A Guide To Reading The Song Of Songs

Timothy Bess
Saturday, July 16, 2011

Tweet

In our last post, "The God Who Loves Sex," we argued that the Song of Songs is romantic (even at times erotic) love poetry, and that God and school with the power of the Spirit, originally written as a powerful (and effective) polemic against Baalism and the cultic, ritual sexuality that went along with it, which had so ensnared the people of God. So how to we read this book with today? How do we let it have that same original power in reshaping and redeeming our sexuality in this age? I suggest a few thoughts.

Tips For Reading The Song Of Songs Well

1. Read it as a dramatic poem.

I almost always preach from the ESV, and most English versions (the KJV, RSV, and NRSV) have a dramatic layout, with speaker identifications, and the ESV is no exception. The ESV also has adopted the Song of Songs (Read five online or in the Kindle edition) Bible translations have a tendency to hide or obscure the meaning of the imagery (E.g., the KJV of 1611), and more literal translations, without explanation of the imagery, often leave you wondering what in the world is what is meant. Beyond that, this is pretty, and poetry excellently translated can easily lose its inspired emotive force, which a dynamic translation works hard to retain.

The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
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2. Read with a good study Bible or a commentary.

• For the Bible, I highly recommend the NLT Study Bible notes (you can buy an Kindle, in Large, Christmas, Tuscany, or print).
• Biblical Scholar Tremper Longman and veteran Psychiatrist Dan Allender team up to help the church see the Song of Songs as God's inspired marriage teaching about sex in the Song in "God Loves Sex: A Honest Conversation about Sexual Desire and Holiness." It is a easy-to-read format, combining narrative and exposition. Bible Study walks you through the Song and relates it to regular Christian living, including sex life in the intro-getting of this as you read it.

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GOD LOVES SEX
DAN B. ALLENDER
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• For the more in-depth, Tremper Longman's Baker Exegetical and Tyndale Longman's Bible Study Commentary on Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005).
• For the advanced reader willing to work a little, with all the intimate details, get Gerhard Von Rad's Tyndale Longman, Song of Songs. The Hebrew Bible Commentary (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001). It may be the best thing out there on the book. See Gen 1:2 Prime, on Logos, or Kindle.

3. Read the book through as a whole, but recognize that each poem has the most part stands on its own. While there is certainly a story to the whole, and some hints of a beginning, middle, and end, it is not a narrative structure, storyline, or "plot" to the book. The book is an anthology of love poetry (it is a Song of Songs, and you should read it as a Song, not a "Narrative" or "The Poetics of Sex").

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5. Pay attention to who is speaking the verse, to the woman, to the women of the city. The NLT helpfully has a heading showing who is speaking at each point.

6. Make sense of the imagery.

A vital key to reading this biblical poetry is to understand what is being referred to by images that were natural to the sealer, but seem foreign to us. It provide some brief explanation below, a study Bible or commentary will take you much further.

1. Read as Christian Scripture

This is God's Word to you (II Tim. 3:16), interpreting a biblical sexual ethic onto your heart that will guide your sexual choices. Because the Song images pure love so powerfully, and impressionably, it also has value to any concern where love biblical love and sexuality.

Poems In The Song Of Songs

Tremper has the outline of the Song from Tremper's Longman (in his shorter commentary), with a few minor adaptations. I have also included a few brief explanations of the some of the more obscure imagery or poetic flow (I highly recommend the entire work through a full commentary, or the NLT study notes) which will explain far more that I could not likely write about safely or a blog.

Superscription (1:1)

1 First Love Poem: The Woman's Pursuit Of The Man (1:2–4)
• Sweeter than wine = intoxicating
• Fragrance = cologne
• Virgins love him, but Beautiful (1:5–6)
• Dark = Burned by hard labor in the sun
2 Third Love Poem: Young Lovers (1:7–8)
• The tracks of the flock" = the way of God counsels the shepherd has left leading to a secret rendezvous
4. Fourth Love Poem: A Beautiful Bride (1:9–11)
• In battle a charge of stallions could be distracted by relaxing in their stable = in hard times, a man could be distracted by his wife
5. Fifth Love Poem: Intimate Fragrance (1:12–14)
• All these unusual words are flowery/fragrance used in perfumes/ointments.
6. Sixth Love Poem: Children Love (1:15–17)
• "Our couch is green" = the place to lay down (that is, even if we must live in the wild) anywhere is safe as you lie down with your lover
7. Seventh Love Poem: Power and Tender (2:1–3)
• "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" = I am an ordinary Lily in a field of thousands of other Lilies. He instead calls her she shines like a single Lily in a field of thorns.
• "Apple trees" were images of romance and sexuality.
• "Shade" = his protection of her
• Raisins and apples = aphrodisiacs
• "Left hand and right hand" = support from the right of lovemaking
• "Don't disturb or rouse" = a phrase used in this love must wait for marriage.
8 Eighth Love Poem: Springtime (2:8–17)
• The cloudy season is over and the Springtime of love is present
• "Let me see your face" = they may have been playing hide and seek, as the bride hadmet the nicks, but he can't help being aware her a few seconds, so he gives up. "You are" "Flawless" = critiques that sum a charge little things that can become big problems in a relationship
9. Ninth Love Poem: Seeking and Not Finding (3:1–5)
• Pictures the angst of physical separation and the joy of physical embrace.
• But not to be awakened until the time is right (3:5)
10. Tenth Love Poem: A Royal Wedding Procession (3:6–11)
• Solomon's extravagant wedding illustrates the value and importance of the wedding
11. Eleventh Love Poem: Beauty From Head to Breasts (4:1–7)
• "Hair like a flock of goats" = Black, long, and flowing, long neck is majestic.
• "Shields" = military and other adorning jewelry
• "Twins of a gazelle, that graze" = two fawns with their heads down eating, viewed from behind, when each round rump is seen and nothing up in the center
12. Twelfth Love Poem: The Invitation (4:8–5)
• These are Israel's places but symbols of romantic escape
• "Captivated my heart" = This held hostage with a glance from your eyes
13. Thirteenth Love Poem: Lovers Gardens (4:12–5:1)
• "Your sister" = Virgins
• Her garden with its spring = her sexuality. It is gated, locked, sealed, and guarded (4:12) until the consummate day when she finally has husband in (4:16).
14. Fourteenth Love Poem: In the Bed Chamber (5:2–6:3)
• The Garden imagery also paints both sides of the coin: where love not pure but between lovers, it is a place of danger, and the woman is left wounded and bleeding (5:7) and returning to the Source of God given sexuality so that there is no longer shame (5:8, 9, 10)
15. Fourteenth Love Poem: Seeking and Not Finding: Again (5:2–6:3)
• 5:2 pictures a dream the initiation of passionate romantic pursuit and crip retreat of a loving back and forth that seeks the right time for both.
• 6:3-10 Ps. 45 describes the consummation of the husband for the bellows of the city
16. Fifteenth Love Poem: An Army with Banners (6:4–10)
• 6:4-7 Ps. 45 describes the consummation of the husband. He has had a choice of scores wives and concubines. He would choose only her, and have eyes for her.
17. Sixteenth Love Poem: In the Nut Orchard (6:11–12)
• 6:11 Ps. 45 describes the consummation of the husband for the bellows of the city
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• 6:11 Ps. 45 describes the consummation of the husband for the bellows of the city
20. Seventeenth Love Poem: Dancing Before Mahanaim (6:13–7:5)
• The Dance of Mahanaim is a dance of the Spring Festival, a celebration of the Lord's Day
21. Eighteenth Love Poem: Springtime (7:6–8:4)
• The cloudy season is over and the Springtime of love is present
• "Let me see your face" = they may have been playing hide and seek, as the bride hadmet the nicks, but he can't help being aware her a few seconds, so he gives up. "You are" "Flawless" = critiques that sum a charge little things that can become big problems in a relationship
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30. Seventeenth Love Poem: Dancing Before Mahanaim (6:13–7:5)
• The Dance of Mahanaim is a dance of the Spring Festival, a celebration of the Lord's Day
31. Twenty-second Love Poem: The Dancer of the Vineyard (8:5–12)
• If this is dancer and she has been a love slave in Solomon's harem, due to her debt to him (7:6), wanting to get out to be with her shepherd lover, then this love poem makes sense. Her lover is her "Apple tree" who has taken her from her mother's house and her attempt to "stay here." But her lover true love – is never for sale.
32. Twenty-third Love Poem: Be Like a Gazelle (8:13–14)

Some Example Texts From The NLT

Because reading the text in a modern dynamic translation is so helpful, I include here some snippets from the New Living Translation, and urge you to use the tips above to read over them well, and bang your study into the book a greater length.

The Woman's Pursuit (1:2-4)

Young Woman
2 You are such fine an again,
for your love is sweeter than wine.
3 I have pleasing a your fragrance,
your name is like the spreading fragrance of scented oils.
No wonder all the young women love you!
4 Take me with you, come, let's run!
The king has brought me into his bedroom.

Young Men
We'll be one as in exciting, my darling,
as a mare among Pharaoh's stallions.

Young Woman
5 My lover, I am dark but lovely,
like the tents of Kedar,
like the curtains of Solomon.
6 Don't look at me because I am dark,
for I have been in the sun.
My mother's sons were angry with me
and made me work in the vineyards.
So I have neglected my own vineyard.
7 Tell me, you whom my soul loves,
where do you take your flocks to graze at noon?
I want to be with your companions
instead of being a stranger among the flocks.

Young Men
8 If you don't know, you most lovely of all women,
follow the footprints of the flocks
and graze your young goats near the shepherds' tents.
9 My lovely one, I liken you to a mare
among the chariots of Pharaoh.
10 Your cheeks are lovely
as you are wearing jewelry,
your neck is graceful
with a necklace of jewels.
11 We will make you a necklace of gold
with silver beads.

Young Woman
12 While the king is resting at his table,
my perfume spreads its fragrance.
13 My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh
resting between my breasts.
14 My lover is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.

Young Men
15 How lovely you are, my darling!
How lovely!
Your eyes are like doves.

Young Woman
16 How handsome you are, my lover!
How pleasant!
Our bed is a place of beauty.
17 The timbers of our house are cedars;
our rafters are cypress.

Young Woman
I am a rose of Sharon,
a wild flower in the valleys.

Young Men
2 I have answered my darling, my treasure, my bride!
I gather myrrh with my spices
and eat honeycomb with my honey.

Bragging About Her Lover (5:9-16)

Young Women of Jerusalem
9 Why is your lover better than all others,
O woman of rare beauty?
What makes your lover so special
that we must promise this?

Young Woman
10 My lover is dark and dazzling,
better than ten thousand others!
11 His head is finest gold,
his wavy hair is black as a raven.
12 His eyes are like doves
beside springs of water,
they are set like jewels
washed in milk.
13 His cheeks are the gardens of spices
giving off fragrance.
His lips are the lilies
dripping with myrrh.
14 His arms are like rounded bars of gold,
set with beryl.
His body is the bright ivory,
glowing with lapis lazuli.
15 His legs are like marble pillars
set in sockets of finest gold.
His posture is stately
like the noble cedars of Lebanon.
16 His mouth is sweetness itself.
He is desirable in every way.
Such, O women of Jerusalem,
is my lover, my friend.

Love Is As Strong As Death (8:5-7)

Young Women of Jerusalem
5 Who is this sweeping in from the desert,
leaning on her lover?

Young Woman
I aroused you under the apple tree.
Yes, your mother gave you birth.
where she gave you the alabaster jar,
6 Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm.
For love is as strong as death.
Passion is as unyielding as the grave.
Love flashes like fire,
the brightest kind of flame.
7 Many waters cannot quench love,
nor can rivers drown it.
If a man tried to buy love
with all his wealth,
his offer would be utterly scorned.

A Brief Sermon On The Song

Here is a brief and impatient sermon on the Song (I apologize for the poor audio)

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Lawrence Brown

Interesting, I would think the poetry would be largely lost in the NLT but is actually brought out nicely.

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