daughters of Jerusalem) praises the beloved and his love for the woman (perhaps as opposed to Solomon's lust for the woman).

^{1:5} “I am black but lovely,

The woman reflects on her own appearance. It doesn't make any difference what her skin color is. As a girl, she could be black, white, or any other color, but she is still beautiful and desirable.

O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar

She could be dark-colored (the “tents of Kedar” were made from the hair of black goats).

Like the curtains of Solomon.”

Or she could be a variety of other colors and shades.

^{1:6} “Do not stare at me because I am swarthy,

White or light-colored women were usually valued more highly than dark-colored ones.

For the sun has burned me.

I have been outside too much without any covering (perhaps meaning that I have been working in the fields or have been too careless with my appearance and femininity).

My mother's sons were angry with me;

Her brothers were angry that she didn't take better care of her appearance. Family members would try to protect their daughters and sisters and look out for them.

They made me caretaker of the vineyards,

Her brothers disciplined her and gave her other responsibilities. Perhaps the responsibilities are caring for or serving other women (vineyard=woman), so that she would learn beauty and femininity from them.

But I have not taken care of my own vineyard."

She has not been able to take care of her own body and beauty as well as she should have.

1:7 "Tell me, O you whom my soul loves, where do you pasture your flock, where do you make it lie down at noon? For why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions?"

The man is a shepherd, and the woman wants to know where he is during the middle of the day (during the rest period) when no one else is around him. Then she can take her veil off and show him her face, and they can be more intimate with each other (women at that time would veil themselves in the presence of male strangers). She wants to spend time with him, rather than just watch him from a distance and from a crowd of others.

1:8 "If you yourself do not know, most beautiful among women, go forth on the trail of the flock and pasture your young goats by the tents of the shepherds."

The man (or possibly the chorus) compliments the woman and tells her that she can easily find him – just follow the trail. If the woman doesn't find him, then he will be able to find her.

1:9 "To me, my darling, you are like my mare among the chariots of Pharaoh."

Solomon or the man tells her, "you are my woman and you belong to me, even in the midst of all of the other women." Another possibility is that he tells her that she is like a mare running loose in a group of stallions and being chased by them, and he is attracted by the thought of chasing and capturing her in the same way.

1:10 "Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of beads."

The man (or Solomon) compliments the woman's jewelry.

1:11 "We will make for you ornaments of gold with beads of silver."

The chorus tells her that they can make more jewelry for her. Perhaps the woman will wear erotic jewelry to please her beloved.

1:12 "While the king was at his table, my perfume gave forth its fragrance."

The woman is sitting at the table with Solomon and was sexually attractive to him because of her scent and her manner.

1:13 “My beloved is to me a pouch of myrrh which lies all night between my breasts.”

The woman thinks of her man or tells him or that she would enjoy embracing and possibly making love to him all night. Perhaps she is thinking this when she is in Solomon’s tent, and this is what causes her to appear seductive and attractive to Solomon as well.

1:14 “My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi.”

The woman indicated that that her beloved is like refreshment in the dessert (like flowers in an oasis). Engedi was a remote oasis, so perhaps this is alluding to getting away to a private place for romance. The reference to “henna blossoms” may also refer to the custom of women decorating their hands and feet with henna for her man’s pleasure as the women (the vineyards) do in Engedi.

1:15 “How beautiful you are, my darling, how beautiful you are! Your eyes are like doves.”

The man tells the woman that she is extraordinarily beautiful. Both the man and woman repeatedly complement each other throughout The Song, emphasizing the importance of frequently verbal blessings—telling your partner how beautiful and special they are, and using words to build your partner up. The one receiving the compliment is thus encouraged to become beautiful and special.

1:16 “How handsome you are, my beloved, and so pleasant!

The woman compliments her man’s appearance and his manner with her.

Indeed, our couch is luxuriant!”

The woman tells her man how lovely their bed is and how ideal it is for love and romance; she could also be referring to how wonderful their relationship is.

1:17 “The beams of our houses are cedars, our rafters, cypresses.”

The woman expresses appreciation for the house that her man has built or will build for her and the materials used to make it. She may be contemplating their life together in the future. Alternatively, this may represent the wealth of Solomon that the man will one day inherit or become one with.

Chapter Two

2:1 “I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys.”

The woman indicates that she considers herself to be so beautiful and attractive that she herself is a flower. She expresses self-confidence in her own attractiveness, in her femininity, and in her worth as a feminine woman.

2:2 “Like a lily among the thorns, so is my darling among the maidens.”

The man (or Solomon) tells the woman that she is much more beautiful and attractive to him than other women.

2:3 “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,

The woman indicates that her man (in contrast to other men) “bears fruit,” i.e., is lovely, attractive, and profitable in contrast to other men (other trees) who are not fruit bearing. A fruit tree in a forest would be rare and would stand out and be obvious.

So is my beloved among the young men. In his shade I took great delight and sat down,

The woman feels protected and sheltered by his love and possibly enjoys being under him in a relational and sexual sense.

And his fruit was sweet to my taste.”

She enjoys the benefits of what her man produces for her.

2:4 “He has brought me to his banquet hall,

The man prepares a banquet for the woman (i.e., an entire life or relationship and not just one simple piece of fruit), or perhaps the man builds a house for the woman where they will feast together. Alternatively, she may be in Solomon’s banquet hall, but thinking instead of her true lover, or perhaps that the true lover will one day become Solomon and have Solomon’s wealth and power.

And his banner over me is love.”

She enjoys belonging to the man – taking his name and his identity and surrendering her own. This is a powerful phrase, because in seven words it summarizes the concepts of male possession of the woman tempered by love and care, as well as her desire to be possessed in love.

2:5 “Sustain me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, because I am lovesick.”

The woman indicates that she is longing for the man in either a romantic or a sexual way. The “raisin cakes” and “apples” may have a specific romantic or sexual meaning, or may simply refer to the woman’s desire for food to sustain her and her excitement as she contemplates his love for her.

2:6 “Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me.”

The woman indicates that she wants to be lying down with her man’s left hand under her head and his right-hand caressing and fondling her.

2:7 “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases.”

Physical union should be entered into only when the pair is ready to be responsible for their union. When a gazelle (male) takes a hind (female) they will produce offspring, and so a couple must not have intercourse until they are ready for the associated responsibilities of relationship and parenting.

2:8 “Listen! My beloved! Behold, he is coming, climbing on the mountains, leaping on the hills!”

The woman hears her man coming and anticipates him searching for her until he finds her. Perhaps he is pursuing/chasing her, or she may simply be anticipating his homecoming.

2:9 “My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag

The woman indicates that her man is virile and strong, and that he desires to have her.

Behold, he is standing behind our wall, he is looking through the windows, he is peering through the lattice.”

The man is interested in her, comes to see her, and is wants to see what she is doing. This may refer to his desire to understand her mind and know what she is interested in, and/or him wanting her to follow him and to be caught up with his desires – to be inside her.

2:10 “My beloved responded and said to me, ‘Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come along.’”

The man leads the woman and makes plans to be together and do things with her. This may include plans for their wedding.

2:11 “For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.”

The man indicates that it is time to get out, build, do things.

2:12 “The flowers have already appeared in the land; the time has arrived for pruning the vines, and the voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land.”

The man indicates that the flowers are blooming, and it’s time to get out and see them. “Pruning the vines” may be a reference to caring for their current financial needs, making sure that they are prepared for the future, or perhaps an in-depth consideration of their relationship (in preparation for marriage?). The “voice of the turtledove” is the singing of birds and may be a reference to their wedding.

2:13 “The fig tree has ripened its figs, and the vines in blossom have given forth their fragrance. Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come along!”

The man indicates that they should go out and enjoy themselves, and he desires to lead her in an exciting romantic and sexual relationship. The “vines in blossom” may be a reference to her body and its loveliness, and a call to marriage. However, the marriage ceremony itself is not described.

2:14 “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret place of the steep pathway, let me see your form, let me hear your voice. For your voice is sweet, and your form is lovely.”

The man indicates that when they are alone in a “secret place” that he wants the woman to undress for him and show him her body and perhaps for her to tell him that she belongs to him. This may be a reference to their honeymoon.

2:15 “Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom.”

The man (or perhaps the woman) indicates they need to eliminate and/or deal with the little irritations and problems that over time can destroy a relationship, so that the vineyards – plural (i.e., possibly the lives of both the man and the woman) will continue to bloom and be attractive.

2:16 “My beloved is mine, and I am his;

The woman indicates that he belongs to her and she belongs to him. This probably means that they are now married.

He pastures his flock among the lilies.”

The woman indicates that the man kisses and intimately caresses her on an ongoing basis and maintains the love relationship through the normal daily events. “Pasturing his flock among the lilies” could refer to some form of sexual caress. On the other hand, this could mean that after the honeymoon, the man now returns to his occupation, and their life flows back into normal channels.

2:17 “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of Bether.”

The woman indicates that she wants her man to take her like a stag would take a doe. She wants him to make love to her all night, until it starts getting light outside. Thus she may be stating a desire for their romantic and sexual activities to continue and grow stronger after the initial excitement of the marriage is over, and married life has begun (perhaps by making love all night rather than just for a brief time).

The “mountains of Bether” are rolling hills southwest of Jerusalem and probably refer to the woman’s breasts and/or body, and the stag (the man) mounting it.

Chapter Three

3:1 “On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him but did not find him.”

The woman wanted her man for both companionship and sex. Perhaps he is spending a lot of time away from her and she wants him back again.

3:2 “I must arise now and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares. I must seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him but did not find him.”

The woman looks everywhere for him.

3:3 “The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, and I said, “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”

The woman asks other people if they have seen her man.

3:4 “Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held on to him and would not let him go

The woman is desperately in love with her man.

Until I had brought him to my mother’s house,

She brings him home to meet her mother because she is so proud of him.

And into the room of her who conceived me.”

The woman wants her mother’s blessing on their relationship, perhaps so that she also will conceive children by her man, and so that she herself will become a mother.

3:5 “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you will not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases.”

Physical union and marriage should be entered into only when the pair is ready to be responsible for their union. When a gazelle (male) takes a hind (female) they will produce offspring, and so a couple must not have intercourse until they are ready for parenthood.

3:6 “What is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all scented powders of the merchant?”

Contrast is made here and later with the wealth of Solomon vis-à-vis the simpler lifestyle of the man and his woman, but that the latter are wealthy in a way that Solomon is not and perhaps never can be, because of the depth of their relationship.

3:7 “Behold, it is the traveling couch of Solomon. Sixty mighty men are around it, of the mighty men of Israel.”

3:8 “All of them are wielders of the sword, expert in war. Each man has his sword at his side, guarding against the terrors of the night.”

Solomon’s guard is necessary because he has so much treasure and so much to lose. In contrast, the man and woman don’t need that kind of expensive protection because the most valuable thing they have is their love and relationship, and no one can take that away from them.

3:9 “King Solomon has made for himself a sedan chair from the timber of Lebanon.”

3:10 “He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, and its seat of purple fabric, with its interior lovingly fitted out by the daughters of Jerusalem.”

More details on all of the expensive accoutrements that Solomon has. The reference to his fancy couch may be in contrast to the simpler couch that the woman mentions in 1:16 above. Solomon’s couches where he would make love to his women were much fancier than the man and woman could ever afford. Alternatively, this could be seen as what the man (the beloved) will eventually become or inherit.

3:11 “Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and gaze on King Solomon with the crown with which his mother has crowned him on the day of his wedding, and on the day of his gladness of heart.”

Solomon had many weddings. He eventually collected seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Perhaps the idea here is to tell people (i.e., “the daughters of Zion”) to carefully compare Solomon’s happiness and “gladness of heart” with that of the man and woman in the story, and then choose for themselves that which is better.

Chapter Four

4:1 “How beautiful you are, my darling, how beautiful you are!

The man again admires the woman’s beauty, encouraging her to be beautiful for him.

Your eyes are like doves behind your veil;

The man enjoys seeing his woman veiled – the veil causes him to focus on her eyes and to imagine what the rest of her looks like.

Your hair is like a flock of goats that have descended from Mount Gilead.”

The woman's hair is very long – all the way down her back. Also, the woman has her hair down, which would be a reference to her sexual availability and desire to make love to him.

4:2 “Your teeth are like a flock of newly shorn ewes which have come up from their washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them has lost her young.”

The man compliments the woman on her beautiful, white, and healthy teeth – none of them are missing. He even includes a sexual reference when complimenting her teeth.

4:3 “Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely

The man compliments the woman on her lips which are reddened with some form of ancient lipstick, as well as her lovely mouth for kissing and caressing.

Your temples are like a slice of a pomegranate behind your veil.”

The woman is, perhaps, blushing behind her veil at this frank and erotic description of her body. The man compliments the woman's face behind her veil which he can't see and is therefore hidden and mysteriously attractive.

4:4 “Your neck is like the tower of David, built with rows of stones on which are hung a thousand shields, all the round shields of the mighty men.”

The shields indicate coins and jewelry that the woman is wearing representing her dowry, and that she belongs to the man. She may be nude and wearing only a veil and jewelry for his pleasure, because in the following verses he compliments her breasts, and then indicates that he will make love to her.

4:5 “Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle which feed among the lilies.”

The woman is probably nude at this point and the man indicates that the woman's breasts are for his pleasure (he is the gazelle) as well as possibly for nursing the children (fawns) that they will have.

4:6 “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense.

The man indicates that he will “go his way” on the woman, on her breasts (the mountain of myrrh), and her mons (the hill of frankincense). He indicates that he will make love to her all night until the morning comes.

4:7 “You are altogether beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you.”

The man indicates that the woman's body is totally beautiful and lovely.

4:8 “Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, may you come with me from Lebanon. Journey down from the summit of Amana, from the summit of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards.”

The meaning of this is unclear but may mean that the man wants the woman to travel with him and to have some type of experience together, which could be romantic/sexual adventures or games that they play. Amana, Senir, and Hermon all refer to the same mountain range (Mount Hermon), which was a location in northern Israel associated with sexual activity. Lebanon may be a metaphor for fertility.

4:9 “You have made my heart beat faster, my sister, my bride. You have made my heart beat faster with a single glance of your eyes, with a single strand of your necklace.”

The man indicates that he is aroused by the woman, by the way she looks at him and wears her jewelry. He appreciates how she makes herself sexually attractive and available to him. The “sister” and “bride” refers to the fact that the woman is both his companion as well as his wife and sex partner.

4:10 “How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!

The man is smitten with the woman’s beauty, and perhaps with the depth of her sexual surrender to him. He compliments her on their wonderful romantic and sexual relationship and what a lovely companion she is. See 4:9 for a description of the “sister and bride” references.

How much better is your love than wine,

The man indicates that love, romance, and physical union with her is better than anything else.

And the fragrance of your oils than all kinds of spices!”

The man indicates that the charms of his woman are better than all other women and their attractions.

4:11 “Your lips, my bride, drip honey;

The man indicates that he loves kissing the woman and sucking her lips.

Honey and milk are under your tongue,

The man indicates that he enjoys deep kisses and exploring her mouth with his tongue.

And the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.”

Perhaps this means that her garments are perfumed and smell fresh like the cedars of Lebanon. However, if Lebanon is a reference to fertility, perhaps he is saying that the perfumes on her garments remind him of their sexual encounters.

4:12 “A garden locked is my sister, my bride,

The man indicates that the woman’s sexual favors are only available to him, that he is her sole partner. See 4:9 for a description of the “sister and bride” references.

A rock garden locked, a spring sealed up.”

The man indicates that he is the only one who can enjoy the garden of the woman’s body and be sexually refreshed from her spring. She is reserved for him, and he reserves himself for her.

4:13 “Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, henna with nard plants,”

The man indicates that the woman’s body is sweet to possess and partake of and that she is a source of great sensual pleasure. The reference to pomegranates could indicate that the woman is fertile, and the reference to henna could mean that she had decorated her hands and/or feet for him.

4:14 “Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all the trees of frankincense. Myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices.”

The man celebrates the woman’s sexually intoxicating appearance and aroma.

4:15 “You are a garden spring, a well of fresh water, and streams flowing from Lebanon.”

The man indicates that the woman is his “water of life” and the source of sexual refreshment. The water is both flowing (a stream), and still (a well) possibly meaning that the woman is both sexually active and passive in this experience. The “streams from Lebanon” may refer to the fact that the source of sexual refreshment is also related to fertility and the conception of children.

4:16 “Awake, O north wind, and come, wind of the south. Make my garden breathe out fragrance,

The woman wants to employ everything she can to make herself and her body attractive to the man. In other words, she uses her creativity to make herself sexually appealing and desirable, so that her body “breathes out fragrance” for him.

Let its spices be wafted abroad

She wants to make sure that he senses her efforts.

May my beloved come into his garden,

The woman identifies her body as belonging to the man (she is the garden, and the garden belongs to him), so that her beauty and body are for his benefit.

And eat its choice fruits!”

The woman wants the man to take her fully and enjoy every aspect of her body and sexuality, and their relationship.

Chapter Five

5:1 “I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;

The man has penetrated the woman and taken possession of her. But here again the man balances his taking of her body and her belonging to him (his garden), with the relational and partnership aspects of the marriage (his sister and bride).

I have gathered my myrrh along with my balsam

Myrrh and balsam were ingredients used in preparing anointing oil. This may mean that the man has “anointed” the woman’s womb.

I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk.”

The man states that he has been fully satisfied with the sexual experiences and has enjoyed her body to the fullest. The references to honeycomb, honey, wine and milk are unclear, but may represent the totality of her sweetness and his satisfaction and may possibly indicate that he has impregnated her.

“Eat, friends; drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers.”

God encourages both the man and the woman to enjoy each other and make full use of the sexual aspects of their relationship. This verse is at the central point—the high point of the story.

5:2 “I was asleep but my heart was awake. A voice! My beloved was knocking:

The woman is asleep, but her man is awake and trying to get her attention.

‘Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect one!’

He may be outside the house, knocking on the door and wanting to be let in, and/or this may be a metaphor for him wanting to enter the woman and asking her to sexually surrender to him.

For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the damp of the night.’

The man is outside the house and has been drenched with dew, but alternatively this may mean that he is sexually aroused.

5:3 “I have taken off my dress, how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet, how can I dirty them again?”

The woman is already in bed and asleep and doesn’t want to get up to let him in. This is a metaphor for her not wanting to surrender to the man, making excuses, and pushing him away. It may well be a reference to an ongoing and persistent problem with the couple which threatens to drive them apart, as later verses would seem to indicate. The following section alludes to a common problem in marriage where the man wants sex more than the woman does.

5:4 “My beloved extended his hand through the opening, and my feelings were aroused for him.”

The man is outside the door trying to open the lock – a metaphor for caressing the woman and penetrating her with his fingers; eventually the woman is aroused by his actions.

5:5 “I arose to open to my beloved;

The woman finally gets up and lets her husband in the house – she prepares to surrender. And my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the bolt.” She works the lock of the door to try to open it. She may have perfume on her hands, or the liquid myrrh may be a metaphor for caressing his member.

5:6 “I opened to my beloved,

The woman opens the door to him, i.e., she sexually surrenders herself.

But my beloved had turned away and had gone!

The woman had initially rejected the man and had taken so long to come around that the man had interpreted her lack of interest as rejection of him and had left her (or at least had left the bed).

My heart went out to him as he spoke

The woman did not mean to reject the man.

I searched for him but I did not find him;

But the man has gone.

I called him but he did not answer me.”

The man feels that the woman has rejected him and has left her (physically and/or psychologically). The woman calls the man to return and possess her again, but he doesn't respond.

5:7 “The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, they struck me and wounded me;

Others (or perhaps the woman's own conscience) discipline the woman and instruct her that she should have made herself available to her man.

The guardsmen of the walls took away my shawl from me.”

Perhaps a reference to the woman's feeling that she should have removed her clothes for the man rather than pushing him away.

5:8 “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, as to what you will tell him: for I am lovesick.”

The woman wants to let the man know that she still loves him and wants him to have her. She involves other people in finding her man and helping to restore their relationship.

5:9 “What kind of beloved is your beloved, O most beautiful among women? What kind of beloved is your beloved, that thus you adjure us?”

The other people that she talks to (perhaps her girlfriends) are concerned about the woman and want to know if the man really loves her, or is just using her.

5:10 “My beloved is dazzling and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand.”
The woman tells the others that her man is both handsome and wonderful.

5:11 “His head is like gold, pure gold;

This may be a reference to his facial appearance, or the woman may be indicating that the man has a good head on his shoulders; that he thinks and plans for them and has created a lovely environment for them to live in.

His locks are like clusters of dates, and black as a raven.”

The woman indicates that the man has nice looking hair.

5:12 “His eyes are like doves beside streams of water. Bathed in milk, and reposed in their setting.”

The woman indicates that her man's eyes are calm and that he is not violent or abusive.

5:13 “His cheeks are like a bed of balsam, banks of sweet-scented herbs. His lips are lilies dripping with liquid myrrh.”

She indicates that her man is a good lover and kisser, and may indicate that he doesn't have bad breath (myrrh was an ancient remedy for breath problems).

5:14 “His hands are rods of gold set with beryl; his abdomen is carved ivory inlaid with sapphires.”

She indicates that her man is valuable, and possibly indicates that he is strong and in shape.

5:15 “His legs are pillars of alabaster set on pedestals of pure gold; his appearance is like the choice cedars of Lebanon.”

She indicates that her man has a noble and attractive appearance and demeanor.

5:16 “His mouth is full of sweetness

She indicates that her man says nice things to her and treats her well.

And he is wholly desirable.

She indicates that she loves all of his aspects.

This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.”

The woman indicates that she wants her man both as a husband, lover, and as a companion. That is the kind of man he is (i.e., he wants her for a relationship and not just for sex). This extended series of flattering descriptions of the man that the woman makes to her girlfriends are another indication of the value of positive communication.

Chapter Six

6:1 “Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?”

The others ask the woman where her man could be found, how they could be restored, and where he wants the relationship to go.

6:2 “My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of balsam, to pasture his flock in the gardens and gather lilies.”

The woman indicates that her beloved has returned to her (to his garden).

6:3 “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine, he who pastures his flock among the lilies.”

The woman indicates that they still belong to each other and will restore all aspects of their relationship. The meaning of the phrase “pasture his flock among the lilies” is unclear but may mean that the man has resumed sexual activities with the woman.

6:4 “You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling, as lovely as Jerusalem, as awesome as an army with banners.”

The man returns to the woman and again begins to reflect on her beauty and her character. The references to the cities of Tirzah (meaning “delight”) and Jerusalem may mean that the man considers the woman as his “city” and his “territory.”

6:5 “Turn your eyes away from me, for they have confused me;

The man indicates that the woman is bewitching him with her loveliness by making eyes at him.

Your hair is like a flock of goats that have descended from Gilead.”

The man indicates that he loves the woman’s long hair that runs all the way down her back. Many of the following comments and compliments by the man are repeated from before, and the implication is that he is rededicating himself to pursuing and possessing her as his original wife, and to renewing their romance and sexual relationship.

6:6 “Your teeth are like a flock of ewes which have come up from their washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them has lost her young.”

The man again compliments the woman on her beautiful, white, and healthy teeth – none of them are missing.

6:7 “Your temples are like a slice of a pomegranate behind your veil.”

The man again compliments the woman’s face behind her veil which he can’t see and is therefore hidden and attractive.

6:8 “There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number;”

This may be the number of wives and concubines that Solomon had when the story was written.

6:9 “But my dove, my perfect one, is unique: she is her mother’s only daughter. She is the pure child of the one who bore her. The maidens saw her and called her blessed, the queens and the concubines also, and they praised her, saying,”

The man indicates that there are many other attractive women that he could have had. But he has chosen his woman, and that she is the one who will truly belong to him.

6:10 “Who is this that grows like the dawn, as beautiful as the full moon, as pure as the sun, as awesome as an army with banners?”

It is unclear who is speaking here. It may be man who is impressed with how the woman has grown throughout their relationship, in beauty, sexual attractiveness, wisdom, and strength. Alternatively, this could be the woman admiring her man, and amazed at how he has matured into her lover and leader. The fact that it is unclear may mean that it applies to both man and woman.

6:11 “I went down to the orchard of nut trees to see the blossoms of the valley. To see whether the vine had budded or the pomegranates had bloomed.”

These three sets of verses are obscure but may indicate the following: the man indicates that he had gone to check out other women (the orchard of nut trees, and the blossoms of the valley) because he has been disappointed in his wife. This is the common problem and complaint of women, that men are not faithful, or as faithful as they should be.

6:12 “Before I was aware, my soul set me over the chariots of my noble people.”

The man indicates that during this process of evaluating other women that he had imagined himself as possessing a number of them. “Before he was aware” indicates how quickly his mind had gone off in

pursuit of other women, and how easy it would be for him to fall into that trap if he does not exercise self-control.

6:13 “Come back, come back, O Shulammitte; come back, come back, that we may gaze at you!” “Why should you gaze at the Shulammitte, as at the dance of the two companies?”

The others encourage the woman to return to her man, and man decides that what he really wants is his original woman. The question about “gazing at the Shulammitte as at the dance of the two companies” may be a rhetorical question and be restated as “why should you look at your own woman when there are so many others who will dance and present themselves to you?” The answer is that the man’s original woman will be better for him not only from the standpoint of doing the right thing, but also because she will be a better partner because they have already established trust.

Chapter Seven

7:1 “How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O prince’s daughter!

The man reappraises his wife and begins to compliment her body again. He likes her feet and enjoys seeing them bare. The woman is possibly nude (dressed only in sandals?) or wearing diaphanous/transparent clothing here, as shown below.

The curves of your hips are like jewels, the work of the hands of an artist.”

The man compliments the woman’s hips and feminine shape.

7:2 “Your navel is like a round goblet which never lacks mixed wine;

This may be a reference to her navel or to her vulva/vagina, and the sweetness of caressing and entering it.

Your belly is like a heap of wheat

The meaning here is unclear, but it may mean that the man admires the woman’s pubic hair.

Fenced about with lilies.”

A reference to her legs or hips.

7:3 “Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.”

The man repeats his earlier compliment about the woman’s breasts and indicates that they are for his pleasure (he is the gazelle) as well as possibly for nursing the children (fawns) that they will have.

7:4 “Your neck is like a tower of ivory, your eyes like the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon, which faces toward Damascus.”

The man compliments the woman’s white neck, her deep eyes, and her lovely nose.

7:5 “Your head crowns you like Carmel, and the flowing locks of your head are like purple threads; the king is captivated by your tresses.”

The man indicates that the woman’s hair is so long and beautiful that she would captivate any man.

7:6 “How beautiful and how delightful you are, my love, with all your charms!”

The man indicates that he is totally delighted with the woman’s body.

7:7 “Your stature is like a palm tree,

The man indicates that the woman’s body was made to be climbed and mounted by him.

And your breasts are like its clusters.”

He will grab and hold her breasts like a cluster of dates.

7:8 “I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree,

The man states that he will climb on top of his woman.

I will take hold of its fruit stalks.’

He will take hold of the woman, possibly by her breasts.

Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,

The man wants the woman’s nipples to be enlarged like ripe juicy grapes.

7:9 “And the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine!”

The man wants to kiss her deeply and repeatedly.

“It goes down smoothly for my beloved, flowing gently through the lips of those who fall asleep.”

The woman indicates that she is ready for the man to take her in whatever way is pleasing to him, and that they will make love and fall asleep together.

7:10 “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.

The woman indicates that she now truly belongs to the man, and that his desire to possess and love her has been renewed. In Song 2:16 she states, “My beloved is mine and I am his,” placing her desire before his. In Song 6:3 she states, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,” placing his desire before hers. Here she states, “I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me,” indicating that she has fully surrendered. In other words, there is a progression in her thinking throughout the story. She begins with putting her own desires first (he is mine and I am his); then she moves to putting his desires first (I am his and he is mine); finally as they have come through rocky times and survived together and she has come to trust him more deeply, she can focus totally on him and his desire for her (I am his and his desire is for me).

7:11 “Come, my beloved, let us go out into the country, let us spend the night in the villages.”

The man indicates that he wants to renew the adventures that he and the woman had experienced when they were first married.

7:12 “Let us rise early and go to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine has budded, and its blossoms have opened, and whether the pomegranates have bloomed. There I will give you my love.”

The man indicates that he wants to explore the woman’s body (his vineyard) and have intercourse with her in the morning as well as in the evening. This may be more than sexual activity and may refer to exploring new ways of maintaining romance and companionship together.

7:13 “The mandrakes have given forth fragrance; and over our doors are all choice fruits,

The woman indicates that she has been exploring new things as well, and has obtained various kinds and type of aphrodisiacs (mandrakes) to enhance their enjoyment of each other. The mandrakes may also refer to her creativity or for her desire for pregnancy and children.

Both new and old,

The woman indicates that she will apply her creativity to their relationship and lovemaking, and they now have many ways and techniques available to them, both old and new.

Which I have saved up for you, my beloved.

The woman indicates that she has dedicated herself to exploring, preserving, and refreshing him in the manifold ways that a woman can give herself to a man. The reference to the “choice fruits over their doors” may indicate a number of lovely elements of their relationship which they are already making use of and have been for some time.

Chapter Eight

8:1 “Oh that you were like a brother to me who nursed at my mother’s breasts.

The woman wants the man for an intimate companionship, i.e., not just sex or romance.

If I found you outdoors, I would kiss you; no one would despise me, either.”

The woman wishes that she could kiss her man in public (like a sister and brother, as married couples in that society were not permitted to display affection in public).

8:2 “I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me;

The woman would bring her man back home again to her mother, who taught her how to be a wife and lover. Perhaps the woman desires to see if her mother has any additional advice for her in becoming a great wife.

I would give you spiced wine to drink from the juice of my pomegranates.

The woman wants the man to have her and enjoy her in her parent’s home. Perhaps the thought here is that her parents have accepted him. The meaning of the “spiced wine to drink from the juice of my pomegranates” is unclear but possibly refers to a special treat the woman has for the man.

8:3 “Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me.”

The woman indicates that she wants to be lying down with her man’s left hand under her head and his right hand holding and caressing her.

8:4 “I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases.”

This may be a reference to the man to take the woman’s sexual desires into account as well as his own, and not forcing her.

8:5 “Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?”

The woman depends on the man for a variety of things in life. “Coming up from the wilderness” may refer to growing up from childhood into maturity.

“Beneath the apple tree I awakened you; there your mother was in labor with you, there she was in labor and gave you birth.”

“Being awakened beneath the apple tree” is probably a reference to their initial lovemaking. The man and woman may be reflecting on their life together beginning at birth and continuing down through the start of their relationship to the present.

8:6 “Put me like a seal over your heart,

The woman wants the man to dedicate himself and his heart totally to her.

Like a seal on your arm

The woman wants the man to dedicate his strength and/or commitment to her, possibly in a public and visible way.

For love is as strong as death, jealousy is as severe as Sheol;

The woman indicates the consequences of infidelity, that once it occurs and trust is broken, it is impossible to reverse (i.e., it is like death and the grave).

Its flashes are flashes of fire,

The woman indicates that once jealousy starts, the fire starts to burn and it will eventually consume everything in their relationship.

The very flame of the Lord.”

The woman warns the man that he has made a vow and a commitment to her, and that God will judge him if he betrays her.

8:7 “Many waters cannot quench love, nor will rivers overflow it;

The woman indicates, however, that trials and problems cannot terminate love.

If a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, it would be utterly despised.”

The woman indicates that her love can never be bought, and that any attempt to do so would be scorned.

8:8 “We have a little sister, and she has no breasts;

The woman now becomes concerned for other members of her family, to make sure that they are aware of the lessons that she and her man have learned. A sister “with no breasts” is a girl who is not yet ready for marriage. This may be because she is too young, but in the context, it is more likely that the girl “has no breasts” because she is psychologically immature and doesn’t understand and/or appreciate the dynamics of male/female relationships.

What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for?”

The woman wonders how the family will handle things when a man comes to ask for her hand in marriage. In that day families were concerned with protecting the virtue and future of their daughters and sisters.

8:9 “If she is a wall, we will build on her a battlement of silver;

If the sister is righteous (a wall) and waits for marriage before she gives her body to her husband, then the family will honor and adorn her (build battlements of silver on top of what she already has).

But if she is a door, we will barricade her with planks of cedar.”

If the sister is a loose woman and opens herself to many men (a door), then the family will restrict her and keep her at home and under control (barricade her with planks of cedar), until she learns.

8:10 “I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers. Then I became in his eyes as one who finds peace.”

The woman indicates that she was virtuous and married her man, and therefore her breasts (representing her sexuality) were employed in the right way. Therefore, she and her husband together found peace in their relationship.

8:11 “Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon. He entrusted the vineyard to caretakers; each one was to bring a thousand shekels of silver for its fruit.

The vineyard at Baal-hamon is probably a reference to all of the women that Solomon had (he literally had extensive vineyards at Baal-hamon, which means “place of a multitude”), as well as to the impersonal nature of his relationship with his women. In a large harem the women are rarely seen by the man and kept under the care of others (the caretakers). The women were there not because of love, but because of money and power, and because of strategic alliances that Solomon had entered into, such as he did with the daughter of Pharaoh; hence the reference of silver (money) for fruit (relationship and sexuality).

8:12 “My very own vineyard is at my disposal;

The woman indicates that she wants to keep her body and present it to her real lover and king – her own husband.

The thousand shekels are for you, Solomon, and two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit.”

The woman indicates that Solomon can keep his money, and that she has something better.

8:13 “O you who sit in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice—let me hear it!”

The woman asks that other couples who have a similar relationship, to speak up and let people know how male/female relationships should be conducted, so that she is not alone in giving this advice.

8:14 “Hurry, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.”

The woman ends this love poem with a plea to the man to hurry and sexually take her. Note that the reference here is to all of the spices, not just one or two. The idea may be that the woman is using all of the romantic, sexual, and wifely techniques that she has learned through the years to attract and please her husband.

Contemporary Reactions to the Song of Solomon

As indicated above, the purpose of the book in my opinion is to delineate principals of a romantic relationship that is fulfilling to both male and female, and which can be sustained for a lifetime. It was written around 3,000 years ago in the context of a society which was, of course, quite different than that of today. Following are some of the differences:

- Entertainment options for adults were, of course, much more limited than contemporary societies. Media in general did not exist and most people had little free time after work was completed. So sex was a much more common and significant leisure activity for adults. As the saying goes, “sex is the poor man’s opera” so the Song may seem to be overly sexualized to modern readers.

With leisure time being much more available and many more options for spending it, many couples don’t engage in sexual activities to the extent that they did in Solomon’s day. Also, many if not most wives have jobs, and therefore have less energy and less desire for romantic and sexual activities. However, couples are missing the simple pleasures of sex. Increasing the frequency and the variety of erotic encounters in marriage, can bring a couple back together and create the intimacy and bonding that both reduces conflict and promotes love and acceptance. Some Arab couples had a custom of watching the sunset together on the roof of their homes and then making love.

- Children were much more important than today, for several reasons: a) The societies were more tribal, and needed children for their growth and survival, so large families were common; b) Children provided the continuity for the family name – they would survive and continue after their parents had died so the family would carry on; c) Children were considered an honor and a blessing – it was a shame for a woman to not have children;

In today’s world children are often considered as inconvenient, unnecessary, and overly expensive. Abortion has claimed the lives of many and is hotly defended by some elements of society, as well as initiatives such as “zero population growth” because it is thought that the planet is being overpopulated and trashed. In many relationships both the man and woman are employed, and earning money is considered to be more important than investing in kids. Children require a lot of time, energy, and resources which working couples or single parents may feel that they lack. There are also no guarantees when raising a child, and they often disappoint their parents. However, raising children is still one of the most fulfilling things a couple can do for all the same reasons that ancient peoples felt. The financial systems and the future of western society is also in trouble because the birth rate has dropped below the death

rate.

- Feministic influences in current society would see the woman in the Song as too traditional, too submissive, and too focused on her man.

It is essential to understand that there is no universal or “one-size-fits-all” Biblical pattern about how male-female relationships should be carried out. Therefore, there is a wideness in what the term “submission” means and how it should be interpreted in the case of any given marriage, and it is left up to individual couples to determine what will work for them. In cases with a strong-willed wife and a retiring husband, leadership and power could be more in the woman’s hands (as a way of acknowledging the husband’s lack of leadership abilities) or shared in a more-or-less equal way, whereas in the case of a more submissive wife and dominant husband, more of the leadership aspects of the marriage would naturally devolve on the man.

Therefore, the mental images that we have from the past associated with traditional sex roles do not need to bind us to any specific way of relating to each other, and even less so should the feministic roles of the present. We are thus free within the confines of the general paradigm to construct a relationship that is mutually satisfying, and in which the specifics vary from couple to couple. If God is the creator of all peoples, then His counsel on a topic as fundamental as sexuality and romance must surely take in account the normal variations in human reality.

So the attitudes and behavior of the man and women in the Song are not directives, but rather a general pattern to follow. These elements include: a) Giving your partner what they want most. For the woman this means that the man must stay true to her, focus on her to the exclusion of other women, devote his efforts to providing for her and their children, and remain in the relationship with her and work through problems together. For the man this means that the woman will sexually surrender to him and allow him to lead her to the extent that he is able to do so; b) Complimenting your partner both directly to him or her, as well as to others; c) Stop complaining about your partner, and instead speak well of them by focusing on their assets and minimizing their liabilities; d) Surrendering independence and any spirit of selfishness in order to cooperate with each other and build each other up; e) Being trustworthy and becoming the rock on which your partner can depend.

Authorship of the Song of Solomon

We do not know exactly when this work was written or who its original audience was, although it was likely addressed to the Israelite nation at large. But it is fairly certain that The Song was written by King Solomon himself, the greatest and most powerful king in Israel’s history. Following are evidences for this:

- The book opens with a statement of authorship—“the Song of Songs which is Solomon’s” meaning that he wrote it and that it was his best song.
- Solomon also wrote Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which are classed as “wisdom literature.” The book of Proverbs also contains the writings of others authors: King Hezekiah (ca. 715-687 BC), a descendent of Solomon, commissioned a man to collect Solomonic proverbs for

chapters 25-29; a man named Agur was the author of chapter 30; and a man named Lemuel authored chapter 31. Solomon may also have used other sources in addition to writing proverbs of his own, but there is no reason to doubt Solomon's authorship of chapters 1-24. A careful reading of the Song would conclude that it is of the same genre as Proverbs, albeit in poetic form, as some of the same euphemisms used in the other Solomonic writings are also used here. For example, Proverbs 5:15-23 contains advice to young men, telling them to avoid prostitutes and the wives of other men, and have sex with their own wife instead:

My son, give attention to my wisdom, incline your ear to my understanding that you may observe discretion and your lips may reserve knowledge. For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and smoother than oil is her speech. But in the end, she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, or you will give your vigor to others and your years to the cruel one. Strangers will be filled with your strength and your hard-earned goods will go to the house of an alien; and you groan at your final end, when your flesh and your body are consumed, and you say, "How I have hated instruction, and my heart spurned reproof! I have not listened to the voice of my teachers, nor inclined my ear to my instructors! I was almost in utter ruin in the midst of the assembly and congregation."

Drink water from your own cistern, and fresh water from your own well. Should your springs be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love. For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress, and embrace the bosom of a foreigner?

The terms "water," "cistern," "well," "spring," "fountain," "hind," and "doe," all of which refer to a woman and to her body in the Proverbs text above, are also used in The Song.

- The Song generally comes from the Solomonic period in history and was included in all versions of the Torah, in the section known as "The Writings." Some scholars have disputed Solomonic authorship for the wisdom writings, especially Ecclesiastes, citing linguistic anomalies. However, the dispute is not convincing enough to cause any serious doubt. All other factors, including evidence of authorship in the text itself, as well as long-standing Jewish tradition, points to Solomon being the main author/compiler of all three works.

The rabbinical opposition to a literal interpretation for the book, as described above, would also argue for its authorship by Solomon himself, who along with King David, his father and the author of most of the Psalms, were the two most highly respected kings in the history of Israel. If the book were written by a lesser figure or by an anonymous scribe, its acceptance into the canon of the Torah would then have been much less certain.

The Life and Times of Solomon

Solomon (ca. 1007-927 BC) was the king of Israel at the apex of the nations' power, and the son of its best-loved ruler—King David (ca. 1085-1015 BC). Solomon had total supremacy, and his reign encompassed long periods of peace and prosperity lasting for 40 years (his name is from the Hebrew word "shalom" meaning "peace"). Reputedly, he was one of the wisest men who had ever lived, as well as one of the wealthiest—enormous quantities of gold came to him. He also had one of the largest harems of history—seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines and had a huge ego to match.

In contrast to his wealthy son, David had rarely been secure in his rule, and his many enemies and difficulties had driven him to desperate prayer in order to seek God's help. David had been humbled by his many suffering which in some cases were self-inflicted (e.g., his affair with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband when she announced that she was pregnant). The Psalms are a record of his intense search for God, and for a relationship with the Divine—no one before him in history, let alone a king of a nation, had ever expressed the hurts, pains, insecurities, and distresses that David poured out. Here are two examples from the Psalms:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax – it is melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, my tongue cleaves to my jaws, and you lay me in the dust of death... Yet you are he who brought me forth from the womb; you made me trust when upon my mother's breasts. Upon you I was cast from birth, and you have been my God from my mother's womb. *Psalm 22*

O God, you are my God; I shall seek you earnestly. My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary, to observe your power and your glory. Because your loving-kindness is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in your name. *Psalm 63*

King David was also a talented musician and the national worship leader. He is the author of the 23rd Psalm, a statement of his dependence on God, and one of the best loved and most famous poems of all time. He was also deeply concerned for the poor and for the welfare of his people; his writings continually state the necessity for personal righteousness and the need for justice for those who would worship God and who would be leaders. This was almost unheard of for a ruler in antiquity. The following is from Psalms 10 and 41:

O Lord, you have heard the desire of the humble; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to vindicate the orphan and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth will no longer cause terror.

How blessed is he who considers the poor; the Lord will deliver him in a day of trouble. The Lord will protect him and keep him alive, and he shall be called blessed upon the earth.

David's example also encouraged others to be honest and transparent about their lives and problems. For example, here is statement from Asaph, who was a priest, musician, and worship leader in David's time:

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart, but as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked... They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?"... When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you, and you have taken hold of my right hand. With your counsel you will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you, I desire nothing on

earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. *Psalm 73*

In contrast, Solomon grew up in a palace without having to face the trials of his father. Solomon began his reign in devotion to God, and by humbly asking for wisdom, possibly because his mother Bathsheba was not a queen or one of David's royal wives. Rather, she was a wife of another man whom David had killed in order to have an affair with her, and Solomon was therefore a "love child" – much younger and less connected than his royal brothers. But after Solomon had a firm grip on power all fears and hesitation were forgotten. As his wealth and influence increased, he became arrogant, self-absorbed, and distant from God. He debased the worship of Jehovah in order to allow all of his foreign women to retain their religious customs, for which he was strongly criticized. This also had the practical implication of requiring high taxes to support the royal court and the lavish lifestyle that Solomon demanded and then provided to all of his women and their children. Like many absentee husbands, Solomon undoubtedly felt compelled to spend large amounts of money in order to buy peace in his house, and I Kings chapter 4 indicates how the entire economy of the country was focused on providing for Solomon's court. Unlike his father David, none of Solomon's writings (Psalm 72, Psalm 127, Proverbs 1-24, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon) express personal humility or longings for God. Rather they are all advice literature, written by a wise man who considered himself to be wise.

Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

1 Kings 4:29-34

As indicated above, there is a cloak of silence over the end of Solomon's reign, and the number of his children is not recorded, but with his many wives and concubines, the total certainly must have been huge. Each of his women would have attempted to protect and promote her own children, causing potentially intense and deadly conflict, as was the case in his father David's succession.

The Bible extensively details such problems in the lives of David's other children. Prior to the story of Adonijah discussed above, David's firstborn son Amnon (from his wife Ahinoam) fell in lust with and eventually raped his half-sister Tamar, (daughter of David's wife Maacah). When David failed to punish Amnon for the rape, Tamar's brother Absalom took matters into his own hands and murdered his half-brother. Becoming estranged from his father David and encouraged by others with their own agendas, Absalom eventually led a revolt, almost seizing the kingdom in a power grab, but wound up hanging from a tree by his hair and being run through with a sword.

If the last days of Solomon were anything like those of his father David, who had only eight wives in contrast to Solomon's hundreds, the royal palace must have been a place of jealousy, power struggles, treachery, fear, greed, and hatred. The following words that Solomon wrote provide a hint of the relational problems that the king had to deal with:

And I discovered more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are chains. *Ecclesiastes 7:26*

In contrast to the many wives of David and Solomon, Saul, the first king of Israel, had only one wife, although he had concubines as well. Despite his other problems, Saul was apparently a good father, and all of his children were loyal to him. His son Jonathan, the heir to his throne, had a deep friendship with David, his father's rival. But in spite of Saul's hatred toward David and his severe criticism of his heir, Jonathan was faithful to his father unto death—all except one of Saul's sons died with their father in battle.

David did not follow Saul's marital example, and despite David's political popularity, his family life was a shambles. Solomon had seen and lived through what had happened to his father, but no doubt felt that he was wise enough to handle the situation, which was a bad mistake. He discovered, as have many others before and after him, that marital and family problems are the hardest and most intractable of all. Toward the end of his life, issues with his wives and other problems in the realm began to fester. The great king was then beset by both internal and external rebellions at a time when his age had weakened him. He died in a climate of political doubt and unrest, where the people were weary of his high taxation and heavy-handed rule and were eager for change.

After Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam came to the throne, and ironically, Rehoboam's mother was Naamah, an Ammonite woman, and therefore not a Jewess. Solomon had apparently selected and declared Rehoboam to be his successor, hoping to avoid the sticky succession problems that had occurred at the start of his reign. There is no indication as to why Rehoboam was selected or how the other royal offspring were treated, but all the people came together to make Rehoboam king, indicating that Solomon had given the royal mantle explicitly to him. However, it seems that the father failed to give his son any advice on how to handle the politics of the transition – a strange and unfortunate epilogue on the wisest king.

Prodded by Jeroboam, an ambitious man who had long been an enemy of Solomon, the people immediately appealed to the new king for relief from their heavy tax burdens. Being politically immature and not sensing the depth of the unrest, Rehoboam haughtily rejected the people's request, which led to a disastrous revolt in which the nation was permanently split into two parts. Solomon, reputedly the wisest man in history, thus failed to properly instruct and prepare even his own sons and educate them on the political realities of ruling.

Secondary and Hidden Meanings

Biblical texts, especially from the Old Testament, may very well contain secondary meanings. However, these typically emerge from the primary meaning and plain sense of the text and are not in conflict with it. Therefore, attempts to spiritualize and allegorize this story should be questioned. For example, consider the following verse from Song 6:7-9:

Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I said, "I will climb the palm tree, and I will take hold of its fruit stalks. Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine!"

It is hard to seriously consider another interpretation for the above text, as it obviously refers to a sexual act that the man performs on the woman. However, there are a number of secondary interpretations that are generally valid and appropriate to some parts of the story, as follows:

- Marriage is used throughout the Bible as the main paradigm for the relationship between God and his people. In the Old Testament, God is the husband and the nation of Israel is his bride, but in the fuller and more complete revelation provided by the New Testament, Christ is the husband, and the church (i.e., the people of God from all over the world) are the bride. In the book of Revelation part of the imagery used to describe entering heaven is a wedding feast—the marriage supper of the Lamb and the consummation of the relationships between Christ and the church. The intense admiration and love exhibited in the story represents the love of God and Christ for us, and the love that we, as the bride, should return to him. The erotic aspects of the story may also be symbolic of the delights of heaven, which are as yet future and unknown:

Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love him. *I Corinthians 2:9*

For now we see as in a glass dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also am now fully known. *I Corinthians 13:12*

From the Book of Revelation we are told that at the end of the world there will be something akin to a wedding feast, and from our human perspective, this involves three of the things that we desire most — intimate relationships, good food, and sex.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, “Write, Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” *Revelation 19:7-9*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. *Revelation 21:1-2*

- Some of the verses have been applied to Christ directly, for example Song 2:1, “I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley,” and Song 6:10, “Who is this, that grows like the dawn, as beautiful as the full moon, as pure as the sun, as awesome as an army with banners?” Alternatively, they could be seen as applying to God’s people (Israel and/or the church), as these are attributes of the woman.
- Solomon represents the seductive allure of what the world has to offer—wealth, power, and unrestrained sexuality, and he may very well be a metaphor for Satan, who is the false Christ, and who attempts to use the things of the world to twist and pervert people, and lure them away from God. Christ is the shepherd lover—“the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep.” He does not offer all of the glitz and glitter that Solomon (Satan) does, but he offers something better—an everlasting love relationship with the Lord of the universe.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul; he guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. *Psalms 23*

Therefore, the question is whether the Shulammitte maiden (the people of God), will resist the attraction of Solomon (the world and Satan), and save herself for her true lover (Christ), who will satisfy her in ways that Solomon with all of his riches never could. This interpretation flows out of the ideas expressed above in which the Song was written by Solomon as a personal catharsis.

A variation on the prior paragraph would see Solomon in this story not so much as figure of temptation, but rather as the fulfillment of Christ, either in heaven or at his second coming. In other words, the appearances of Solomon throughout the Song may represent the beloved (the man in the story) as he ultimately will be and become at the end of time; transformed from the poor shepherd boy into the king and ruler of all. But in my opinion, this interpretation does not square with the text of the Song in which the woman turns away from the king and back to her beloved.

I am not at all diminishing secondary interpretations of the story—they make it more powerful and meaningful. But prior to considering any secondary interpretation, the primary meaning of the text must be stated and explored. Furthermore, secondary meanings lose their power and cogency if the primary meaning is ignored or repressed.