



CORNERSTONE
CORNERSTONECOURSES.ORG

CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 11: SONG OF SONGS – 1

BIBLICAL READINGS:

Read the complete Song of Songs after studying the course units on this book.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK:

The title of this book, Song of Songs (Hebrew: *Shir ha-Shirim*) is an expression in superlative form – like “King of Kings” or “Holy of Holies” – giving it the meaning of “the greatest song of all.” The book is also known as the Song of Solomon and the “Canticle of Canticles” (from the Latin word *canticum*, meaning a song). But the form of the book is that of a poem or collection of poems that may have been intended to be read, recited, or sung, and the Song of Songs (abbreviated from this point as “the Song”) is widely regarded as one of the great love poems of the ancient world.

The Song may well have been influenced by ancient Egyptian love poetry dating from the thirteenth to the eleventh century BC which was known throughout much of the ancient Near East and has a number of parallels of style and content. Like the Song, it is possible that many of the Egyptian compositions were meant to be sung or recited aloud. Both use the same kinds of metaphors and expressions (see Note 1). But many of the similarities of language and theme are to be expected, given the topic, and the Song does have its own unique aspects, as we will see.

The Song is included in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, known as the *Ketuvim* or “Writings.” There, it stands with Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther as part of the *Megillot* or festival scrolls read out on holy days in Judaism. In Christian Bibles, the Song is included with Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes as the final book of the “wisdom writings.” It takes its place among the books we call Wisdom Literature because although these works all share poetic structure to some degree, they all have the practical goal of achieving or reflecting on aspects of successful living.

Unlike the other Hebrew writings classified as wisdom literature, however, the Song is one of the most mysterious books of the Bible, as virtually nothing is known about its author, origin, or the characters of whom it speaks. It can also be a somewhat difficult book to follow as it is not always clear who is speaking or to whom! Finally, the meaning of the text is open to several interpretations, and this can make reading the work a challenge. But although almost every aspect of the book is shrouded in uncertainty, the Song is a fascinating work that includes important lessons and that can richly repay careful reading.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The opening line of the Song states: “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's” (1:1 ESV), and Solomon's name is mentioned several more times in the work (3:7-11; 8:12; etc.). But it is unsure if this means that King Solomon, the son of King David, who reigned over Israel for 40 years (971-931 BC), actually wrote the composition or if the poem uses his name in some other way. There are three major possibilities regarding the Song's origin:

1) The Song was composed by King Solomon regarding one of his own relationships around 950 BC. But it seems unlikely that Solomon, who had many hundreds of wives (1 Kings 11:3), would have written such a work about just one of them – especially as the woman in the poem is not of royal birth or one of the king's “great” wives. Some commentators propose that the Song was written by Solomon for his first wife, but this cannot be the case, as Solomon is described as already being king and other royal wives and concubines are mentioned in the Song (6:9).

2) The Song was composed by Solomon around 950 BC as a literary work – a poem celebrating the love of two hypothetical young lovers. This possibility would explain the superscription of the Song (“the Song ...which is Solomon's”) and also some details of the narrative, as we will see. In 1 Kings 4:32 we are told that Solomon composed a thousand and five songs, and these were doubtless not all about his own relationships.

3) The Song was composed after the time of Solomon by an anonymous author who used Solomon's name to give weight and setting to the composition or because the song was in the style of Solomon's many songs and wisdom writings. This possibility would also explain the Song's opening line but has several difficulties. It is true that some details of the language used in the Song indicate the possibility of an authorship after the Babylonian exile when Aramaic had replaced Hebrew in everyday life, but this could be the result of oral preservation and recitation of the song. There is also no tradition of an author composing the work in a later period. Finally, as we have seen, the Song has a number of similarities to Egyptian love poetry from closer to the time of Solomon, and 6:4 indicates that at the time of writing the city of Tirzah was of considerable importance, which fits the time of Solomon better than a later date.

Although the Song is not mentioned in any earlier Jewish writings or in the New Testament, we do know that it is old because it was included in the ancient Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible. Also, according to the Jewish Talmud (Ta`anit 4:8), sections of the Song were sung at certain festivals in the temple at Jerusalem, prior to its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD. The Song was formally accepted into the Jewish canon of Scripture in the second century AD and is found in all Hebrew manuscripts of Scripture. It was readily accepted as part of the Christian Old Testament and is included in the earliest known complete Christian Bibles. Despite the uncertainties of its date of origin, the Song's love poetry is timeless. It need not be viewed in a historical context to study and appreciate it.

UNITY AND STRUCTURE

The Song has no clear story line but seems to simply move from scene to scene and from speaker to speaker. The apparently unstructured nature of the composition has led some scholars to claim that the book is really a collection of separate love poems – perhaps composed by different authors at different times – rather than a single work. This viewpoint is also based on the somewhat abrupt shifts of mood that seem to lie behind some of the book's sections.

However, the lack of a clear “plot line” in the Song may be meaningless if the composer of the work simply chose a different type of organization for its material, or if the work is intended to depict events occurring at different points over an extended period of time. Either one of these possibilities would explain the seemingly abrupt shifts of scene, character and mood.

Furthermore, the clear repetition of specific words, phrases, and themes that can be seen throughout the work argues much more strongly for the essential unity of the poem than its apparent lack of a connected story line argues against it. One example of this repetition is the recurrent stress on sleep and dreaming that is woven into different sections of the poem – for example, 3:1-5; 5:2-8.

Although there may be no clearly defined story line in the Song, we do see developing themes as the poem unfolds. In fact, if we accept that the Song is a unified composition, it is possible to see three recurrent themes throughout its structure:

- 1) Seeking and Finding: The couple is repeatedly shown seeking and finding each other – a literary device that may stress their longing to come together or recurrent situations over time.
- 2) Profession of Love: The couple repeatedly detail their love for each other, both when apart and when together. The woman’s beauty is celebrated in three passages (4:1-7; 6:4-10; 7:1-7) and that of the man once (5:10-16).
- 3) Separation and Uniting: The couple is united at several points, yet the final words of the book (repeating those of 2:17) begin the cycle of separation and seeking again (8:13-14).

Even when we see a linear progression in the Song, it is important to remember that the scenes are not directly connected. The Song seems to look at events over time that are telescoped together. In that sense, the Song is not just about the young couple’s “love life,” but also about their ongoing life of love – a point to which we will return.



Song of Solomon by Domenico Morelli

CHARACTERS AND ROLES

While interpreters throughout the centuries have all agreed that the Song is a love poem, exactly who the lovers are has often been debated.

An early view of the book is that it has three main characters: Solomon, a young woman, and the young shepherd to whom she was engaged in her home area. According to this view Solomon had taken the young woman to be in his harem, but when she resisted the king's advances he permitted her to return to her home and her rustic lover. Seen this way, the love that is celebrated in the poem is the faithful love of the young woman for the shepherd, and Solomon plays only the part of a wistful onlooker. While this view does fit some of the details of the text – such as why the lover is depicted in a pastoral role, as well as why the poem ends in a setting away from Jerusalem – it seems unlikely that Solomon would have so easily relinquished the young woman or recounted the event in a major composition.

Another view of the Song's main characters is that there are only two – Solomon and the young woman. This view assumes Solomon took the woman to his harem in Jerusalem, where he was smitten by her virtuous inner beauty – as well as her outward beauty – which turned him from his initial physical sensuality to a higher form of love. Again, while this view might fit certain aspects of the text, it hardly matches what we know of Solomon and his actual marriages.

Whatever we may think about the role of Solomon in the poem, the role of the young woman is clear and quite exceptional. The woman is said to be a Shunamite or Shulamite, probably meaning from the village of Shunem or Shulem (the home of the aged King David's attendant, Abishag, 1 Kings 1:1-4). In any event, the young woman takes the leading role in the poem. The Song begins and ends with her words, focuses primarily on her, records her amazing confidence ("I am a rose of Sharon," 2:1; etc.), and describes her beauty and charm. Some commentators believe the two individuals are already married, while others see the young woman's role as progressing through the story – first as being engaged, then as a bride, and finally as a wife. But the lover's affectionate phrase "my sister, my bride" (4:9-10, 12; 5:1-2) is not to be understood literally (see 8:1); both terms simply express closeness and intimacy.

Other characters mentioned in the poem include the young woman's family, as well as others who appear to be friends (the "women of Jerusalem" in NKJV) who act like "backing vocalists" in providing responses to her statements (5:9; etc.).

In many modern translations such as the NIV and ESV, the speeches of the two lovers are labeled "He" and "She" or "Man" and "Woman," along with those of "Friends" or "Others," but these labels are added and are not in the original text. Such labels are added because it is not always clear who is speaking in the poem, or to whom. For example, it is clear in 6:1 that it is the "daughters of Jerusalem" who are speaking, but if you compare the NIV and ESV translations of 1:11 you will notice that the NIV includes this verse as part of the speech of the central male character in the poem ("He"), while the ESV includes it in the response of the lovers' friends ("Others").

The frequent difficulty in knowing who is speaking means that different interpretations of what is said are often possible – and as a result, different meanings can be seen for the poem as a whole. This is the most fascinating aspect of the Song – discovering exactly what is going on – and this will be the focus of the next unit, which examines the different possible interpretations of the Song of Songs and gives conclusions regarding what seems to be the best way to understand this intriguing biblical poem.

* Note 1: Egyptian love poems tend to be shorter, lyric style poems, but there is great similarity between the images and vocabulary used in them and in the Song of Songs. Notice, in the following extracts from an Egyptian New Kingdom example, the same use of animal and plant images in describing the loved one, the stress on the lovers hurrying to each other, the intense emotion, and other similarities with the Song of Songs:

My lover is a marsh ...
Her mouth is a lotus bud,
Her breasts are mandrake blossoms.
Her arms are vines,
Her eyes are shaded berries.

Oh, hurry to look at your love!
Be like horses charging in battle,
Like a gardener up with the sun,
Burning to watch his prize bud open. – Papyrus Harris 500

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Background Basics

1. Summarize the main views regarding the authorship of the Song of Songs.
2. Why is the Song included in the wisdom writings in Christian Bibles?
3. Summarize the arguments for the essential unity of the Song as a single composition rather than as a collection of small love poems.

Looking Beneath the Surface

1. Read the two sections of the Song that seem to be describing dreams (3:1-5; 5:2-8). Think about how the fact that they are dreams affects our understanding of what is said in these two sections and that they should not be understood literally (for example, 5:8).

Copyright CornerstoneCourses.org 2021. All rights reserved. This material is part of a free Cornerstone Bible Course and is not to be sold. Download the free course from CornerstoneCourses.org.