

# GOD LOVES SEX

AN HONEST CONVERSATION ABOUT  
SEXUAL DESIRE AND HOLINESS

DAN B. ALLENDER AND  
TREMPER LONGMAN III



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*To Alice and Becky*  
*You are the love of our lives*



How beautiful your love, my sister, my bride!  
How much better your love than wine  
and the scent of your oils than spices!

Song of Songs 4:10



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# Acknowledgments

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:25 NIV

**G**od created us as sexual beings. Sexuality is an integral part of the human experience. This statement is true of young and old, male and female—in short, of everyone who breathes.

It is the thesis of this book not only that we should acknowledge this truth but that, as Christians, we should talk honestly about it. While this is not the first or only Christian book to address the issue of sexuality, it is certainly more the exception than the rule. Though few Christian leaders adopt the view, believed and practiced in the Middle Ages, that even marital sex was toxic to spirituality (a view described more fully in the first chapter), sexuality is still a taboo topic in many churches today, and when it is discussed, the focus is typically on what Christians shouldn't say or do in the realm of sexuality.

We need an honest conversation about sex in the context of our Christian pursuit of holiness, and it is our belief that a holy approach to sex is not exclusively focused on the “do nots” of sexuality. Our hope as authors is that this book will invite and encourage discussions among Christians, including sermons, Bible studies, and especially conversations between spouses and among friends of both genders.

You see, we believe that we should not be ashamed of our sexuality. After all, as our title declares, God loves sex.

## Acknowledgments

We want to thank the people who have made this book possible by providing expertise and resources in order that we might write the best book we are capable of writing.

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# Introduction

## Holy Sex

**G**od loves sex. He conceived, created, and blessed the process by which our bodies know and are known through desire, arousal, foreplay, intercourse, orgasm, and rest.

Sex is meant by God to be one of the bridge experiences between earth and heaven. It awakens and intersects our deepest physical and spiritual desires. Sex, like music, fills us simultaneously with notes of an intense immanent bodily pleasure and with the sonorous reverberations of another world that is transcendent and holy.

It is no wonder that the enemy of God is relentlessly committed to fouling both immanent pleasure and transcendent joy. Evil hates sex and is ruthlessly committed to tearing down the bridge between desire and holiness.

### Real People, Real Struggles

Real people have real sexual struggles. Here is a glimpse of folks sitting near you on a Sunday morning.

#### *Kevin*

Kevin is an elder in his church, married, with three children between eight and fourteen years old. He is a kind, generous man whom everyone in his community turns to for emotional support and wisdom. His wife

recently discovered a file on his computer with emails from another elder's wife that indicate a growing, intense relationship that has crossed a line into the beginnings of an emotional affair. Her emails often detail how she feels in his presence and how she wishes they were married. He attempts to encourage her by telling her how beautiful she looked at church.

### *Helene*

Helene is twenty-four and a student in a seminary where she is being trained to be a pastor. She is a virgin, wore a purity ring given to her by her father, and has waited to kiss her fiancé until at the altar on their wedding day. She feels like a fake because she often struggles in dreams with images of unclothed women being fondled by other women. She doesn't think she is gay, but she will masturbate to those images a few times a month. Her parents were so strict about sex that they asked her to cover her eyes if a television show portrayed two unmarried people kissing. But when they visited her grandparents, her parents said nothing about the pornography that was stacked in a magazine rack next to the only commode in the house.

### *Matthew*

Matthew is newly divorced and just starting to date again. He joined a popular Christian dating site and developed a profile that focuses on his desire to follow the leading of Jesus. He is struggling with the loss of his marriage after his wife had an affair. After the second date with a woman he enjoyed, she showed up at his apartment in a trench coat, and when he opened the door she pulled her coat back to reveal she was naked except for high boots. He stammered, closed the door, and drank a bottle of wine as he watched television that night.

It should be obvious that we live in a mad world that is sexually tinged and provocative in every media outlet, workplace, church, neighborhood, and home. We live in an increasingly sexual milieu that is progressively transgressing the boundaries of every sexual practice, including pedophilia. Miley Cyrus, in the now infamous Video Music Awards show,

masturbates and performs simulated fellatio on her partner while wearing a bear costume. Her stage is filled with dancers wearing large teddy bears on their backs. The image couldn't be clearer: the symbol of childhood innocence, a teddy bear, is participating in the sexual emancipation of a child star, Hannah Montana, into the sexual freedom of a vamp.

It is not that Miley Cyrus is promoting pedophilia, but she is reveling in the power of transgressing childhood innocence, and that is similar to the desire of a pedophile. We live in a world where sexual desire seems anything but holy. Instead, it is bound to self-absorbed indulgence, transgression, and violence. To link holiness and sexuality seems like an oxymoron in our day. Yet this is simply the by-product of evil's desire to free sex from true spirituality and holiness.

This book defends two core assertions. First, sexual desire doesn't begin to be released on the altar the second after you say "I do." It begins in the womb and grows irregularly and progressively through our lifetime until death, and from childhood until death this journey is fraught with turns, twists, disasters, failure, and growth. Second, sexual desire is meant to become more holy and whole the longer we live. It is important to consider what it means to be holy and how that relates to sexual desire.

## Holy, Holy, Holy

Holiness is a central and core description of the character of God. He is holy. All that he does is holy, and he requires holiness of those in his presence. What does it mean to be holy? There are three key elements to the meaning of the word. To be holy is to be set apart; to be without flaw, blemish, or stain; and to shine with a fire-like brightness, full of glory and awe. We are to be like God, set apart as his beloved; to be beautiful, without flaw or blemish; to be bright and shining in his sight, a blessing to him and to the world. All holiness involves being beloved, beautiful, and a bright blessing.

### *Set Apart: Chosen to Be His Beloved*

To be holy is to grow in the awareness that we are God's chosen delight. We are a holy people, set apart for his pleasure. We are beloved,

and we carry the mantle of his covenant commitment to show us favor in spite of our lust, anger, adultery, and murder. He has chosen us in Christ Jesus, and he can no more reject or discard us than he can reject or discard his beloved Son.

Holiness is not our achievement; it is a gift from our holy God. No one is sexually holy—married, single, gay, straight, or celibate—but we are gifted with holiness just as we are with faith. It is not our work but the gift of God. We must then approach the gift of sexual holiness with fear and trembling, knowing that our sin cannot cause us to be discarded, nor can it turn him from seeing us as his beloved. Just as salvation is a gift that must be worked out in fear and trembling, so is holiness.

### *Without Flaw or Stain: Arrayed to Be Beautiful*

To be holy is to be without flaw, stain, or blemish. Evil desires for us to be sexually used and then discarded. It also works to make us feel dirty, fouled, and ruined. God's gift of holiness is the promise that he will clothe us in his most beautiful righteousness so that we are dressed to be stunning and arrayed in his beauty. What God increases in us through the gift of holiness is the desire for our sexuality to be caught up in wonder and joy. We are meant to long for our experience of nakedness and pleasure, to be freed from shame and made holy, good, and innocent.

Holiness is not reaching perfection in this life; it is the *desire* to be set aside (chosen), blameless (beautiful), and revelatory of his glory (blessing). No one is sexually perfect, and our stains, flaws, and failures are used by God to intensify our surprise and wonder and to increase our gratitude for how his perfect love cannot be thwarted by our imperfection.

### *Bright Fire: Called to Be a Blessing*

The design of evil is for sex to be hidden in the dark, ignored, unspoken, and filled with disgust. Adam and Eve flee from their Creator to hide and cover themselves and then turn to contempt and disgust to further hide their shame.

Our sexuality is not to be hidden and held in institutional contempt by the systemic silence that shrouds virtually all discussions of sex in

the church. Seldom is the joy of sex spoken of, nor is the sorrow of our brokenness.

Seldom is sexual sin normalized, nor is sexual joy spoken of as the height of what God longs to restore in salvation. Sex is, at best, viewed as a great benefit of being married, rather than as a gift for every human—married or not. We simply do not have the language or experience to talk about God's desire to bless sexuality as part of the universal experience of being human. And if we consider sexuality as a blessing in marriage, we have not gone beyond this awareness to consider how our sexuality is meant to be a blessing to everyone with whom we engage on a day-to-day basis.

Holiness grows as we surrender more and more to God's calling for us to be his—a beautiful bride—revealing through our brokenness the allure of his undeserved, unexpected, matchless love. We grow in our capacity to hold his glory and increase our heart's desire for him the more we are seized by the extravagance and lavish love of our beloved. Sex is about pleasure. It is about an intimate, exclusive, loyal bond that is beyond words and comprehension, but not outside what our mind and body can imagine and desire.

God intends to purify our desire in the holy consumption of his love. We must take the risk of bringing our desire—holy and impure before his eyes—to be caught up in what sex is meant to offer: the arousal of our deepest desire to be in union with him.

This book invites you to consider what it means to grow in the holy desire of being beloved, beautiful, and bright, and how our sexuality—holy and broken, beautiful and bent—is used by God to draw us deeper into his love.

Sex is about pleasure. It is about an intimate, exclusive, loyal bond that is beyond words and comprehension, but not outside what our mind and body can imagine and desire.



# 1

## Song of Songs

### A Holy and Erotic Book

#### Is the Song Sexual or Spiritual?

Song of Songs is a collection of related erotic love poems that emphasizes the goodness of sex. It does not hesitate to arouse and entice, nor does it fail to warn and caution. It is a book that has been considered too dangerous to be in the canon or read by those new to the biblical message.

By far the most common reading of the text is to desexualize it by seeing it as an allegory of Christ and his church. As an allegory, the book is not about sex—heavens no!—but is a spiritual tale told through the apparently sensuous language of a marriage relationship. This presumes that each chapter develops the story toward an ending that, like any allegory, concludes with a lesson to be learned.

There are God-honoring folks who hold passionately to this position. We believe they are wrong. Not only does an allegorical approach rob the text of its true meaning, but it makes the Bible a book with magical meanings to be decoded by the expert. In fact, an allegorical approach steals from us one of the strongest messages that we need today: God loves sex.

Of course we live in a sex-crazed world. It is mad in terms of obsession with media (television, films, music, magazines) and mad in that sexuality is the subject of profound abuse, perversion, distortion, and violence as a normal course of life through pornography, prostitution, sexual abuse, human trafficking, rape, and promiscuity. But the church must deal with sex differently than it has historically. And the Song of Songs offers a fresh and lucid frame of reference to help us define what it means to be both sensuous and holy.

Unfortunately we are up against a long history of not telling the truth about the Bible's sexuality and our own. We live in a day in which people hide their struggles and pretend to live above the erotic fray, or confess their struggles and remain blissfully ignorant about the violence of their own desire.

As a therapist I (Dan) would love to collect a dollar for every time I have heard promiscuity explained away as "looking for love in all the wrong places." The problem in this case is one of blaming topography. "If only I

had been in church instead of in a bar, then I wouldn't have been tempted to sleep with him/her." Sadly, the stories I have heard about misguided sexuality in the church by pastors, elders, youth directors, music directors, deacons, and congregants make most bars look far safer.

The point is simple and disturbing: every human being on this earth struggles with sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are contrary to love and in conflict with the holiness of God. We can either pretend that a few struggle with sexual problems that don't tempt the rest of us, or we can openly acknowledge that all humanity is caught up in sexual wars that must be engaged if we are truly to be human.

We believe that sexuality has the potential to entrap our soul and body in lust and sexual harm, but we also believe that the God of the universe intends to redeem and revolutionize our sexuality so that we might know unfettered pleasure, not only with our spouse, but in relationship with our

The church must deal with sex differently than it has historically. And the Song of Songs offers a fresh and lucid frame of reference to help us define what it means to be both sensuous and holy.



God. Sex is not only sensual and physical; it is also profoundly personal and spiritual. To separate our sexuality from our spirituality is to rob both of meaning and passion. Holiness is not a flight from our body or an aversion to sensuality.

Song of Songs leads us in a new understanding of sensual holiness as long as we are not sidetracked by its two-thousand-year history of Christian neoplatonic de-eroticization. We do not benefit from extreme modesty, such as the fabled blushing Victorian covering of piano legs to keep tender souls from lusting. The Song is bawdy yet discreet, poetic and dense, arousing and erotic, honest and convinced of the primal impulse of love to rise against death.

We will approach the Song of Songs not as a progressive allegory but as a book of individual poems or songs. The Song is not ordered in a form that requires the reading of one poem as a precursor to reading the next. Therefore, we will approach the book looking at themes related to sexuality rather than poem by poem. Tremper will explain why this is a far more faithful reading of the text in the analysis sections of the book. The translation of the Song that we use is Tremper's from his commentary on the book.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, we will approach this poetic book through the use of fiction, by looking at a group of fictional characters in an imagined scenario. We desire that Christians will do more than merely alter their personal viewpoints about the nature of sexuality, our struggles, and the way of redemption. We want people to engage each other with honor and honesty about sexuality—in community and not merely in isolated, whispered conversations that can never fully get at what is binding our hearts or limiting our joy. Sexual harm comes through relationships, and sexual healing equally comes through the process of reclaiming our sexuality in relationship with our spouse and others.

What does that mean? What does it look like? There are so few people who have reflected on a redeemed sexuality that it requires imagination to envision a new future. Just as science fiction often presages and encourages technology that might appear decades later, so fiction—an imagined story—can point to what is possible if we begin a different way of being sexual in this world. Therefore, interspersed with formal analysis of the Song of Songs will be a story set in a fictional small group that is attempting

to study the book together. The Bible study is made up of two couples, a single woman, a single man, and a woman who is separated from her abusive husband. The narrating voice of the fictional sections will be Malcolm, a twenty-six-year-old recent convert to Christianity who led a promiscuous life prior to coming to faith and is still not fully persuaded that Christians he has met are any less troubled or immoral than he was or is.

## Where Did the Song Come From?

Listen to the first several verses of the Song of Songs.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,  
 for your love is better than wine.  
 How wonderful is the scent of your oils;  
 your name is poured out oil.  
 Therefore, the young women love you.  
 Draw me after you; let's run!  
 The king has brought me into his bedroom. (1:2–4a)

What in the world is a passage like this doing in the Holy Bible?

This has been the reaction of many through the ages as they have read the Song's passionate expressions of an unnamed man's desire for physical intimacy with an unnamed woman and, as here, of the woman's desire for the man. Indeed, through much of history, the church has repressed the commonsense meaning of the book by means of an allegorical interpretation.

The Song was written during Old Testament times (we don't know exactly when), but even if it was among the last books to be included in the canon of the Jewish people (around 300 BC), it was still centuries before the first surviving written interpretation appeared. Indeed, the first voice we hear commenting on the proper way to read the Song comes from a rabbi named Akiba (AD 100), who has left us two memorable statements on the book. First, he said that "whoever sings the Song of Songs with a tremulous voice in a banquet hall and (so) treats it as a sort of ditty has no share in the world to come."<sup>2</sup> This statement tells us two things: people understood that the Song spoke of sex, and the religious authorities were doing their best to repress that meaning. Then, in

response to those who felt that the Song should not even be in the Bible because of its sensuality, Akiba responded: “God forbid!—no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”<sup>3</sup>

Akiba gave the Song an exalted place because he believed that the book spoke not of the love between a man and a woman but rather of the love between God and his people. In other words, he did not read the Song according to the obvious, commonsense meaning of the words, but rather he discovered a figurative meaning by understanding the book as an allegory. In this understanding, the man is God and the woman is Israel. The Song of Songs, then, is the story of the relationship between God and Israel. If Akiba is correct, then Song of Songs is unquestionably the Bible’s most intimate and passionate description of God’s relationship with his people. We get glimpses of that sensual and intimate love in many passages (Hosea 2:14–20, for example), yet there is no single book in the Bible that makes that love the entire focus. No wonder Akiba considered the Song of Songs to be the holy of holies.

Over the next seventeen hundred years, till the mid-nineteenth century, most Jewish interpreters took this approach to the Song. For instance, the Targum to the Song, an interpretive Aramaic paraphrase of the book composed sometime between AD 700 and 900,<sup>4</sup> interpreted the woman’s words quoted above (1:2–4a) as a reference to the exodus from Egypt. This makes sense when the book is understood as an allegory, since the woman, Israel, is asking the man, God, to take her into his bedroom (the promised land).

Early Christians learned this allegorical interpretation from Jewish teachers and changed it to fit their theology. For early Christian interpreters, the man was Jesus and the woman was either the church or the individual Christian.

My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh  
lodging between my breasts. (1:13)

This is taken as a reference to Jesus Christ (the sachet of myrrh), who spans the Old and New Testaments (symbolically represented by the

woman's breasts). As with Jewish interpretation, this type of reading was prominent among Christian interpreters until the mid-nineteenth century.

It is not difficult to imagine why the allegorical interpretation came to be the dominant paradigm: we are desperate to know that God loves us, and we are awkward in addressing our sexuality. This interpretive structure gives us a way of resolving both our hunger and our awkwardness.

So then, what happened in the mid-nineteenth century that caused Jewish and Christian interpreters to turn from an allegorical understanding of the book to one that recognized it as love poetry? We will briefly consider the factors underlying this shift.

The nineteenth century saw the beginning and development of archeological exploration of Israel and the broader Middle East, starting with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. Seeing the pyramids and other monumental relics fired the imagination of Europeans, and they began sending scholars to the region, which led to the discovery of ancient writings. These ancient writings included love poetry. This love poetry sounded a lot like the Song of Songs, and it helped recover the understanding that the Song has to do with human love.<sup>5</sup>

Besides ancient love poetry, European diplomats in places like Damascus attended weddings of important Arab officials. They heard erotic songs at the ceremonies that reminded these biblically literate politicians of the Song. Many of these songs described the physical beauty of the bride and the groom in the manner of Song of Songs 4:1–5:1; 5:10–16; and 7:1–10. These songs were preludes to the lovemaking of the wedding night.

It thus became increasingly obvious that the Song of Songs was not an allegory, but rather that through the centuries an allegorical interpretation was imposed on it. An honest and impartial assessment of the book reveals that the Song bears none of the features of an allegory. After all, allegories are quite obvious, and the relationship between a feature of the story and its meaning is usually one to one. Take, for example, the most famous allegory of all, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. What is *Pilgrim's Progress* about? It is about a man named Christian who is traveling to the Celestial City. Along the way he encounters obstacles like the Slough of Despond. The symbolic meaning of this book is obvious, nothing like the Song of Songs.

If the Song is not an allegory, however, why did so many intelligent people read it as such for so many years?

## The Limits of Self-Control

Looking back from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we can clearly see how Jewish and Christian interpreters were deeply influenced by the culture of the day (as we are today). In particular, educated religious leaders were influenced by the philosophy of Plato, which pitted matters of the spirit over against the body. They reasoned that the body was a hindrance to the spiritual life. Thus, to grow spiritually the body had to be ignored—or worse. Thus we see the rise of a celibate priesthood and the emergence of the monastic movement from the early church through the Middle Ages and beyond.

To these Christians, nothing was more connected to the body than sex. But it was not only the physical act of sex that discouraged spiritual formation in their view; it was also the emotions that went along with it. Sex arouses intense desire—desire directed not toward God but toward the other. One can lose one’s self-control and reason in the throes of passion.

This explains the behavior of many of the great theologians of the early church and their interpretation of the Song. Origen (AD 185–253/54), truly a monumental figure in the development of early Scripture interpretation, did to the Song of Songs what he did to his own body:<sup>6</sup> He castrated himself to keep from acting on his sexual impulses, and he “desexed” the Song by treating it as an account of the relationship between Jesus and the church rather than speaking about the physical intimacy of a man and a woman. Jerome (AD 331–420), another giant of the faith, used to throw himself into a thorn bush whenever he felt sexual arousal, so it is no surprise that he too adopted an allegorical approach to the Song. Indeed, in a letter to his disciple Paula concerning how she should direct her daughter in Scripture reading, Jerome said that she needed to read the whole Bible and even “commit to memory the prophets, the heptateuch (the first seven books of the Old Testament), the Books of Kings and of Chronicles, the rolls also of Ezra and Esther,” before she could read the Song of Songs. For otherwise, “if she were to read it at the beginning,

she would fail to perceive that, though it is written in fleshly words, it is a marriage song of a spiritual [wedding]. And not understanding this she would suffer from it.”<sup>77</sup>

Approaching the Song with a belief that sex and its passions are at war with holiness encouraged these celibate interpreters to adopt an interpretive approach that, in essence, made the book say something different than what it obviously says. Much later, John Wesley (1703–91), the founder of the Methodist Church, illustrated this type of reasoning when he said, “The description of this bridegroom and bride is such as could not with decency be used or meant concerning Solomon and Pharaoh’s daughter; that many expressions and descriptions, if applied to them, would be absurd and monstrous; and that it therefore follows that this book is to be understood allegorically concerning that spiritual love and marriage, which is between Christ and his church.”<sup>78</sup>

## The Invisible Book

Today, one looks in vain for a scholarly treatment—whether Christian (Protestant and Catholic) or Jewish—that would take the Song as an allegory in the manner of Akiba, the Targum, Origen, Jerome, or Wesley. However, the sexual meaning is often suppressed in the church today in one of two ways. Some pastors still teach and preach the Song as an allegory of the relationship between Jesus and the Christian, while ignoring its message concerning sex. However, most often the Song is repressed by ignoring it altogether. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the Song of Songs? Maybe it was read at a wedding, but a concerted focus on the Song is often missing from our churches and our Bible studies.

Indeed, I (Tremper) was once disinvented from preaching at a church because I chose as my text a passage from the Song. The pastor knew I was going to preach on the Song because he invited me to preach on Valentine’s Day. When his elder board heard about it though, they forced him to cancel my invitation. Apparently there are parts of the Bible that are too radical to be treated in a sermon!

But such an attitude is not only cowardly; it is dangerous. By removing the Song from Scripture on a practical level—by not reading it, teaching

it, or preaching it—we keep ourselves from clearly hearing God’s voice on sex, and sexuality is a significant and often confusing part of our human experience.

If the Song of Songs is not an allegory and is in fact a collection of erotic love poems, then does it speak only of human sexuality and say little or nothing about our relationship with God? Far from it. Our central conviction, which we will explore throughout the book, is that sex is a window into the heart of God, pure and simple, even though our experience of sexuality is usually complex and tinged with the debris of the fall.

It is easy to see why some would prefer the Song of Songs to be solely spiritual or solely physical. It makes the book and our own experience of it less complicated. In fact, what is seen reveals the nature of what can’t be seen. In Romans 1:20, Paul suggests that the visible makes known God’s invisible character, and the implication of his claim is staggering. What does that imply about the body of a woman? A man? Their union and climax? The rise and fall of hormones before, during, and after intercourse? It compels us to ask the question: What is God’s goal for sex? We can at least say that the pleasure and transcendence are not as separable as they might seem.

Today we mistakenly either separate sexuality and holiness by a huge chasm or merge them in a pantheistic, immanent unity. The church often makes sexuality unspiritual, just as the world substitutes a sexual encounter for a spiritual experience. We must find a way to embrace the uniqueness of our bodies and our spirits and experience the intersection not as a loss of one or both but as the fulfillment of each.

By removing the Song from Scripture on a practical level, we keep ourselves from clearly hearing God’s voice on sex.

## Drama or Collection?

As we have described, the interpretation of the Song has moved away from the idea that it is an allegory and toward the idea that it is love poetry. That said, the next question is, what type of love poetry? Is it a

poetic drama that tells a single story, or is it a collection of different love poems similar to the Psalms?

Some readers wrongly believe that the Song is a drama. In other words, it tells a single story. The purpose of interpretation then is to discover and describe the story. The weakness of this approach is exposed by the different stories discovered by various interpreters. Indeed, those who take this approach to the book even disagree over whether there are two main characters in the book or three.

On the surface, the two-character approach appears promising, since it looks like there is one unnamed man and one unnamed woman who speak and interact in the book. Sometimes the man is identified as Solomon (mentioned in 1:1, 5; 3:7; 8:11) and the woman as the Shulammitte (6:13). While there are many variations on this two-character approach to the book, the plot is usually said to follow the journey of their relationship as it moves from courtship to marriage to a honeymoon, followed by conflict and reconciliation.

However, other readers detect a third major character in the book. They accomplish this by insisting that there are actually two men, a king and a shepherd, in the book along with the woman. The three-character approach introduces an interesting twist: a love triangle. Again variations abound among those who take this interpretive approach, but the basic plot is said to concern a lustful king who tries to force an innocent country girl into his harem. She, however, virtuously maintains her love for the shepherd boy back home.

All of this makes for interesting reading and is born from an impulse readers have to see a story even where there isn't one. The fact that the advocates of a narrative reading cannot even agree about whether there are two major characters or three suggests that they are reading a story into the poems rather than discovering a story intended by the author.

This book will approach the Song as a collection of love poems rather than a single poem telling one story. We will explore the Song's themes by explaining the powerful and sensuous imagery and being sensitive to the poet's expressions of emotions. The Song is a collection of about twenty poems. They are individual poems to be sure, but there is still a type of literary (not narrative) coherence among them. A man and a woman speak throughout the book. They are not identified as specific



people (more on this below), yet their voices (along with the supporting chorus, often called the “daughters of Jerusalem”) provide a kind of consistency throughout the book. It is not that new poems introduce different characters. Rather, different poems deal with the same characters but do not tell a single, unified story.

In addition, the Song has a kind of coherence that is provided by two refrains that are repeated in the book. On two occasions, the woman says, “His left hand is under my head, and his right embraces me” (2:6; 8:3). Three times she utters, “I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the deer of the field, not to awaken or arouse love until it desires” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). These and many other features give a sense that these multiple songs cohere into a single song. Perhaps this is one reason why the book is described in the first verse as a “song of songs.”

This understanding of the Song of Songs explains why we will be treating individual poems out of their order as we explore the major themes of the book and asking how they shape our own perceptions, emotions, and behavior in matters of sexuality and spirituality. But, first, let’s explore the book’s main message to its readers. The Song is, first of all, a celebration of sex.

Most of the Song’s poems celebrate sex. Notice that it is sex, not love, whose pleasures these poems praise. That is not to say, of course, that the physical intimacy desired and enjoyed by the man and the woman does not arise out of love; it certainly does. But with only one notable exception (8:5–7), that love is expressed as a yearning for physical touch. In the chapters that follow, we will examine poems that express desire (chap. 4), describe physical beauty (chap. 7), and depict sexual scenes (chap. 10), as well as express the glory of sex (chap. 16).

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a celebration of sex.

By far the most important message of the book is the celebration of sex, but an important minor theme must also be pointed out. Sex is so wonderful that the danger is to engage in a sexual relationship impulsively and prematurely. Thus, some of the poems are dedicated to warning that this wonderful gift is also fraught with danger and needs to be approached carefully. We will deal with these struggles of sexuality in chapters 12 and 13.

## Who Are the Man and the Woman?

As we enter into the following chapters, it is important to identify precisely who the man and the woman are in the poems. Perhaps you will be surprised to learn that they are you! Let us explain.

The man and the woman are intentionally not made specific characters so that those married couples who read it can identify with the characters and can be inspired to speak sensuous words to one another. In other words, the Song of Songs is very much like the book of Psalms in this regard. While we might be able to identify an author of a psalm from the title (as in Ps. 51, which names David as its composer), the psalm itself speaks in the first person.

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions. (Ps. 51:1)

Notice that David does not embed the particular situation that inspired him to write the psalm (the title specifies his adultery with Bathsheba). This shows his intention not to memorialize his experience but rather to compose a prayer that can be used by later worshipers who have a similar though not necessarily identical situation.

The Song works the same way. Surely the poet expresses his own emotions but does so in a way that allows the reader to identify with them and learn from them.

But what about Solomon and the Shulammite? We mentioned above that Solomon and a woman who is given the name Shulammite are mentioned, though rarely, in the book. Aren't we to identify the man and the woman with them?

No, we are not. They play a different role. Shulammite is mentioned only once in the book. Solomon is mentioned a few more times, but he does not speak; he is spoken about. He also plays different roles in the book. The only substantial references to Solomon in the book are in 3:5, where his marriage is used to enhance the glory of weddings, and in 8:11, where he is an example of someone who tried to buy love.

That said, it is interesting that Shulammite is a feminine form of the name Solomon (which in Hebrew is *Shelomo*) and that both are based on the Hebrew root *shalom*, which means, among other things, “peace” or “contented.” Perhaps we are to have in the backs of our minds the idea that the union of Shelomo and Shulammite would lead to contentedness. That contentedness is the consequence of physical intimacy and is, after all, the point of the poem in 8:8–10 (to be described in chap. 16).

The bottom line is that married couples benefit from reading this book together and placing themselves in the roles of the man and the woman.

## Who Are the Daughters of Jerusalem?

Throughout the Song, we hear from and about a group of women who are sometimes identified as the “daughters of Jerusalem” (also sometimes called “daughters of Zion” or “women of Jerusalem”). They serve multiple functions in the poems of the book. Sometimes they are the disciples of the woman. They hear her and watch her and learn in the ways of love. They give third-person witness to the beauty and goodness of the relationship of the man and woman, acting at times almost like cheerleaders encouraging them in their intimacy (5:1). Other times they are the object of the woman’s warning that such a passionate relationship should only be entered when the time is right (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). We will have more to say about these and other passages connected to the daughters in the following chapters.

## The Brothers and the Mother

Some members of the woman’s close family also play a role in this poem. Her mother never speaks but is mentioned in a couple of passages, including one particularly telling example in 8:2, when the woman says,

I would lead you; I would bring you  
to the house of my mother who taught me.

The passage then discreetly describes how the woman would lead the man into lovemaking. Thus, the mother is the one who has schooled her daughter in matters of love.

The brothers play an even more active role. They are spoken about in 1:5–6, and then they speak in 8:8–10. What unites these passages is the fact that brothers played an important role in marriage negotiations in ancient Israel. We can see this, for instance, in Genesis 34 where the brothers interact with Shechem, who wants to marry their sister. Again, we will wait till we treat these passages in chapter 13 to explore this in more detail.

## The Poetry of the Song

Before looking at specific passages in the Song, we need to point out the obvious. It is poetry and needs to be read as poetry. What does that mean? First, poetry is compact language. It says a lot using very few words. We need to slow down and ponder poetry as we draw out its meaning. Second, we should expect not absolute clarity of meaning, but rather artful and intentional ambiguity in poetic language. The many powerful images speak indirectly, but truly.

It can almost be assured that poetry doesn't carry one single meaning. Or, said differently, it is not true that a rose in a poem means a rose is a rose. The word "rose" may refer to a flower we call a rose, but it could also be used to symbolize a woman whose beauty has captured the poet and has pierced him when he tried to take hold of her.

A modern reader's apprehension of the poem is also hindered by the fact that ancient images are sometimes less clear to us than they were to the ancient reader or listener. What does it mean to say that someone's eyes are "like doves" for instance (4:1; 5:12)? Does this refer to their color, their fluttering, or something else? We can't be sure. Poetic language must be respected for its powerful evocation of emotion and thought, but not pressed to say more than it intends to say.

## Reading the Song in the Light of the Whole Bible

No book of the Bible should be read in isolation from the rest of the canon. While each book, including the Song, makes an individual contribution to the whole Bible, the ultimate context of a book is found as part of the entire canon. Reading the Song in the light of the rest of the Bible helps

us understand the meaning and significance of the book according to its divine purpose, as we will explain in the following sections.

### *Marriage and the Song*

There is a noticeable lack of explicit mention of marriage in the Song. Song of Songs 3:6–11 reflects on Solomon’s wedding in a way that illustrates the glory of marriage. The erotic description of the woman finds the man referring to her as his “bride” in chapter 4, starting at verse 8, through chapter 5, verse 1, but otherwise there are few references to the fact that they are married.

However, to think that a book in the Bible celebrates the sexual intercourse of an unmarried couple is a mistake bred by reading it from a modern context outside of its canonical and cultural setting. Ancient societies in general did not smile on extramarital and premarital sex, and the teaching of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) is explicit in promoting sexuality within the context of the legal commitment of marriage.

This realization raises questions: Who should read the Song of Songs and how? Who was it written for? We already stated above that the Song’s two main characters, the man and the woman, were unnamed so that married couples can put themselves in their place. The Song then helps the couple find a language of erotic love with which to speak to each other as a prelude to lovemaking. Today, as in the past, the language of love and intimacy is not easy to express. It makes us too vulnerable to each other. Today, too, the ethos of the church sometimes discourages eroticism even within marriage. The Song is a counter to this idea. Just as the Lord’s Prayer is a model of prayer to help us learn how to pray, so the Song is a model of godly sensuality.

But what about others? Is it just for married lovers? What value does it have for singles? Singles should identify themselves with the “daughters of Jerusalem.” They look on (not voyeuristically) as the woman enjoys intimacy with the man. The “daughters” serve as a community (both men and women) that learns through suffering and celebrating the vicissitudes of sexuality. It is a role that is difficult to describe or comprehend: cheerleaders, neophytes, chorus—all of the above. In some ways, it is an

apprenticeship in sexuality without the risk of harm, though also without the benefits of direct participation.

It is not voyeuristic in that the “daughters” feel the joy and suffer the ups and downs for themselves and their “friends.” Also, they (and we the readers) are invited to witness not the physical lovemaking but only the thoughts and emotions of the beloved. But their participation must be viewed as implying that sexuality, though private in the act, is not a taboo subject. Christians often fail by not talking about sex enough. Others fail when they trivialize sexuality through interactions that are crude and familiar.

The “daughters” are also given instruction. They are told to wait until the time is right. The assumption is that the time may very well come for them and that it is good to be disciplined in these matters. The Song can be an agent of discipleship.

Besides this, all readers can benefit from the theological dimensions of the Song. These dimensions arise from a canonical reading, which makes evident both that the Song is the story of the already-but-not-yet redemption of sexuality and that our relationship with God is like a marriage.

### *Return to Eden*

Reading the Song canonically takes us back to the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2, Adam and Eve are in the Garden enjoying a harmonious relationship with God and with each other. The creation of Eve from Adam’s side signals their equality and mutuality, and Adam’s exultant song reveals his joy.

This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken. (Gen. 2:23 NRSV)

Soon after, we are told that marriage is defined as leaving one’s parents to form a new primary loyalty to one’s spouse, joining together through common experience and communication, and then finally becoming one flesh through the enjoyment of sexual intercourse (Gen. 2:24). In terms of the Song, the most relevant statement in Genesis 2, in the final verse

of the chapter (2:25 NRSV), is that the man and the woman were “both naked, and were not ashamed.” This nakedness symbolized not only a physical openness to each other but also an unabashed spiritual, psychological, and emotional exposure. They had nothing to hide.

The next chapter, however, narrates Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God. They asserted their own moral independence by saying they would define what was right and wrong and reject God’s definition. The effect was immediate. Because they broke relationship with God, they felt alienation from each other, made public by their need to now cover themselves up from each other. At the end of Genesis 3, Adam and Eve now wear clothes, no longer able to bear exposure.

The Song describes the man and the woman back in the garden (many of the poems have garden settings) once again enjoying each other. The underlying message is that sexuality is redeemed. It is possible to enjoy God’s good gift of sex in spite of sin. That said, the Song is still a very realistic book. It affirms the redemption of sex, but it also recognizes that it is an already-but-not-yet redemption. There are still obstacles and dangers connected to intimate exposure. In chapters 12 and 13 we will examine and explore the not-yet aspect of the Song’s message.

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### *God as Husband*

Finally, we read the Song in the light of the Bible’s extensive teaching that God is our husband.<sup>9</sup> In the Old Testament, Yahweh is pictured as the husband of Israel. Unfortunately, most of the time the image is used negatively. Israel is God’s wife, but she has committed adultery by worshipping other gods. Here we see the ground of the divine-human marriage metaphor. Relationship with God and marriage are the only two exclusive relationships. In the creation ideal, one can have only one spouse and only one God. To have more than one is a transgression against the relationship; thus there is an analogy between idolatry and adultery. While this negative portrayal of the divine-human relationship is found

throughout the Old Testament, classic texts of this negative relationship are found in Ezekiel 16 and 23, and in Hosea 1 and 3.

That said, we do find glimmers of the positive use of the image, even if only as a reminiscence of better days gone by.

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
 your love as a bride,  
 how you followed me in the wilderness,  
 in a land not sown. (Jer. 2:2 NRSV)

Therefore, I will now allure her,  
 and bring her into the wilderness,  
 and speak tenderly to her.  
 From there I will give her her vineyards,  
 and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.  
 There she shall respond as in the days of her youth  
 as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

. . . And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD. (Hosea 2:14–15, 19–20 NRSV)

The Song is not an allegory but is about marriage, and the more we learn about marriage, the more we learn about our relationship with God.

## Themes

We will approach the poetry of the Song of Songs by looking at themes that arise throughout. These themes show up not only in the Song but in every person's sexual experiences.

*Desire.* How is it we come to desire our lover? How does desire invest, move, and transform us in a way that leads to love and not merely to lust? And what do we do with the reality that so many of our sexual desires are contrary to what we know is honoring and beautiful? For some, desire is a lust for taboo experience in one's marriage, and for others, sex



is the price of admission or continuation of the marriage, something to be endured and not a passionate and pleasurable part of the process of lovemaking.

*Erotic Triggers.* What turns up the erotic heat at one point of the relationship may not do so a year later. Erotic arousal is variable and yet has some universal dimensions that are related to our biological differences. It is imperative to understand and to engage arousal as a part of us that is not all good or simply neutral. We can be aroused by triggers that are linked to past harm or to doing harm to others. We are aroused by series of images, symbols, or narratives to the point of sexual satisfaction for both husband and wife. Our body's arousal is connected to the individual images and stories that are bound to our sexual identity. What are the images and stories that are most honored and blessed in the Song?

*Sexual Scenes.* The poetry of the Song sets the scene for seductive teasing, verbal banter, setting up a tryst, dealing with privacy, preserving honor, and imagining the process of pleasuring one another. It uses holy and luscious imagery to set the scene for good sex. How are we to take from other nonbiblical narratives and poetry the erotic power of imagination without being defiled or defiling others in a form that is bawdy and pornographic?

*Sexual Struggles.* No one ever on this earth has been able to escape sexual wars. We are sexual beings from the day we are born to the day we die, and throughout our life we will struggle to know and embrace goodness in our sexuality rather than loss, shame, and contempt. How do we engage the heartache—past, present, and future—woven into our sexuality and still delight in what God has made for our pleasure?

*Glory of Erotic Faithfulness.* Sex is far more than periodic ecstasy or—on a more mundane level—a romp that leads to brief and fleeting pleasure. A transcendent view of sexuality means that sex is revelatory, both in its parts and as a whole, of something greater than itself or the process. As we will see in more detail, sex is our best means to deal with the ever-present fear and loss that comes with death. Sex is more than procreative or relationship-building;

Sex is the one act that stands most opposed to the ravenous decay and destruction of death.

it is vastly more than mere sensuality and play. It is the one act that stands most opposed to the ravenous decay and destruction of death.

Our desire is to invite you to the intersection of your sexual desire, struggles, and search for the “more” that lingers in and about sexuality like a compelling fragrance. To the degree that we enter these turbid waters, we will discover the depths of our fear, heartache, harm, and fury as lived through one of the most intimate acts known to humanity. It is that ground that God intends to light up with his holy delight to redeem our sexuality.

Stay with us through this book and you will find yourself singing this resurrection sex song.