

God's love poem

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Song of Songs 2.8-14

The book known as the Song of Songs contains love poems, or songs, of Israel. It's mainly a dialogue between a man and a woman. The woman (who has the largest number of lines) and the man (portrayed both as king and shepherd) express their love for each other with desire, admiration, and boasting about each other. Each delights to describe the physical charms of the other. Most scholars believe the book to be a complete whole, rather than a series of unrelated poems; there is a delicate mood of love and devotion through the whole text.

Possibly these songs were originally oral compositions that came to be used in weddings, later assembled as a "book" of the Bible. Perhaps this was because they show mutuality and fidelity in love. We have no certain date for the poems. They are attributed to Solomon only because his name is mentioned in the text.

Shir Hashrim, the Song of Songs is traditionally read at the Jewish celebration of Passover; just as the beloved calls his fair one to arise and come away, for the winter is past, so God called the people of Israel to arise and come out of Egypt, for their time of slavery was ended. While the Book of Exodus tells the story of the outer journey from slavery to freedom, the Song of Songs tells the inner story.

For many years the ancient Rabbis were reluctant to include the Song of Songs in the scriptures. But Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph settled the question in the 2nd century CE. "Heaven forbid that any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs is holy", he wrote. "For the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy and the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5). Perhaps, again, he was referring to the inner part of human life. Just as the Holy of Holies occupied the very heart of the Sanctuary, the Song of Songs is at the heart of the mystery of freedom.

As for the Jewish commentators, so also for many Christians. In the third century, Origen wrote a commentary describing the Song of Songs as a picture of the relationship between God or Christ and the Church, or between God and the soul of the believer. Others who came after him also read the book in this way — as speaking of the love between God and humankind.

In the Middle Ages the Song of Songs was among the most widely studied and best loved of all the Old Testament books, especially amongst monks and nuns. In the twelfth century, St Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a series of eighty sermons on the first two chapters alone. There was a long tradition of Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationship between God and his people. The way of interpreting the Song of Songs was encouraged by passages like that from Ephesians that we heard tonight, Gospel parables such as the story of the marriage feast and the story of the wise and foolish virgins, as well as passages in the Apocalypse.

On the other hand, in the late fourth century, Theodore of Mopsuestia has argued for interpretation of the Song of Songs literally, as a love poem, but his writings were banned. However, from the sixteenth century onwards, the literal interpretation of the text as a love story has been increasingly accepted.

But if it is right to read the Song of Songs as love poetry from a human, man-woman point of view, why is it included in the Bible? It does have a great deal of overtly sexual content, and

God is not mentioned at all. There's nothing wrong about using it as a picture of God's love for us in Christ. But there is nothing to show that the writer thought it to be about anything other than human love, the physical expression of human love — sex, or at least sexuality.

Ancient and medieval commentators were encouraged to read the Song of Songs as an allegory because of its place in the Scriptures. But in the Hebrew Bible, God can be found in the experiences of human lives, both bad and good. In the Wisdom literature — Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes — scripture comments on human experience, often without making any explicit reference to God. (Compare Ps. 45; Isa. 54:4-6; 62:4, 5; Jer. 2:2; 3:1, 20; Ezek. 16; Hos. 2:16, 19, 20. Compare also Matt. 9:15; John 3:29; Eph. 5:23, 27, 29; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17.) Esther is another biblical book where God is only in the background.

The Song of Songs, appears only twice in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, on which our Australian lectionary is based. Our reading this evening, chapter 2.8-13, is set on both occasions. Song of Songs is not easy to preach and study publicly when it is so explicitly erotic. There is nothing about what we call 'morality' – nothing about the disciplined expression of sex, nothing about sexual fidelity, nothing about sexual restraint – that is elsewhere in the Bible.

This book of the Bible is about sexual passion. This passion is to be understood as the gift of God, but that is never made explicit. Inclusion of the Song of Songs in the Bible is an affirmation of wonder and delight in human sexual chemistry.

The Song of Songs speaks in rich images of the beauty of the human body and the wonder of love — flowers, fruit, animals, jewels, spices, scent, water, wine, a garden, the countryside, the moon, the sun, and more. Everything possible is used to speak of love. Even the season of the year, Spring, is the right one for love.

If we neglect the beauty of this text, we overlook part of God's gift to us in the scriptures. These biblical songs don't moralise or sermonise. In glorious language, they remind us in our cynical modern age of the beauty, freshness and delicacy of human love, sexual and otherwise.

Perhaps that is the reason to see this as revelation from God— it renews our delight in the way the world is, with all its beauty and all its fragility; it refreshes our awareness of the wonder of human love.

The Song of Songs is food for the soul rather than the rational intellect, it is poetry, poetry of the emotions. The Holy Spirit sparks our imagination, causes us to rejoice, laugh, sing, and create. Where are the hymn writers? Where are the novelists? Painters? Playwrights? It to encourage them that our relationship with CAMRA is important.

One feels the warmth of the spring, sees the fields colored with the flowers, hears the sound of the turtledove, tastes a ripe fig, and smells the fragrance as the loved one.

The Song urges us to go outside; search out the wildflowers, listen for the message of the dove and the nightingale, learn from the gazelle and the wild deer. It invites us to encounter God in the drama and beauty of creation, through our bodies and their senses, in intimacy with another and in love for all.

The Song of Songs is to be enjoyed. It is the Song above all Songs because it is about nothing less than the richness of human experience and the delight God gives us at the presence of each other.