

Song of Songs



REFORMED

EXPOSITORY

COMMENTARY

IAIN M. DUGUID

“Iain Duguid takes a book of the Bible that many Christians are intimidated by and showcases it in its rightful place as the finest of songs. Perhaps we’ve been as insecure about tackling the allegorical and literal interpretations in this song as we may be in our own relationships. Not anymore! This commentary will prove that of all the songs written to explore the age-old questions of love, the Song of Songs is the one that we cannot and do not want to get out of our heads.”

—**Aimee Byrd**, Author, *Housewife Theologian* and *Theological Fitness*;
cohost, *Mortification of Spin*

“So is the Song of Songs really about sex or Jesus? Iain Duguid steers a wise and pastoral path between those simplistic choices. He demonstrates how this poetic book on the excellencies of human love is not merely a practical marriage guide nor an allegorical representation of the coming Christ. Rather, this book is the best song of all songs because it provides divinely inspired insights into the blessings and weaknesses of human love in order to point us toward the goodness and necessity of the grace of God, whose love is perfected in Christ alone.”

—**Bryan Chapell**, Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“Here’s the work of a multigifted scholar on display! Here Iain Duguid is the expositor, the biblical theologian, the pastor, the counselor, and—quite often!—the surgeon. This exposition is vintage Duguid—sneakily convicting and awash in grace. He lures me to oversimplify: if someone asks me how best to prepare for marriage, I will be tempted to say, ‘Study the Song of Songs and read Duguid’s commentary.’”

—**Dale Ralph Davis**, Minister in Residence, The First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, Columbia, South Carolina

“This book helps us. As a wise and seasoned pastor, Iain gently weeps with us in our broken search for false loves. Yet he strongly rouses our affections to the One whose love is true, satisfying, lasting, romantic, and alluring. Practical, tasty, and invigorating, Iain’s prose and poetry offer a timely guide for those who desire the lovers of Solomon’s Song to disciple them in Jesus.”

—**Zack Eswine**, Pastor, Riverside Church, Webster Groves, Missouri;
Director of Homiletics, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Iain Duguid’s *Song of Songs* is not your typical commentary. Though based on solid scholarship, it is completely pastoral in tone, easy to read, and rich with insights. Dr. Duguid’s pastoral experience anticipates the modern reader’s experiences and concerns, and helps us avoid reading the Song of Songs strictly as an allegory or, alternately, as a dating or sex manual. Instead, *Song of Songs* teaches us to appreciate the beauty of married sexual love, while at the very same time enriching our understanding of God’s love for us.”

—**Winston T. Smith**, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation, Glenside, Pennsylvania

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

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Song of Songs

IAIN M. DUGUID



P U B L I S H I N G

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For Sam and Pat Befus:
An apple tree and a lily of the valley,
Still blooming after all these years.

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confes-

Series Introduction

sion of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastors-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

There would be no sermons without congregations. That may not be completely true: I did meet a church planter who once delivered a sermon to an entirely empty auditorium because no one turned up for the service (his own family happened to be out of town that week). He preached the message aloud anyway because he felt that even if no one else needed to hear his sermon on faith, he himself certainly did! But the exception underlines the rule. Preachers need listeners, and good listeners are a tremendous encouragement to those of us who preach. I would therefore like to thank the congregation of Christ Presbyterian Church, Grove City, Pennsylvania, for providing such an attentive audience for these sermons. The fledgling congregation of Christ Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, was also remarkably eager to have this book as the topic for our first sermon series, which would not exactly be conventional church-planting wisdom.

Many individuals within those congregations encouraged us along the way, and it is risky to single some out and risk slighting others who were equally important. But Matt & Rebecca Harmon and Jonathan & Kat Kuciemba formed a wonderful pastoral team with us in Grove City, along with our elders and deacons. We look forward to continuing our relationship with them as our overseeing session, and with Lincoln & Emma Larsen as he joins the team in Philadelphia as an intern. One other couple from Grove City stand out as a particular inspiration: our friends Bob & Louise Schmitberger share a love that has endured many trials and difficulties unquenched: their unfailing care for others and constant encouragement of us and of the church are hard to leave behind.

I would also like to thank those who have contributed to the production of this volume: Phil Ryken and Doug O'Donnell read the manuscript carefully

Preface

and corrected many mistakes, while Amanda Martin and John J. Hughes, along with the whole team at P&R Publishing, skillfully brought it into its finished form.

It has been poignant to ponder this material as we contemplate our own children's reaching the age where love and marriage become the source of so much potential joy and frustration. We pray for Wayne, Jamie, Sam & Peggy, Hannah, Rob, and Rosie & Chris that they will find great joy in the Lord's plans for them in this area of life, whether that involves marriage or singleness. I would also like to thank Barb, for excelling as a wife who constantly cares about our relationship and pursues me, even when I am so far from being the ideal husband. I am richly blessed to be married to a woman who understands grace so deeply.

I would like to dedicate this book to Barb's parents, Sam and Pat Befus. They are a couple whose faithful love has been lifelong and unfaltering, and whose lives were poured out in service of the church, first as missionaries in Asia, Africa, and South America, and then in pastoral ministry closer to home. They are real people with real faults and failings, but also a very deep and genuine love for the Lord and for those around them. Everyone who has known them has been profoundly touched by the warmth of their love; I owe them a personal debt of gratitude for welcoming me into their family so kindly more than thirty years ago, and for praying for us and cheering us on ever since.

INTRODUCTION¹

What on earth is the Song of Songs about? If that is your response to this biblical book, then you are certainly not alone. A British Old Testament scholar, David Clines, used to assign the book to his entering class of university students, along with the question, “What does the Book do to you if you read it? (Be intellectual about this, not confessional).” One student said, “Personally, I would like a narrative alongside this text to explain what is actually happening. I find it to be slightly confusing and annoying that what is happening is never clear,” while another commented, “I have a nose like the tower of Lebanon and like the Great Wall of China, but I do not consider it worthy of romantic poetry.”² It is certainly a challenging book to understand.

INTERPRETING THE SONG

Part of the difficulty of the Song of Songs comes from the fact that it is a *song*, and therefore poetry. Poetry is the art of condensation: expressing maximum meaning in the minimum number of words. As a result, poetry is often more evocative than explicative. It doesn’t take the time to unpack its figures of speech or to explain its analogies. It relies on the reader to fill in the blanks. Poetry tends to be open-ended, leaving us pondering and wondering rather than tying up every loose end with a watertight argument.

1. I have written a much lengthier discussion of these introductory matters in *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 19 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 19–56. Here I will simply summarize my conclusions from that work.

2. D. J. A. Clines, “Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?,” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. P. R. Davies and D. J. A. Clines, JSOTS 205 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 94–121.

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Yet at the same time, poetry has a remarkable ability to address the whole person and to move our souls with a power that prose can rarely match.

The second challenge is to decide what precisely the Song is about. On one level, that is an easy question to answer: it is about love. But whose love? Some scholars have argued that it is an originally secular love song about two people that acquired a religious cast simply by being included in the Bible. On the opposite end of the spectrum, others have insisted that it was composed as an allegory of God's love for his people that really has nothing to do with human love at all.

Historically speaking, an allegorical approach that sees the Song of Songs as being about the love of God for his people has certainly been the most popular among preachers. It is not hard to see why. Without having to descend to the embarrassing matter of talking about sex from the pulpit, hearers can be encouraged and directed in their spiritual lives with all kinds of edifying observations about prayer and Bible reading. Don't worry: it is all about Jesus! So according to Cyril of Alexandria, writing in the fifth century A.D., when the woman describes her lover lying between her two breasts like a sachet of myrrh, what she is really talking about is Jesus coming between the two Testaments, Old and New. This allegorical approach enabled Bernard of Clairvaux to preach eighty-six sermons on the opening chapters of the Song of Songs to a congregation of monks!

Graeme Goldsworthy illustrates the problem of this approach, however, by the example of the Australian Sunday school teacher who was concerned that her lessons were becoming too predictable. So one week she started out by asking her children, "What's gray, furry and lives in eucalyptus trees?" No response. So she asked again. Still no response. In desperation, she asked the pastor's daughter, "Suzie, don't you know what the answer is?" She replied slowly, "Miss, I know the answer must be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a koala to me."³ Sometimes a koala really is just a koala, not a picture of Jesus.

The kind of free association that Cyril of Alexandria engaged in is, of course, the problem with allegorical interpretation. Given enough imagination, you can get radically different messages out of the same passage: the Song can relate to Yahweh and Israel, God and the church, or wisdom and the individual soul. Equally, you can get the same message out of radically different passages: in that case, why do we need the Bible at all, when by

3. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), xi.

using the same technique you could preach edifying messages from *Winnie the Pooh*?

On the other hand, a more typological form of interpretation pays attention to inner biblical connections. It sees the hero of the Song as Solomon, the son of David, the king of Israel. If that is the case, then it is not just a random connection to see the man as pointing to Christ and his bride as pointing to the church. Other biblical passages seem self-evidently to point beyond themselves to a coming greater Son of David, even if they were originally written for Solomon or another Old Testament king—for example, Psalm 45, a psalm written for a royal wedding, and Psalm 72, which speaks of the Son of David's ruling from shore to shore.

There are two potential dangers with such a typological approach, however. The first is that in its eagerness to draw positive connections between the hero of the Song and Christ, it might overemphasize the similarities between them and overlook the differences. In practice, this tendency frequently pushes typology in the direction of the free-association kind of allegory in order to find Christ in the passage. The other problem is that this approach tends to downplay or even ignore the specifics of the surface-level meaning of the text in favor of a general connection to Christ. The message that a passage such as Psalm 72 might have had for the Davidic kings themselves, or even for us as we think about our own rulers and political structures, gets completely lost. So, too, any message that the Song of Songs might have about human relationships and earthly marriage tends to get lost or downplayed in favor of its immediate application to the relationship of Christ and the individual believer.

In response to this approach, other preachers have interpreted the Song of Songs simply as a celebration of human love and sex. Instead of comparing it to passages such as Psalm 45, they read the Song against the backdrop of passages such as Proverbs 5, in which the father says to the son, “Rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?” (Prov. 5:18–20). We might call this the “Solomon on sex” approach to the Song, to quote the title of one popular book.⁴ The Song now becomes simply a divine dating and marriage-counseling manual. To use the Goldsworthy analogy, this time the koala is just a koala, and the Sunday

4. Joseph Dillow, *Solomon on Sex* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

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school lesson becomes simply a Christian biology class about the birds and the koalas. In the process, the applications to human relationships can become as imaginative and strained as anything ever dreamed up by the earlier allegorists.

There is certainly nothing wrong with biology classes or practical tips about dating and marriage. But when Jesus unpacked the central message of the Old Testament to his disciples on the road to Emmaus, he didn't focus on its value in providing practical teaching for their marriages. He declared that the central message of the Old Testament is the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow—that is, the gospel.⁵ What is more, the title of the book, “The Song of Songs,”⁶ is a superlative: it indicates that this poem is the finest of songs, in the same way that the Holy of Holies was the very holiest of places in the temple. Is human love, even within marriage, the worthy subject of the very best of songs? The Bible tells us that true love is not that we love one another, nor even that we love God. Rather, it is that God loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10). So the finest of songs surely has to point us in some profound way to God's love for us in Christ, the love that entered our fallen world, lived the perfect life in our place, and suffered and died for our sins.

In fact, even a passage such as Proverbs 5 is not merely about human faithfulness in marriage, because as we read on in Proverbs we discover that the fundamental choice that faces all of us in life lies between Dame Wisdom, whose home is built on the foundation of the fear of the Lord, and Lady Folly, who seduces fools away from true worship to the worship of idols. Adultery is never just about sex in the book of Proverbs, any more than the idea of “building a house” in that book is just about bricks and mortar.

I believe that it is possible to steer a middle ground between the allegorical and literal extremes: to recognize the Song of Songs as wisdom literature that celebrates a great mystery in life, the mutual love of a man and a woman (Prov. 30:19), yet that in this celebration will not only shape our thinking about human relationships but also show us profound insights into the love that Christ has for his bride, the church. To change the Goldsworthy analogy, suppose that the Sunday school teacher had described a sparrow and

5. See Iain M. Duguid, *Is Jesus in the Old Testament?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

6. This biblical book is sometimes referred to as “The Song of Solomon.” Both titles are abbreviations of the fuller title in the superscription of the book itself, which is literally “The Song of Songs, about that which belongs to Solomon.” Given the complexity of determining the relationship of Solomon to the Song, which I discuss in more detail below, I have chosen to use the simpler title, “The Song of Songs.”

then gone on to teach her students about God's care for the little sparrow and his far greater fatherly care for us. The sparrow is not Jesus; it remains just a sparrow. Yet the lesson that is drawn from the sparrow can and must still center appropriately on Jesus, as the One who shows us the full extent of God's fatherly love and care for us. So, too, we don't need to make the man in the Song of Songs into an allegory or a type of Jesus to see how the book points us to "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow."

SOLOMON IN THE SONG

Then there is the question of the role of Solomon in the Song. Is Solomon the author and hero of the story? Many fine commentators think so, both among those who follow the allegorical or typological model and among those who follow the literal model. The opening superscription might seem to point clearly in that direction.⁷ Isn't the greatest Davidic king the ideal person to speak about love and marriage, and thus foreshadow Christ? But that identification seems difficult to reconcile with the historical Solomon that we know from the rest of the Bible—a famous collector of a thousand wives and concubines (1 Kings 11:3). He hardly seems like a model of an exclusive, lifelong, "till death do us part" marriage relationship, the kind extolled in the Song! Even if Solomon wrote the book to a particular woman when he was young, before he married all his other wives, his subsequent life story would surely undercut the Song's teaching. What would we say about someone who gave a wonderful testimony in church about his true love for his bride—and then later repeatedly betrayed her trust? Would we keep that testimony prominently posted on our church website, even if everything he had said about love and marriage were true?

Similar difficulties attend the view that Solomon wrote the Song later in life as an act of repentance. That might work if he wrote it about someone else, but it would hardly be an act of repentance to speak about the wonderful love he had shared with his one and only true love while omitting any mention of his own long subsequent history of serial adultery. People can certainly teach us how to do things that they themselves have not done very

7. The evidence, however, is not as clear as it might superficially seem. In Hebrew, the superscription actually deviates markedly from the normal ascription of authorship seen in the Psalms, suggesting a more complex relationship between Solomon and the Song. For a fuller discussion, see Duguid, *The Song of Songs*, 73–76.

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well, but if they pretend that they did them perfectly themselves when they didn't, that is a problem.

There are other issues with seeing the hero of the Song as Solomon. If Solomon is the hero of the Song, how would the Shulammite's love for her man illustrate the theme that is so central to chapter 8, that true love cannot be bought for any price? When someone is about to marry one of the richest men in the world, allow me to be skeptical of the purity of her motives. This is like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* suddenly deciding that perhaps Mr. Darcy isn't so sullen and proud, immediately after she sees his gorgeous estate in Derbyshire! Moreover, if Solomon wrote the Song of Songs about himself, then the wonderful description of the man's appearance in 5:10–16 seems an embarrassingly laudatory self-portrait.

Some commentators have therefore imagined that the Song depicts a three-cornered love triangle between Solomon, the woman, and her shepherd-boy lover. In this approach, Solomon has carried the woman off to his harem, but she pines for (and in some cases actually pursues) her true love. Yet this view requires abrupt transitions in the poems from one subject to another, not to mention raising acute moral and ethical questions about a woman who is married to one man (however unwillingly) and actively pursuing a love relationship with someone else.

For these reasons, I take the Song of Songs to be a poem by an unknown and anonymous author about two idealized people, a man and a woman, whose exclusive and committed love is great but, like all loves in this fallen world, far from perfect. As we will see, their idealized love story is actually contrasted in the Song with the alternative Solomonic model of "love," clearly displayed in 1 Kings 11. This Solomonic model identifies love as a commercial and political transaction, serving as a means to some other end, whether wealth, political advantage, security, or significance. Thus, the Song is designed to show each of us how far short of perfection we fall, both as humans and as lovers, and to drive us into the arms of our true heavenly Husband, Jesus Christ, whose love for his bride is truly perfect. Solomon is thus a foil for the main character, not the main character himself.

Finally, a word about the structure of the Song. Some scholars have denied any unity to the Song, seeing it as a very loose anthology of love poems, while at the opposite extreme, others have suggested that it forms a tightly structured chiasm. I think the answer lies somewhere in between. As we noted

earlier, the title given in the first verse, the “Song of Songs,” is a superlative, “the Finest of Songs.” That suggests that this is not an anthology made up of many different songs, but rather that at its heart it is one song. That is not to say that the poem tells a straightforward sequential narrative, but there is general agreement among commentators about the broad outlines of the Song. After the superscription, there are six major units: 1:2–2:7; 2:8–3:5; 3:6–5:1; 5:2–6:3; 6:4–8:4; 8:5–14.⁸ The opening and closing sections of the Song balance one another with a number of significant verbal parallels, while the section 3:6–5:1, which includes the consummation of the marriage, forms the central core for the piece.

It does seem, therefore, that there is a broad development of and logical flow to the Song. In general, this movement leads up to and away from the marriage and the consummation of the relationship, a flow that makes it possible to speak of *before* and *after* in the couple’s interactions. Unlike Hollywood stories, which typically focus exclusively on the excitement of the *before* phase of the relationship, the Song shows us some aspects of the ongoing relationship *after* the wedding as well, while still leaving the couple (and us) at the end of the Song longing for something more complete—a more perfect and eternally enduring love.

OUTLINE

1. Title (1:1)
2. Prologue (1:2–2:7)
 - A. Introduction (1:2–14)
 - i. Desire (1:2–4)
 - ii. Uncertainty and Request (1:5–7)
 - iii. Response and Reassurance (1:8–11)
 - iv. Desire (1:12–14)
 - B. A Litany of Love (1:15–2:7)
 - i. Mutual Affirmation (1:15–2:3)
 - ii. The Delights and Dangers of Love (2:4–7)

8. See J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 38. Many of the divisions between the units are marked by the appearance of particular terms, such as “come”; “house,” “room,” or garden”; “wine”; and “embrace” (Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 31), while the repeated refrains about not stirring up love form clear structural markers (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).

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3. Before the Wedding: Joined and Separated (2:8–3:5)
 - A. Morning (2:8–17)
 - B. Night (3:1–5)
4. The Wedding (3:6–5:1)
 - A. Question (3:6)
 - B. Solomon's Glory (3:7–11)
 - C. The Beloved's Glory (4:1–7)
 - D. Consummation (4:8–5:1)
5. After the Wedding: Separated and Rejoined (5:2–6:3)
 - A. Night (5:2–8)
 - B. The Lover's Glory (5:9–16)
 - C. Restoration (6:1–3)
6. Contemplation and Renewed Consummation (6:4–8:4)
 - A. Contemplation of the Beloved (6:4–10)
 - B. Response (6:11–12)
 - C. Contemplation of the Beloved (6:13–7:10a)
 - D. Response (7:10b–11)
 - E. Renewed Consummation (7:12–8:4)
7. Epilogue (8:5–14)
 - A. The Overwhelming Power of Love (8:5–7)
 - B. The Incomparable Value of Love (8:8–12)
 - C. The Unending Nature of Love (8:13–14)

ABBREVIATIONS

AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ATR	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
CT	<i>Christianity Today</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
JSOTS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
SVT	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries



Song of Songs

FRIENDSHIP ON FIRE

1

DESIRE AND SATISFACTION

Song of Songs 1:1–4

¹ The Finest of Songs, about what is Solomon's.¹

Woman

² Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your caresses are better than wine.

³ As for the scent of your oils, it [too] is better.
Your name is flowing oil.

No wonder the eligible young women love you!

⁴ Carry me off with you, hurry!
Oh, that the king would bring me [to] his chambers!

Daughters of Jerusalem

We will exult and rejoice in you!
We will celebrate your caresses more than wine.

Woman

Rightly they adore you!

It is common for books to have an introduction, in which they set the scene, introduce the main characters, and orient you to the action that will

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Song of Songs are the author's own translation throughout this volume.

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follow. Thus, in Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, the author follows his famous first line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," with a lengthy description of the state of society and affairs in England and France that provides the backdrop for the ensuing action. Other authors, however, prefer to launch right into the action. Novelist Iain Banks begins his book *The Crow Road* like this:

It was the day my Grandmother exploded. I sat in the crematorium, listening to my Uncle Hamish quietly snoring in harmony to Bach's Mass in B Minor, and I reflected that it always seemed to be death that drew me back to Gallanach.²

KISS ME!

The Song of Songs belongs very much to the latter category of composition. It plunges right into its subject matter without introducing the characters, setting the stage, or anything else, with the breathless declaration of the woman: "Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (Song 1:2). Like love itself, the Song of Songs catches us in the midst of life and steals our breath away. The very first words are words of want, of aching desire—for this is what the Song is really about.³ The Song of Songs is not primarily a book about sex, or a manual of dating tips, or an "agony aunt" column of relationship advice. It is a book about desire from beginning to end—desire stirred, desire frustrated, desire satisfied, desire frustrated again—but above all, desire. The woman wants something—or rather someone—with a passionate and breathless desire.

What she wants from the man is spelled out rather clearly: she longs for the kisses of his mouth. What other kinds of kisses are there, you may ask? Well, apparently Egyptians indulged in rather more formal "nose kisses," which would perhaps be comparable to the "kiss on the cheek" greeting that happens in some cultures.⁴ Needless to say, that is not what the woman has in mind.

2. Iain M. Banks, *The Crow Road* (London: Scribners, 1992), 3.

3. See Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 8.

4. Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 97.

Indeed, her thoughts become clearer still when she declares, “Your caresses are better than wine” (Song 1:2). English translations often translate “caresses” rather coyly as “love,” but there is no question about what kind of love she has in mind. When this Hebrew word (*dôd*) occurs in the plural, as it does here, sexual intimacy is in view. In Ezekiel 16:8, a young woman who has reached sexual maturity is ready for “love” (*dôdîm*). Likewise, in Proverbs 7:18, the adulteress seduces the young man with the words: “Come, let us take our fill of love [*dôdîm*] till morning.” It is thus a particular kind of “love” that she desires from the man: sexual love. Yet at the same time, the word also connotes a particular kind of sex: passionate sex, not simply an act of procreation. She wants the man for himself (and for herself), not just so that she can bear his children. That kind of love, she says, would be better than wine—a symbol of a rich and fulfilling life.

From the taste of his kisses, she moves on to the aroma of his anointing oils (Song 1:3). Scents have a remarkable power to stimulate memories. Whether it is the smell of overcooked cabbage, which brings back years of abominable school meals, or the fragrance of rosewater that reminds you of your grandmother, a single whiff can bring flooding back a raft of associations, good or bad. In this case, when she recalls the aroma of his distinctive cologne, the associations are all good. Even though the man isn’t present with her right now—for there is no dialogue in this section—the mere memory of his scent can bring him to be with her in a way that comforts her aloneness.

THE SOUND OF HIS NAME

Yet the woman’s attraction to the man is not merely physical. What draws her to him as much as the man’s touch or his scent is his name, which she compares to oil that has been poured out (Song 1:3), releasing its fragrance. It isn’t simply that her knees grow weak whenever someone says “Fred,” or “Jonathan,” or “Maher-shalal-hashbaz,” or whatever his name happened to be. What makes her feel excited is what that name represents, which is his character. The man is not just a sweet-smelling, good-looking hunk who also happens to be a good kisser; he is reliable and responsible, respected and admired by others in the community as a man of integrity and character.

This is the man whom she loves—and whom she is convinced that everyone else ought to love as well. This is, of course, characteristic of love. It

demands to be shared. When your sister or daughter falls hard for the adorable fellow student that she met at college, expect to spend the next several weeks hearing about him. A lot. His cute little habits, the curl in his hair, the summer he spent volunteering in an African orphanage, the picture he has on his cell phone of his beautiful younger sister . . . oh, and did I mention his hair? Nor will she be content until you acknowledge that he is indeed rather a dish. So, too, in the Song, the woman is convinced that her view of the man is shared by all the *‘alāmôt* (Song 1:3). These are not strictly “virgins,” as the esv translates it, but rather young women who have recently reached the age of sexual maturity and are thus ready for marriage,⁵ the people who in every culture tend to be the arbiters of what constitutes male desirability.

Such powerful desire seeks satisfaction. The woman longs for her beloved to sweep her off her feet, and to carry her off swiftly to the privacy and intimacy of his chambers (Song 1:4), where she can finally experience the kisses and caresses for which she so longs. She wants to be able to say those classic lines from the novel *Jane Eyre*, “Reader, I married him.” Deep sighs of satisfaction all around as the credits roll. Indeed, in this poem, as the camera fades away from this image of the happy couple, we hear the endorsement of the community on their affection. A plural voice, perhaps representing the daughters of Jerusalem, adds its benediction to their love story, affirming that the approbation of the eligible young women is correct: his caresses are indeed better than wine, and their relationship is truly something to be celebrated. Notice what has not yet transpired, however. The man is not actually present in this scene, except as the object of the woman’s desire. He does not actually kiss her, nor do they yet make love. It is not yet clear at this stage whether her longing for a relationship with him is even reciprocated, let alone whether it will ever be consummated.

RESHAPING OUR VIEWS OF GENDER

So what does this short poem have to teach us about our own relationships? Immediately, it is clear that the Song intends to challenge and reshape our views of sex, gender, and marriage, whether we have formed those views from the culture around us or from the Christian subculture in which we grew up. Wisdom literature always provides “beams” and “bombs”—the

5. See Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 51–52.

sturdy beams that are the building materials of a Christian worldview and the powerful bombs that explode the false worldviews that we so easily substitute for it.

How does this poem do that? To begin with, the woman is neither a feminist nor a traditionalist. In contrast to our wider culture, which depicts women as equally sexually aggressive as men, she does not dream of grabbing her man, planting a kiss on his lips, and dragging him behind her into her bedroom. She wants *him* to kiss her, and *him* to sweep her off her feet. Yet neither is she a shrinking violet who will pine away in silence, waiting for the man to figure out her interest in him. She expects and longs for the man to provide the leadership in their relationship, while at the same time she is not shy about communicating her own hopes and desires. This contrasts dramatically with much that passes for wisdom within our Christian subculture, which depicts the woman's role in seeking a romantic relationship in purely passive terms.

Likewise, the woman in the Song is neither independent of her community nor completely subject to her family's wishes. She is a strong woman who knows her own mind and what she is seeking in a man. Unlike some young people whom I have counseled, she doesn't need her father's permission before she is able to have a cup of coffee with a young man "alone" (along with six hundred other people!) in a college cafeteria. Yet at the same time, contrary to the trend in our culture, it matters in the Song what the community thinks of their relationship. Love is not its own sufficient reason, regardless of what others think. The woman wants her relationship to be publicly accepted and celebrated by those around her.

RESHAPING OUR VIEWS OF SEX (AND HOW TO PRESENT THEM)

Equally, the vision of sexuality that is presented in the Song is a long way both from the picture in our culture and from the image that has often been presented in the church. In our culture, any kind of sexual love between any two consenting adults is regarded as good and proper, something to be celebrated whatever their gender or relationship. You don't have to be married or even to be in a long-term committed relationship to engage in intercourse: sex is just sex. Nor is sex just for men and women in our culture: it can be for men and men or for women and women. That is not

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the perspective that the Song celebrates, as we will see. It glorifies as the ideal human relationship a single-hearted, lifelong, devoted, and exclusive relationship between one man and one woman.

Typically, when Christians talk about why premarital sex, adultery, easy divorce, or homosexuality is wrong, we go straight to the legal passages of the Bible and point to the *thou shalt not*s. Of course, those laws are true and biblical, the loving commands of our heavenly Father, who knows the destructive power of sexual sin in our lives. Yet the Song of Songs reminds us that sometimes it might be better for us to spend more time referencing the *thou shalt*s as well. In the garden of Eden, when Satan asked Eve, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1), she recounted to him the law about not eating from the forbidden tree, even adding some extra regulations about not touching the tree, just to be on the safe side. But in her focus on the commandment about not eating from one special tree, she downplayed what God had said first: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden” (2:16). She mentioned the permission, to be sure (3:2), but she missed the emphatic nature of God’s command to eat (“You may *surely* eat . . .”), as well as its comprehensive breadth (“ . . . of *every* tree of the garden”). Those key omissions set her up to believe Satan’s lie that God was a restrictive and hard taskmaster rather than a kind and generous Father, and therefore that his law is repressive rather than liberating.

The church has often done the same thing with sex. We have focused on all the ways in which the Bible tells us *not* to have sex, even adding some extra regulations of our own. The early and medieval church glorified virginity and celibacy as higher spiritual states than marriage. Yet when the woman in the Song dreams of her boyfriend, she does not imagine them sharing an inductive Bible study and praying together, but thinks about his kisses and caresses. It is precisely this desire that her community celebrates and rejoices in. Such thoughts are not aberrant and dirty, but good and right. Sex is not merely permissible under the proper circumstances; it is a wonderful and glorious gift in the context for which God designed it, which is within marriage. It is therefore good and right for us to long for it. After all, God himself crafted all the relevant body parts and the various biochemical reactions that make sex such fun. We should celebrate and rejoice in that fact! Even when our desires for sex are unable to be satisfied or are disordered in their object, the desire itself is something that God made good.

This also speaks to the way in which we address those who are struggling with the temptation to engage in premarital sex or with same-sex attraction. It is not enough for us to say that the Bible says that premarital and homosexual sex is wrong, although it does. The law cannot change our hearts. In fact, by itself, the law can only condemn us, often leaving us feeling guilty and dirty, and sometimes driving us away from God rather than toward him. In contrast, the Song paints a glorious picture of the marriage relationship between a man and a woman that is so rich and deep that we should all long to have a relationship just like that. To be sure, as a result of the fall, we all have disordered desires. For some, given their particular makeup and background, that disordered desire will be same-sex attraction. For others, it may be a desire to possess and use members of the opposite gender to serve their own lust, whether that desire is ever acted on or remains concealed in their minds. For still others, the disorder may be a complete suppression of any sexual desire as something dirty and wicked. We are all broken people, and the answer that the Song gives to our sexual brokenness is to show us with incredible beauty what sexual wholeness would actually look like: one man and one woman deeply and permanently bonded together in a unique relationship of love.

THE PERFECT BRIDEGROOM

What use is a beautiful picture of wholeness when we are all so broken, though? Isn't that like rubbing salt into our wounds, or like seeing a mirage of cool, refreshing water in a dry and thirsty desert? It might be, if the Song of Songs were all that we had in the Bible. Yet the Song echoes the melody of another deeper and richer song, a song about a true and faithful Lover who is not like Solomon, with his massive harem of disposable women, but rather One who loves and gives himself for his bride. Though we are dark and unlovely (see Song 1:6), he is "altogether lovely" (5:16 *NIV*). This Lover is preparing the church to be his bride, adorning us with the beautiful garments of his spotless righteousness in place of our own filthy rags of sin and failure—including all our sexual failure. He is preparing a honeymoon mansion for us in heaven, where he will spend eternity delighting in us as his chosen beloved. The conclusion of the biblical story is the God of all creation declaring joyously about his church, "Reader, I married her!" He

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is the true Hero for whom all our hearts yearn, the One toward whom all our most intense earthly desires ultimately point.

This is how the Song speaks to us today, whether we are looking for love, in love, out of love, forsaken and disillusioned by love, or totally confused about the whole subject. Our desire to love and be loved by a human being is at its core simply a reflection of our desperate need to love and be loved by the God who made us for himself. As Augustine famously put it: “You have made our hearts for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find repose in you.”⁶ The Song addresses us as broken people who have disordered desires and shows us a glimpse of what ordered desire looks like, while at the same time reminding us just how hard it is to find love like that in this world. In so doing, the Song of Songs calls us to a relationship with the One who entered this world of disordered desires and loved perfectly in our place. Jesus Christ is truly the One whose name is above all names. The aroma of Christ and his righteousness fills the world with true sweetness and beauty (2 Cor. 2:14); as Christians, we are all longing for the day when he will come and sweep us off our feet and carry us off to our heavenly home so that our relationship can finally be fulfilled. The intensity of our earthly desire for love thus mirrors that greater and deeper hunger for God’s love.

Yet it also works the other way around. The intensity of the heavenly love with which Christ has loved us relativizes all our earthly desires. Jesus loved perfectly as a human being without ever being married, or enjoying the kind of intimacy and sexual pleasure that our hearts and bodies so easily feel that we cannot live well without. This means that if God’s perfect plan for us doesn’t involve sex and marriage (which always go together in God’s plan), we are not somehow less than human or doomed to live unfulfilled and unsatisfied lives. Equally, if we have failed in our sexual or marital history, what counts far more than our record of unfaithfulness is the faithfulness that our heavenly Husband has shown to us. Human marriage is a pointer to Christ’s love; if we have the reality, then everything else may fade away.

RESPONDING TO GOD’S LOVE

Do you have that reality in your life? Are you married to Christ through faith in his faithfulness to you, expressed in his obedient life, perfect death,

6. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. E. B. Pusey (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1949), 1.1 (language updated).

and triumphant resurrection? When God asks why he should let you into his heaven, is your answer “Because I belong, body and soul, to my faithful Husband, Jesus Christ, and I am trusting in his goodness, not my own”?⁷ That is the only answer that opens the door to a joy-filled eternity. That answer paves the way to a life of deep joy here on earth as well, in spite of our ongoing brokenness.

If you are married to Christ, is that relationship the center of your thinking? Do you find yourself dreaming about him, lost in amazement at how wonderful Christ is, how incredible it is that he should love you, and longing for more of his presence? Do you constantly wear out your friends and relations with your endless chatter about how wonderful your Beloved is? If you are anything like me, the answer most of the time is “No.” I have to admit to living most of the time as a functional single, spiritually speaking. Every now and then I bump into Christ, as it were, and am reminded that we are married. It helps, of course, that as a pastor and professor, reading the Bible is actually my job! Even so, much of the time I am so absorbed with my own earthly desires and projects that I admit to my shame that he never even crosses my mind.

The answer to my sinful self-centeredness is not more law: it is not telling me that I need to spend more time in Bible study, or that I need to pursue longer quiet times, or to endure more rigorous Christian disciplines. The answer to my self-centeredness is worship: beholding the beauty of God in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why in our church we return to the Lord’s Table every week. As we come to the Table, we come afresh to gaze on the beauty of Christ crucified and raised, and to be reminded that even when our gaze wanders away after our other lovers, his gaze remains steadfastly and lovingly fixed on us. At the feast, we remember the glory of Jesus’ sacrifice, the excellence of his love for us, and the splendor of the inheritance that is stored up for us in him. Week after week, we join our brothers and sisters and say once again, “We will rejoice and be glad in you! We will celebrate again your love! We will turn our hearts and our faces toward you, O Christ, and proclaim the beauty of your name, which is better than oil that is poured out, sweeter than the richest of wine.” There our hearts are fed and our souls refreshed with the good news of his relentless love for us, his beloved bride, as we await his long-expected return.

7. See the Heidelberg Catechism Q. 1. In this paraphrase, I have substituted the word *Husband* for the original *Savior*.

“Here Iain Duguid is the expositor, the biblical theologian, the pastor, the counselor, and—quite often!—the surgeon. This exposition is vintage Duguid—sneakingly convicting and awash in grace. He lures me to oversimplify: if someone asks me how best to prepare for marriage, I will be tempted to say, ‘Study the Song of Songs and read Duguid’s commentary.’”

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