

# The Earth Is Crammed with Heaven: Four Guideposts to Reading and Teaching the *Song of Songs*

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Perhaps when you read the Song of Songs you feel as perplexed as the Ethiopian eunuch did with Isaiah. If asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ([Acts 8:30b](#)), you can only reply, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" ([Acts 8:31a](#)).

If so, you are not alone in your quest for clarity. Saadia, a ninth-century Jewish rabbi, likened the Song to "a lock for which the key had been lost."<sup>1</sup> Franz Delitzsch, a nineteenth-century German Lutheran Hebraist, wrote, "The *Song* is the most obscure book of the Old Testament. Whatever principle of interpretation one may adopt, there always remains a number of inexplicable passages. . . ." <sup>2</sup> More recently, Marvin Pope comments, "[N]o composition of comparable size in world literature has provoked and inspired such a volume and variety of comment and interpretation as the biblical Song of Songs." <sup>3</sup> Daniel Estes adds, "Scholars vary widely on nearly every part of its interpretation. . . . Virtually every verse presents challenges in text, philology, image, grammar or structure." <sup>4</sup>

My favorite example of perspicuity angst comes from Christopher W. Mitchell, who begins his commentary, published in 2003, by reviewing the history of his study of the Song: "My fascination with the Songs of Songs began in 1978 . . . when I took a graduate class on its Hebrew text at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. That fascination grew under the tutelage of my doctoral advisor, Professor Michael V. Fox." Mitchell goes on to talk about how he has read commentaries and articles, preached and taught, and since 1992 worked earnestly on his 1,300 (!) page commentary on the Song. He has worked almost thirty years on the Song, but then he writes in his preface about his desire to spend another decade to "delve more deeply into . . . this most difficult book of sacred Scripture." <sup>5</sup>

Scholars who disagree on much of the Song all agree it is a tough text. Thus, we need a guide to uncoil its complexities, solve its riddles, and find that lost key to unlock its door. In this article, I seek to offer some basic directions to help us, especially those of us who preach, to navigate through the often dark (but ah so beautiful!) waters of Solomon's Song. By means of setting four guideposts in place, I hope to open God's Word, as Philip did, and "beginning with this Scripture," teach you "the good news about Jesus" ([Acts 8:35](#)), revealing to you something of the meaning of the mystery of marriage ([Eph 5:32](#)).

## 1. Guidepost One: This Is a Song

We start with the first guidepost: *This is a song*.

Our text begins, "The Song" ([Song 1:1a](#)). <sup>6</sup> The significance of this simple observation is that it identifies the genre. This is not a letter, gospel, law book, prophecy, or an apocalyptic revelation. This is a song. And a song (this is what I've learned after many years of study) is written to be sung. (Aren't you glad I'm your guide?)

Perhaps this Song was originally written to be sung during the seven-day marriage festival. <sup>7</sup> We know that Israelite wedding celebrations lasted this long from [Gen 29:27](#), [Judg 14:12](#), and extra-biblical Jewish history. And we know from [Jer 7:34](#) that singing was part of these festivities: "the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride." <sup>8</sup>

Thus, following the lead of Duane Garrett, <sup>9</sup> I envision the following scenario. Just as there were professional singers and musicians for temple worship (e.g., [2 Chr 29:28](#)), so I envision professional singers and musicians poised to sing and play for these week-long weddings. And each day, as the bride and groom come out of their chambers, the wine is served, the music begins, and the singers sing. The soprano starts, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine" ([Song 1:2](#)). Then, over sweet strum of the strings, the tenor softly serenades, "Behold, you are beautiful, my love" (1:15). And throughout the song, as the soprano and tenor call back and forth, from time to time other voices join in-like a chorus in a Greek play or a choir in an Oratorio. These voices are comprised of the young maidens, "the daughters of Jerusalem" as our text calls them.

That is what I envision day after day for *seven days*, a *perfect* celebration of the new creation of man and wife as one. Whether or not you envision it precisely that way, however, what matters most is that you see the Song as a song.

Furthermore, when you think "song," you must think "poem" or lyric poetry. "This is a song" is the same as saying "this is a poem set to music." This is obvious everywhere, even in the first verse. Our song begins with a poetic device called consonance: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (*shir hashirim asher lishlomoh*).<sup>10</sup> In Hebrew, we hear the repeated "sh"-sound, and even the English translation gives a repeated "s"-sound.

Herein the potential danger lies. We can read and teach the Song, forgetting or neglecting its poetry and quickly run from alliterations to applications. The cry for practical propositions beckons the preacher. It is important that we learn real-life lessons from each poetic pericope. But it is likewise important (nay, necessary!) to first understand and feel the power and play of words, what only poetry can do to the human heart and imagination. For there is a difference between saying,

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.  
Thus mellowed to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.<sup>11</sup>

and saying,

A woman in a black dress with shiny beads looked pretty when she walked by.

There's a difference between saying,

Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold,  
Pease porridge in the pot, nine days old;  
Some like it hot, some like it cold,  
Some like it in the pot, nine days old.

and saying,

If the pea pudding has been in the pot for nine days, no thanks, I'll pass.

If you turn that simple nursery rhyme into a statement, it loses its punch. Take away the poetic structure (8 syllables, 9 syllables, 8 syllables, 9 syllables) and poetic devices such as alliteration (the p-words), assonance (the o-sound), and the rhyme scheme (hot/pot . . . cold/old), and you take away the point of the poem: to make you laugh.

The Song is a song. Thus each time you read and teach a poetic section, you should ask yourself, "What is the poetry doing?" You should try to feel the poetry before you act upon its message.<sup>12</sup> You should, in a sense (and with your senses), *smell* the myrrh, frankincense, and aloes, *touch* the polished ivory, *taste* the wine and apples, *hear* the flowing streams, *see* the gazelles leaping over the mountains . . . yes feel the flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.

That is the first guidepost: This is a song.

## 2. Guidepost Two: About Human Love

Here is the second guidepost: This is a song *about human love set in the context of marriage*.

We will deal with the second part of that sentence first. We have already noted that this is a wedding song. Let me now defend that claim. We know it is a wedding song from the cultural context. (The sexual revolution of the 1960's hadn't yet reached Jerusalem in 960 b.c.) In that place and time, there were only two kinds of love: "free love" between a man and a woman in marriage, and sexual slavery, which is found in adultery and fornication.<sup>13</sup>

So we know that this is a wedding song from the cultural context (i.e., in Israel only sex within marriage was celebrated), but also from the language of the Song itself.<sup>14</sup> After the word "wedding" is used in 3:11 (as the wedding day of Solomon is used as a foil), the word "bride" is used of the young woman six times in the next seventeen verses (chs. 4-5). This is the heart of the Song, the section that undoubtedly describes sexual relations.

Further support for this marriage-song thesis is found in the language of a permanent pledge, such as "set me as a seal upon your heart" (8:6) or "my beloved is mine, and I am his" (2:16a; cf. 7:5; 8:4).<sup>15</sup>

Thus, this is a wedding song that is naturally about what weddings celebrate: *human love*. On the back cover of Tom Gledhill's excellent commentary are these words:

At first reading the Song of Songs *appears to be* an unabashed celebration of the deeply rooted urges of physical attraction, mutual love and sexual consummation between a man and a woman. Tom Gledhill maintains that the Song of Songs *is in fact* just that—a literary, poetic exploration of human love that strongly affirms loyalty, beauty and sexuality in all their variety.<sup>16</sup>

If you didn't know and weren't influenced by the history of the interpretation of the Song, and simply read the Song as is, you would likely surmise—with phrases like, "kiss me," "his right hand embraces me," "your two breasts are like two fawns," and so on—that this is *erotic* poetry set within the *ethical* limits of the marriage bed.<sup>17</sup> However, the near consensus of both Jewish and Christian interpretation for at least 1600 years was that the Song is not about human love at all, but only divine love. That is, it sings of God's love for Israel and/or Christ's love for the church or the individual Christian soul.<sup>18</sup>

The reason for this seems to be the presupposition that human sexual love is an inappropriate topic for Scripture. Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349) could speak of the love between a bride and groom as "proper" but not the proper subject of Scripture and thus the Song. Such fleshly love even within marriage has, in his words, "a certain dishonorable and improper quality about it."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 393-c. 457) wrote that those who give the Song a "corporeal interpretation" have committed an "awful blasphemy."<sup>20</sup>

This explains why—from Origen of Alexandria to Charles Spurgeon of London, from the medieval mystics to the American Puritans—Christians allegorized every jot and tittle of the Song, each thigh and breast and kiss and consummation. For example, one commentator says that the phrase "while the king was on his couch" (1:12) refers to "the gestation period of Christ in the womb of Mary," and the "sachet of myrrh that lies between [the bride's] breasts" (1:13) symbolizes "Christ in the soul of the believer, who lies between the great commands to love God and one's neighbor."<sup>21</sup> Those allegories are orthodox (and certainly Christ-centered and thus edifying), but they are also exegetically absurd<sup>22</sup> and potentially theologically dangerous.

It is dangerous when Christian commentators, theologians, and pastors think there is a radical dichotomy between the sacred and the secular—praying is sacred; kissing is secular. When we believe that sexuality is the antithesis of spirituality and that there is a great chasm between *eros* and *agape*,<sup>23</sup> we are in danger of losing not only our witness to the world ("What? Your religion has nothing to say about sex except that it is bad?"),<sup>24</sup> but also vital tenets of the Christian faith: the incarnation (John 1:1, 14), the bodily resurrection (1 Cor 6:12-20; 15), and the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet 3:13).

Take the incarnation, for example. Our creed is undermined if the "truly man" part of the "truly God and truly man" is not truly human flesh (1 John 4:2-3; cf. 1:1). How could satisfaction for sins be made if Jesus is not both God and man (cf. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*)? Yet notions that the body is "the tomb of the soul," as Orpheus taught and some Christians embraced,<sup>25</sup> or "Brother Ass," as St. Francis famously phrased it (a useful but infuriating beast), isn't far removed from Matthew Henry's hermeneutic, which says, "When we apply ourselves to the study of this book [i.e., the Song] we must not only, with Moses and Joshua, *put off our shoe from off our foot* [we are on holy ground, but we must also] . . . forget that we have bodies."<sup>26</sup> Really?! Why should we forget that we have bodies when the Bible contains no separation between godly purity and physical passion? Why should we forget that we have bodies when there are four poems in the Song about delighting in seeing, touching, and tasting (!) the human body? Why should we forget that we have bodies, when for our salvation "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14)?

Following Marvin Pope's analogy, I liken the history of interpretation to Hans Christian Andersen's children's tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*.<sup>27</sup> Like the Emperor's ministers and subjects affirmed that he was indeed wearing clothes (when he was not), so interpreters kept telling themselves and their readers that the Song is solely about spiritual love (when it's not). But just as a child saw the reality of the situation—the emperor is naked!—so do we see that the characters in the Song are naked. They are naked and unashamed. And we today should share their lack of shame. For the Song is a song that Adam could have sung in the Garden when Eve arose miraculously from his side, and it remains a song that we can and should sing in the bedroom, the church, and the marketplace of ideas.

Don't get me wrong here. The lyrics here about seeing, touching, and tasting are "candid but not crude."<sup>28</sup> They are not prudish, but neither are they immodest. They are far removed from the sexual anarchy and idiocy of our Top 40 music, as well as the crass love poetry of the ancient Near East. The Song has a beautiful balance: it has adult content, but it is adolescent-appropriate. It is not X-rated, but rated PG: parental (and pastoral) guidance

recommended. This Song guides us to see with scriptural sensibilities that the earth is crammed with heaven,<sup>29</sup> that the way of a man with a woman is "too wonderful" (Prov 30:18-19), and that marriage is not simply a concession to the necessity of procreation, but an affirmation of the beauty, chastity, and sacredness of human love.

This is a song about human love set in the context of marriage. I hope I have pounded that second (sadly necessary) guidepost soundly into place.

### 3. Guidepost Three: Found in the Bible

With our second guidepost in place, let me quickly add the third lest we get off course. Just because the Song is about human love does not mean that we must think a-theologically about it, namely, that it has nothing to say about God's love for us or our love for God.

This is not an English poem scribbled on the New York City subway. It is a Hebrew poem, and there is no Hebrew literature of this era that is non-religious. The Song is constructed of imagery that borrows heavily from the rest of the OT. For example, when we read the garden imagery in 4:12-5:1, it is right and natural for us to think about Eden; or when we read on the theme of intoxicating love in 1:2, the command of Prov 5:19 to be "intoxicated always in her [i.e., a wife's] love" ought to come to mind. This Song of Scripture is saturated with other scriptural language.

The Song uses Hebrew words, Hebrew names, Hebrew places, Hebrew poetic devices, *and* has a Hebrew author: "This is the Song of Songs which is Solomon's" (1:1). That last word-"Solomon's"-sets this Song within an historical and theological context. So here is the third guidepost: this is a song about human love set in the context of marriage that is *found in the Bible*. The Song of Songs cannot be read properly if it is read outside of its canonical context.<sup>30</sup> We must read its positive marriage imagery in contrast to Israel's unfaithfulness as depicted in the prophets. While God rejoices over his people as "a bridegroom rejoices over his bride" (Isa 62:4), Israel spoils the honeymoon with their spiritual promiscuity and adultery.<sup>31</sup> And whether we think there are no allusions or a thousand allusions to the Song in the NT,<sup>32</sup> we must read it in light of the person and work of Jesus, the very compass of the Christian canon. John the Baptist calls Jesus "the bridegroom" (John 3:28; cf. Matt 9:14-15), and Paul calls him our "one husband" (2 Cor 11:2). Jesus' kingdom and consummation is like "a wedding banquet" (Matt 22:2; Rev 19:7). The Song is a song about human love set in the context of marriage, which is *found in the Bible*, and the Bible's ultimate reference point is Jesus: his birth, life, teachings, miracles, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension, mediation, and return.

Perhaps an illustration will help. If you were to read C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and did not know that Lewis was a Christian and uses Christian symbolism and parts of the plot of the Bible, then you might never see Aslan, who dies and rises and rules, as a Christ-figure. You might just think he is a lion who talks, a neat character in a nice children's tale. But those who know something about the author and his intentions see more of what he wanted his readers to see: the story beneath the story. The story of Jesus opens our eyes to the subtle details of those Narnian adventures.

Similarly, knowing the story of Jesus opens our eyes to the story of the Song. The love celebrated here has as its source and ultimate illustration Jesus Christ; the loyalty, beauty, and intimacy of human love depicted in this Song points to "that Love that undergirds all of reality and in whose Presence alone all longing can be satisfied."<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, with this third guidepost in place, throughout our reading and teaching of the Song, we should seek, without exaggerating analogies, to be exegetically accurate, thoroughly canonical, and thus "boldly Christological."<sup>34</sup> Literary merit and guileless veneration of human sexuality are not the reasons that love's soft and idyllic voice appears between Ecclesiastics and Isaiah.

### 4. Guidepost Four: Written to Give Us Wisdom

Our fourth and final guidepost is about wisdom. This is a song (guidepost one) about human love (guidepost two) found in the Bible (guidepost three) *written to give us wisdom* (guidepost four).

I say "wisdom" because we can rightly categorize the Song of Songs as Wisdom Literature, thus fitting in with the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The most obvious reason is 1:1: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's." This is Solomon, the king of Israel, but also the wisest of men, the supreme sage of the Bible's Wisdom Literature.

In the Christian canon, the order goes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Proverbs begins, "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel" (1:1).<sup>35</sup> Ecclesiastes begins, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1) = Solomon?<sup>36</sup> Finally, the Song starts, "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (1:1). The part translated "which is Solomon's" could indicate:

- *Dedication: to or for Solomon*
- *Subject Matter: about Solomon*
- *Affinity: in the Solomonite literary tradition*
- *Authorship: by Solomon.*<sup>37</sup>

I take the traditional view,<sup>38</sup> the most natural linguistic view,<sup>39</sup> that Solomon was the author.<sup>40</sup> I take this Song as one of Solomon's 1,005 songs (see 1 Kgs 4:32). As the superlative superscription states, the "song of (all) the songs,"<sup>41</sup> it is the very best of all of his prolific songwriting labors.<sup>42</sup>

I also side with the medieval Jewish scholar Rashi that Solomon wrote this Song not in his youth but in his old age<sup>43</sup> and that he did so as an act of contrition. In other words, in view of his idolatrous, polygamous relationships that led his heart away from the Lord (1 Kgs 1-11) and away from sexual purity and marital intimacy, he sets himself up as the foil in this Song.<sup>44</sup> Thus, he writes this greatest of his songs in a distant "self-deprecating tone"<sup>45</sup> to say to his first readers and to us, "Listen, on this matter of marriage, do as I say, not as I did."<sup>46</sup> Put differently, he says, "Don't emulate my love life. Emulate theirs-this imaginary (or real?) couple. Emulate their simple, monogamous, faithful, passionate love for each other."

Whether one holds this particular view or not,<sup>47</sup> it is important to see the Song as part of the wisdom corpus,<sup>48</sup> based partly on its association with Solomon, but also on the *wisdom admonition* that functions as a refrain throughout the Song: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem . . . do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases." That refrain is first found in 2:7 and then also in 3:5 and 8:4. Besides that wisdom admonition, there is another subtle refrain, what we may call a *wisdom admission*: "My beloved is mine, and I am his." This is found in various forms in 2:16, 6:3, and 7:10. These two refrains function as a double-edged key that helps unlock the front door of the Song. They highlight that this is a unified poem, not a collection of random poems pasted together; and they direct us to the wisdom Solomon seeks to give two different groups: the married and the unmarried.

The primary target audience is the unmarried, specifically single young women, "the daughters of Jerusalem." Thrice the refrain begins, "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem." These "daughters" are the "virgins" mentioned in 1:3 or the "young women" in 2:2.<sup>49</sup> They might be viewed as "bridesmaids,"<sup>50</sup> but they certainly should be understood as young Israelite women (of Jerusalem-Israel's city girls and "local lasses").<sup>51</sup> It addresses women of marriageable age,<sup>52</sup> whose bodies are ripe for sexual love,<sup>53</sup> who desire marital intimacy, but are still unmarried.

These girls are admonished to wait for sexual intimacy. Their bodies are saying "yes." Their instincts for intimacy are saying "yes." Their suitors might even be saying "yes" (or at least "please"). But they are admonished to say, "no." The wisdom message to these young women is to wait. Virgins, stay virgins (!) . . . not forever, but for now. Wait for marriage. That is wisdom. That is the simple wisdom in this complex book.

Now notice how Solomon artistically does this. The admonition does not come through the voice of a celibate prophet, a learned rabbi, a stern sage, or even a father or mother (as common in the Wisdom Literature), but through the voice of a newlywed-the bride, a former daughter of Jerusalem herself, one of their peers. This is a book about peer pressure at its biblical best! Yes, the protagonist in this poem is a young bride.<sup>54</sup> And this newly married woman comes out of her wedding chamber, love scene after love scene, to tell the young ladies, "Wait for this-what I'm enjoying. It's worth it. Cool your passions now, and arouse them later, when it's time." The daughters of Jerusalem who hover around this "poetic drama" (they seem never to leave the scene) are the key to understanding the purpose of this whole wisdom poem.<sup>55</sup>

Setting the Song alongside Proverbs, another Wisdom book, sheds further light on the feminine-focus of the Song. The book of Proverbs can be called "a book for boys." The word "son" is used forty-four times; the word "daughter" is never used. "My son, stay away from that kind of girl, and don't marry this kind of girl. But marry and save yourself for that girl-Prov 31:10-31."<sup>56</sup> That's how the book ends, quite intentionally, for Proverbs is a book for boys. The Song of Songs is a book for girls. And its message to girls is "patience then passion" or "uncompromised purity now; unquenchable passion then." Or put another way: In Proverbs the young lad is told to take a cold shower. In the Song the young lassie is told to take a cold shower.

However, also in the Song the married couples-the newlyweds and not so newlyweds-are told to take a warm shower . . . together. I mean it. God's Word means it. The shower part is optional, the passion part is not. There are two refrains to the Song: one is to the unmarried (young women especially); the other is to the married. That

second refrain goes like this: "My beloved is mine, and I am his." This is the second side of the double-edged key. It opens to us the wisdom admission of mutual compatibility and absolute intimacy: two becoming one.

In an indirect and impressionistic manner, the second refrain functions as an invitation to intimacy. In [Titus 2:3-4](#), Paul instructs the older women to "train the young women to love their husbands." Here in the Song, the young woman (the bride) trains the older women to love their husbands. That is, the Song is a like a splash of fresh water that some of us old lovers need thrown on our faces. Or to change metaphors and borrow one from the Song itself, it is like the wind that rekindles a flame that is dying out: "Awake, O north wind . . . come O south wind! Blow" (4:16) . . . blow this fizzling spark into a forest fire.

So the Song asks the Christian husband and wife, "How's your love life? Is your wedding bed dead or alive? Is it as cold as a frozen pond in February or as hot as the Florida sand in August?" Reading, studying, listening to, and feeling the Song of Songs is like attending a wedding and witnessing the ripeness and rightness of young love. This Song is God's provision to sustain loving marriages and renew loveless ones. It is his provision for increased intimacy that reflects the intimacy of Christ's love for the church, an intimacy that makes the world turn its head to view our marriages and say, "So, that's the gospel. What must I do to be made *wise* unto salvation?"

## 5. "Understandest Thou What Thou Readest?"

It is no easy task to navigate through the deep waters of Solomon's Song. When we read from its opening scene

Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses! ([Song 1:2a](#))[57](#)

We will indeed rejoice and be happy for you.

We will indeed recall your *lovemaking* more than wine. ([Song 1:4b](#))[58](#)

we scratch our heads, only after we blush. We not only wonder how the two things that we will do our best to teach our young daughters to avoid-kissing boys and comparing such kissing to alcoholic consumption-made it into God's Holy Word, but we also wonder how to explain to our congregations how such erotic poetry is appropriate and edifying for the church gathered. The four guideposts presented in this article- *this is a song* (guidepost one) *about human love* (guidepost two) *found in the Bible* (guidepost three) *written to give us wisdom* (guidepost four)- cannot explain every image or solve every philological, grammatical, and structural riddle, but hopefully they can give us greater confidence to read and teach this holy book that is wholly applicable today.

[1] Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7C; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 17.

[2] Franz Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 6:497.

[3] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 17.

[4] Daniel J. Estes, "Song of Songs," in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (AOTC 16; Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 267. Cf. Roland E. Murphy, "Canticle of Canticles," in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. Raymond E. Brown et al.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 507.

[5] Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture* (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), xx.

[6] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

[7] While I disagree with M. Bossuet's sevenfold division of the text (based on this tradition), I agree that it is probable that the Song originated or was eventually used during the seven-day wedding celebration. See C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 255.

[8] Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs* (BST; Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 27. Estes notes, "The term *šîr* is often, but not exclusively, used for lyric songs and especially for love songs (cf. [Isa 5:1](#); [Ezek 33:32](#)). It could well refer to a wedding song, for music was typically employed in wedding celebrations ([Jer 7:34](#); [16:9](#); [25:10](#); [33:11](#); cf. Murphy, *ABD* 6:151)" ("Song of Songs," 302).

[9] Duane Garrett organizes his commentary as a song, with soprano, tenor, and chorus ("Song of Songs," in Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Songs of Songs/Lamentations* [WBC 23B; Nashville: Nelson, 2004], 32). He summarizes, "I suggest that the Song of Songs is a unified work with chiasmic structure and is composed of thirteen individual songs, or *cantos*, for presentation by a male and a female soloist with a chorus" (31).

[10] On the significance of this sound, see Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 39.

[11] Lord Byron, "She Walks in Beauty." This poem was the first of several English poems that Isaac Nathan set to synagogue tunes, published as *Hebrew Melodies* (1815).

[12] In *Sermon 79:1*, Bernard of Clairvaux teaches, "But in this marriage song it is affections, not words, that are to be considered" (*On the Song of Songs I-IV* [trans. Irene Edmonds; Cistercian Fathers Series; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1980], 4:138). Leland Ryken adds, "The Song of Solomon is affective, not analytic" (*Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992], 289).

[13] Roland E. Murphy states, "These touches alone suffice to indicate why the Song should not be described as a treatise on 'free love.' The cultural setting is one that encouraged strict standards of sexual morality and marital fidelity (e.g., *Deut 22:13-29*). What this poetry celebrates is not eroticism for its own sake, and certainly not ribaldry or promiscuous sex, but rather the desires of an individual woman and man to enjoy the bond of mutual possession (2:16; 6:3; 7:10[9])" (*The Song of Songs* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 98). Similarly, Brevard S. Childs writes, "The Song is wisdom's reflection on the joyful and mysterious nature of love between a man and a woman within the institution of marriage. . . . The writer simply assumes the Hebrew order of the family as a part of the given order of his society, and seeks to explore and unravel its mysteries from within" (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 575). Cf. Daniel Grossberg, "Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible," *HS 35* (1994): 1-25.

[14] Steven C. Horine ("An Integrative Literary Approach to the Song of Songs" [PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998]) has argued persuasively that the whole Song is set within a marriage relationship.

[15] David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (The Communicator's Commentary 15B; Dallas: Word, 1991), 273.

[16] Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, emphasis mine.

[17] Garrett adds, "The Song achieves something that medieval Christian culture could not fathom and that modern and postmodern culture cannot artfully attain: a man and woman who maintain passionate desire for each other in the context of conventional morality" ("Song of Songs," 102).

[18] Origen exemplifies (and establishes!) the traditional Christian hermeneutic: "It seems to me that this little book is an epithalamium, that is to say, a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God. And deeply did she love Him, whether we take her as the soul made in His image, or as the Church" (*The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies* [trans. R. P. Lawson; ACW 26; New York: Newman, 1956], 21).

[19] Nicholas of Lyra, *The Postilla of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs* (ed. Kenneth Hagen; trans. James George Kiecker; Reformation Texts With Translation [1350-1650]; Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 29. Cf. John Calvin's remark about the heretic Castellio, who thought the Song was about an immoral affair: "He [i.e., Castellio] considers that it is a lascivious and obscene poem, in which Solomon has described his shameless love affairs" (*Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* [Corpus Reformatorum xxxix, 1873], col. 675).

[20] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Preface*, cited in ACCS 9 (ed. J. Robert Wright; Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 290.

[21] Quoted without reference in George L. Klein, ed., *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 119. For hundreds of more examples of allegories, see *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (trans. and ed. Richard A. Norris Jr.; The Church's Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[22] See Martin Luther, "Lecture on the Song of Solomon: A Brief but Altogether Lucid Commentary of the Song of Songs" (*LW15:264*). Roland Murphy adds a helpful reminder: "Despite the pretense of exegetical precision,

exaggeration and uncontrolled fantasy seem to be flaws endemic to allegorical exposition" (*The Song of Songs*, 93).

[23] The Song "portrays the love between the Lord and his people as *desire*. With his immensely influential *Agape and Eros*, Anders Nygren persuaded three generations of theologians and exegetes that self-giving love, *agape*, and desire, *eros*, are two incompatible sorts of love, and that only the former characterizes the relation between the biblical God and his people; no allegory plausibly solicited by the Song can agree." Robert W. Jenson, *Songs of Songs (Int)*; Louisville: John Knox, 2005), 12. For further exploration on the general fallacy of Nygren's connection of these concepts with these terms, see D. A. Carson's discussion on *agapaō* and *phileō* in *Exegetical Fallacies* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 51-53.

[24] John Updike puts it well: "Carnal passion has its natural place in the annals of Israel; Judaism recognized that the body is the person, a recognition extended in the strenuous Christian doctrine of the bodily resurrection. A world-picture must include everything that is the case, and the love frenzy of the young . . . completes, along with the cynicism of Ecclesiastes, the despair of Lamentation[s], the problematic of Job, and the plagues and war-fury of Numbers, the picture. We might even say that, in this era of irrepressible sexual awareness, we trust the Bible a bit more because it contains, in all its shameless, helpless force, The Song of Solomon" (foreword to *The Song of Solomon: Love Poetry of the Spirit* [ed. Lawrence Boadt; New York: St. Martin's, 1999], 10).

[25] This notion appears in Plato (*Phaedr.* 250c; *Crat.* 400b-c; *Gorg.* 493a-c), but its origins likely lie with Orpheus, on whom, see William Keith Chambers Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 217-18. On the sexual attitudes in early Christianity, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[26] Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (repr., McLean, VA: MacDonald, 1985), 3:1053.

[27] Pope writes, "The quest for the supposed lost key has been futile, for the door to the understanding of the Song was not locked, nor even shut, but has been wide open to any who dared to see and enter. The barrier has been a psychological aversion to the obvious, somewhat like the Emperor's New Clothes. The trouble has been that interpreters who dared acknowledge the plain sense of the Song were assailed as enemies of truth and decency. The allegorical charade thus persisted for centuries with only sporadic protests" (*Song of Songs*, 17).

[28] Estes, "The Song of Songs," 289.

[29] I reference a line from the seventh book of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh: A Poem in Nine Books* (New York: Crowell, 1883), 265.

[30] Cf. Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 207-8.

[31] See the story of Hosea, and read the forthright language of Ezekiel (16:7-8), Jeremiah (2:2, 19-20), and Isaiah (54:5-8).

[32] According to UBS4 there are no quotations or allusions to the Song of Songs in the NT (*The Greek New Testament* [4th ed.; ed. Kurt Aland et al.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993], 887-901). Conversely, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg claims, "The New Testament is pervaded by references to the Songs of Songs. . . . Proportionally no book of the Old Testament is so frequently referred to, implicitly or explicitly" ("Prolegomena to the Song of Solomon," in *Commentary on Ecclesiastes with Other Treatises* [trans. D. W. Simon; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860], 297).

[33] Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 254.

[34] Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, 7. For additional guidance on how to interpret sections (not each body part, flower, bird, tree, etc.) christologically, see my ten sermons in Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton: Crossway, forthcoming).

[35] Bullock's summary reflects well my view of authorship: "It is our opinion that 1:1-29:27 is Solomonic in authorship, although some allowance may be made for editorializing in the process of compilation and final edition of the book" (*An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 159).

[36] The book title, "Ecclesiastes," is the Greco-Latin form of the Hebrew *qōhelet*. It might be that Ecclesiastes is a "royal autobiography," that is, "[t]he person who calls himself Qoheleth pretends to be Solomon in order to argue

that if Solomon cannot find satisfaction and meaning in life in these areas, no one can" (Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 7). Yet from looking at what the text itself says about the author (see 1:1-2, 12, 16; 2:1-12, 15, 17, 20; 4:13; 7:25-29; 8:2-5; 10:16-17, 20; 12:9-10)-especially calling him "the son of David" and "King in Jerusalem" (1:1), and then describing his wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12; cf. 7:25), wealth (2:1-11), and literary achievements (12:9-10; cf. Prov 1:1)-I find no reason we should not call the author of Ecclesiastes "Solomon." Moreover, as Longman points out, "the verb *qahal*, on which the name Qoheleth is formed, occurs a number of times in 1 Kgs 8, which is Solomon's speech at the dedication of the Temple" (*Ecclesiastes*[Cornerstone Biblical Commentary; Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2006], 253).

[37] See Ernest C. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 175.

[38] "In the entire Rabbinic literature, we find no one contesting Solomon's authorship of the Song of Songs, understanding the title: 'The song of songs, which is Solomon's' literally" (Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg, "The Midrashic Approach to the Song of Songs," in *The Five Megilloth* [ed. A. Cohen; New York: Soncino, 1984], 11).

[39] Mitchell argues that the phrase "which is Solomon's" is "more naturally understood as *lamed auctoris*, introducing the author of the text" (*The Song of Songs*, 549). Note also what Longman says, "The superscription is like the title page of a modern book in that it provides information about the genre, *author*, and occasionally the subject matter and date of a book (e.g., Isa 1:1; Jer 1:1-3; Nah 1:1). Superscriptions are found in other wisdom contexts as well (Prov 1:1; Eccl 1:1), where, interestingly, Solomon is either mentioned or implied" (Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 87, emphasis mine).

[40] In favor of Solomonic authorship, see Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 474; Lloyd G. Carr, *The Song of Solomon* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), 19; John G. Snaith, *Song of Songs* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 5.

[41] On the superlative, see Pope, *Song of Songs*, 294.

[42] Contra Origen's view (and others) that the Song is the apex of all revelation or the best of all the songs in Scripture.

[43] See Rosenberg, "The Midrashic Approach to the Song of Songs," 13.

[44] Bruce K. Waltke views the three references to Solomon in the Song (1:5; 3:6-7; 8:11-12) as "all negative" (*An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 164). While these references are arguably all negative, I view only the last as certainly negative.

[45] Daniel C. Fredericks and Tremper Longman III, "Song of Songs," in *NLT Study Bible* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008), 1085.

[46] "[T]he fact that Solomon himself did not always heed its teachings does not mute its value or render it invalid" (Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1998], 469).

[47] With all that said, nevertheless, I agree with Longman: "Fortunately, little is at stake in terms of authorship" (*Song of Songs*, 7).

[48] Duane A. Garrett notes, "Wisdom in the Bible is meant to teach the reader how to live in the world. For this reason politics, personal morality, economics, social behavior, and many other areas of life all come under its teaching. And certainly courtship, sensual love, and marriage cannot be excluded since these areas are among the most basic universals of human experience. The Song of Songs celebrates love, but it also teaches love; in this respect it must be counted as wisdom literature" (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1993], 366-67). Cf. Katharine J. Dell, "Does the Song of Songs Have Any Connection to Wisdom?" in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs* (ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn; BZAW 346; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 8-26.

[49] Longman writes that the "simplest theory" is that the "daughters of Jerusalem," "daughters of Zion," and the "young women" (i.e., virgins) reference the same group (*Song of Songs*, 94).

[50] William Sanford LaSor et al., *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 514.

[51] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 318.

[52] Hess writes, "Certainly, the maidens in the Song are unmarried women who are, or shortly will be, sexually mature" (*Song of Songs*, 51).

[53] Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 344. Cf. Othmar Keel, *Song of Songs* (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 278.

[54] Garrett writes, "The man and woman of Song of Songs are young. Their bodies are perfect: beautiful eyes, black hair, golden skin, and not a tooth missing (Song 4:2). The young man leaps on the hills like a gazelle (Song 2:9). The young woman's cheeks have the blush of youth (Song 6:7). They are new to love and to sexuality. It is a glorious, wonderful, and fleeting time-like the springtime that the Song itself describes (Songs 2:10-13) ("Song of Songs," 104).

[55] The term "poetic drama" I borrow from Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 164. I acknowledge that while the Song is not a drama, it holds some dramatic features-characters and a "loose temporal progression" or a "collage or kaleidoscope of scenes that suggests a story," as Daniel Estes phrases it ("The Song of Songs," 291-92).

[56] See Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom: Preaching Christ from the First and Last Chapters of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 47-60.

[57] Song 1:2a, as translated by Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 45.

[58] Song 1:4b, as translated by Hess, *Song of Songs*, 52.