UNDERSTANDING THE SONG OF SONGS (a little better), PART 2
Mount Calvary Baptist Church Adult Sunday School (February 2, 2025)

Material drawn from Layton Talbert, "Adoring Shulamite as Foil to Adulterous Israel: A Canonical Theology of Song of Songs," *Journal of Biblical Theology and Worldview* 5.1 (Fall 2024).

Last week I introduced Part 1 of this study with 5 issues I wanted to explore over these two Sundays. There are, of course, *lots* more things we could explore in connection with this book. But these are the 5 Big Ideas I want you to understanding about this book by the time we're done. We covered these first 3 in the previous lesson.

1. **How is Solomon qualified to write a Song extolling the beauty and virtues of monogamy?**
2. **Is the Song an allegory and, if not, how is it to be understood and interpreted?**
3. **What are some of the Song's implications for the marriage relationship?**

That leaves us with these two for today:

4. **Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?**
5. **What role does the Song play in the broader theological storyline of Scripture?**

4. WHO IS THE SONG'S PRIMARY SPEAKER, AND WHY IS THAT SIGNIFICANT?

Different literary genres have different characteristics and different "rules" for interpretation. A very large segment of the Bible is written in a genre called *historical narrative*—think Genesis, Judges, Ruth, or the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. If you study the interpretation of historical narrative (e.g.,), you discover that dialogue is crucial for understanding the point of a passage.

But in the Song, dialogue is not just central—it is *everything*. After the title in 1:1, the Song is *entirely* dialogue with no narration. The whole Song is a series of dramatic interchanges between the two protagonists. If we're going to understand this Song accurately even on just a *literary* level, we have to give close attention to who says what to whom—and how much.

The Actors
That dialogue is shared by basically three actors/speakers/singers: a female voice, a male voice, and a chorus.

Him
The Song's central male character is described as a shepherd (1:7). The Shulamite's favorite pet-name for him (over thirty times) is (*my*) *beloved* (דּוֹד or the possessive דּוֹדִי).[1] I will refer to him throughout as the beloved.[2] (As I mentioned already, many think this is Solomon; I—along with many others—do *not* think this is Solomon. But for our purposes, it's not crucial to settle that point here.)

Her
The female voice is described as a shepherdess (1:8) and identified as a "Shulamite" only in 6:13 (twice).[3] She is usually called (*my*) *companion*, *darling*, *lover* (רַעְיָתִי; 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4). Other terms of endearment for her include *my bride* (4:8, 11), *my sister* (5:2), or *my sister-bride* (אֲחֹתִי כַּלָּה; 4:9, 10, 12; 5:1), and *love* (אַהֲבָה; 7:6)—an entirely different Hebrew word than "beloved" (the name she uses for him). I will refer to her throughout as the Shulamite.

It is critical to remember, however, that *the terms of endearment are exclusive to each of the lovers throughout*. She never calls him anything but *beloved*, and he never uses this term with reference to her. Remembering this

exegetical fact will prevent a multitude of interpretational and applicational sins; forgetting it will lead to confusion and misapplication.[4]

Chorus

A group(s) of plural speakers (who are clearly neither the Shulamite nor the beloved) occasionally react to or interact with statements from the Shulamite or the beloved. Their precise identity is unclear. Most are presumed to be a group of "daughters (of Jerusalem)" since the Shulamite sometimes addresses such a group.[5]

Dialogue Distribution

Translations may vary slightly in identifying and assigning the dialogue. There are a few small sections where interpreters differ over whether it's one of the main characters or the chorus. But the two main speakers are nearly always identifiable by virtue of the number and gender of the Hebrew pronouns.[6]

The important question about dialogue in the Song is not only *what* is said, but *who* says it. Who speaks the most? Who gets the most "press"? In a love song, written by a man, in a largely patriarchal society, who would you expect to be the dominant speaker? Likewise, in a song widely regarded to depict God's love for his people, who would you expect to hear the most?

Let's start here: who gets the first word? *She does* (1:2). Who gets the last word? *She does* (8:14; remember, the term "beloved" always refers to him and he never uses it of her). That alone is suggestive, but the bigger question is, who speaks the most throughout the Song? She does. And the ratio is not insignificant—for all practical purposes, she outspeaks him at a ratio of 2:1.[7] Actors refer to the number of "speaks" they have; that's the number of individual speeches they have. That ratio makes the same point—he speaks 9 times, she speaks 17 times. However you add it up, the Shulamite sings to and about her beloved twice as often,[8] and twice as much content, as he speaks about her.[9] He always sings to (and about) her; she sings sometimes to him and sometimes to others, but always about him—his qualities, her desire for him, and what he means to her. Why is that?

SPEAKER	WORDS	%	Speaks
Chorus	148	12%	7
Him	379	30%	9
Her	719	58%	17
Total	**1246**	**100%**	**33**

This is not about the loquacious proclivities of the feminine personality, hardly giving her beloved a chance to get a word in edgewise. In any literary creation, dialogue does not happen by accident. The Song calls our attention to the woman in the relationship, and her expressions of devotion and admiration for her beloved. That is purposeful and significant.

Others have noted the rhetorical dominance of the female voice in the Song.[10]

> "The Song of Songs is largely a woman's song, for the female lover is the first and last to speak, as well as the most frequent speaker, and sometimes her male beloved speaks only indirectly, through her speech." (Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology,* 299)

Again, the question is, why does Solomon (and more importantly, the Holy Spirit) create this noticeably uneven distribution of speech in the Song? What is the significance of this literary emphasis? And what impact might it have on our understanding of what the book is doing canonically?

To appreciate the significance of this discovery, we need to explore what the commentators do with the Song

The Theology of the Song: A Survey of Views

Most interpreters make the Song a celebration of marital love and, by theological extension, God's love. Eugene Merrill writes that the Song's purpose is "to glorify romantic love and to celebrate the purity of sexual intimacy within the bonds of married life."

> Its bold, graphic imagery of lovemaking between the Shulamite maiden and her beloved came to be understood in Jewish exegesis as a parable depicting the Lord's love for Israel and, in Christian hermeneutics, a picture of Christ's love for the church.[11]

But accenting the *divine* side of this relationship overlooks the Song's distinctly lopsided emphasis on *her love* for *him*, not the other way around. Merrill sums up the Song's significance this way:

> Theologically, the message is that what God has created is intrinsically good and beautiful and that man and woman, in their love and admiration of one another, are fulfilling the creation mandate that imparts to the two of them together the authority to have dominion over all things and to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gn. 1:28).[12]

But the Song says *nothing* about procreation[13] or dominion. The Song focuses on the delights of the relationship itself, *especially* through the Shulamite's eyes. Merrill also describes the Song as a theological paradigm for a higher love—"that of the Lord for his creation and, in particular, for mankind created in his image"—that furnishes a glimpse "into God's indescribable and inexhaustible love for all beings in all places and at all times."[14]

I love Eugene Merrill; he's an excellent OT theologian. But this portrayal not only misses the Song's emphasis on the Shulamite's love for her beloved, but also flattens the Song's theology into a generic message about God's love for humanity. The Song does not depict compassion or love in general. It is laser-focused on a particular species of *relational* love—the supremely *exclusive* relationship of romantic love in the context of marriage. God certainly loves creation and mankind in general; but that's not the category of love that the Song spotlights and praises.

David Moore and Daniel Akin, in their commentary on the Song, argue that although allegorizing tendencies have gone too far at times,

> marital relations are to be an earthly picture of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). . . . While maintaining that the song is about human love, human love does not exhaust the greatest Song humanity has ever encountered. Indeed, the Bible sings the beauty of the love of God.[15]

Once again, the emphasis on God's love for man, however admirable and biblical, misses the Song's distinctive and repeated focus on *her* love for *him*—and by way of application, on man's love for God, not the other way around.

Another interpreter, Dennis Kinlaw, notes that the historical Jewish and Christian interpreters were onto something, even if they weren't going about it the right way:

> Their argument was allegorical. Their intuition may have been correct even if their exegetical method left something to be desired. This writer concurs with their position and believes there is biblical support for that intuition. That support rests in the analogical nature of the relationship between biblical election and human marriage.

That's helpful. He continues,

> The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship God has to His people is almost universal in Scripture. From the time God chose Israel to be His own in the Sinai Desert, the covenant was pictured in terms of a marriage. Idolatry was equated with adultery (Ex. 34:10–17). Yahweh is a jealous God. Monogamous marriage is the norm for depicting the covenantal relationship throughout Scripture, climaxing in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. God has chosen a bride.[16]

Kinlaw is *definitely* on the right track. God, not man, created marriage. And God, not prophets or theologians, decided to make the marriage/adultery motif the primary metaphor under which he describes and discusses the nature of the covenantal relationship between himself and his people. But the parallel of the Song to the divine-human relationship still needs to accurately reflect the literary emphasis of the Song in terms of its dialogue. God *has* chosen a bride; but that's not the side of the relationship that the Song accents. The Song is not about the man choosing the woman, nor does it primarily spotlight his love for her. The Song emphatically sings *her* love for *him*.[17]

Another OT scholar, Tremper Longman, also recognizes that the Song's emphasis on marital love "does not exhaust the theological meaning of the Song."

> So we come full circle, reaching similar conclusions to the early allegorical approaches to the Song. The difference, though, is obvious. We do not deny the primary and natural reading of the book, which highlights human love, and we do not arbitrarily posit the analogy between the Song's lovers and God and Israel. Rather we read it in the light of the pervasive marriage metaphor of the Old Testament.[18]

He clarifies what we discussed briefly last week about the problems of an allegorical reading.

> The allegorical approach erred in two ways, however. First allegorists suppressed the human love dimension of the Song, and, second, they pressed the details in arbitrary ways in order to elicit specific theological meaning from the text.[19]

That's true. But even an *analogical* approach to the Song often errs in two ways: (1) by using it to emphasize issues on which the Song is silent (e.g., procreation, dominion, God's love for humanity); and (2) by putting the analogical emphasis on the wrong syllable—God's love for his people, rather than his people's love for him.

As helpful as many of these explanations are of the Song's theological significance, all of them fail to factor in a crucial aspect of the Song that usually goes unnoticed: the dominance of the woman's expressions for her beloved. What are the implications of that emphasis in the Song for Israel's marital-covenant relationship to God, or ours to Christ?

Of all the interpreters I've read, Paul House comes closest to the mark of the Song's *distinctive* function and role when he observes that "the love depicted here puts the adulterous love Israel shows for Yahweh . . . to shame."[20] That observation transitions us from the 4th to the 5th and final question we need to explore; and these two final questions are very much interconnected.

5. What role does the Song play in the theological storyline of Scripture?

This question raises the issue of what is called a canonical theology of the book. All that means is, once we figure out what's going on in the book itself (in this case, the Song), what the Song is *about*, and *how* the Song communicates what it's about, then we want to raise a bigger question: How does this Song relate to the rest of the Bible? What does it contribute to the bigger picture of the rest of Scripture? Does the book play a role in connection with some other aspect of the bigger biblical picture?

One common canonical perspective sees the Song as a commentary on Genesis 2:24–25, "a manual on the blessing and reward of intimate married love."[21] But did the Spirit of Christ who superintended the writing of the Song (1 Pet 1:11) intend it to be more than merely a commentary on human marital love.

Stephen Dempster remarks, "When reading this text, the reader hears Jeremiah's oracle, Ezekiel 16, and Hosea 1–3." Why those passages in particular? He is alluding to passages in which God laments and rebukes Israel for their unfaithfulness to and abandonment of him—and the God describes that unfaithfulness and abandonment as *adultery*. It is a form of *spiritual* adultery, because Israel had agreed to enter into a covenantal relationship with him as the one and only true God, whom they would obey and to whom alone they would be faithful.

But then he writes that the Song

> is the reminder of the passionate and fiery love that Yahweh had for his people . . . . Such a text inspires hope for Israel, since it suggests that God will not abandon his beloved.[22]

To be sure, God's love for Israel is incontestable and unending. But if we apply the Song's language consistently, neither Israel nor the Church is the "beloved"—God is. And if we take the Shulamite's dominance in the Song as purposeful and significant, then the Song emphasizes not a reassurance of *God's* love, but a call to God's people to emulate the *Shulamite's* love.

Let me try to pull it all together this way:

1) God has chosen the marriage relationship as the primary analogy to depict the nature of his relationship to his people.[23]
2) The Song is a poetic expression of love within the marriage relationship, and *especially highlights not the male side of the relationship* (analogous to God's love for his people)*, but the female side* (analogous to the love of God's people for him).
3) That suggests that the Song especially emphasizes and exemplifies the ideal posture of the *human* side of that divine-human relationship.
4) In the broader canonical context of both the OT and NT, the Shulamite stands in conspicuous contrast to Israel's habitual spiritual adultery and prostitution within the context of her covenant relationship with Yahweh.[24]

In literary terms, the adoring Shulamite functions as a foil—a character contrast—to adulterous Israel. However intentional or not on Solomon's part, on the canonical level, the Shulamite was—throughout Israel's history—a timeless witness to what Israel should have been in her relationship to Yahweh. And

insofar as the NT continues the use of that marriage metaphor, the Shulamite remains an enduring model for God's people today.

A Biblical Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

The answer to this 5th question is filled out by tracing God's frequent use of this metaphor that is the Song's diametrical opposite: covenantal defection as spiritual adultery.[25]

- The marriage/adultery metaphor surfaces in almost every corpus of the biblical canon.
- Time permits only a very representative sampling, but it will be enough to make the point.

Old Testament: *Pentateuch*

The metaphor is rooted in the garden of Genesis 2 with the divine institution of the one-flesh union between one man and one woman. The exclusivity of monogamy is built into the created order by God from its very genesis. If the ultimate goal was purely procreation, there are far more efficient ways of filling the earth than monogamy. But in the plan of God, from the commencement of creation, human marriage exists for more than merely procreation; it is also designed to mirror the divine-human relationship, setting the stage for God to employ marriage as a metaphor to describe the nature of his relationship to his people.

Exodus 20:2–6 is the first enunciation of the concept of *divine jealousy* toward his people.[26] Exodus 34:14–16 reiterates God's jealousy even more forcefully, and contains the first sexual metaphor for spiritual infidelity. God describes the worship of any other god as "playing the harlot" and "whoring after other gods" (i.e., prostituting themselves). We can become so accustomed to this metaphor, sanitized by its biblical usage, that it fails to shock us that God would choose such a repugnant metaphor to describe the spiritual unfaithfulness of his people as committing spiritual adultery.

Leviticus 17:7 and 20:4–6 restate the harlotry motif. In Numbers 15:39 God commands the Israelites to attach a tassel to their robe as a visual reminder, "that you may not follow the harlotry of your own heart and your own eyes." The verb "follow" is the same term used repeatedly (13x) to describe those who *searched* or *scouted* or *spied out* the land. In other words, the tassels were a visual warning against *exploring* the harlotry that lurked within them. The verse casts the net much wider (and deeper) than merely external, physical idolatry.[27]

The Pentateuch closes with the sad forewarning that "this people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land . . . and will forsake me and break my covenant which I have made with them" (Deut 31:16). The Historical Books chronicle that national descent.[28]

Old Testament: *Historical Books*

After God miraculously preserved them through the wilderness and established them in the land, as if on cue, Israel ignored her godly leadership and played the prostitute not only with other gods (Jud 2:17; 8:33) but even with Gideon's ephod (Jud 8:27). The Chronicler underscores the irony that they prostituted themselves with the gods of the very people "whom God had destroyed before them" (1 Chr 5:25). Nor was this true only of the largely apostate northern kingdom; the southern kingdom followed in their steps as well (2 Chr 21:13).[29]

Old Testament: *Prophets*

Israel's infidelity to their covenant relationship with Yahweh is particularly pronounced in the Prophets.[30] The development of this metaphor takes a new twist through God's instruction to Hosea to take a wife of promiscuous tendencies, "for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the

Lord" (Hos 1:2). God is making it very personal—as if *your* wife entered into multiple adulterous affairs and prostituted herself freely while still living under your roof, enjoying your protection and provision. God then issues the first prophetic call to the people to abandon their harlotries before he shames them publicly (Hos 2:1–13). The passage takes an unanticipated, undeserved, impossibly merciful and affectionate eschatological turn, when God promises to woo the nation back to himself in language at least conceptually reminiscent of the Song (Hos 2:14–20).

In Isaiah 1, Jerusalem "the faithful city has become a harlot" (1:21). Judah's "spiritual whoredom is seen to translate into social meltdown, for the offences decried in vv. 21-23"—murder, rebellion, robbery, bribery, exploitation of the vulnerable—"are not religious but moral and social in nature" and the symptoms of a "deeply personal defection from Yahweh."[31] And yet, like Hosea, Isaiah includes a glorious future reversal by way of an extended eschatological marriage metaphor (Isa 54:4–10).

Through Jeremiah God again uses the metaphor of Judah's harlotry to describe her wanton abandonment of him: "on every high hill and under every green tree you lay down, playing the harlot" (Jer 2:1–5, 20–24). The language of love in the Song is sensually rich yet beautiful in the purity of its passion, because it is expressed within a legitimate marital relationship. Here, the language is sexually explicit but vulgar and repulsive; God portrays his people as a camel or donkey in heat, desperately searching to mate. So pathetic was Judah's frenzied quest for any replacement for Yahweh that "she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees" (Jer 3:1–9).

A witness against Israel's adulterous desertion of her covenantal Husband, the Shulamite all the while modelled the pure passion of a wife delighted in and devoted exclusively to her husband. By virtue of God's persistent use of marriage as his preferred metaphor for his covenant relationship with Israel—she exemplified the delight and devotion that Israel should have had for Yahweh alone. If you want to see what Israel should look like with respect to her God, look at her.

It is important to remember that these prophetic diatribes did not originate from the puritanical opinions of a few antiquated old fogies. In each case, they are quoting Yahweh's words and viewpoint. And through no prophet does God speak more bluntly than Ezekiel. Ezekiel features two chapters of embarrassingly explicit imagery to describe Judah's marital infidelity.

Ezekiel 16 is the longest literary unit in Ezekiel. The language in Song of Songs, though often sexual, is poetically discrete; the language in Ezekiel 16 is shockingly graphic. "No one presses the margins of literary propriety as severely as Ezekiel."[32] The interpreter faces a dilemma, then: trying to convey the force of divine language without unduly offending public sensibilities. The fact is, it is offensive because God jolly well means it to be offensive, because God himself is deeply offended by the behavior of his people. The description of God's people here is the ultimate antithesis to the picture we have in the Song of Songs. Judah has become not merely an adulteress, nor even a harlot; she has become, in the common parlance of God's choosing, a nymphomaniacal slut.

In 16:1–14 God's love for Jerusalem is personified in a parable.[33] God reminds Jerusalem of the pagan background from which he redeemed her (16:4–5); but God showed great kindness and compassion to her (16:6–7), and graciously beautified her as his wife (16:8–14; cf. 2 Chr 6:5–6, 9:1). But then something very ugly starts to happen. Imagine the pure and lovely heroine of your favorite romantic story—whether Cinderella or Snow White, Dickens's Amy Dorrit or Gaskill's Molly Gibson, or (to make it as personal as God takes it) your own fiancée or wife—turning to adultery, choosing to become a prostitute. It is a revolting, offensive thought that such stories should end that way. That is the point, and that is exactly how God reacts.

God describes Jerusalem's arrogant conceit and her ungrateful betrayal in committing spiritual prostitution (16:15ff.). The language grows exceedingly graphic—more so in Hebrew than in most translations—as God describes Jerusalem's incurable infatuation with the surrounding culture under the

metaphor of an adulterous wife-turned-prostitute. The verb זָנָה (prostitute oneself, be a harlot) occurs 21 times in Ezekiel 16; and the references to high places (16), images (17), pagan offerings (18–19), pagan worship (20–21) indicate the character and locales of this behavior. Though the books of Kings do not characterize the nation's idolatry in this way, it is the fullest documentation of what this spiritual adultery and fornication looked like.[34] They multiplied their idolatrous adulteries at every intersection and eagerly made themselves available to anyone and everyone other than Yahweh (25)—the Egyptians (26), the Assyrians (28), the Babylonians (29). God is not describing literal forays into sexual immorality (although that may well be a side-effect of much of the idolatry). He is using married immorality as a metaphor to describe how he views their defection from him, and his covenantal claim on their exclusive affection and allegiance. But they left him and joined themselves to these idolatrous cultures with an obsessive desperation that disgusts even the nations that they want to be like. Yahweh describes his reaction to this betrayal not only in terms of an offended God but in the language of a wronged and grief-stricken husband:

> I was crushed [lit., broken/shattered] by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot after their idols; they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations. And they shall know that I am the LORD; I have not said in vain that I would bring this calamity upon them. (Ezekiel 6:9–10)[35]

Off in the canonical distance stands the Shulamite bride in the Song of Songs, faithfully modeling the pure passion that God's people should have had exclusively for him, their Husband. But it gets even worse. Yahweh describes Jerusalem's behavior in terms of a dysfunctional and insatiable lust to be like—and be liked by—the surrounding nations (16:30ff.). God bluntly observes, in effect, that a prostitute at least does it for money, but Judah is so desperate to be like them that they are willing to pay for the privilege of becoming their whore. The sin God is addressing is not ultimately sexual—though there are moral effects in the behavior of his people. The sin God is addressing is deeply spiritual, cultural, religious, and relational.

How does this kind of frenetic, obsessive, idolatrous, adulterous behavior start? It did not begin with random Israelites who one day happened to see a gold idol and think, "Wow, that's so beautiful it must be god! I think I'll adopt that as my god and worship it." That's not how idolatry works; idolatry is religious but never merely religious; it is social and cultural. Israel's idolatry was often not a total abandonment of Yahweh and a wholesale substitution of some other religious culture. Often the idolatry was bootlegged in and cross-dressed as the worship of the true God (Ex 32), or it was unabashedly adopted alongside their continued worship of Yahweh (Jer 7:9–10; Eze 23:38–39)—up to their high places for an idolatrous fling, then back down to Yahweh's temple as though it was all perfectly natural. The prophets all describe God's disgust with their worship and sacrifices to him for that very reason. Fawning affection for the surrounding culture cannot coexist with a genuine, Shulamite adoration for God and God's culture, for the same reason that John expresses: the two are diametrical opposites and mutually exclusive (1 Jn 2:15).[36] *Idolatry—spiritual adultery—always begins with an admiration, affection, and infatuation with the ways and values of a neighboring culture.* Idolatry is not ultimately *about* the *idol*; it is about the accompanying *culture*, *values*, and *lifestyle*. If you want confirmation of that, read Ezekiel 23.

In Ezekiel 23 God delves into another account of Israel's marital infidelity. She is not merely an adulteress, nor even a harlot; she has become something even worse. The chapter describes both Israel and Judah as obsessed nymphomaniacs. The verb עָגַב (to have sensual desire, to pursue erotically) occurs eight times in the OT, and seven of them are in Ezekiel 23. God tells another parable—an allegory, in fact—about two women. By the end, God's metaphorical language becomes what we might almost call obscene (23:20)—but that's because the actual behavior he is describing is, to him, obscene. Again, we

must remember that God is not directly describing the physical sexual immorality of all the Israelites with their pagan neighbors; God is describing their idolatrous obsession with the surrounding pagan culture via obscenely metaphorical sexual language. Why? *Because Israel's religious idolatry was a form of marital betrayal and infidelity of the worst imaginable kind.* It was an infatuation with the up-and-coming surrounding pagan culture.

> But she increased her harlotry; she looked at men portrayed on the wall, images of Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion, girded with belts around their waists, flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like captains, in the manner of the Babylonians of Chaldea, the land of their nativity. As soon as her eyes saw them, she lusted for them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. Then the Babylonians came to her, into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their immorality; so she was defiled by them, and alienated herself from them. She revealed her harlotry and displayed her nakedness. Then I alienated Myself from her, as I had alienated Myself from her sister. (Ezek 23:14–18)

Their adulterous fascination was fixated not on the gods, but on the people: their dress, their pomp, their style, their impressive appearance, their pride and security. Judah's breathless response to what they saw was, in essence, "That's what I want! That's what I want to look like! That's who I want to be like!" In short, Judah idolized them. What form did this idolization take? Religious idolatry? This was certainly part of it (cf. 23:36–39). Literal immorality with the Assyrians and Babylonians? Probably. Political alliance? Perhaps.[37] But unlike Ezekiel 16, the focus here is not on the religious dimension (idolatry proper), but on the cultural dimension: the people, the clothing, the status, and the culture of the surrounding nations. That desire to be like the nations around them is the OT expression of its NT counterpart: worldliness.

Worldliness is nothing more complex than world-likeness, and *world-likeness* is simply the opposite of *Godlikeness*, the antithesis of holiness—the concept of being set apart uniquely and exclusively for God, as a wife is to her husband. Worldliness is not an idea invented by paranoid puritanical fundamentalists. It is not even a new concept first introduced in the NT; it was going on all through the OT. Indeed, it began in Genesis 3:15.[38] Worldliness is simply identifying with the unbelieving world—preferring their company, emulating their culture, adopting their values over God's, or mixing it with God's and calling it "Christian" under the rubric of liberty. What the NT identifies as "the world" is not a neutral zone but a war zone, a kingdom of subjects governed and influenced by a spirit who is in declared and hostile opposition to God. Worldliness, like idolatry itself, is not an external sin, though it has external symptoms. Worldliness is a profoundly internal, spiritual, religious, and relational issue. The OT describes it as wanting to be like "the nations." The NT calls it conformity to "the world." In both testaments, God calls it not just idolatry, but adultery and prostitution. That is because religion and culture are inseparable; religion always expresses itself in the culture, and the culture that is embraced always works its way into one's religion. All of life and culture is religious, because all of reality is theological, because all of humanity has been created in the image of God and is either pursuing God or rejecting and rebelling against Him.

And all the time, the Shulamite stands as the sterling model of loving marital loyalty—an example that Israel never emulated in her relationship to Yahweh her Husband.

> "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am lovesick!"
>
> "What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?"

> "He is altogether lovely. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" (Song 5:8. 9, 16).

In the context of the predominant metaphor God has chosen throughout the canon to portray his relationship to his people, the adoring Shulamite depicts the ideal wife and, as such, the consummate foil to adulterous Israel. It is no wonder that God delights in, and that the best of songs celebrates, the kind of pure passion and devoted admiration of such a woman for her husband—because Yahweh never got it from the nation he favored and chose out of all others. One day he will.[39] And as the NT indicates, he still looks for it from his people today. The marriage/adultery metaphor does not die with the OT, but resurfaces in the NT. But again, we can become so acclimated to NT language that we never pause to marvel over it.

New Testament: *Gospels*

On at least three different occasions Jesus referred to the religious leaders of his day as an "adulterous generation" (Mt 12:39; 16:4; Mk 8:38). Why *adulterous*?[40] This was not a swipe at the personal morality of some in his audience; it was a concise and picturesque commentary on the spiritual character of these Jews as a whole, echoing the language of the prophets.[41] The OT background of that language that we have already surveyed corroborates this conclusion. And yet, if there is one sin of which these Jewish leaders were not guilty, it is pagan idolatry in the classic religious sense—which only underscores my earlier argument that spiritual adultery involves much more than merely bowing down to false gods.[42] One wonders whether the word "adulterous" caught their attention and made them think of any of those OT passages.

New Testament: *Epistles*

Paul echoes God's language of jealousy when he writes, "I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin [like a Shulamite bride] to Christ" (2 Cor 11:2). In Paul's most classic use of the marriage metaphor, his instruction to wives and husbands is likened to and grounded in the higher reality between Christ and his church (Eph 5:22–33). Like the Song of Songs, Ephesians 5 is first and foremost about the human marriage relationship and, secondarily by analogical application (not allegory), about the divine-human relationship.[43]

The NT passage most reminiscent of the OT marriage/adultery motif is James 4:4–5.

> Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

The connections implied in the OT are made explicit here: adultery = friendship with the world, which in turn arouses divine hostility.[44] Instead of reserving their love and devotion for Christ, these had, by prioritizing their own pleasure (ἡδονή, 4:1, 3) and lust (ἐπιθυμέω, 4:2) and by their affection (φιλία, 4:4) for a world at enmity with God, put themselves on the side of God's enemies. Also, verse 5 again links jealousy to the marriage metaphor; it's the same OT concept of God's righteous claims on the singular devotion of his people. All of humanity is divided into two sides: those who are in rebellion against God and those who have been rescued from their rebellion and made his sons and daughters. In the OT it was Israel and "the nations"; in the NT it is the church and "the world." To dote on and flirt with the world, let alone to pant and pursue and lust after the world—desiring to be like and to be liked by the surrounding culture—is to commit spiritual adultery. Spiritual adultery is no better than physical adultery just because it's *only* spiritual; it is not just *spiritual* adultery, it is spiritual *adultery*.[45]

New Testament: *Revelation*

The marriage metaphor that pervades both the Old and New Testaments appropriately comes to final fruition in Revelation—the consummate book of consummation. Revelation 17–18, the angel shows to John "the judgment of the great harlot" (17:1).[46] But thankfully, the Bible does not end on that negative note. The Bible's storyline concludes with the beautiful marriage imagery of Christ and his bride in Revelation 19 and 21.

> Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright *and* clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. (Rev. 19:7-8)

Of all the images God might have chosen to depict the character of this eschatological atrocity, why a whore? Why is a prostitute the persona of choice to epitomize this final expression of human mutiny against God? If the ultimate issue at stake in history is a *kingdom* issue between God and Satan,[47] why is Babylon not depicted more simply as, say, a *rebel*? The essence of "prostitution" (literal or metaphorical) is the selling on the public market of what is intended to be private and sacred and devoted to one—whether it is one's body, or one's soul and worship. Prostitution is taking what God has given for one use only, and merchandising it publicly for profit.[48] This whore prostitutes her soul and worship—which rightfully belong exclusively to God—to the Beast and to the dragon, apparently in exchange for a considerable degree of power since she is the one *riding* the Beast and therefore in control (for the time being). She is also described as drunk with the blood of saints, implying that part of the services she has sold is an effective role in helping the Beast hunt down and destroy the saints (who would not worship the Beast or his image). Like all prostitutes, she is a tool and a slave.

Against this backdrop of the final divine destruction of prostitutional defection from the Creator, Revelation 19 (vv. 6–9) and 21 (vv. 2, 9–11) complete the biblical theological marriage metaphor with the marriage celebration of the Lamb (Christ) and his wife ("the saints").[49]

> So, from a New Testament perspective, the love depicted in the Song is not only a taste of what was given in creation, but a sign of what will be consummated in the new creation—a sign of the gospel. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31–32)."[50]

CONCLUSION

The Bible begins and ends with references to the creation and the new creation; and folded into both of those creation passages, at the Bible's beginning and end, is the marriage motif (Gen 2; Rev 22). It is a metaphor chosen and reiterated throughout the Scripture by God himself, and which bookends his self-revelation.

The Song of Songs memorializes a consummate picture of the pure and passionate longing of the Shulamite for her beloved. It is precisely *because* the Song is primarily about marital love that it necessarily has theological and Christological relevance. Just as the book of Ruth is the counterweight of covenantal family-loyalty in the context of the rampant disloyalty that characterized the era of the Judges,[51] the Song of Songs is the counterweight of covenantal marital-loyalty in the larger canonical context of Israel's lack of love and loyalty in her covenant relationship to Yahweh. The Shulamite is the richest image of what should be the posture of Yahweh's people toward him.[52] On a personal level, the Shulamite's opposite is Gomer (Hosea 1, 3). Just as Gomer represents the adulterous unfaithfulness of Israel to Yahweh, the Shulamite's passionate love and loyalty to her husband (her beloved) is the ideal and ultimate foil to

Israel's adulterous infidelity to her Husband (her Beloved, Isa. 5:1). In the broader canonical context, she is the model of passionate fidelity with the power to shame the nation for its unconscionable infidelity. And because God employs the marriage metaphor trans-testamentally, she remains for all of God's people the model of passionate admiration and exclusive fidelity both to one's spouse and to one's God.

What does that look like?

> To love God truly is not simply to keep his commandments, but to thirst for him as a deer thirsts for flowing streams (Ps. 42:1), and to long for him as a bride longs for her groom. For that is how we ourselves are loved by God . . . . When what should be the fruits and accompaniments of love [*i.e., obedience*] are mistaken for love itself, the heart sooner or later goes out of religion, however committed to orthodoxy and good works it may be [*like the Ephesian church which forsook its first love, Rev. 2:4*], and it becomes a burden rather than a joy. The Song of Songs is there to stop love going out of our relationships, with God and with one another.[53]

When we fail to measure up to the Shulamite's example, or even like Judah wander wantonly into worldliness, the NT introduces us to another woman well-known for her prostitution (Luke 7:36-50). But when she came to Jesus, and poured out on him her repentance, and gratitude, and devotion—he received her, forgave her, and comforted her. He does that for all of us who return to him like that.

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[1] Interestingly, this address of endearment surfaces in another song: "Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of *my Beloved* regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill" (Isa. 5:1). The song is sung to Yahweh, the owner of the vineyard (5:7). Many interpreters think the singer is Isaiah; if so, he would be speaking as a model Israelite in his holy affection for Israel's exalted God. Cf. John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 152–53; he also observes that the same word *vineyard* in Isaiah's song "has sexual overtones in Canticles."

[2] As indicated earlier in the article, whether or not Solomon is the beloved in the Song and, as such, the main male actor is irrelevant for the purpose of this study's proposal. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Solomon is mentioned by name a few times (1:1; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12). Within the Song itself, the referent of "Solomon" or "the king" is debated. Some clearly refer to King Solomon comparatively (8:11–12). Others could be culturally conditioned references to the beloved as her "Solomon" or her "king" so to speak (3:7, 9, 11). Some evidence suggests that brides and grooms in Near Eastern marriage culture referred to each other as "king/prince" and "queen/princess." Bell, 270; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 92.

[3] Debate persists over what this term signifies. Was she an inhabitant of Shulam (unknown location), or of Shunem (2 K. 4:8) as a unique variant of Shunammite (2 Kgs 4:12, 25, 36; cf. Abishag the Shunammite, 1 Kgs 1:3, 15; 2:17, 21, 22)? Is it a feminine form of Solomon, "the Solomoness" (Solomon = *Shlomo*; Shulamite = *Shulamiyt*), or does it derive from *shalom*? For a discussion of these and other possibilities, see Mitchell, 127–136.

[4] James Hamilton's reference to the woman as "the beloved" misses the Song's consistent use of this term exclusively as the woman's term of endearment for the man. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 307–08.

[5] **Bold** indicates instances of this group's dialogue; the other references indicate the group being addressed or referred to (1:**4**, 5, **11**; 2:2, 7; 3:5, 10, 11; 5:8, **9**, 16; 6:**1**, 9; 8:4; 8:**8–9**). Based on the statement in 1:6, 8:8–9 is often attributed to the Shulamite's brothers.

[6] Bell, 271.

[7] Including 1:1, the technical total is 1250 words; but the opening verse is introductory and not part of the Song. The Shulamite's word count includes two passages in which she is quoting the beloved (2:10–15; 5:2); in one of them, she recounts what he says to her in her dream. In both cases, they are his words only secondarily; she is the one saying them; that, too, is significant. The speaker in one passage (6:10; 11 words) is debated between Him and the Chorus; the chart assigns them to the beloved to maximize his speaking role, but his actual word count may be even less than indicated.

[8] Garrett's outline of the Song assigns 17 "speaks" to the woman, and only 8 "speaks" to the man. Garrett, 381,

383.

[9] Again, Hamilton's depiction of the Song is askew because of this. Referencing Song 7:10 ("I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me"), he writes, "The use of this term 'desire' in Genesis 3:16" indicated that "Yahweh cursed the woman with 'desire' for her husband, which meant that she would inappropriately seek to take the initiative in the relationship. The Song sings the righting of reversed desire. The one who desires is the man, and it is he who takes proper initiative in the relationship." Hamilton, 308. Whatever one makes of Genesis 3:16 (including the tantalizing detail that its Hebrew word for "desire" occurs elsewhere only in Gen. 4:7 and Song 7:10), the dialogical realities of the Song simply do not emphasize the man's initiative in this relationship. In fact, Gledhill enumerates 13 passages that express "the woman's initiatives" versus only 6 passages that express "the man's initiatives." Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs* (Downers Grove; IVP, 1994), 251–52.

[10] "Where the Torah and Prophets' texts portrayed the male, whether human or divine, as the dominant and proactive partner, Song of Songs presents a female character who dominates speech and takes most of the sexual initiatives—at least in terms of words. The male is either quoted (e.g. 2:10–14), or speaks rarely (e.g. 1: 9–11, 15; 2:2; 4:1–15; 5:1; 6:4–10; etc.)." David M. Carr, "Passion for God: A Center in Biblical Theology," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 23 (2001), 20. Carr, however, sees the relationship depicted in the Song, "featuring as it does a prominent female voice and a different vision of male-female relationships" as "probably grounded in some kind of alternative women's discourse within ancient Israel." Similarly, Gledhill writes, "The initiatives of the girl in seeking romantic encounter and stimulating desire are far more numerous in the Song than those of the boy. This subtle [?] disproportion may be a deliberate attempt by the author gently to challenge the pronounced patriarchalism of OT Hebrew society." T. D. Gledhill, "The Song of Songs," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 216. Such explanations exemplify a horizontally preoccupied tunnel vision regarding the Song's canonical role and significance.

[11] Eugene Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 639.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Song 3:4 and 8:5 technically refer to procreation with reference to the birth of the Shulamite and the beloved themselves (respectively), but not with reference to the relationship between the Shulamite and the beloved.

[14] Ibid., 639–40.

[15] David G. Moore and Daniel L. Akin, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs,* Holman Old Testament Commentary, vol. 14, ed. Max Anders (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003), 138–39.

[16] Dennis Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 1208.

[17] Indeed, she "not only speaks more often but also initiates the relationship and pursues it." Longman, *Song of Songs*, 15.

[18] Tremper Longman III, "Song of Solomon, Theology of" in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible,* ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 743.

[19] Longman, *Song of Songs,* 67, 70.

[20] Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP. 1998), 465.

[21] Kaiser, 146; cf. this same view of the Song as commentary in Dempster, *Dominion & Dynasty*, 207; R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 265; G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: And Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), 37; Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther,* New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 30–31.

[22] Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion & Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 207–08.

[23] It should go without saying that this analogy does not extend to the sexual dimension of the marital relationship; unfortunately, however, that caveat needs to be spelled out in view of recent writings that seek to apply the sexual dimension of marriage to the divine-human relationship, and even to draw explicit parallels between sex and spirituality. Even when God uses the marriage metaphor, he always speaks of his relationship to his people in covenantal and relational terms, never in sexual terms. The closest the metaphor comes to sexual innuendo is when it describes the human *breach* of that relationship in terms of adultery and prostitution. As will be seen below, Ezekiel 16 and 23 are quite graphic in illustrating negatively the nature of Israel's adulterous abandonment of Yahweh.

[24] The view proposed in this article does not necessitate that the Shulamite be flawless in all her interactions with the beloved. Even if some passages in the Song may be interpreted as a failure on the Shulamite's part, the standard she represents need not be perfection but, rather, an unshakably exclusive devotion that always compels her to return to

her beloved even in spite of sin and failure.

[25] One invaluable work for filling out such a survey is Raymond C. Ortlund, *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003). He begins by treating marriage in Genesis 2 as the necessary backdrop to the study of spiritual adultery. This context is essential for understanding and interpreting the enormity of spiritual adultery when it begins to surface later in the redemptive story. The rest of the work is a detailed, systematic, biblical theological treatment of passages that develop the theme of spiritual adultery. Ortlund does not, however, draw any connection between this theme and the canonical-theological function of the Song of Songs that I am proposing. I believe these two themes function in counterpoint as contrasting images of God's people.

[26] We think of (and often experience) jealousy in terms of suspicion, distrust, and paranoia. But in certain contexts, jealousy is an entirely appropriate emotion. How we express it can sometimes be sinful; but the expectation of loyalty and devotion from someone with whom we have a covenant or family relationship is a righteous expectation.

[27] "Verse 39 does not specify idol worship as the harlotry in view. Nothing in the passage requires so narrow a referent. This ambiguity has the positive exegetical function of broadening the field of reference to all the wayward desires of the heart and the lust of the eyes. The language concerns Israel's 'playing the harlot' after their own hearts and eyes, implying without limitation the various temptations which may be imagined, perceived, and caressed through the senses. . . . The net force of the declaration is that all the sinful preferences of the autonomous self, running contrary to the law of God, are a kind of whoredom" or prostitution. Ortlund, 40.

[28] Solomonic authorship would place the Song early in the nation's canonical history, lending weight to the canonical-theological function proposed here, whether or not the later sacred historians and prophets were conscious of the contrastive function of the Shulamite. At the same time, however, even a late date for the Song would not undermine its canonical-theological function. Either way, prospectively or retrospectively, the adoring Shulamite functions as a foil to adulterous Israel.

[29] Though it doesn't warrant a separate section, the spiritual adultery motif also finds its way, however briefly, into poetic literature as well (Ps 106:39).

[30] The degree to which the prophets (or historians) may have been aware of the Shulamite foil in the canonical-literary background is irrelevant to the Holy Spirit's superintending design. It is unlikely that the biblical authors saw any significance in the omission of Melchizedek's genealogy from Genesis 14 until the writer of Hebrews discloses its Christological implications (Heb 7:3).

[31] Ortlund, 79.

[32] Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 466. Whereas previous oracles "softened potentially offensive ideas with euphemisms (e.g., 7:17)," in chapter 16 "Yahweh throws caution to the wind" and describes Judah's adulterous defection in the earthiest of language. After identifying some of the oracle's most explicit vocabulary, Block adds that "the semipornographic style is a deliberate rhetorical device designed to produce a strong emotional response." Block, 467.

[33] "This prophetic oracle is a parable about a despised orphan who became the wife of a king, then gave away all his gifts to become a harlot"—a story of "grace and ingratitude, of God's love spurned." Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville: B & H, 1994), 167–68.

[34] See, e.g., 2 Kgs 16:1–4, 10–18; 21:1–15. You can trace the trajectory of this behavior throughout the books: 1 Kgs 3:2–3; 11:7–8, 13; 14:23–24; 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kgs 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35; 16:4; 17:9-19; 18:4, 22; 21:3; 23:5, 8, 9, 13.

[35] For a discussion of whether such a passage is adequately explained under the rubric of anthropomorphism, see my article "Greater Is He Than Man Can Know: Divine Repentance and an Inquiry into Anthropomorphism & Anthropopathism, Impassibility and Affectability," *JBTW* 2/2 (Spring 2022), 73-93.

[36] Paul (1 Cor 10:21–22) underscores the same contradiction—intriguingly, with specific reference to the Corinthian temptation to idolatrous syncretism: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons." He follows this with a clear echo from the OT: "Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?"

[37] Summarizing this passage, Cooper observes that "Judah's political prostitution was presented in explicit sexual terminology." Cooper, 228. But when did Judah rush into a political or military alliance with Babylon, and was then repulsed, as the passage describes? Jehoiakim became subservient to Babylon for three years, but then rebelled against them (2 Kgs 24:1). It seems nearer the mark to say that Judah's *cultural* prostitution is in view and presented in explicit sexual terminology.

[38] Gen. 3:15 guarantees the perpetual presence and temptation of worldliness, and the unavoidable endemic enmity between God's people (the seed of the woman) and the world (the seed of the serpent)—an enmity that is not merely natural or incidental, but divinely ordained ("I will put enmity between . . . ."). For a thorough exploration of the

trans-canonical significance of Genesis 3:15, see Jonathan M. Cheek, "Genesis 3:15 as the Root of a Biblical Theology of the Church and the World: The Commencement, Continuation, and Culmination of the Enmity Between the Seeds" (PhD diss., BJU Seminary, 2019).

[39] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the eschatological reversal of Israel's adultery, but it is promised even in some of the stiffest condemnations we have surveyed (e.g., Jer 3:11–20; Hos 2:14–23; 3:5).

[40] This is the same root used in Eze 16:32 (LXX), "You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband."

[41] Citing this passage, Ortlund comments, "Jesus responds to his contemporaries with denunciations not unlike those of the Old Testament prophets." Ortlund, 137. Lane likewise notes that this is "an expression colored by the strictures of the prophets against idolatry (cf. Isa. 1:4, 21; Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 2:4)." William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*. NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 310.

[42] It is often asserted that the Babylonian captivity cured the Jews of idolatry, but that is not my point here. One has only to read Ezra and Nehemiah with a modicum of attentiveness to see that the exiles were still as susceptible to idolatry and its concomitants as they were prior to the captivity. This was not the case with the NT-era religious leaders. Yet, spiritual adulterers they were nonetheless.

[43] "Paul is the one who lifts the hermeneutical capstone into place by revealing what our intuitions may have suspected all along, *viz.* that marriage from the beginning was meant to be a tiny social platform on which the love of Christ for his church and the church's responsiveness to him could be put on visible display. Human marriage is finally divulged to be emblematic of Christ and the church in covenant, destined to live together not as 'one-flesh' for a lifetime in this world but as 'one spirit' for eternity in a new heavens and a new earth." Ortlund, 172.

[44] Friendship with the world does not, of course, mean befriending an unbeliever for the sake of the gospel, or being a good, friendly neighbor. James is describing believers who have aligned their desires and pursuits and values with those of unbelievers in ways that compromise their allegiance to God and his call to holiness.

[45] For some penetrating practical applications of spiritual adultery, see Ortlund, 174–76. Also, for readers who may wonder why 1 John 2:15-16 is not included, the primary focus of this NT survey is not worldliness but the marriage/adultery metaphor.

[46] This description is "indicative of her spiritual harlotry and representative of an ecclesiastical or religious facet that is a counterfeit of the real. In prophetic language, prostitution, fornication, or adultery is equivalent to idolatry or religious apostasy (Is. 23:15-17; Jer. 2:30-31; 13:17; Ezek. 16:17-19; Hos. 2:5; Nah. 3:4). . . . With this background it is beyond dispute that this woman . . . is the epitome of spiritual fornication or idolatry. She leads the world in the pursuit of false religion whether it be paganism or perverted revealed religion. She is the symbol for a system that reaches back to the tower of Babel and extends into the future when it will peak under the regime of the beast. . . . So this woman represents all false religion of all time, including those who apostatize from the revealed religion of Christianity." Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 282–83.

[47] Kingdom vocabulary dominates the Apocalypse. The βασιλ- word family shows up 39x; θρόνος occurs 47x; ἐξουσία appears 21x.

[48] Someone who sells her labor, skill, time, or knowledge for legitimate purposes is not a prostitute. That is why the metaphorical definition of "prostitution" is the selling of one's time and services to an unworthy cause.

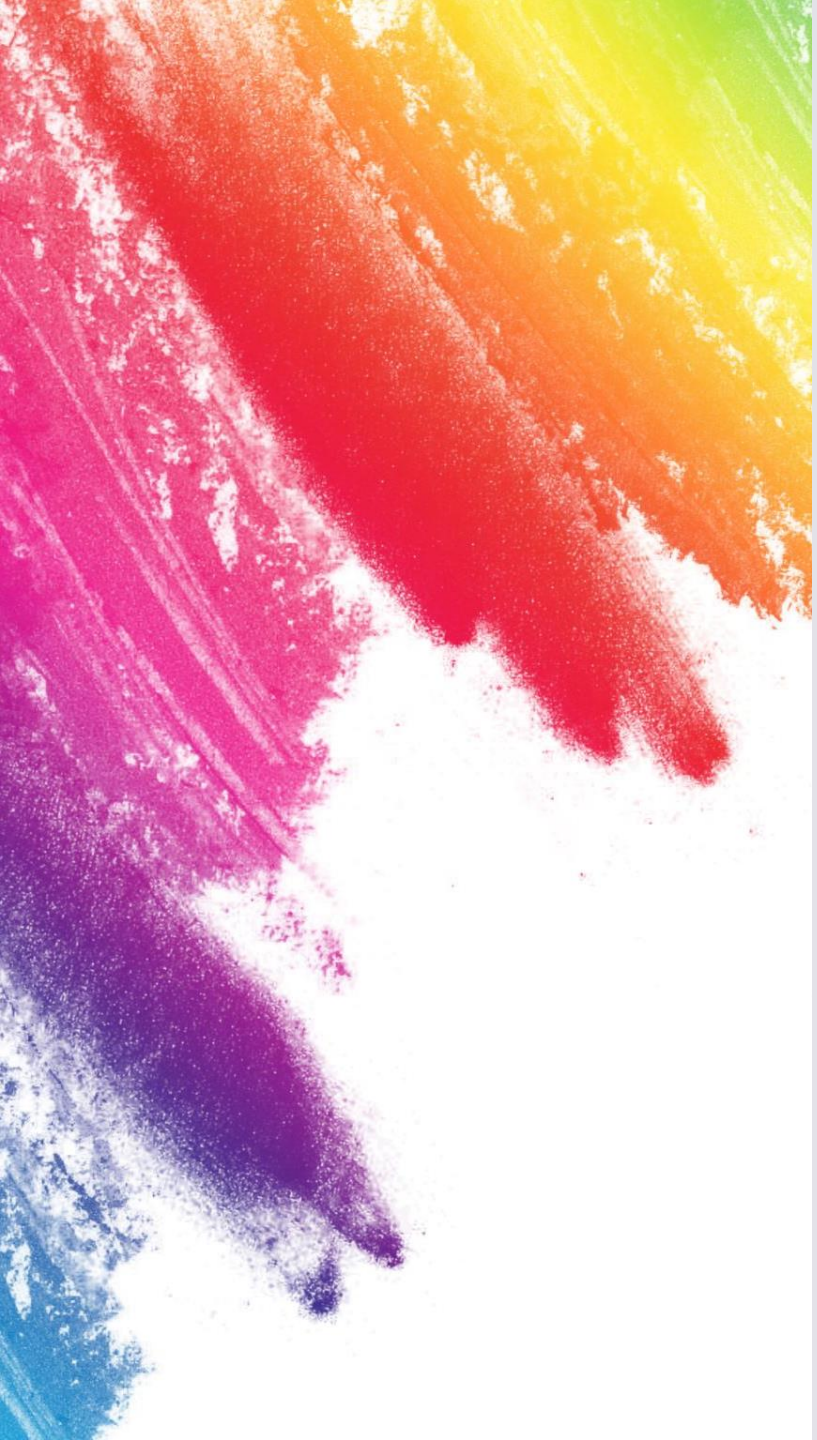
[49] "According to Jesus, there will be no sex or marriage in heaven as we know them now, but neither will there be any singleness, for both will have been replaced by a greater reality, the final union between Christ and his people, in which all of the redeemed will be included (Rev. 19:6–10)." Webb, 34.

[50] Ibid. Marriage, notes Ortlund, "is a divine creation, intended to reveal the ultimate romance guiding all of time and eternity." Ortlund, 173.

[51] Ruth 1:1 is important for locating the story not only chronologically but theologically. Throughout the era of the Judges Israel forsook (עָזַב) the Lord (e.g., 2:12, 13; 10:10, 13, 16). That they failed to be loyal to Yahweh is apparent not only from the storyline but also from the conspicuous absence of the word חֶסֶד, which occurs only twice in Judges (and one of those notes the *absence* of loyalty, 8:35). By contrast, loyalty is a conspicuously present and controlling motif in the book of Ruth, both in word (1:8; 2:20; 3:10) and action (1:14, 16–17; 2:11; 4:14, 15).

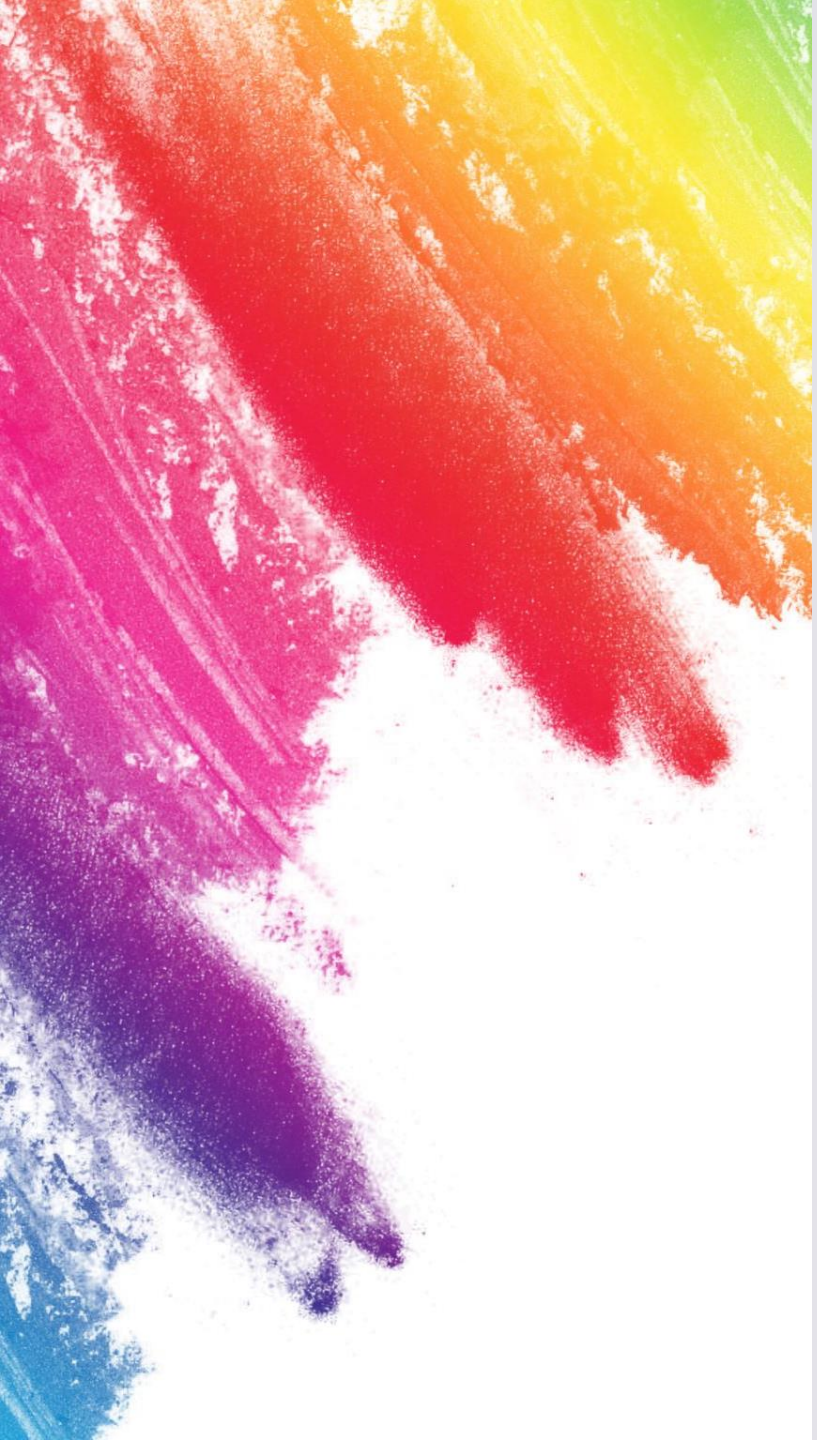
[52] Garrett issues an important and appropriate caveat: "sexual language should not be brought into the vocabulary of worship and devotion via allegorism or any other means." Garrett, 357. Likewise, Gledhill concedes that "there is some biblical justification for a moderate typological approach. But the danger of this hermeneutic is that of thinking that the relationship between the believer and God is highly emotional or even erotic." Gledhill, "The Song of Songs," 215.

[53] Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther,* New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 53.



Understanding the Song of Songs

(a little better)

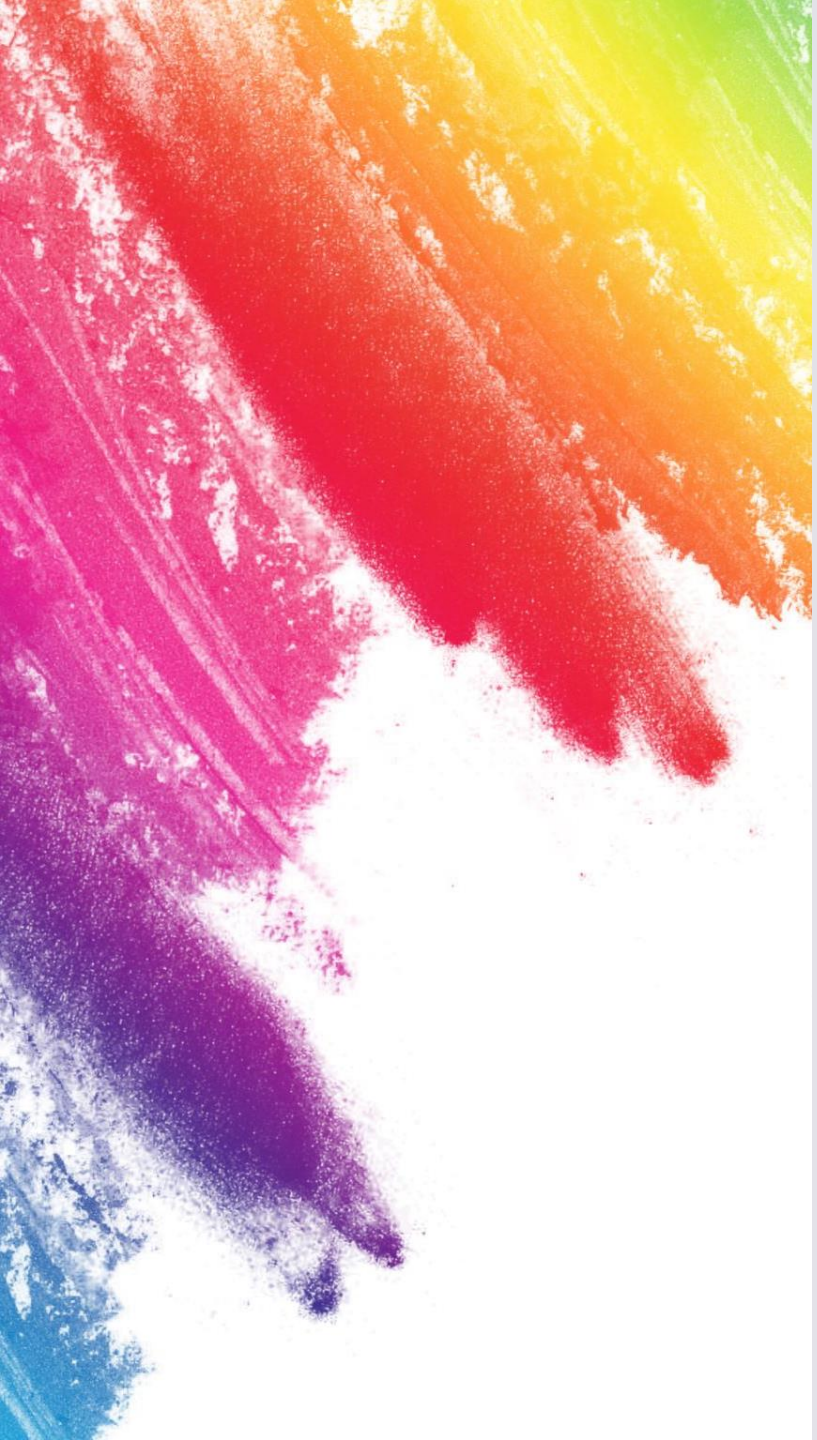


5 BIG IDEAS

1. How is Solomon qualified to write a Song extolling the beauty of monogamy?

2. Is the Song an allegory and, if not, how is it to be understood and interpreted?

3. What are the Song's implications for the marriage relationship?



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1. How is Solomon qualified to write a Song extolling the beauty of monogamy?

2. Is the Song an allegory and, if not, how is it to be understood and interpreted?

3. What are the Song's implications for the marriage relationship?

4. Who is the Song's primary speaker and why is that significant?

5. What role does the Song play in the theological storyline of Scripture?

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

ACTORS: *Him*

- *shepherd* (1:7)
- *"(my) beloved" (dōd, dōdi)*

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

ACTORS: *Her*

- *shepherdess* (1:8); *Shulamite* (6:13)
- *"(my) companion, darling, lover"*
- *"my bride"; "my sister"; "my sister-bride"; "love"*

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

ACTORS

NOTE: *These terms of endearment are exclusive to each of the lovers throughout the Song, not interchangeable.*

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

ACTORS: *Chorus*

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

DIALOGUE DISTRIBUTION

SPEAKER	WORDS	%
Chorus		
Him		
Her		
Total	1246	100%

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

DIALOGUE DISTRIBUTION

SPEAKER	WORDS	%
Chorus	148	12%
Him	379	30%
Her	719	58%
Total	1246	100%

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

DIALOGUE DISTRIBUTION

SPEAKER	WORDS	%	Speaks
Chorus	148	12%	7
Him	379	30%	9
Her	719	58%	17
Total	1246	100%	33

Who is the Song's primary speaker, and why is that significant?

"The Song of Songs is largely a woman's song, for the female lover is the first and last to speak, as well as the most frequent speaker, and sometimes her male beloved speaks only indirectly, through her speech."

(Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*, 299)

Theology of the Song: A Survey of Views

- Celebration of Marital Love & God's Love

The Song "came to be understood in Jewish exegesis as a parable depicting the Lord's love for Israel and, in Christian hermeneutics, a picture of Christ's love for the church." (Eugene Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*)

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"Theologically, the message is that what God has created is intrinsically good and beautiful and that man and woman, in their love and admiration of one another, are fulfilling the creation mandate that imparts to the two of them together the authority to have dominion over all things and to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gn. 1:28)." (Eugene Merrill)

Theology of the Song: A Survey of Views

❖Celebration of Marital Love & God's Love

The Song is a theological paradigm for a higher love—"that of the Lord for his creation and, in particular, for mankind created in his image"—that furnishes a glimpse "into God's indescribable and inexhaustible love for all beings in all places and at all times." (Eugene Merrill)

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"While maintaining that the song is about human love, human love does not exhaust the greatest Song humanity has ever encountered. Indeed, the Bible sings the beauty of the love of God." (Moore & Akin, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*)

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"Their argument was allegorical. Their intuition may have been correct even if their exegetical method left something to be desired. This writer concurs with their position and believes there is biblical support for that intuition. That support rests in the analogical nature of the relationship between biblical election and human marriage."
(Dennis Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," *Expositors Bible Commentary*)

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"The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship God has to His people is almost universal in Scripture. From the time God chose Israel to be His own in the Sinai Desert, the covenant was pictured in terms of a marriage. Idolatry was equated with adultery (Ex. 34:10–17). Yahweh is a jealous God. Monogamous marriage is the norm for depicting the covenantal relationship throughout Scripture, climaxing in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. God has chosen a bride." (Dennis Kinlaw)

Theology of the Song: A Survey of Views

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"So we come full circle, reaching similar conclusions to the early allegorical approaches to the Song. The difference, though, is obvious. We do not deny the primary and natural reading of the book, which highlights human love, and we do not arbitrarily posit the analogy between the Song's lovers and God and Israel. Rather we read it in the light of the pervasive marriage metaphor of the Old Testament." (Tremper Longman)

Theology of the Song: A Survey of Views

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"The allegorical approach erred in two ways, however. First allegorists suppressed the human love dimension of the Song, and, second, they pressed the details in arbitrary ways in order to elicit specific theological meaning from the text." (Tremper Longman)

Theology of the Song: A Survey of Views

❖Celebration of Marital Love & God's Love

But even an *analogical* approach to the Song often errs in two ways:

(1) by using the Song to emphasize issues on which the Song is silent (e.g., procreation, dominion, God's love for humanity, etc.);

(2) by putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable— God's love for his people, rather than his people's love for him.

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"the love depicted here puts the adulterous love Israel shows for Yahweh . . . to shame."
(Paul House, *Old Testament Theology*)

What role does the Song play in the theological storyline of Scripture?

- A commentary on Genesis 2:24-25
- Stephen Dempster, *Dominion & Dynasty*: "When reading this text, the reader hears Jeremiah's oracle, Ezekiel 16, and Hosea 1–3."

"[It] is the reminder of the passionate fiery love that Yahweh had for his people. . . . Such a text inspires hope for Israel, since it suggests that God will not abandon his beloved."

What role does the Song play in the theological storyline of Scripture?

- Throughout the Bible, God has chosen to use marriage as a picture of his relationship to his people.
- In depicting an ideal marriage relationship, the Song especially highlights the Shulamite's love for her beloved.
- The Song, therefore, emphasizes and exemplifies the human side of the divine-human relationship.
- The Shulamite stands in conspicuous contrast to Israel's spiritual adultery, and models the exclusive devotion that God's people should have and express to the Lord.

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

- Old Testament: Pentateuch
  - *Genesis 2*
  - *Exodus 20:2-6; 34:14-16*
  - *Leviticus 17:7; 20:4-6*
  - *Numbers 15:39*
  - *Deuteronomy 31:16*

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

- Old Testament: Historical Books
  - *Judges 2:17; 8:27, 33*
  - *I Chronicles 5:25*
  - *2 Chronicles 21:13*

- Old Testament: Poetic Books
  - *Psalm 106:39*

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

- Old Testament: Prophetic Books
  - *Hosea 1:2; 2:1-13*
  - *Isaiah 1:21, 21-23 (cf. 54:4-10)*
  - *Jeremiah 2:1-5, 20-24; 3:1-9*
  - *Ezekiel 16; 23*

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

Ezekiel 23:14-18

But she increased her harlotry; she looked at men portrayed on the wall, images of Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion, girded with belts around their waists, flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like captains, in the manner of the Babylonians of Chaldea, the land of their nativity. As soon as her eyes saw them, she lusted for them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. . . .

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

Song 5:8, 9, 16

"I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am lovesick!"

"*What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?*"

"He is altogether lovely. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem."

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

- New Testament: Gospels
  - *Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38*
- New Testament: Epistles
  - *2 Corinthians 11:2*
  - *Ephesians 5:22-33*
  - *James 4:4-5*

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

James 4:4-5

Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

- New Testament: Gospels
  - *Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38*
- New Testament: Epistles
  - *2 Corinthians 11:2*
  - *Ephesians 5:22-33*
  - *James 4:4-5*
- New Testament: Revelation
  - *Revelation 17-18; 19; 21*

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

Revelation 19:7-8

Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright *and* clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

So, from a New Testament perspective, the love depicted in the Song is not only a taste of what was given in creation, but a sign of what will be consummated in the new creation—a sign of the gospel. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church' (Eph. 5:31–32). (Barry Webb, *Five Festal Garments*)

CONCLUSION

"To love God truly is not simply to keep his commandments, but to thirst for him as a deer thirsts for flowing streams (Ps. 42:1), and to long for him as a bride longs for her groom. For that is how we ourselves are loved by God . . . . When what should be the fruits and accompaniments of love are mistaken for love itself, the heart sooner or later goes out of religion, however committed to orthodoxy and good works it may be, and it becomes a burden rather than a joy. The Song of Songs is there to stop love going out of our relationships, with God and with one another."
(Barry Webb, *Five Festal Garments*)