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Richard M. Davidson

Andrews University, davidson@andrews.edu

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THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY IN THE SONG OF SONGS: RETURN TO EDEN

RICHARD M. DAVIDSON
Andrews University

“For in all the world there is nothing to equal the 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.”¹ Such was the vision of the exalted importance of the Song of Songs as purportedly expressed by Rabbi Aqiba at the Council of Jamnia (ca. 90 A.D.). According to tradition, Aqiba’s speech helped confirm the Song’s place in the canon of Scripture.

1. *Allegorization of the Song of Songs*

Unfortunately, the speech did not equally serve to confirm a lofty conception of sexuality. Even the Jewish rabbis, with their basically healthy and robust view of sexuality, apparently had great difficulty seeing how what seemed to be a purely secular love song could be included in the sacred canon. Therefore they adopted and developed an elaborate allegorical interpretation of the Song which downplayed the literal sense in favor of a hidden, spiritual meaning. When Aqiba said the Song of Songs was the Holy of Holies, what he probably had in mind was that the Song was a detailed allegory of the historical relationship between the Divine Presence (the *Shekinah* in the Holy of Holies) and the people of Israel from the Exodus to the coming of the Messiah.² Thus, Aqiba warned against taking the Song of Songs only as a human love song: “He

¹Mishnah, *Yadaim* III, 5.

²See Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, AB (Garden City, NY, 1977), pp. 89-112, for a detailed description of the development and content of the normative Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs as pioneered by Aqiba and found full-flowered in the targum to the Song of Songs. In the latter the following historical periods appear to be the allegorical referents of the major divisions:

1. Exodus and Entry into Canaan—Cant 1:2-3:6.
2. Solomon’s Temple—Cant 3:7-5:1.
3. Sin and Exile—Cant 5:2-6:1.

who trills his voice in the chanting of the Song of Songs and treats it as a secular song has no share in the world to come.”³

Christian allegorists went even further than the rabbis: They not only downplayed, but rejected the Song’s literal sense altogether. Influenced by the pagan Greek philosophies (i.e., Platonic dualism, stoicism, and the Hellenistic-Roman cults), they posited a dichotomy between things of the flesh and things of the spirit. Purity was associated with sexual renunciation, and all expressions of bodily pleasure—including sexual expression—were considered evil. In the Song of Songs all erotic imagery was allegorized as the yearning of the soul for union with God, or an expression of Christ’s love for his church. As by allegory the Greek philosophers had succeeded in transforming the sensuous gods of Homer and Hesiod into ethereal, spiritual ideals, so the celibate church theologians were “able by allegory to unsex the Sublime Song and make it a hymn of spiritual love without carnal taint.”⁴

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-254), one of the foremost Christian proponents of the allegorical method of Biblical interpretation, wrote a 10-volume commentary of nearly 20,000 lines on the Song of Songs. In the prologue he warned that the Song of Songs is safe reading only for mature persons no longer troubled by sexual desires: “I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it.”⁵ Origen further pleads: “We earnestly beg the hearers of these things to mortify their carnal senses. They must not take anything of what has been

4. Rebuilding of Temple—Cant 6:2-7:11.

5. Roman Diaspora and Coming of Messiah—Cant 7:12-8:14.

(See Pope, pp. 95-101, for a detailed analysis.)

³*Tosephta Sanhed XII, 10*, quoted in Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1969), pp. 1054-1055. William E. Phipps, *Recovering Biblical Sensuousness* (Philadelphia, 1975), p. 47, alternatively argues that Aqiba is opposed to the use of Canticles as a “vulgar” or “bawdy” song outside of the context of marital love.

⁴Pope, p. 114. For a discussion of medieval allegorizing of the Song of Songs and samples of the specific exegesis, see pp. 112-124, and passim.

⁵R. P. Lawson, trans., *Origen: The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies*, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 26 (Westminster, MD, 1957), pp. 22-23, quoted in Pope, p. 117.

said with reference to bodily functions but rather employ them for grasping those divine senses of the inner man."⁶

For fifteen centuries the allegorical method held sway in the Christian church, and the Song of Songs became "the favorite book of ascetics and monastics who found in it, and in expansive commentaries on it, the means to rise above earthly and fleshly desire to the pure platonic love of the virgin soul for God."⁷

During these 1,500 years only one church leader of stature dared to protest against the allegorical interpretations. Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) asserted in his commentary that the Song should be understood according to its plain and literal sense—as a love song in which Solomon celebrates his marriage. This view was considered so radical that even his student, Bishop Theodoret, considered Theodore's literal interpretation "not even fitting in the mouth of a crazy woman."⁸ The Second Council of Constantinople (553) anathematized Theodore and condemned his views as unfit for human ears.

The allegorical interpretation of Canticles continued its dominance in Roman Catholicism until very recently and was also generally accepted among Protestant scholars until the nineteenth century. Luther, though breaking formally with the allegorical method, still criticized those who attempted to interpret the song literally.⁹ The Westminster Assembly in the seventeenth century censured blasphemous Presbyterians who "received it as a hot carnal pamphlet formed by some loose Apollo or Cupid."¹⁰ John Wesley wrote to his Methodist followers that

⁶Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 1.4, quoted in Phipps, p. 51. So, e.g.,

the kiss of Christ = the Incarnation
 the cheeks of the bride = outward Christianity, good works
 the golden chain = faith
 spikenard = redeemed humanity
 hair like flocks of goats = nations converted to Christianity
 navel of the Shulamite = cup from which God gives salvation
 the two breasts = the OT and NT

⁷Pope, p. 114.

⁸Johannes Quasten, *Patriology* (Utrecht, 1966), 3:540, quoted in Phipps, p. 59.

⁹Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, MO, 1972), 15: 192-195; cf. Phipps, pp. 57-58.

¹⁰Westminster Assembly, *Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testaments* (London, 1951), 1: n.p., quoted in Phipps, p. 58.

the description of this bridegroom and bride is such as could not with decency be used or meant concerning Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter; that many expressions and descriptions, if applied to them, would be absurd and monstrous; and that it therefore follows that this book is to be understood allegorically concerning that spiritual love and marriage which is between Christ and his church.¹¹

2. *The Literal Interpretation of the Song of Songs*

The allegorical interpretation still has its representatives,¹² but fortunately it is no longer anathema (at least in most circles) to interpret the Song according to its plain and literal sense. The break with the traditional allegorical view was foreshadowed in John Calvin. The Reformer maintained that Canticles is both inspired by God and a song of human love. The English Puritan Edmund Spenser seems to have been among the first to concur with Calvin, and two centuries later the German Romanticist J. G. von Herder also interpreted the Song as a natural expression of human love.¹³ Since the time of Herder a number of novel interpretations of the Song have arisen, attracting some adherents;¹⁴ but in recent decades "there has been a notable trend toward the interpretation of the Song of Songs as human love poetry."¹⁵ Although diverging in a number of significant details, contemporary interpreters generally do not feel constrained to "unsex the Sublime Song." H. H. Rowley, after a thorough review of the Song's hermeneutical history, gives a judgment consonant with the literal interpretations of Theodore, Spenser, Herder, and in harmony with today's prevailing scholarly assessment: "The view I adopt finds in it nothing but what it appears to be, lovers' songs, expressing their delight in one

¹¹John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* (Bristol, Eng., 1765), 3: 1926, quoted in Phipps, p. 58.

¹²See, e.g., A. B. Simpson, *The Love-Life of the Lord* (Harrisburg, PA, n.d.), and the notes in the Jerusalem Bible.

¹³See Phipps, pp. 59-61; Pope, pp. 126-127; 131-132.

¹⁴For details on the various dramatic and dream theories, cultic/liturgical interpretations, wedding-week theory, etc., see Pope, pp. 133-192, and Harrison, *Introduction to the OT*, pp. 1052-1058.

¹⁵Pope, p. 192.

another and the warm emotions of their hearts. All of the other views find in the Song what they bring to it."¹⁶

If one interprets the Song according to its plain and literal sense, then it must be concluded that one whole book of the OT is devoted to celebrating "the dignity and purity of human love."¹⁷ A whole book extolling the beauty of human sexual love! How could Scripture more forcefully proclaim that human sexuality is not cheap, ugly, and evil, but beautiful, wholesome, and praiseworthy!

3. *The Song of Songs, the Garden of Eden, and the Nature of Sexuality*

In the Song of Songs we have come full circle, in the OT, back to the Garden of Eden. Several recent studies have penetratingly analyzed and conclusively demonstrated the intimate relationship between the early chapters of Genesis and the Song of Songs.¹⁸ In the "symphony of love," begun in Eden but gone awry after the Fall, Canticles constitutes "love's lyrics redeemed."¹⁹ Phyllis Trible summarizes how the Song of Songs "by variations and reversals creatively actualizes major motifs and themes" of the Eden narrative:

Female and male are born to mutuality and love. They are naked without shame; they are equal without duplication. They live in gardens where nature joins in celebrating their oneness. Animals remind these couples of their shared superiority in creation as well as their affinity and responsibility for lesser creatures. Fruits pleasing to the eye and tongue are theirs to enjoy. Living waters replenish their gardens. Both couples are involved in naming; both couples work. . . . Whatever else it may be, Canticles is a commentary on Gen. 2-3. Paradise Lost is Paradise Regained.²⁰

¹⁶H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (London, 1952), p. 233.

¹⁷E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1949), p. 336.

¹⁸See especially Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973): 42-47; idem, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 145-165; Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *JBL* 98 (1979): 513-528; and idem., *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, Eng., 1983), pp. 183-265.

¹⁹Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 144.

²⁰Idem, "Depatriarchalizing," p. 47.

The Song of Songs is a return to Eden, yet the lovers in the Song are not to be equated with the pre-Fall couple in the Garden. The poetry of Canticles reveals the existence of a world of sin and its baleful results: There are the angry brothers (1:6), the wet winter (2:11), the "little foxes that spoil the vineyards" (2:15), the anxiety of absence from one's beloved (3:1-4; 5:6-8; 6:1), the cruelty and brutality of the watchman (5:7), and the powerful presence of death (8:6). Yet the lovers in the Song are able to triumph over the threats to their love.

In parallel with Gen 2:24, the Song depicts the ideal of "woman and man in mutual harmony after the fall."²¹ The theology of this inspired reflection and elucidation of the divine ideal for post-Fall sexuality may be discussed under the major subheadings that emerged in my treatment of sexuality in Gen 1-2 in a previous article.²²

Sexuality Is Good

First, underlying the entire Song is the same high doctrine of creation that forms the backdrop for biblical wisdom literature in general.²³ Without explicitly mentioning that God "has made everything beautiful in its time" (Eccl 3:11), the author describes the beauty of God's handiwork made during the six days of creation week in the lovers' natural surroundings: brilliant light, fountains and springs, many waters, mountains and hills, pastures and vineyards, trees and flowers, sun and moon, birds and animals.²⁴ Like-

²¹Ibid., p. 48.

²²See Richard M. Davidson, "The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1-2," *AUSS* 26 (1988): 5-24.

²³The majority of scholars represented, e.g., by James Crenshaw, ed., *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York, 1976), p. 5, would exclude Canticles from discussion of wisdom literature; but Roland E. Murphy, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. VIII: *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1981), p. xiii, argues that although not technically wisdom literature, the Song "emphasizes values which are primary in wisdom thought (cf. Prov. 1-9)." Murphy, *ibid.*, cites a number of scholars who are becoming "open to ascribing the preservation and transmission of these poems [Canticles] to the sages of Israel." For a discussion of the doctrine of Creation in wisdom literature, see, e.g., Crenshaw, *Studies*, pp. 22-35.

²⁴The six days of Creation are profusely represented:

1. Light: "flashes of fire" (8:6) of YAHWEH—cf. below, p. 18.

wise, sexuality is assumed to be a creation ordinance, given by God for man to enjoy.²⁵ In lofty love lyrics “the voices of the Song of Songs extol and enhance the creation of sexuality in Gen. 2.”²⁶

Sexuality Is for Couples

Secondly, the man and woman are a duality, as in the beginning—a lover and his beloved. Hypotheses which suggest a lovers’ “triangle” in the Song, with a rustic shepherd and King Solomon vying for the same Shulamite, are not convincing.²⁷ Furthermore, recent studies provide strong evidence for the unity of the Song, rather than its being a collection of unrelated love poems. Roland Murphy points to recurring refrains, themes, words, and phrases;²⁸ J. Cheryl Exum analyzes numerous structural indications of “a unity of authorship with an intentional design”;²⁹ Michael Fox elaborates on four factors that point to a literary unity: (1) a network of repetends (repetitions), (2) associative sequences, (3) consistency of character portrayal, and (4) narrative framework;³⁰ and William Shea seems to clinch the case for unity by his persuasive

2. Water and air: springs of fresh water, fountains or wells, many waters, wind (North and South)
3. Land and vegetation: mountains and hills (Lebanon, Amana, Senir, Gilead, Hermon, Carmel); pastures, vineyards (Ein-Gedi); trees (palm, cedar, pine, apple, fig, pomegranate, nuts); fragrances (nard, saffron, calamus, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, aloes); etc.
4. Luminaries: sun, moon
5. Birds (and fish): turtledoves, ravens
6. Animals (and man): gazelles, young stags, hinds of the field, flocks of goats, sheep, lions, leopards, etc.

²⁵See below, pp. 18-19, for a discussion of the divine origin of love in the Song.

²⁶Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 145.

²⁷The “Shepherd” hypothesis argues for three characters: the Shulamite, her shepherd-lover, and King Solomon, who carries the Shulamite by force to his harem and, after unsuccessfully attempting to seduce her, allows her to return home to her rustic lover. This view (popularized by H. Ewald and accepted by S. R. Driver, C. G. Ginsburg, and many others) is discussed (with major proponents) and critiqued in, e.g., Harrison, *Introduction to the OT*, p. 1054; cf. Pope, pp. 136-141.

²⁸Roland E. Murphy, “The Unity of the Song of Songs,” *VT* 29 (1979): 436-443.

²⁹J. Cheryl Exum, “A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs,” *ZAW* 85 (1973): 47-79.

³⁰Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI, 1985), pp. 209-222.

demonstrations of an overarching chiasmic structure for the entire Song.³¹ It is in a *unified* song, therefore, that the love relationship between a *couple*—man and woman—is extolled and celebrated.

Sexuality Is Egalitarian

Third, the lovers in the Song are presented as equals in every way. Canticles “reflects an image of woman and female-male relations that is extremely positive and egalitarian.”³² The keynote “of the egalitarianism of mutual love”³³ is struck in Cant 2:16: “My beloved is mine and I am his.” The Song of Songs begins and closes with the woman speaking. The woman carries the majority of the dialogue (81 verses to 49 for the man).³⁴ She initiates most of the meetings and is just as active in the lovemaking as the man. Likewise, she is just as eloquent about the beauty of her lover as he is about her. The woman also is gainfully employed as a shepherdess and vineyard keeper. In short, throughout the Song she is “fully the equal of the man.”³⁵ As in Gen 2, she is man’s “partner . . . , ‘the one opposite him.’”³⁶

Feminist readings of the Song of Songs have tended to argue for a reversal of the divine judgment given in Gen 3:16, so that the “Return to Eden” in Canticles means the recovery of the pre-Fall male-female relationship.³⁷ However, attempts to contrast the “recovery of mutuality” in the Song with the “male power” of Gen 3:16³⁸ misconstrue both the nature of the divine judgment and the meaning of mutuality. In my discussion of Gen 3:16 in a previous article,³⁹ I set forth evidence that God’s judgment was prescriptive,

³¹William H. Shea, “The Chiasmic Structure of the Song of Songs,” *ZAW* 92 (1980): 378-396.

³²Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia, 1979), p. 92.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴The count may vary, depending upon the interpretation of the sometimes ambiguous first-person statements.

³⁵Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 161.

³⁶Foster R. McCurley, *Ancient Myths and Biblical Faith: Scriptural Transformations* (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 101.

³⁷See especially Tribble, “Depatriarchalizing,” p. 46; *idem*, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 159-160.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Richard M. Davidson, “The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 3,” *AUSS* 26 (1988): 121-131.

not simply descriptive. It did not portray the perverted use of male power that would result from sin, but rather it gave the divine normative pattern for the achievement of true mutuality after the Fall. This pattern did not nullify the full equality (“one-fleshness”) between husband and wife set forth in Gen 2:24, since the latter verse, as we noted, is specifically addressed to post-Fall conditions. Yet in the context of sin, God appointed the husband to “rule” (*māšal*)—in the sense of “protect, love, care for,” rather than “subjugate, coerce, tyrannize”—as a blessing for the maintenance of union and preservation of harmony within the marriage setting.

In the Song of Songs, as we have already noted, the voices repeatedly speak of post-Fall conditions which impinge upon the couple’s relationship. The way of “woman and man in mutual harmony after the fall”⁴⁰ is likewise portrayed in imagery consonant with the divine norm given in Gen 3:16. Note in particular Cant 2:3:

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

Francis Landy has not failed to catch the intent of the imagery:

The apple-tree symbolizes the Lover, the male sexual function in the poem; erect and delectable, it is a powerful erotic metaphor. It provides the nourishment and shelter, traditional male roles—the protective Lover, man the provider. . . .⁴¹

Cant 8:5 seems to continue the apple tree/protector motif:

Who is that coming up from the wilderness
leaning upon her beloved?
Under the apple tree I awakened you. . . .

Thus the Song of Songs has recovered the true “lyrics” of the “symphony of love” for post-Fall sexual partners. In the garden of Canticles the divine plan for man’s post-Fall role in the sexual relationship—*māšal*, “to protect, love, care for”—is restored from its accumulated perversions and abuses outside the Garden of Eden.

⁴⁰Tribble, “Depatriarchalizing,” p. 48.

⁴¹Landy, “The Song of Songs,” p. 526.

That this *māšal* is the “rule” of love and not tyrannical power is made explicit in the Song by attributing to the man the “strong desire” (*tēšūqāh*) which is connected with the woman in Gen 3:16. As in the divine judgment God promises to the woman that still “Your desire (*tēšūqāh*) shall be for your husband,” now in the Song the woman says, “I am my lover’s and for me is his desire (*tēšūqāh*)” (7:10). She thus joyfully acknowledges the mutuality of love that inheres in the ideal post-Fall relationship even as she is leaning upon, and resting under the protecting shadow of, her lover.

Sexuality Is Related to Wholeness

Closely related to the motifs of equality/mutuality, we note, fourthly, the concept of wholeness in sexuality. That concept is highlighted by “one of the key themes in the Song”—“the presence and/or absence of the lovers to each other.”⁴² Throughout the Song the fact of physical closeness is obviously important as the lovers speak and cling to each other: “His left hand is under my head, and his right arm embraces me” (2:6; 8:3). Even more significant is the feeling of loss and anxiety in the partner’s absence. Already in Cant 1:7 the desire of the beloved for a rendezvous with her lover is clear (“Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock . . . ?”), but the motif reaches its zenith at the matched sections of the chiasm⁴³ in which the dreaming woman searches anxiously for her lover:

Upon my bed at night

I sought him whom my soul loves;

I sought him but found him not. . . .

“Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”⁴⁴

I opened to my beloved,

but my beloved had turned and gone. . . .

⁴²Roland E. Murphy, “A Biblical Model of Human Intimacy: The Song of Songs,” in *Concilium: Religion in the Seventies*, vol. 121: *The Family in Crisis or in Transition*, ed. Andrew Greeley (New York, 1979), p. 63.

⁴³See Shea, pp. 388-389, 396, for structural analyses of the dream sections (3:1-5; 5:2-8).

⁴⁴Cant 3:1-3 (cf. vss. 1-5).

I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.⁴⁵

The absence motif serves to heighten the meaning of presence. Lovers need each other to be whole. In the Song man and woman each appears as an individual—capable, independent, self-reliant—and at the same time they have become “bone of one’s bone, flesh of one’s flesh.”

Sexuality Is a Multidimensional Relationship

From the aspect of wholeness and solidarity we are led to a fifth insight into the nature of sexuality: Paradisiacal sexual love means a multidimensional relationship. The relational symphony of the sexes in the Song of Songs is a “live performance” of the “score” set for them in Gen 2:24. As in Gen 2 man “leaves” (i.e., he is free from all outside interferences in the sexual relationship), so in Canticles the lovers are unfettered by parental prearrangements⁴⁶ or political promises.⁴⁷ They are in love for love’s sake alone. They are free for the spontaneous development of an intimate friendship.⁴⁸ In the freedom from outside interferences the couple may find mutual attraction in the physical beauty⁴⁹ and inward character qualities⁵⁰ of each other.

⁴⁵Cant 5:6 (cf. vss. 2-8).

⁴⁶Numerous references in Canticles are made to the mothers of the lovers (1:6; 3:4, 11; 6:9; 8:1, 2, 5), indicating the closeness of ties that continue between parent and son (3:11)/daughter (3:4; 8:2). But in all of this there is nothing of the parents’ interfering with the lovers’ freedom of choice and action. Thus both the fifth commandment and the “leaving” of Gen 2:24 are upheld.

⁴⁷I concur with F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI, n.d.), p. 3, that according to the most natural reading of the text, the Shulamite is not the daughter of Pharaoh (as maintained by many), but “a country maiden of humble rank, who by her beauty and by the purity of her soul, filled Solomon with a love for her which drew him away from the wantonness of polygamy, and made for him the primitive idea of marriage, as it is described in Gen. 3:23ff., a self-experienced reality.”

⁴⁸The Shulamite is considered as close as a sister by her lover (4:9; 5:1; etc.), and she in turn can say of him, “This is my beloved and he is my friend” (5:16).

⁴⁹For a discussion of the mutual, frank, and erotic expression of praise for each other, see below, p. 17.

⁵⁰See Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared to Greek* (New York, 1960), pp. 77-89, for a discussion of how the imagery used in praise of bride and groom in

As in the Genesis model, in which man and woman are to “cleave” to each other in a marriage covenant, so the Song of Songs climaxes in the wedding ceremony. The chiastic structure of the unified Song reveals a symmetrical design focused upon a central section which describes the wedding of Solomon and his bride.⁵¹ Cant 3:6-11 clearly portrays the wedding procession of Solomon “on the day of his wedding” (3:11). What follows in Cant 4:1-5:1 appears to encompass the wedding ceremony proper.⁵² Only here in the Song does Solomon address the Shulamite as his “bride” (*kallāh*, 4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5:1).⁵³ The groom praises the bride, paralleling the Arab *wasf* of modern village weddings in Syria.⁵⁴ Following this come the central two verses of the entire chiastic structure of the Song (4:16, 5:1), which seem to be the equivalent to our modern-day exchange of marriage vows.⁵⁵ The groom has compared his bride to a garden (4:12, 15); now the bride invites her groom to come and partake of the fruits of her (and now his) garden (4:16), and the groom accepts her invitation (5:1a-d). The marriage covenant solemnized, the invitation is then extended to

Canticles penetrates beyond the surface to describe dominant and admirable qualities of the partners.

Cf. Delitzsch, p. 5: “That which attached her [the Shulamite] to him [Solomon] is not her personal beauty alone, but her beauty animated and heightened by nobility of soul. She is a pattern of simple devotedness, naive simplicity, unaffected modesty, moral purity, and frank prudence,—a lily of the field, more beautifully adorned than he could claim to be in all his glory. We cannot understand the Song of Songs unless we perceive that it presents before us not only Shulamith’s external attractions, but also all the virtues which made her the ideal of all that is gentlest and noblest in woman.”

⁵¹See Shea, pp. 387-395.

⁵²See *ibid.*, p. 394, for discussion of supporting evidence for this conclusion; Pope, p. 508, lists other commentators who have come to similar conclusions.

⁵³See Delitzsch, pp. 81, 90-91, for the significance of the term *kallāh* here.

⁵⁴For illustration and analysis of the *wasf* (the “description” of the physical perfection and beauty of the bride and groom sung in the modern village wedding festivals in Syria), see Delitzsch, pp. 172-176; Pope, pp. 55-56 (includes further bibliography); Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, Eng., 1982), pp. 80-87.

⁵⁵Delitzsch, p. 89, argues that “between iv. 16 and v. 1a the bridal night intervenes,” but the evidence from the text set forth by Shea, p. 394, appears to argue for linking 5:1 with what comes before. Thus all is part of “the wedding service proper.”

the friends of the bride and groom to join in the wedding banquet (5:1e).

In Gen 2:24 the "cleaving" refers not only to the formal marriage covenant, but to the inward attitudinal dimensions of the covenant bond. Likewise, the Song reveals the fidelity, loyalty, and devotion of the partners,⁵⁶ the steadfastness of their love,⁵⁷ and the exclusiveness of their relationship.⁵⁸ The description of the "covenant partnership" between Solomon and the Shulamite, like the word *dāḥaq*, "connotes a permanent attraction which transcends genital union, to which, nonetheless, it gives meaning."⁵⁹

As in Gen 2:24, where the "one-flesh" union follows the "cleaving," so in the Song of Songs sexual intercourse occurs only *within* the context of the marriage covenant. Those scholars who argue to the contrary⁶⁰ have failed to take seriously the unity of the Song and the testimony of the groom regarding his bride. Solomon likens his bride to a garden during the wedding ceremony proper. More precisely, she is a *locked* garden (4:12):

⁵⁶See, e.g., Cant 3:1-5; cf. 2:16; 6:3; and the general use of the possessive pronouns and language of ardent devotion throughout.

⁵⁷See especially Cant 8:6, 7; cf. discussion and references in Pope, p. 195.

⁵⁸This seems to be implied in, e.g., Cant 2:16; 6:3; R. G. Laurin, "The Life of True Love: The Song of Songs and Its Modern Message," *Christianity Today* 6 (1962): 1062-1063, argues for this motif also in Cant 7:13. Of course, the reference to the 60 queens and 80 concubines (of Solomon?) in Cant 6:8 must also be taken into account. Delitzsch, p. 111, takes the low number (compared to the record in 1 Kings 11:3) as an indication of the occurrence of the marriage early in Solomon's reign, yet indicative of the fact that Solomon himself did not live up to the ideal of exclusiveness. Joseph C. Dillow, *Solomon on Sex: The Biblical Guide to Marital Love* (Nashville, 1977), p. 121, postulates that this harem may have been inherited from his father David, and "Solomon may not have been sexually involved with those many concubines until later in his reign, when we know he began to degenerate into lustful polygamy." G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL, 1984), p. 148, notes that it is not necessary to equate this harem with Solomon's: "More probably, no particular harem is being considered. Note the text does not say 'Solomon has' or 'I have,' but it is a simple declaration: 'There are . . . , and my beloved is unique' (vs. 9, NIV)."

⁵⁹Raymond Collins, "The Bible and Sexuality," *BTB* 7 (1977): 153; see the discussion of *dāḥaq* in Davidson, "Gen 1-2," p. 21.

⁶⁰See, e.g., Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 162: "to the issues of marriage and procreation the Song does not speak." Cf. McCurley, p. 101: "It is not even clear in the Song that the man and woman are married to each other."

A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
 a garden locked, a fountain sealed.

Modern commentators generally concur that here "the locked garden denotes virginity."⁶¹ If this interpretation is correct and the Song is a unity, then the groom is clearly announcing at the wedding ceremony that his bride is still a virgin. In fact, the high point of the ceremony and of the entire Song is focalized in the invitation and acceptance on the part of bride and groom to "become one flesh" with each other through sexual intercourse. Sexual union is thereby reserved and preserved for husband and wife after marriage.

The pivotal, central section of the Song, with its description of the wedding ceremony of Solomon and his virgin bride, must be given due weight in the interpretation of what precedes and follows. In light of the information from this midsection, the love lyrics of Cant 1:3-5 cannot describe premarital sexual intercourse. The earlier sections of the Song may consist of later reflections upon the love relationship as it developed up to the time of the wedding, including poetic descriptions of sexual relations in the bridal chamber on the wedding night. Franz Delitzsch, followed recently by Joseph Dillow and others,⁶² has argued rather convincingly that the Song of Songs contains a series of reflections encompassing the historical scope of the relationship between Solomon and the Shulamite from the first flush of friendship and love through the courtship period, reaching its climax on the wedding day and extending beyond with a depiction of married life together. Although Delitzsch should probably be faulted for his emphasis upon the melodramatic character of the Song (six acts, each with two scenes) and for his interpretation of certain details, yet his overall analysis has much to commend it.

Dillow has shown how this approach may actually provide in the Song a "Biblical Guide to Married Love"—principles pertaining to each stage of the love relationship. We note a few of Dillow's

⁶¹Pope, p. 458. Carr, p. 123, sees the garden here as a euphemism for the female sexual organs and concludes that "a fountain sealed and a garden locked speak of virginity." Cf. Delitzsch, p. 84: "To a locked garden and spring no one has access but the rightful owner, and a sealed fountain is shut against all impurity."

⁶²Delitzsch, pp. 10-11 and passim; Dillow, passim; cf. S. Craig Glickman, *A Song for Lovers* (Downers Grove, IL, 1976), passim.

points. In the bride's wedding-day reflection of Cant 1:1-8, for example, Dillow draws attention to her healthy attitude toward sexuality in anticipation of the wedding night (1:2-4), recognition of the principle of natural versus contrived beauty and acceptance of the special value of physical imperfections (1:5-6), the need for counting the cost of commitment to the relationship (1:7-8), and the virtue of modesty (1:7b). Again, according to Dillow, in the reflection over the lovers' courtship (2:8-3:5), the Song emphasizes how the relationship of Solomon and the Shulamite developed as they spent time together getting to know each other (the springtime visit, 2:8-17) and worked through problems (the "little foxes," 2:15-17) gnawing at the love relationship. Dillow also explores the portrayal of the sexual relations of the bride and groom in their bridal chamber (1:17-2:7) for insights into the nature of sexual intimacy and how to enhance it.⁶³ As a final sample, we note Dillow's analysis of later sections of the Song, interpreted as referring to the couple's married life subsequent to the wedding: The dream of 5:2-8 is seen to reveal sexual problems arising in their marriage (Solomon's late-night approaching and her lack of interest), while Cant 5:9-6:13 presents a working out of those sexual problems through a change of attitude and action.⁶⁴

Whether or not one accepts the historical-biographical interpretations of Delitzsch/Dillow, it may be affirmed that the Song of Songs parallels and expands upon Gen 1-3 in its portrayal of a multidimensional sexual relationship between Solomon and the Shulamite.

Sexuality Is Pleasurable

As a sixth insight into the nature of sexuality from the Song of Songs, we note one aspect that is *not* mentioned. The Song contains

⁶³Dillow, pp. 26-41.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 98-147. According to Dillow, pp. 129-130, the "three basic attitudes adopted by Shulamith and Solomon in the interim between the beginning of the sexual problems and their solution" include: (1) "the assuming of responsibility for one's own behavior instead of blaming the mate"; (2) "to render a blessing when hurt or offended by one's mate," and (3) "a complete and transparent communication of one's feelings." The change of action involves the Shulamite's aggressively taking the initiative in the loveplay (*ibid.*, pp. 130-147). Note also Dillow's analysis of the wedding night (4:1-5:1) as providing insights into the sexual intimacy between bride and groom (pp. 72-97) and of the final section of the Song, summarizing how love is awakened, defined, developed, and enjoyed (pp. 148-157).

no reference to the procreative function of sexuality. As is true with the Creation account of Gen 2, the sexual experience within marriage in the Song is not linked with utilitarian propagation. McCurley expresses it nicely: "The love affair is by no means designed for the production of progeny. The pleasure of the bedroom rather than the results for the nursery occupies the poet's concern here."⁶⁵ Lovemaking for the sake of love, not procreation, is the message of the Song. This is not to imply that Canticles is hostile to the procreative aspect of sexuality: The lovers allude to the beauty of their own conception (3:4; 8:2) and birth (6:9; 8:5). But in the Song sexual union is given independent meaning and value; it does not need to be justified as a means to a superior (i.e., procreative) end.

Sexuality Is Beautiful

This leads us to the final insight and the major statement of the Song of Songs regarding the nature of sexuality. In living pictures sexuality is presented as wholesome, beautiful, and good; something to be celebrated and enjoyed without fear or embarrassment. In the Canticles, as in Gen 1, sexuality, along with the rest of God's creation, is *ṭôb m^eʔod*—"very good." As in Gen 2, lovers in the Song stand "naked and . . . not ashamed" before each other.

We have returned to Eden. "The Song," says Herder, "is written as if in Paradise. Adam's song: Thou art my second self! Thou art mine own! echoes in it in speech and interchanging song from end to end."⁶⁶ Though in a sinful world, lovers after the Fall may still bask in the beauty of Paradise. "Male and female," writes Tribble,

first became one flesh in the garden of Eden. There a narrator reported briefly their sexual union (Gen. 2:24). Now in another garden, the lovers themselves praise at length the joys of intercourse. Possessive adjectives do not separate their lives. "My garden" and "his garden" blend in mutual habitation and harmony. Even person and place unite: the garden of eroticism is the woman. In this garden the sensuality of Eden expands and deepens. Emerging gradually in Genesis 2-3, all five senses capitulated to disobedience through the tasting of the forbidden fruit. Fully present in the Song of Songs from the beginning, these

⁶⁵McCurley, p. 101.

⁶⁶Quoted in Delitzsch, p. 5.

senses saturate the poetry to serve only love. Such love is sweet to the taste, like the fruit of the apple tree (2:3; cf. 4:16; 5:1, 13). Fragrant are the smells of the vineyards (2:13), the perfumes of myrrh and frankincense (3:6), the scent of Lebanon (4:11), and the beds of spices (5:13; 6:2). The embraces of lovers confirm the delights of touch (1:2; 2:3-6; 4:10, 11; cf. 5:1; 7:6-9; 8:1, 3). A glance of the eyes ravishes the heart (4:9; 6:13), as the sound of the lover thrills it (5:2). Taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing permeate the garden of the song.⁶⁷

Set against a backdrop where all is sensuously beautiful,⁶⁸ the lovers in the Song celebrate the beauty of married sexual love. In language that is erotic and sensual and yet in delicate taste, the lovers extol each other's beauty. By means of poetic metaphors, *double entendres* that both reveal and conceal, the ecstatic pleasure of sexual intimacy is described.⁶⁹ As we have already noted, the very apex of the book—the chiasmic center (4:16-5:1)—consists of an invitation to consummate marriage through sexual union.

4. Conclusion

A whole book taken up with celebrating the wholesome beauty and enjoyment of human sexual love! How can the inclusion of such a book be justified in the sacred canon? No further justification is needed. Those who have resorted to an allegorical interpretation to legitimize the existence of Canticles in Scripture have missed the crucial point—the Song of Songs in its plain and *literal* sense is *not* just a “secular” love song, but is fraught with deep spiritual, theological significance. From the OT Hebrew perspective God is not absent from the Song, nor are his love and concern for his creatures lacking in it. Rather, they are clearly shown in the enjoyment and pleasure (given by God to man in the creation) which the lovers find in each other and in their surroundings.⁷⁰

In harmony with the presentation of creation in Genesis, sexuality in the Song is part of God's good creation; and since it is

⁶⁷Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 154-155.

⁶⁸See above, p. 6, note 24; *ibid.*, pp. 155-157; Falk, pp. 88-106; and Murphy, “Human Intimacy,” p. 64.

⁶⁹For an analysis of the imagery of intercourse in the Song, see, e.g., Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 152-153, 157; Dillow, pp. 28-32, 72-86; Exum, pp. 57-58, 71.

⁷⁰Stephen Sapp, *Sexuality, the Bible, and Science* (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 26.

created by God, it speaks eloquently—perhaps most eloquently of all—of his love for his creation as it is enjoyed in harmony with the divine intention. The affirmation of human sexual love in the Song is therefore an implicit affirmation of the Creator of love.

The Song of Songs also may contain an explicit indication of the divine source of human love. The climax of the Song is generally recognized to come in the great paean to love in Cant 8:6-7. A number of scholars have suggested that the best translation of *šalhebetyāh* in v. 6 should be “a flame of Yah(weh).” The whole verse would then read:

For love is as strong as death,
ardent love as relentless as Sheol;
the flash of it is a flash of fire,
a flame of Yah(weh) himself.⁷¹

If this interpretation is correct, then true human love is explicitly described as originating in God as “a spark off the original flame.” To put it another way, human love at its best, as described in the Song, points beyond itself to the Lord of love.

In the final analysis, therefore, the allegorical interpretation of the Song may be correct in its *conclusion* that the Song shows God’s love for man, but incorrect in the *way* in which the conclusion is reached. The love relationship between Solomon and the Shulamite is not a worthless “husk,” to be stripped away *allegorically* to find the Song’s kernel or the “true” meaning—the love between God and his people. Rather, the love relationship between husband and wife, described in the Song, has independent meaning and value of its own that is affirmed and extolled. At the same time this human love is given even greater significance as it *typologically* points beyond itself to the divine Lover in the Song’s climax (8:6). Rather than an *allegorical* understanding (with its fanciful, externally-and-arbitrarily-imposed meaning that is alien to the plain and literal sense), the Song itself calls for a *typological* approach,⁷² which

⁷¹See the Jerusalem Bible translation; Delitzsch, p. 147; Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary* (New York, 1954), p. 74; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983), p. 195; Murphy, “Human Intimacy,” p. 65; cf. BDB, p. 529. Delitzsch, p. 147, argues forcefully for interpreting *šalhebetyāh* as a true subjective genitive (“flame of Yahweh”) and not as a mere superlative strengthening of the idea (“mighty flame”).

⁷²For the distinction between allegory and typology, see Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical Τύπος Structures* (Berrien Springs, MI, 1981), pp. 20, 81, 100-101.

remains faithful to, and even enhances, the literal sense of the Song by recognizing what the text indicates—that human love typifies the divine. Thus human sexual love, already highly esteemed in Scripture, is given its highest acclamation. The Song of Songs, therefore, becomes the fitting climax and the supreme statement on the nature of sexuality in the OT. We have indeed reached the “Holy of Holies.”