

INTRODUCTION TO 22ND BIBLEBOOK

SONG OF SONGS (930-879 B.C.)

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A. THE ORIGIN OF SONG OF SONGS.

1. The name of the book.

In the Old Testament the book is called 'Song of Songs'; in Hebrew: 'shir ha-shirim' and in Greek: 'Asma asmatón' (asma = a glad song). The duplication expresses 'most excellent' in comparison: 'the most excellent song'¹.

2. The writer of the book.

The title is followed by the words: 'with reference to Solomon' (Hebrew: 'le-Shelomoh'). *Solomon is not the author of the book, but rather the book is about Solomon.* Song of Songs is the most excellent glad song about king Solomon. It would be strange if Solomon would write about his 'curtains' (1:5), 'his carriage' (3:6-9), 'the daughters of Zion looking at him wearing the crown' (6:11), 'his vineyard' (8:11) or that the beloved says to him, "The thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon (8:12)."

We do not know who the author was of Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles, Esther, Job and Song of Songs. Nevertheless, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of these books.

3. The time the book was written.

In 930 B.C. the kingdom split when Jeroboam broke away from king Rehoboam. The capital of the northern kingdom remained Tirzah² until in 880/879 B.C. when Omri bought the hill of Shemer and built the capital on it and called it Samaria³. Samaria remained the capital until its destruction by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Because the two capitals Tirzah and Jerusalem are mentioned together in 6:4, Song of Songs was written between 930-879 B.C.

4. The unity and division of the book.

Three times the same refrain is used: "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). This points to the unity of the book and to three parts of a single poem⁴.

B. DIVISION OF SONG OF SONGS.

The theme is: *A praiseworthy appreciation of the spontaneous love of king Solomon and the Shulammitic maiden.*

The refrain "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" divides the book into three songs of love. With these words the poet says that every attempt to awaken love artificially (in the wrong way and at the wrong time) is futile. True love originates spontaneously in the soul.

1. First part. Song of Songs 1:2 – 2:7.

The Shulammitic maiden is brought to the chambers of the harem in the king's palace (1:4). She expresses there her longing for love from her lover (1:2-7). He responds (1:8). This is followed by a dialogue between the king and this maiden praising each other's beauty and ending with his left arm under her head and his right arm tenderly embracing her (2:6).

2. Second part. Song of Songs 2:8 – 3:5.

The beloved speaks about her lover. He comes to his beloved, bouncing as a gazelle over the hills (2:8-9). In images of the awakening Spring he implores her to come with him (2:10-13), to show her face and let him hear her voice (2:14). Because she has been speaking from Song of Songs 2:8 onwards, she continues to speak in Song of Songs 2:15, "Catch for us (the lover and the beloved) the small foxes that ruin the vineyards ... that are in bloom." She exhorts her lover to do nothing that would harm their blossoming relationship! She invites the king to come to her in the evening (2:17). In her dream she had taken hold of her lover and would not let go of him (3:1-4).

3. Third part. Song of Songs 3:6 – 8:4.

Song of Songs 5:8 divides this part in two.

First, the song returns to the situation in Song of Songs 1:4 where the bride is brought to the brides chamber. It describes the wedding procession (3:6-11).

¹ Cf. 'King of kings' and 'Lord of lords' (Revelation 19:16)

² 1 Kings 14:17

³ 1 Kings 16:23-24

⁴ Cf. Psalm 42:5 and Psalm 43:5 which is also regarded as one Psalm.

In Song of Songs 4:1-15 the lover pictures the beauty of his bride as garden with flowing water. In Song of Songs 4:16 the bride invites her husband to come into his garden and enjoy the taste of its fruits. In Song of Songs 5:1 he responds that he is coming into his garden and surrenders to the joy of their love. Once more in her dream she expresses her aching desire for his love (5:2-7) culminating in exhorting the daughters of Jerusalem to send a message to her husband that she is faint with love (5:8).

Second, the daughters of Jerusalem ask the question in what way the lover is better than others (5:9). The Shulammitte maiden answers this question by describing the outstanding qualities of the king (5:10-16). Then they ask the question where her lover has gone to (6:1). The Shulammitte maiden answers that the king (the one who is the browsing shepherd/regent of his people among the lilies) has gone down to his garden, that is, to his bride to whom she belongs. Then, introduced by the call on the Shulammitte maiden to show herself (7:13), the king describes the outstanding qualities of the Shulammitte maiden (6:14 – 7:9a). The maiden suddenly takes the word and says that the costly wine from her palate flows directly to her lover. She is his and his desire is for her (7:9b-10). She invites him with images from nature to share love with her (7:11-13). This part reaches its peak by saying that the difference between her rural and his royal upbringing would not make a difference to their love (8:1-2). His left arm is under her head and his right arm embraces her (8:3).

4. Three short pieces at the close of the book emphasizes its main purpose.

- Song of Songs 8:5-7 remembers the first time the king met the Shulammitte under the apple tree and their love was aroused. Their love was as strong as death and burnt like blazing fire.
- Song of Songs 8:8-10. The brothers of the young bride are anxious to protect her maiden honour. But she says that she kept her honour like the wall of a fortress, but then surrendered her defence to the royal groom.
- Song of Songs 8:11-14 makes a comparison between Solomon's vineyard, his harem, and the maiden's vineyard, her feminine charms. Finally, the king implores her to let him hear her voice and she replies by imploring him to rush to her with the speed of a gazelle (8:13-14). Thus, Song of Songs ends with the gripping antithesis between the royal harem (of thousand women) and the true and spontaneous love of the king and his Shulammitte bride.

C. THE PLACE OF THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES IN THE CANON.

The Hebrew Canon consists of three parts:

- the Law
- the Prophets
- the Writings

The Writings consisted of three parts.

- The first part consisted of the books: Psalms, Proverbs and Job.
- The second part consisted of five scrolls (5 megillot): These were read during five Jewish festivals:
 - Song of Songs was read during Passover.
 - Ruth was read during Pentecost.
 - Lamentations was read during the Commemoration of the destruction of the temple of Solomon.
 - Ecclesiastes was read during the Feast of Tabernacles.
 - Esther was read during the Purim festival.
- The third part consisted of the books of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah and Chronicles.

We follow the Greek translation and Canon, which placed Song of Songs within the group of five Poetical books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

D. DIVERENT VIEWS ABOUT THE STYLE OF SONG OF SONGS.

There are four different views.

1. The staged view.

Some expositors think that Song of Songs is not a unity, but a composition of various songs, love songs or wedding songs between a seated bride and groom, playing the role of and addressed as queen and king with great possessions of horses and chariots.

However, it is unlikely that weddings were conducted as a play staging a king and queen and that a simple farmer's/shepherd's couple would "have 60 queens or 80 concubines or virgins beyond number" as maids of honour (6:8). It is also unlikely that their wedding procession would consist of a carriage with silver and gold and purple upholstery, escorted by 60 warriors brandishing swords. It would be strange that the young groom (who is not king Solomon) would three times be addressed as 'Solomon' (3:6-10). And it would be peculiar to speak of 'the daughters of Zion' (3:11) or 'the daughters of Jerusalem' (1:5; 2:7; 3:5,11; 5:8; 8:4) at an ordinary private wedding.

2. The allegorical view.

The Jews regard Song of Songs as an allegory about God as the groom and Israel as the bride. The early Christians followed this view and regarded Christ as the groom and the Church as the bride. There are other examples of allegories in the Old Testament.

- Jeremiah 25:15-29. The announcement of judgement on the nations through the picture of drinking the cup of God's wrath.
- Ezekiel 17:3-10. The unfaithfulness of Zedekiah is depicted as two eagles and a cedar shoot that turned into a spreading withering vine.
- Ezekiel 19: 2-9. The destiny of the two kings Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin pictured as a lioness with two cubs.
- Ezekiel 24:3-12. Jerusalem and her destiny depicted by a rusty cooking pot.
- Zechariah 11:4-17. God giving up his dealings with Israel and the nations depicted by a shepherd with two staffs that are broken.
- Ecclesiastes 12:3-5. An allegorical description of growing older and dying.

These allegories are short and it is clear that these comparisons are allegories. For example The two lions depict kings. However, the figurative speech only describes the love relationship between the bride and groom and not the bride and groom themselves. For example, what in the allegorical view would 'the cheeks' and 'the neck' of the bride (1:10) refer to in the Church? The 'earrings of gold studded with silver' do not refer to Christian virtues (1:11)! It is unthinkable that the groom, Christ, would say to the bride, the Church, "Turn your eyes away from me" (6:5).

3. The dramatic view.

A third person is introduced in the exposition of Song of Songs: the young girl from the rural area doing her utmost best to resist the approach of king Solomon to conquer her and remains steadfastly faithful to her rural fiancé. Song of Songs would then be a triumph song of pure love against the seduction from the side of king Solomon. The captured young rural girl in the harem of king Solomon asks her far away rural fiancé, "Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday (1:7)." This would contradict her request to the king to sweep her away into his bedchamber (1:2-4). And it would contradict the intimate conversation between the king and the maiden at his table (1:9-14). It is also not likely that the king speaks 4:1-7 and 9-15 to the maiden, but is interrupted by the request of her rural fiancé to come away with him in 4:8. Likewise it is a forced construction to construe 7:9-11 as the maiden rejecting the king's advances in 7:7-8.

4. The typological view. The best explanation.

The Song of Songs is a love song of king Solomon (3:7,9,11) and the Shulammitte maiden (6:13, one of his 700 wives and 300 concubines⁵). Besides the many outpourings of passionate words from the lover and the beloved, the wedding procession/train is described (3:6-11), the dreams of the bride are described (3:1-4; 5:2-7) and the call to the maiden of the admiring spectators to show herself (6:13). There is no evidence that the speaking king is suddenly supplanted by the rural fiancé.

In 4:12 the Shulammitte maiden is called 'an enclosed garden with a sealed fountain'. No one has yet entered her. In 4:16 the maiden invites the king to come into his garden (his wife) and in 5:1 the king says that he entered his garden to enjoy all the fruits in it. Also in 6:2 and 6:11 we find the same imagery. The 'going down to the grove of trees' to enjoy its beauty (6:11) is equal to an exhortation to give in to the joy of loving. Inquiring after where the king was grazing his flock and resting his sheep (1:7) and 'his browsing among the lilies' (2:16) amounts to inquiring after the king's task to govern the people.

E. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SONG OF SONGS AS PART OF THE BIBLE.

1. Song of Songs discusses the love between the husband and wife within marriage.

Other Bible passages are:

"A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies⁶."

"A wife of noble character is her husband's crown⁷."

"He who finds a wife, finds what is good and receive favour from the LORD⁸."

"Rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always.⁹"

"Enjoy life with your wife whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life (if you live it without God) that God has given you¹⁰."

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife (singular) and they (the two) will become one¹¹."

"The wife of your youth ... is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. The LORD made them one. In flesh (body) and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. ... Do not break faith with the wife of your youth. I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence¹²."

⁵ 1 Kings 11:1-4

⁶ Proverbs 31:10

⁷ Proverbs 12:4

⁸ Proverbs 18:22

⁹ Proverbs 5:18-19

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 9:9

¹¹ Genesis 2:24

¹² Malachi 2:14-16

2. Song of Songs reveals something of Jesus Christ.

In John 5:39 Jesus says, “*The Scriptures testify about me.*” And in Luke 24:27 and 44 we read, “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” The apostle Paul teaches that the model for the relationship between a husband and a wife is the relationship between Christ and the Church. “As the Church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her¹³.” Thus, the Song of Songs reveals the rich and deep relationship of love between Jesus Christ, the groom, and the Church, the bride.

The fact that the sovereign king Solomon chose the rural Shulammitte girl and she says, “I am my lover’s and my lover is mine ... I belong to my lover and his desire is for me (6:3; 7:10)” is a *typological conception of Song of Songs about the Lord Jesus Christ* choosing us and loving us. This notion *keeps us from regarding Song of Songs as an allegorical exposition. Then it would not be necessary to explain every detail of the Song allegorically.* Song of Songs then is a type of the historical reality that Christ loves the Church and the Church loves Christ, without having to explain Solomon’s many wives and concubines which he as an ancient Eastern king had married to ratify political and economic interests. Without approving Solomon’s polygamy, we endorse the truth that *genuine marriages enjoy the glory of married love.*

¹³ Ephesians 5:24-25