

## Dec 3 –Song of Solomon 1-4

### Introduction

In response to the idea that the Song of Songs should be disputed regarding its inclusion in the Hebrew canon of scripture, Rabbi Aqiba (d. 135 CE) said, *“God forbid! No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth that day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”*

Despite its popular attribution to King Solomon, no one knows for sure who authored (and then who perhaps edited) the Song of Songs, nor when it was exactly written. Most scholars agree that large parts of the Song of Songs began in the oral tradition, and then were written down. Because of its cohesion as a work, it seems feasible that it was mostly written by 1 author (or perhaps had an excellent editor who tied it all together). Most scholars today believe that it was written after the exile, but it does share similarities with other ancient works (ie from Egypt) that existed around the time of Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC. It may have been attributed to Solomon to give it more respectability, but also because 1 Kings states that Solomon was known to have composed more than 1000 songs and 3000 proverbs. In the editor’s view, the Song was a superlative work, the very best of Songs, and thus, it must have been composed by the wisest of all composers, Solomon (who having had 700 wives and 300 concubines would have been well versed in the ways of love). Some believe that this work may have been written by a woman, or at the very least FOR women, as the woman speaks more often than the man, women’s sexuality is celebrated in this work rather than controlled, and the focus is on the mother and mother’s house, rather than the father’s (which would be countercultural in a patriarchal society).

The Song was described by Josephus to be the part of the 4 canonical books which “contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.” Romance, love, marriage, and sex are all “precepts for the conduct of human life.” They are all good gifts from God, described through the courtship of the couple in Song of Songs. And yet, both Jews and Christians have sought to treat this book about the tangible, earthy gifts of human love as an allegory for the love between God and God’s people (Israel and the Church). In Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is often portrayed as a bride (or adulteress) and the Lord as her faithful husband, and the Church is described in the New Testament as “the bride of Christ.” The amorous language contained within the Song caused great embarrassment and blushing to early and medieval Christians, and so every attempt was made to strip the Song of its “realness” and to root its language firmly in the realm of the spiritual. However, nothing could be further from the

original intent of this work, which was meant to be a total celebration of God's good gift of love!

What is Song of Songs? Four possibilities exist:

1. A drama –a dialogue between 2 characters and a chorus that tells the story of courtship and marriage.
2. A collection of wedding songs, intended to be used at various stages during a wedding ceremony.
3. A fertility cult liturgy, stripped of its pagan elements and reinterpreted as allegory between God and Israel.
4. An assembled anthology of separate love songs edited into a coherent work.

Reading Song of Songs can be difficult, because the meaning of some terms and expressions has been lost to time, and it's not always clear who is speaking, but while reading ponder the following: What is the literal meaning of this text? What does it mean for human love that such a work is in the Bible? What does this text remind me of in my relationship with God?

## Chapter 1

The unnamed woman speaks immediately (vs. 2-8), with soaring praise of her lover's kisses, love, and scent. She refers to her lover as "king," this is a favorable nickname rather than a literal position (he is really a shepherd). Apparently because he is so sweet smelling "all the maidens love him." Beginning in vs. 5, she make a countercultural statement that she is both black and beautiful. In an urban area in the middle east, there would have been a cultural bias for lighter skin in women, suggesting that they stayed indoors and didn't have to work. This bias exists to this day. But this woman confidently declares that even though she has dark skin because her brothers forced her to work out in the vineyard, that she is beautiful. The term "vineyard" will recur as a metaphor for female sexuality. The first use of vineyard is literal, but "my own vineyards I have not kept" refers to the fact that she is not a virgin. Ancient Israelite rules regarding veiling are not entirely clear –in some parts of the Bible prostitutes wear veils, whereas in other parts brides wore veils. In vs. 8 a male chorus tells her to follow the sheep to find her lover, the shepherd.

In vs. 9, the man first speaks. In ancient Egypt, the military would send a mare into an enemy encampment to stir up and excite the stallions. This is another way of saying that the woman is exciting, sexy even. The woman responds by saying that her lover is like nard, myrrh, and henna (all precious, arousing, fragrances in the ancient world).

## Chapter 2

Rose of Sharon and lily of the valley were both common flowers in this part of the world. The woman is saying that she is just an ordinary beauty, but her lover responds saying that she is an exquisite beauty –a lily among brambles. She responds with a more masculine comparison: that he is an apple tree among the ordinary non-fruit bearing trees of the forest. He gives shade like all the other trees, but she also delights in his fruit. This is a sexual allegory. “He brought me to his banqueting house” suggests a sexual tryst, in which she delighted in the sweet and precious fruits available. Vs. 7 is a refrain that the woman will say over and over again. This is either warning her fellow women of the dangers of love, or it’s more practically requesting that the lovers not be interrupted until their time of intimacy is over.

Vs. 8-17, the man stands in secrecy outside her garden wall, requesting her to join him for another tryst in the countryside, for Spring has sprung. She asks him to return at dusk (when the shadows flee), for it is too dangerous in the daytime (the foxes threaten the vineyard). Vs. 10-12 could indeed be interpreted allegorically as God calling to us, the beloved, wooing us into relationship, offering us the hope and new life that Spring symbolizes.

## Chapter 3

The woman has waited for her lover to return at dusk, it’s now the nighttime and he’s nowhere to be found. She seeks him in the city. This could be allegory for a “dark night of the soul” when we feel lost and disconnected from God. There is a dreamlike quality to this passage. In fact, even after she finds him and brings him into her mother’s house for a sexual tryst, we’re still not sure if she really found him or if she dreamt the whole thing. Vs. 6-11 describes the only wedding in Song of Songs, as the king’s wedding procession (not the two lovers’). It could be a later addition, inserting Solomon into the narrative, or it could be the woman’s metaphor, that her lover is like the extravagant royal entourage of the king. Wedding crowns were used as part of the marriage liturgy in ancient Israel, prior to the destruction of the second temple.

## Chapter 4

The man now praises the beauty of his love with a series of favorable comparisons: her eyes are like soft doves, her hair is black and bouncy like a flock of goats, her teeth are white and even like twin freshly shorn sheep, her lips are crimson, her cheeks are red and round like pomegranate halves, her neck is bejeweled in many layers of necklaces, her breasts are perfectly matched and soft. Her kisses are like wine, milk, and honey (all the best tastes in life). She is perfect in his eyes. Calling her “my sister, my bride” is not a literal relationship, but refers to the deep intimacy and tender connection he feels toward her. “A garden locked” refers to her chastity, which she now unlocks for her lover. Vs. 13-15 refer to his intimate knowledge of her anatomy.