

The Song of Songs Celebrates God's Kind of Love¹

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Introduction

Romance novels are popular, especially among women. Romance fiction sells more than inspirational, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, or classic literary fiction. It had the largest share of the United States consumer market in 2012. What are the two basic elements in every romance novel, according to the Romance Writers of America? “A central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. . . . In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love.” More than ninety percent of the market is comprised of women.²

The Bible contains numerous romances, but the Song of Songs according to Solomon is romance that is completely nonfiction. The Song of Songs has passion, competition, conflict, and resolution. Even though the Song of Songs is “according to Solomon,” much of it is written from the feminine point of view. The first and last voices are a woman's. Almost two-thirds of the verses (62 percent) are quotations of the Shulammitte (65 verses) or the daughters of Jerusalem (65 verses), while about one-third (38 percent) are quotations from Solomon (33 verses) or the shepherd (11.5 verses).³ Moreover, more than five of the eleven verses of the shepherd's words are being quoted by the Shulammitte (2:10–14; 5:2b). Richard S. Hess agrees: “The female voice dominates this poem to a greater extent than any other book or text of comparable length in the Bible.”⁴ Renita J. Weems also notes, “Nowhere else in scripture do the thoughts, imaginations, yearnings, and words of a woman predominate in a book as in the Song of Songs.”⁵ What is this woman like? A lover of God's creation, she is sensual and passionate. Not shy, she takes initiative, seeking the shepherd, but is also responsive to him. She wants intimacy and is intimate within a basis of commitment. Nevertheless, being self-aware, she is cognizant of the danger of passions and love as a “mighty flame” (8:6). She is literary, speaking with many analogies from nature. We learn that, for her, love is more important than wealth.

In a time of polygamy, the Song reaffirmed monogamy. It develops Genesis 2:23–24, what it means for a man and a woman to be “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” or “one flesh.”⁶ It describes God's type of love—one that is fiercely jealous and affirmative. It portrays a love that cannot be stolen by idols. The love that is triumphant is a love of equals.

The Song of Songs is a wistful tract by Solomon supporting the fundamental appeal of monogamy over polygamy: Solomon, who could woo and win princesses from around the world, loses out to a simple shepherd in wooing a country vineyard keeper because the shepherd can love her truly.⁷

Interpreters differ over how to understand the Song. Does it have three or two⁸ primary characters, or is it simply an anthology (a collection of poems on human love)?⁹ Should it be understood literally or allegorically?¹⁰ I have concluded that

to interpret the Song of Songs as a drama and lyrical ballad¹¹ with three primary characters (the Shulammitte, Solomon, the shepherd, and, secondarily, as well, the daughters of Jerusalem) best fits all the data.¹² Further, who is speaking is identified by the use of imagery. Imagery by or about Solomon tends to be more urban, financial, militaristic, and related to travel. Also, the ancient Masorite scribes (and probably those earlier) used Hebrew letters to indicate paragraph markings in the Hebrew Bible. These may even have been in the earliest original biblical scrolls.¹³ In the Song of Songs, the Hebrew letter *samek* (or the *sethumai*) tends to indicate a change of perspective or locale, while the Hebrew letter *pē* (*pethuma*) indicates the beginning of the final conclusion at 8:11. In addition, in Hebrew, some pronouns are either masculine or feminine and help readers in discovering if an individual man or a woman is addressed. The two men who court the heroine are presented in the first eight verses of chapter one.

The Narrative of the Song Unfolds

The Song begins with the Shulammitte's¹⁴ words of praise about Solomon:

Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth because
more excellent (is) your love than wine.

Your ointments (have) an excellent fragrance,
oil poured out (is) your name,
on account of this, young women love you.
Draw me. We rush after you.

The king brought me (into his) chambers. (1:2–4)¹⁵

The Shulammitte is a vineyard keeper, dark from the sun. She has not been concerned about her appearance (1:6). She has been given authority and responsibility by her family as the watcher of the vineyard (1:6). She takes initiative throughout, seeking the shepherd. Phyllis Tribble agrees: “She works, keeping vineyards and pasturing flocks.” She is “independent, fully the equal of the man.” Often “she initiates their meetings” and is “bold and open.” “The man of Genesis 2 once left his father and mother to cleave to his woman (v. 24); now the woman of the Song bids her man make haste, and in this bidding all others are left behind.”¹⁶ She is the only daughter of a family with more than one brother. She is wooed by two men, one of whom is Solomon himself.

King Solomon is most impressive. His appeal is materialistic. He has power, is encased in expensive fragrances, and is sensual. His dramatic entrance is akin to the entrance of a movie star or idol. The Shulammitte describes it:

Who is this ascending from the wilderness like
columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and
frankincense, with all scent-powders of traders?

Behold, (it is) Solomon's sedan chair,

Sixty mighty men round about it, mighty warriors of
 Israel,
 all seizing a sword, being instructed in battle;
 each man (seizing) his sword upon his thigh from
 terror by night.
 King Solomon made for himself a palanquin from the
 wood of Lebanon.¹⁷
 He made his pillars of silver, his back of gold, his seat
 of purple cloth,
 its center inlaid with love from the daughters of
 Jerusalem.
 Go forth, and go see, daughters of Zion, upon King
 Solomon,
 upon (his) crown, crowned by his mother,
 in the day of his wedding ceremonies (engagements),
 in (the) day of the joy of his heart. (Song 3:6–11)

From afar, he comes, the dirt in the desert is raising clouds (or
 smoke from incense burned before the procession), like a per-
 former preceded by mist from a fog machine. He is surrounded
 by sixty warriors, each grasping a sword. Solomon sits regally on
 a purple cushion in their midst with the sedan chair reflecting its
 silver and gold. His crown has been given to him by his own queen
 mother, Bathsheba. Solomon has power, wealth, status, and glitter.

The competing suitor, the shepherd, a neighbor and friend,
 with his companions, feeds a flock of sheep in the countryside,
 possibly even in the land owned by the king.¹⁸ The Shulammite
 asks him:

Tell me, whom my soul loves, where do you feed your
 flock, where do you cause them to lie down at
 noon?
 Why should I be one veiling herself near flocks of
 your companions? (Song 1:7)

The Shulammite calls the shepherd the one “whom my soul
 loves” (1:7). She seeks him out. The shepherd invites her to bring
 her flocks to be near them:

If you continue to know not, you fairest among women,
 go out by footprints of the flocks and feed your kids,
 near (my) companions’ tents. (Song 1:8)

Thus, both the Shulammite and the shepherd work as laborers.
 Even though the shepherd addresses her as “fairest among wom-
 en” (1:8), yet he eagerly responds to her request and assumes they
 can work together as collaborators.¹⁹ They are companions (5:2).
 They have a relationship of equality and mutuality.²⁰

While the shepherd responds in action, Solomon seeks to
 attract the Shulammite by his extended complimentary speeches,
 which mainly describe the Shulammite’s physical appearance and
 the expensive jewelry she will have:

To my mare, in chariots of Pharaoh,
 I have compared you, my beloved companion.
 Your cheeks are pleasing with strings of jewels,
 Your neck with a string of beads.
 Plaits of gold—we will make for you,
 With ear-pendants of silver. (Song 1:9–11)²¹

We return to the Shulammite’s perspective as she describes her
 presence now at the king’s mansion. She depicts her passionate
 feelings with the expensive fragrance of myrrh:

While the king (sat) at his round table,
 nard gave fragrance.
 A little bag of myrrh, my beloved (is) to me,
 between (my) breasts, it lodges;
 a cluster of the henna blossom,
 my beloved (is) to me, in vineyards of En-gedi. (Song
 1:12–14)

Solomon again appeals to the Shulammite’s beauty and points
 out his own luxurious and expensive surroundings:

Behold, you (are) beautiful,
 My beloved companion, behold you (are) beautiful,
 your eyes (are) doves.
 Behold you (are) beautiful,
 My beloved, as well as pleasant as our canopy-bed is
 luxurious.
 The beams of our houses (are) cedars,
 Our paneling (are) cypresses. (Song 1:15–17)

In contrast, the Shulammite identifies herself with the beauty and
 scent of nature: “I (am) a flower of the Sharon seacoast, a lily
 of the plains” (2:1). Meanwhile, Solomon, being in his younger
 years, when he had only sixty wives and eighty concubines (6:8),
 begins to compare the Shulammite to the wives and concubines
 he already has. (Later he will have seven hundred wives and three
 hundred concubines [1 Kings 11:3]!) The Shulammite, according
 to Solomon, is “as a lily between thorn-bushes, . . . among the
 daughters” (2:2). In his eyes, his other women are “thorn-bushes”
 in comparison to her.

The Shulammite then continues to describe her presence at
 the king’s mansion:

As an apple-tree among the trees of the forest,
 so my beloved (is) among the sons.
 Under its shade, I delighted greatly,
 and I sat and it bore fruit sweet to my mouth.
 He led me to the banqueting-house
 And his banner over me (is) love.
 Revive me with raisin cakes,
 Refresh me with apples because I myself fall sick
 (with) love.
 Let his left hand descend to my head,
 His right embrace me. (Song 2:3–6)²²

As a result, the Shulammite is caught up with physical desire for
 Solomon. She warns the daughters of Jerusalem, the wives and
 concubines of Solomon (6:8–9), about the power of seductive
 passion, what scientists have analyzed as dopamine.²³

I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem,
 by female gazelles or by deer of the field,
 (do not) cause to awake
 and utterly evoke love,
 until it please you. (Song 2:7)

The scene now jumps back to the shepherd.²⁴ The shepherd does not have a dramatic entrance signifying power and wealth. Rather, his appeal is his intimacy. He is a friend and companion with similar interests who supports her career as vineyard keeper and shepherd. He is handsome, strong, healthy, and his speech “most sweet” (5:16).

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag,
Behold, there, standing behind our walls,
Looking through the windows,
Gazing through the lattices. (Song 2:9)

His speech to the Shulammitte is quoted by her:

My beloved replied and said to me:
“Rise up, come, my beloved companion, my fair one,
and come away,
Because, behold, the winter is passed on,
the rain shower moved away; it is gone.
The blossoms appeared on the earth,
(the) season of song has arrived,
the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree put forth her early fig,
and the blossoming vines give fragrance.
Arise, my beloved companion, my fair one, and walk.
(Song 2:10–14)²⁵

He encourages her to join him as they together explore what God has done in the fields out in nature. He also knows and tells her that she is “fair” and “beautiful” and his “beloved companion” (2:13–14).

The Shulammitte then reflects on the shepherd, emphasizing the key characteristic about him that is unique and contrasts with Solomon: “My beloved belongs to me and I belong to him” (2:16a). If the Shulammitte is “a lily among the plains,” the shepherd then is “the one shepherding among the lilies” (2:16b). The Shulammitte then reflects further about the shepherd, describing him “as my gazelle or a stag” (2:17), a frequent image used by the Shulammitte (e.g., 3:5).²⁶

“The one my soul loves” is a term used by the Shulammitte only for the shepherd. In the midst of a dream at night, the Shulammitte seeks him, but does not find him at first (3:1–4). His voice has been elusive in this song, in contrast to Solomon’s. The shepherd has only a few direct quotations (1:8; 4:12–15; 5:1), but also some indirect quotations (2:10–14; 5:2). As Solomon has launched a major onslaught to win the Shulammitte, apparently she has felt the shepherd’s influence waning, so, in a dream she seeks and eventually finds him and brings him home:

On my bed by night (night-dream) I sought (the) one
my soul loves,
I sought him and found him not.
I will rise now and I will go about in the city,
In the streets and in the plazas,
I will seek the one my soul loves.
I sought him and I did not find him.
The watch, going about in the city, found me:
“Did you see (the one) my soul loves?”

Soon after I passed by them,
I found (the one) my soul loves.
I grasped him and did not let go
Until I brought him to the house of my mother
and chamber of my conception. (Song 3:1–4)

She repeats the earlier warning not to awaken love too early (3:5).

Solomon now makes his grand entrance with his sixty warriors (3:6–11), followed by another, even more extensive affirmation of the Shulammitte’s physical beauty (4:1–11). She has dovelike eyes, long, dark hair, all her teeth, and regal posture.²⁷ He calls her his “beloved companion” and “bride” (4:7, 9), but does not embark with her on a mutual activity, as does the shepherd. Instead, he enchants her with the travels and views they will see (4:8).

The Hebrew text has the letter *samek* at the end of 4:11, which may indicate a change in perspective. Probably, it is now the shepherd who intercedes, pointing out that the Shulammitte has not yet fallen for Solomon: “a garden locked is my sister, bride, a spring locked, a spring sealed up” (4:12).²⁸ As a result, the Shulammitte invites him to herself, “my garden,” to eat “his harvest of fruit” (4:16), and he responds, “I come to my garden, my sister bride” (5:1).²⁹

Then the Shulammitte has another dream as she falls asleep (5:2).³⁰ She hears her beloved knocking: “Open to me, my sister, my female companion, my perfect dove” (5:2a). The shepherd’s hair is enveloped with the fragrance of the night dew, he has taken off his shoes, he has extended his hand through an opening of her house to call her attention and grasped myrrh in his hand (5:2–5). But, when the Shulammitte opens the door, the shepherd has disappeared. Since he is “the one my soul loves,” her soul has gone forth with him. This time, when she searches for him, the city watch beat her and wound her (5:6–7). Her passionate love has turned into a nightmare. When the Shulammitte asks the daughters to help her find her beloved, they respond with a question:

What is your beloved more than (another) beloved,
Fairest among women;
What is your beloved more than (another) beloved,
thus you adjure us? (Song 5:9)

She describes the shepherd as “wealthy” in his looks and sweet in his speech, altogether precious:

My beloved (is) dazzling and ruddy,
More outstanding than a myriad:
His head (is) pure gold,
His locks a swaying palm branch, black as a raven,
His eyes as doves upon a ravine from the sea,
Bathed with milk, dwelling upon a border.
His cheek as a bed of balsam, towers of herbal spices;
His lips (are) lilies dripping with flowing myrrh.
His hands (are) rods of gold filled with precious stone,
His body (is) polished ivory covered (with) sapphires,
His legs (are) standing alabaster set upon golden
pedestals,
His appearance as Lebanon, distinguishing as cedars.
His mouth (is) sweet,
His (is) all precious.

This (is) my beloved and this (is) my friend,
Daughters of Jerusalem. (Song 5:10–16)

Solomon's main appeal has been the attraction of his powerful wealth, but the Shulammitte takes Solomon's appeal and attributes it metaphorically to the shepherd. In her eyes, his face (etc.) really is his fortune! The daughters of Jerusalem agree to look for the shepherd, together with the Shulammitte:

Where has your beloved gone,
Fairest among women;
Where has your beloved turned away,
And we will search for him with you? (Song 6:1)

He has returned to his gardens to feed his flock and to gather lilies (6:2). Who is the Shulammitte's true love? "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine, the one feeding his flock among the lilies" (6:3).³¹

Solomon must be sensing that he is losing the Shulammitte. He responds with another extended description of the Shulammitte (6:4–9).³² He calls her unique among the other sixty queens and eighty concubines and young women without number, all of whom praise her (6:8–9).³³ However, the Shulammitte descends to her own valley, to her own noble people (6:11). The daughters try to call her back ("Return, return, Shulammitte, return, return, and we will look on you" [7:1a MT; 6:13 LXX]). Then Solomon, again, for the final time, responds with an extended description of the Shulammitte. He calls her noble and describes her physical attributes: "a king is captured," in her locks of hair (7:6 MT [7:5 LXX]; 2–10 MT [1–9 LXX]).³⁴

But, again, the Shulammitte responds to the shepherd. "I myself am my beloved's and his desire is upon me" (7:11 MT [7:10 LXX]).³⁵ As before, she seeks the shepherd in the garden and with him explores the spring, the buds of the vine (6:11; 7:12–13 MT [7:11–12 LXX]). She wants to give her love to him (7:13 [7:12 LXX]–8:3). Once more, the Shulammitte warns the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love until they are ready (8:4).³⁶ Next, the daughters see the Shulammitte coming from the pasture, leaning upon her beloved, and she explains to the shepherd that she awakened him "under the apple tree" (8:5). Nature was their matchmaker.

The Shulammitte explains the essence of true love:

Set me as a signet ring upon your heart,
As a signet ring upon your arm,
Because strong (fortified) as death is love,
Harsh as *Sheol* is jealousy,
Her flashes are flashes of fire,
A mighty flame,
Many waters cannot overcome love,
Rivers cannot drown it.
If a man would give all affluence of his palace for love,
Derision will despise him. (Song 8:6–7)

Love is jealous and powerful. The Song builds up to the Shulammitte's decision and exclusive claim that only the shepherd can offer—full, sole commitment. A signet ring was worn on the right hand, made often of a precious stone. On the stone was engraved the seal: the name or insignia of an important person. This seal marked ownership and legal assent to a contract. The ring normally could not be torn off (Jer 22:24–27). It was permanent. It was a sign of

a genuine promise. One did not change one's ring every day, as if it were a decoration. For example, when Tamar asked Judah for a pledge that he would give her a baby goat, he gave her his signet ring because he was serious about his promise, and the ring would identify him without a doubt (Gen 38:17–26). Therefore, one has to treasure and value this ring. God tells Zerubbabel that God was going to make him like a signet ring because he had chosen Zerubbabel to lead Israel (Hag 2:23). Zerubbabel was valuable and precious to God. So, in analogy, the Shulammitte wanted to be treasured or valuable. She was unique, created in God's image. She wanted her husband to treat her as special.

The Shulammitte wanted to become the sign of the shepherd's own identity. He no longer belonged to himself—he belonged to her. She now belonged to him. If normally that ring was worn on one's right finger, she, instead, wanted him to press that ring—herself—upon the soft clay or wax of his own heart, his inmost self (Job 38:14). His love for her had to be genuine. She also wanted him to place that ring upon his arm. The shepherd's arm was what he used to gather the lambs and carry them close to his chest (Isa 40:11). With these same hands and arms he could embrace her: "O that his left hand were under my head and his right would embrace me!" (Song 8:3). On the arm, the seal would be definitely public, an outward sign. The shepherd's beloved had to become an inward and outward sign of his own identity. The shepherd and the vineyard keeper had two independent identities that were becoming intertwined. They will be one flesh.

What could the shepherd do that Solomon never could? He could be monogamous—a "one woman" man (1 Tim 3:2, my translation). He could focus only on his wife, his friend, his "sister." As the Shulammitte said: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song 6:3; also 2:16). There are no sixty wives who would share his love (not to mention eighty concubines!).

The signet ring was a symbol of a contract. The Shulammitte wanted a permanent relationship. Glitter, status, power, and money are not permanent. You never can be sure these attributes will remain. But love is eternal. How permanent? "Strong (or fierce or fortified) as death is love, hard (or heavy or harsh) as *Sheol* (or hell) is jealousy" (8:6). What kind of love does this biblical couple want from each other? The Hebrew uses an intensive verb (*ʾadad*; "to be strong, fortified" [8:6]) and a noun (*Sheol*, referencing something ultimate) to describe it: a love that is as permanent, as powerful, and able to lock up a beloved's heart—and as fortified to keep that one faithful—as death: a fierce love so complete that it wreaks total devastation on all other claims. This love cannot be satisfied with anything except complete faithfulness. That is the point of the second image—"As heavy or harsh or hard as the grave is its jealousy."

In another of Solomon's inspired books, Proverbs, he uses *Sheol*, or the grave or hell, as a symbol of something completely insatiable. Proverbs 27:20 tells us *Sheol*—the realm of death—is never satisfied. Proverbs 30:15b–16 adds that three things are never satisfied; four never say "enough": (1) *Sheol*, or hell or death, (2) the barren womb, (3) the desert for water, and (4) the fire that consumes. Each never says "enough!" This is the kind of love God has. God is described throughout the Old Testament

as a jealous God. The second commandment in Exodus 20:4–5 states: “You shall not make for yourself an idol. . . . You shall not bow down and worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.” Those who break this commandment are punished down through the generations, but those who keep it are rewarded with God’s “steadfast love,” promised by God “to those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod 20:6). Human love and the covenant of marriage are designed by God and modeled on such “steadfast love.” We are made to be jealous people who guard our spouse’s affection exclusively and who reward our beloved’s faithful love with our own steadfast love. By this we mirror the nature of the God who made us. Our love should be like the consuming fire we hear about both in the Song of Songs 8:6 and in Proverbs 30:16—a cauterizing, purifying, refining fire that cannot be put out. This is a love that is like a natural phenomenon. It cannot be bought. This is a love that can only be bestowed.

What Lessons Can We Draw from the Song of Songs?³⁷

1. Solomon and the shepherd competed for the Shulammitte. But, she chose by love, common interest, friendship, and exclusiveness. Weems concludes that “the Song of Songs advocates balance in female and male relationships, urging mutuality not domination, interdependence not enmity, sexual fulfillment not mere procreation, uninhibited love not bigoted emotions.”³⁸ Lloyd Carr agrees: “There is nothing here of the aggressive male and the reluctant or victimized female.”³⁹ Tremper Longman adds, “Love is mutual, exclusive, total and beautiful.” The couple have an “egalitarian” relationship that contrasts with Genesis 3:16.⁴⁰ When we marry, we forsake all others for an exclusive human love. This covenant is permanent—our hearts are pressed with each other’s brand as our signet seal.

2. Life is full of ups and downs. The traditional vow of marriage promises for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. So, we need to keep our eyes on the common values that bring us together, to keep us supported through life, no matter what happens.

3. As we build our love on companionship, friendship, mutual interests, and monogamous love, we are building on the blueprint of God’s love so that our marriage will reflect God’s perfect love and God will bless us. When we promise faithful love to one another until death parts us, that promise reflects a deeper love that is eternal. Faithful human love honors God’s eternal love.

4. Just as the Shulammitte maiden longed to be treasured and cherished, we need to treasure and cherish one another and focus on one another in a godly marriage. We are each other’s. God’s gift to each couple is the other.

5. We need to love each other with a permanency that boldly contrasts with the serial, throwaway relationships and marriages we see out in the world. Jewish and Christian marriages are marriages ordained by the eternal, jealous, exclusive God who loves with a steadfast love. Therefore, we need to honor and encourage a reflection of that steadfast love in one another so we will not ever stir up that ferocious jealousy in each other. One of William Congreve’s most quoted statements is, “Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman

scorned.”⁴¹ He was on solid biblical ground, and his observation applies to both partners. We are made to protect our love.

In conclusion, exclusive marriage is one of God’s greatest blessings. It is a true source of joy and a means of grace. It is filled with rewards for those who honor it. It comes with a blessing and a spiritual lesson. It mirrors the nature of the God who created us and will not only draw us together with each other, but also together with God.

The Shulammitte summarizes to the daughters of Jerusalem what Solomon humbly left as a vestige of courting a woman who did not become his sixty-first queen:

Solomon had a vineyard at Baalhamon. He gave the vineyard to keepers, each will turn in, when bearing fruit, thousands in silver. My vineyard, which (is) mine, (is) for myself. May the thousands (be) to you, Solomon, and two hundred (silver coins) for the keepers of his fruit. (Song 8:11–12)⁴²

The Shulammitte has decided not to be enticed by Solomon’s great wealth. He can keep his thousands of silver pieces. Solomon may own the mountains of spice, but her beloved who runs around in them is more desirable. The Song of Songs ends with the Shulammitte calling out to her beloved shepherd to “hasten” and “be like a gazelle or a stag, a hart upon the mountains of fragrance” (8:14).

Women and men are interested in love, whether they read romance novels or not. Since God is love (although love is *not* god [1 John 4:8]), God is the best one to teach us about genuine love. Genuine love is passionately monogamous, mutual, and founded upon companionship. In this sacred lyric ballad, God’s beautiful created world is love’s matchmaker. No other wealth is needed. No other show is required. Solomon’s advice in Proverbs has been reiterated in his Song of Songs: “Rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love” (Prov 5:18b–19). In the Song, the wife rejoices in the husband of her youth, a handsome, graceful, and athletic “gazelle.” His companionship satisfies her at all times. She is intoxicated by his love.

Notes

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2. Romance Writers of America, The Romance Genre, “Romance Industry Statistics,” <https://rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=580&578>, accessed 3 March 2014; Palash Ghash, “Damsels in Distress: Why Do So Many Contemporary Women Read Old-Fashioned Romance Novels?,” *International Business Times*, 17 Dec. 2013, <https://ibtimes.com/damsels-distress-why-do-so-many-contemporary-women-read-old-fashioned-romance-novels-1512548>, accessed 3 March 2014; Got Questions Ministries, <https://gotquestions.org/Printer/Christian-romance-novels-PF.html>, accessed 3 March 2014.

3. See chart of speakers on page 13.

4. Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 21.

5. Renita J. Weems, "Song of Songs," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 156.

6. See also Edward M. Curtis, *Song of Songs*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 46; Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1978).

7. C. Haskell Bullock agrees: The Song is "a celebration of love between man and woman, but more than that, the elevation of a love so genuine that it cannot be purchased with royal enticements. It is, like divine love, given freely and meritoriously" (*An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books: The Wisdom and Songs of Israel* [Chicago, IL: Moody, 1979], 237). Curtis explains it as Solomon's description of an ideal relationship between a man and a woman "in strong contrast to his own failures in marriage." He also concludes that "the mystery and wonder of the relationship" between a man and a woman is profound: "one of the things too wonderful to understand is 'the way of the man with a maiden'" (Prov 30:18–19) (Curtis, *Song*, 38, 44). Richard S. Hess explains that "this song offers the hope that couples today may find something of [the garden of Eden] again and may see in their love that which is beautiful and good, from the good God" (*Song*, 11).

8. Watchman Nee, *Song of Songs* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1965); Hess considers the Song love poetry between two unnamed characters (*Song*, 347); Weems, "Song," 156–58; G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: An Introduction and Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 34.

9. Weems, "Song," 156; Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 9, 19, 55; Duane Garrett, *Word Biblical Commentary 23B, Song of Songs* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 26.

10. Allegorically, the king represents the Lord, and the Shulammitte represents Israel or the church. For examples, see Richard A. Norris Jr., *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

11. A lyrical ballad "moves from scene to scene without connecting links" (Bullock, *Introduction*, 235).

12. See also Bullock, *Introduction*, 242. F. Godet writes that 8:7 conclusively shows that Solomon is rejected over against the shepherd by the young maiden (ed. W. C. Kaiser, *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972], 152); Myron C. Kauk, "Song of Solomon: A Defense of the Three Character Interpretation," paper presented to the Midwest Region of the Evangelical Theological Society, 19–20 March 2010.

13. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 48–49, 198, 200; William R. Scott, *A Simplified Guide to BHS*, 4th ed. (N. Richard Hills, TX: BIBAL, 2007), 1.

14. Shulam (Solem or Shunem) is a village in the Plain of Esdraelon in northern Israel. See Song 6:13; 1 Sam 28:4; 2 Kgs 4:8; *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 4:341.

15. She refers to Solomon's curtains (1:5) and expensive ointments (1:3) and the many women who love him (1:3). He is called "king." These literal translations of the Masoretic Hebrew text of the Song of Songs are by the author, guided by *The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text: A New Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955) and John Joseph Owens, *Analytical Key to the Old Testament*, 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991). The other Bible quotations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.

16. Tribble, *Rhetoric*, 152, 161.

17. Solomon had the temple and his home built from wood from Lebanon (1 Kgs 5:6–7:2). Solomon was interested in fauna and flora

(Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, Concordia Commentary [Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 2003], 113).

18. Eccl 2:4–5 notes the many vineyards and flocks Solomon purchased.

19. 1:8 ends with the letter *samek*, indicating a change of voice.

20. See also Tribble, *Rhetoric*, 145.

21. Images used by Solomon include references to "chariots" (1:9) and silver and gold. Solomon introduced horses from Egypt to Israel (1 Kgs 10:28).

22. Imagery related to Solomon here includes "banqueting house" and banner.

23. Aída Besançon Spencer, William David Spencer, Steven R. Tracy, Celestia G. Tracy, *Marriage at the Crossroads: Couples in Conversation about Discipleship, Gender Roles, Decision Making, and Intimacy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 173–74.

24. The letter *samek* at the end of 2:7 notes a change in scene.

25. A *samek* at the end of 2:14 indicates a change of person.

26. A *samek* at the end of 2:17 indicates a change of perspective or locale.

27. Solomon uses military imagery, tower of David, shields, warriors (4:4), and fragrances (4:6, 10–11, 14).

28. That voice continues in 4:12–15.

29. Who is addressed in 5:1b? "Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk, loved ones" could be the voice of the shepherd or the observing daughters. Both Codex Sinaiticus and Jerome's Old Latin indicate that the sentence refers to the "groom to the neighbors" (Jay Curry Treat, "Lost Keys: Text and Interpretation in Old Greek Song of Songs and Its Earliest Manuscript Witnesses," PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 487.

30. A *samek* at the end of 5:1 indicates a change of person.

31. A *samek* at the end of 6:3 indicates a change of person and perspective.

32. He uses imagery of "Jerusalem" and military images such as "a troop with banners" (6:4, 10).

33. A *samek* closes 6:9. Possibly 6:10 is the voice of the daughters reiterating Solomon's perspective.

34. He again uses military imagery ("thighs like fortifications" [7:2], tower, urban [7:2, 4–6]).

35. The *samek* at the end of 7:11 indicates that thereafter the Shulammitte addresses the shepherd.

36. A *samek* at the end of 7:4 indicates a change of person.

37. Thanks to my husband, William David Spencer, for his assistance in drawing out these applications.

38. Weems, "Song," 160.

39. Carr, *Song*, 54.

40. Longman, *Song*, 62, 66.

41. William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*, 3.8.

42. The Hebrew letter *pē* at the end of 8:10 indicates the conclusion will follow.

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Each asterisk represents the Hebrew letter *samek*, indicating a change of person, perspective, or locale. The double asterisk represents the Hebrew letter *pē*, indicating that the conclusion will follow.

1:1 Title

Scene 1: Introduction

All key characters are introduced in the first seven verses. Solomon is presented as enticing, popular, and a challenge to the shepherd (1:2–4). The relationship of honesty between the Shulammitte and the daughters is shown. The character of the Shulammitte is shown and information on her is given (1:5–6). In contrast, the shepherd is hard to find, spends time around flocks. The shepherd invites the Shulammitte to join him (1:7–8).⁴³

1:2–4 Shulammitte and daughters of Jerusalem about Solomon *

1:5–6 Shulammitte to daughters

- 1:7 Shulammitte to shepherd
1:8 Shepherd (daughters) to Shulammitte *

Scene 2: Solomon and the Shulammitte

Solomon focuses on the Shulammitte (1:9–11). His appeal comes through. The Shulammitte is at Solomon's house (1:12–14). Solomon focuses on the Shulammitte (1:15–17), his first extended appeal (twenty-one Hebrew words). They converse (2:1–2); the Shulammitte responds to Solomon (2:3–6). The Shulammitte gives a refrain to the daughters (2:7).

- 1:9–11 Solomon to Shulammitte
1:12–14 Shulammitte at Solomon's *
1:15–17 Solomon to Shulammitte
2:1 Shulammitte to Solomon
2:2 Solomon to Shulammitte
2:3–6 Shulammitte about Solomon
2:7 Shulammitte to daughters *

Scene 3: The Shulammitte and the Shepherd

The Shulammitte describes the shepherd (2:8–9). She recalls the shepherd's words and his appeal (2:10–14). She responds to the shepherd (2:15–17) and she seeks the shepherd by night, in a dream (3:1–4). The Shulammitte gives a refrain to the daughters (3:5).

- 2:8–9 Shulammitte about shepherd *
2:10–14 Shepherd to Shulammitte, cited by the Shulammitte (2:13 *)
2:15–17 Shulammitte to shepherd * (2:16 Shulammitte to daughters?)
3:1–4 Shulammitte about shepherd
3:5 Shulammitte to daughters *

Scene 4: The Shulammitte and Solomon

The Shulammitte describes Solomon's impressive approach (3:6–11). He further focuses on the Shulammitte, developing 1:15–17 (4:1–11, 126 Hebrew words). The shepherd defends the Shulammitte and claims her for himself (4:12–15). The Shulammitte responds to the shepherd (4:16). The shepherd responds to the Shulammitte (5:1).

- 3:6–11 Shulammitte about Solomon * (3:8 *)
4:1–11 Solomon to Shulammitte * (4:7 *)
4:12–15 Shepherd (Solomon) to Shulammitte
4:16 Shulammitte to shepherd/Solomon/herself⁴⁴
5:1 Shepherd (Solomon) to Shulammitte *

Scene 5: The Shulammitte and the shepherd

The Shulammitte seeks the shepherd by night, in a dream, where he visits, but she is thwarted (5:2–7). She asks help from the daughters (5:8). The daughters ask about the appeal of the shepherd (5:9). She describes the shepherd's appeal (5:10–16). The daughters offer to help the Shulammitte (6:1). The Shulammitte describes why the shepherd is special (6:2–3).

- 5:2–7 Shulammitte about shepherd (shepherd to Shulammitte, 5:2)
5:8 Shulammitte to daughters
5:9 Daughters to Shulammitte⁴⁵
5:10–16 Shulammitte about shepherd
6:1 Daughters to Shulammitte
6:2–3 Shulammitte about shepherd *

Scene 6: Solomon and the Shulammitte

This is Solomon's third attempt to win over the Shulammitte by focusing on her physical attributes (6:4–9, fifty-eight Hebrew words; see 1:15–17; 4:1–11). The daughters join in praise of the Shulammitte (6:10). The Shulammitte begins to leave Solomon to return to her people (6:11–12). The daughters call her back (7:1 MT; 6:13).

- 6:4–9 Solomon to Shulammitte *
6:10 Daughters about Shulammitte *

- 6:11–12 Shulammitte to daughters
7:1 (6:13 LXX) Daughters to Shulammitte

Scene 7: Solomon and the Shulammitte

This is Solomon's fourth attempt to win over the Shulammitte by focusing on her physical attributes (7:2–10 MT; 7:1–9, 119 Hebrew words). The Shulammitte summarizes to the daughters, Solomon, and the shepherd why she prefers the shepherd (7:11).

- 7:2–10 MT (7:1–9 LXX) Solomon about Shulammitte
7:11 MT (7:10 LXX) Shulammitte to daughters *

Scene 8: The Shulammitte and the Shepherd

The Shulammitte invites the shepherd to join her (7:12–8:3). The Shulammitte gives a refrain to the daughters to watch out for the power of love (8:4).

- 7:12–8:3 (7:11 MT–8:3)⁴⁶ Shulammitte to shepherd
8:4 Shulammitte to daughters *

Scene 9: The Shulammitte and the Shepherd

The daughters respond to the joining of the Shulammitte and the shepherd (8:5a); the shepherd responds to the Shulammitte (8:5b). The climax occurs when the Shulammitte calls for the formalizing of their love (8:6–7).

- 8:5a Daughters about Shulammitte
8:5b Shulammitte about shepherd
8:6–7 Shulammitte to shepherd *

Scene 10: The Shulammitte and the Daughters

In the denouement, the daughters talk about the possibility of love of another young woman (8:8–9). The Shulammitte explains how she obtained peace (8:10).

- 8:8–9 Daughters about sister⁴⁷
8:10 Shulammitte to daughters about shepherd **

Scene 11: Conclusion

The Shulammitte closes her relationship with Solomon (8:11–12), and she opens her relationship and future with the shepherd (8:13–14).

- 8:11 Shulammitte about Solomon
8:12 Shulammitte to Solomon
8:13–14 Shulammitte to shepherd

Notes continued

43. Independently, my division of scenes is very similar to that of Bullock, *Introduction*, 242–54.

44. Jerome sees 4:16 as “the bride to herself” (Treat, “Lost Keys,” 487).

45. Codex Sinaiticus and Jerome's Old Latin. See 5:9 to refer to the “maidens and the guards of the walls” (Treat, “Lost Keys,” 490).

46. At 8:1, the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint (LXX) have the same numbering.

47. Jerome sees 8:8–9 as “the young men on behalf of the bride” (Treat, “Lost Keys,” 500).

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