

# Eternal Love

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LIKE MANY BABY-BOOMERS, philosopher Roger Scruton as a young man accepted the sexual standards of his generation, eschewing marriage in favor of “experiments” with less binding relationships. Scruton finally did marry when he found that his “experiment had turned into a commitment instead,” but the marriage lasted only a few years. Reflecting on his painful and all-too-common experience, Scruton wrote, “Our years of cohabitation had disenchanted our first love, while offering no second love in place of it.”<sup>1</sup>

Members of conservative Christian churches rarely find themselves encouraged to cohabit before marriage. However, Scruton’s distinction between “first” and “second” loves offers a vital insight for those—like the Latter-day Saints—who would presume to keep love and marriage enchanted forever. By “first” love, both Scruton and I refer not to one’s first crush but to love in its beginning stages, love that is romantic, passionate, and sexual. First Love is big, Hollywood-movie kind of love. Should we die never having experienced it, we would feel bereft, cheated. But if we never grow beyond First Love, love itself dies. To survive the trials of mortality we need Second Love: a deeper love to capture First Love, to domesticate it, and strengthen it for everyday life and for eternity. It was for this full and robust love that God created humankind as sexual beings, pronouncing the first man and woman “one flesh.” Jesus and Paul both echoed this declaration, but the richest, most delicious portrait of the endless love for which God intended us can be discovered in an odd, much maligned little book, the Song of Solomon.

## THE SONG OF ENDLESS LOVE

On first reading, many wonder why a frankly erotic little poem like the Song of Solomon is part of the Bible. For centuries, embarrassed the-

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1. Roger Scruton, “Becoming a Family,” in *Modern Sex: Liberation and Its Discontents*, ed. Myron Magnet (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 198.

ologians recast its sensuality into an allegory of the love of God for Israel or of Christ for the church. In the past hundred years, scholars have come to accept and celebrate the Song as an endorsement of the glories of human love. My own reading of the Song, however, suggests that only its first half focuses on the erotic aspects of love. The second half of the poem depicts that sensuality blossoming, ripening into a rich, soul-melding sexuality, an ardor that can endure when passion fails. Reading the Song in this light reveals that the Song of Solomon is in the Bible because its beautiful portrait of fully-realized love and sexuality are holy indeed.

Although the King James translation of the Bible names this book the Song of Solomon, the first line of the piece gives its title as “The Song of Songs.” This means something like “the greatest of songs.” There are two characters in the story—the lovers, whom I call “the Woman” and “the Lover”—as well as a chorus of voices.<sup>2</sup>

The first half of the Song of Songs, which I will summarize only briefly here, follows the lovers through the exhilaration and longings of courtship. Interestingly, the Woman initiates the relationship. In fact, her first words are:

1:2 Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

1:7 Tell me, you whom my soul loves,  
where do you pasture?

Where do you lie down at noon?

For why should I be like one who is veiled  
beside the flocks of your friends?

The Lover responds eagerly:

2:10 Arise, my darling,  
my beautiful one, and come with me. . . .

2:12 Flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come

2:14 Let me see you from every side,  
let me hear your voice;

For your voice is sweet,  
And you are lovely to look at.

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2. In Hebrew (the original language of the Song of Songs), the gender and number of the pronouns used indicates when it is the Lover, the Woman, or the friends who are speaking in any particular passage. Unfortunately, this is not obvious in English translations, so labels are needed. This paper follows the New International Version of the Bible in allocating the speeches. I created my version of the poem by comparing word-for-word several

Lavishing each other with praise, the two sing of their passion and longing:

- 2:5 Sustain me with raisins,  
 refresh me with apricots;  
 for I am faint with love.  
 O that his left arm were under my head,  
 And his right hand should caress me!

Despite her attraction, the Woman does not immediately accept the Lover's invitation to commitment. When she finally decides in his favor, the poem takes us on an adventure in which she leaves her bed at night to search the city for her beloved. Finding him and publicly proclaiming her love, she brings him home. When at last the lovers come together, the Lover proclaims:

- 5:1 I have come to my garden, my sister, my bride;  
 I have gathered my myrrh with my spice,  
 I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey,  
 I have drunk my wine with my milk.  
 Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.

Phyllis Trible writes that this is the language of fulfillment, of longing consummated far beyond reasonable expectation.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE SECOND HALF OF LOVE

Fairytales and romantic stories usually end with this love-drunk consummation. By and large, our culture urges us not to venture too far beyond the passion of new love, lest we find only a burned-out hulk. In the Song of Songs, by contrast, First Love takes us not quite halfway through the poem. The second half of the piece elaborates on the rest of love, a love that leads to enduring ardor.

The second half begins with a vignette that parallels the earlier ad-

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different translations of the Song (King James Version; New International Version; Revised Standard Version; the New Revised Standard Version; *The Jerusalem Bible* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1966]; *A New Translation of the Bible*, James Moffatt [New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1935]; and *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*, Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995]) and then choosing those translations which had the best scholarship behind them and which made the most sense both to contemporary readers and in the context of the story.

3. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 153-54.

venture in which the Woman goes out into the dark city streets to look for her lover. In the second vignette, she is dreaming of her beloved when he comes to the door:

THE WOMAN

5:2 I was asleep, but my heart was awake.  
I heard my beloved knocking.

“Open to me, my sister, my love,  
my dove, my perfect one;  
for my head is wet with dew,  
my locks with the drops of the night.”

3 I had taken off my tunic;  
am I to put it on again?  
I had washed my feet;  
am I to dirty them again?

The Woman was dreaming of her lover, but oddly enough, she greets his actual presence with annoyance and shame. This is the man who adores her, who has proclaimed that she captured his heart with “one bead of her necklace.” Now she refuses to let him in because getting out of bed would dirty her feet. In light of what has gone before, the Woman’s annoyance seems selfish and vain. But before condemning her, consider what she had to lose. Her lover had lavished her with adulation: praise for her beauty, praise for her grooming, and praise for her ornaments. He has just now called her his “perfect one.” In the face of such expectations, who among us would thoughtlessly fling open the door? Sexual intimacy does not necessarily bring security. Sheltered only by First Love, a wise woman worries about, perhaps even resents, being caught ruffled and drowsy.

Moreover, this midnight lover is no dreamboat himself. Curiously, the Song of Songs is not an epic poem in which the Lover proves his worthiness by undertaking an ordeal for his beloved’s favor, nor does she rescue him from some gratifying and thrilling danger. He comes to her in need, but his distress is hardly heroic. He has gotten his hair wet, and now he rattles the doorknob and pleads to come in out of the dew. The dew? His predicament isn’t exciting; it’s pathetic. Love’s fantasy comes crashing down. No wonder she hesitates to open the door.

Here we meet First Love’s crisis, one we all inevitably face. To survive it, lovers must admit to themselves, as well as to the other person, that they are not perfect. They must be willing to be seen without their public masks and defenses. The first step to Second Love requires lovers

to trust that they will be accepted in all their untidy little secrets. Equally difficult, they have to accept the other's untidiness as well.

Thus, we see the mechanism by which cohabitation, married or not, disenchant First Love. First Love blinds lovers to each other's flaws, allowing them to indulge in a fantasy of love perfectly groomed. Next comes consummation, overwhelming love in a garden. But we are only mortal, and inevitably everyday life makes itself known. Despite our romantic virgin dreams, marriage involves many adjustments, petty annoyances, and disappointments: the toothbrush left on the bathroom sink or the object of our erotic longings coming to bed in ratty underwear and an old T-shirt. The little disappointments may not amount to much objectively, but they do take that first eager, romantic edge off our ardor. In them we lose not only the dream image of our beloved, but also of ourselves. So the Song of Songs celebrates our passion and our triumphs and then asks, Now that you have seen the object of your longing from every side, now that you have *been* seen, do you still choose this love?

As the Woman struggles with this question, she reflects:

5:4 My beloved thrust his hand through the (the equivalent of  
latch opening, rattling the doorknob)  
and my womb trembled for him.  
I arose to open to my beloved

The text tells us that the Woman finally arrived at a judgment in her lover's favor because her inner parts or womb "trembled for him." Scholars who read the Song as merely an erotic poem interpret the Woman's trembling womb as an expression of her sexual feelings for her lover,<sup>4</sup> but from this point on, we can no longer understand the Song of Songs as "merely" an erotic poem. The Bible uses the image of a "trembling womb" many times, but nowhere else does anyone consider it to mean sexual desire—nor, I maintain, does it mean sexual here. Rather, the "trembling womb" is the Hebrew term expressing compassion or mercy:<sup>5</sup> "motherly womb love," the love of mother for child, of God for Creation, and now, the grace that lover grants beloved—self-giving, caring concern for the other person, for the other person's sake. While First

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4. For example, see Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 33, 45, and 80; or Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*.

5. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 33, 45. Tribble actually interprets this particular passage as indicating the Woman's sexual feelings for her Lover, but in another chapter of her same book points out that every other Biblical instance of this image indicates compassion. See my piece, "God as Mother," *Sunstone* 124 (October 2002): 42-46, for other biblical instances of the "trembling womb."

Love says, "I want you because you excite and gratify me," Second Love says, "I care about you even when you do not."

The Woman had always desired this appealing man, but had seen him with First Love's wild, blind acceptance. For love to grow, she must now desire him in his weakness, when he is less than appealing and in need of petty comfort. Only by loving compassionately, mercifully, can she let go of her own fears, defenses, and resentments, open the door and give herself fully. Compassion—the beginning and root of second love—asks of lovers the most terrifying thing possible: the complete honesty and acceptance of truly caring.

In fact, the Song of Song warns that compassion can be dangerous:

#### THE WOMAN

- 5:5 I arose to open to my beloved,  
       and my hands dripped with myrrh, (An image of yearning  
       my fingers with liquid myrrh, and yielding.)  
       upon the handles of the bolt.
- 6 I opened for my lover,  
       but my lover had left; he was gone.  
 My soul failed at his flight.  
 I sought him, but did not find him;  
 I called him, but he did not answer.
- 7 The watchmen came upon me as they made  
       their rounds in the city.  
 They beat me, they wounded me,  
       they took away my mantle,  
       those sentinels of the walls.
- 8 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
       if you find my beloved,  
       tell him this:  
       I am faint with love.

In the first version of the searching story, the Woman passes the city watchmen unscathed. In the second version of the story, the watchmen beat her and take away her mantle. What has changed? Only the nature of her love. Loving devotedly, she opened her heart. Compassionate love rendered her vulnerable in ways that *eros* never could, and she suffered for it.

Here then lies the dark secret of endless love. Only without our defenses can love grow, but in openness lurks a terrible danger. When we

care about the welfare of someone else, his or her weaknesses and needs open us to new sources of pain. When my first child was born, I felt more vulnerable than I ever had in my life, because I had never before loved someone so helpless. A beloved without defenses cannot protect either himself or us.

The weaknesses of our husbands or wives rarely expose us to physical harm, but they do endanger us in other ways. Maybe she makes foolish investments. Perhaps he craves a fame he can never have. They hurt; we suffer with them. When we truly love, we bear the burden of each other's imprudent choices, vain ambitions, anxieties, physical pain and ailments, character flaws, and even eventual death. How often have such weaknesses disenchanted love right out of existence? But the Song asks us to receive these dangers, to accept without defense the fact that our beloved's weakness exposes us to harm we cannot control. Like the Woman in the Song, we can only say, "If you find my beloved, tell him this: I am faint with love."

While caring love exposes the Woman to danger, we should recognize that the Lover himself did not harm his beloved, nor did he wish harm upon her. The Song warns us that we will suffer for our loved ones' sake, but it neither condones nor tolerates abuse, nor asks for its passive acceptance. Compassion, unlike *eros*, is purely voluntary. We cannot help whom we desire, but we choose whom and how we will love sacrificingly. Had the Lover a tendency to hurt purposefully, the Woman would have done well not to open the door.

The Woman has elicited the help of her friends in seeking her beloved after she had turned him away, but as it happens, she does not need them.

#### THE FRIENDS

- 6:1 Where has your lover gone,  
       most beautiful of women?  
 Which way did your beloved turn,  
       so we can help you look for him?

#### THE WOMAN

- 2 My beloved has gone down to his garden,  
       to the beds of spices,  
       to browse in the garden,  
       and to gather lilies.  
 3 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;  
       he browses among the lilies.

The Woman hesitated to open her heart fully, and indeed, when she did, she paid a price for her exposure. But her new weakness, her acceptance of the fears and concerns of truly loving, finally flings open the gates of the garden. When the daughters of Jerusalem ask which way they should look for the Lover, she tells them that he has gone down to his garden, to the bed of spices, to browse among the lilies. However, he went not away from, but to her: The poem told us earlier that she is herself the garden, the spices, and the lilies among which he grazes. The poem began with her request to know where this attractive man “pastured.” At its crisis, she refused him that shelter. But now, at the core of the Song, she knows the answer to her question: He pastures in her. “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,” she sings. Now begins true union.

Our modern culture tells us that we cannot do this impossible thing—we cannot adore and trust, even depend on, a person whose weaknesses may hurt us. Our culture calls women who trust and depend on others fools; it calls trusting and dependent men even worse names, making them the butt of jokes or fearing them as potential stalkers. But the Song tells us that trust and dependence are the way of true love, and reordering our priorities makes the impossible possible:

#### THE WOMAN

10 I am my beloved’s,  
and his desire is for me.

11 Come, my beloved,  
let us go forth to the fields,

We will spend the night in the villages  
and in the morning we will go to the vineyards.

12 We will see if the vines are budding,  
if their blossoms are opening  
if the pomegranate trees are in flower.  
There I will give you my love.

13 The mandrakes give forth fragrance,  
and at our door is every delicacy,  
new as well as old.  
I have stored them for you, my beloved.

#### ALL YOUR BELOVED NEEDS

Lovers can abandon themselves to the vulnerability of compassion because their abundance transcends the limited blessings of First Love.



The lovers in the Song express no concern about any need aside from that for each other. The Song names the Woman lover, bride, and daughter of a nobleman, but never a housewife. Unlike the hard working “good wife” in Proverbs 31, she does no work. Similarly, the Woman calls the man beloved, bridegroom, and king, but he never acts the part of a husband, with all the attendant worries. He does not work and he provides nothing.<sup>6</sup> Despite their lack of industry, however, all fruit, spice, wine, and freedom is theirs.

It is this abundance which gives the Song its common name. The first verse of the Song of Songs calls it “Solomon’s” (which is why it is often called the Song of Solomon). This ascription did not intend to imply, however, that Solomon wrote the poem. In fact, linguistic evidence suggests that the poem was written well after Solomon’s lifetime.<sup>7</sup> Nor is Solomon the Lover. Rather, the poet alludes to the legend of Solomon in order to contrast the wealth of Israel’s most glorious king with the even greater riches of love. Putting material wealth in context, the Song depicts Solomon—a ruler possessed of enormous wealth, power, and many wives—as one who requires men with swords to defend himself and his possessions from the terrors of the nights. But the lovers, having shed their defenses in compassion, have no need to arm themselves. Throughout the Song, they go where they please and sleep in beds of henna blossoms under cedar trees, the very air they breathe floating with exotic spices and intoxicating perfume.<sup>8</sup> The Lover lies all night between the breasts of a woman who knows he neither wants nor needs anyone, anything, but her. To him, she is all sweet and tasty things, a lily and the garden, a garden fountain and a well of living water. To her, he is pure gold, his name “oil poured out”—images of voluptuous wealth.<sup>9</sup> So, the Song of Songs asks us, which do you choose? To hold, in anxious terror, the world’s most valuable material objects? Or to have the person you adore regard *you* as the most precious thing in the world?

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6. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 157.

7. Hebrew, like any living tongue, changed throughout the years as its speakers were exposed to other languages and cultures. The Hebrew usage in the Song of Songs indicates that the poem was written in roughly the third century B.C.E, perhaps 700 years after King Solomon lived (Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 25).

8. The lovers’ out-of-the-way trysting places suggest to some interpreters that the couple’s relationship is furtive and illicit. I propose instead that the Song’s depiction of the lovers sleeping comfortably outdoors amid blossoms is another image of the wealth, safety, and honesty of true love.

9. Some scholars have proposed that the Song of Songs is not a single, integrated poem, but merely a collection of songs sung at weddings (see, for example, the introduction to the Song of Songs in *The Jerusalem Bible*, 991-92). The overall flow of images and development of themes like this one contrasting Solomon’s wealth with the glories of love, however, argue for the Song’s integrity as a single work of art.

The Song *is* a poem of love in a garden. Obviously, keeping love fresh is easy when life is one long vacation, as it seems to be for the lovers. We mortals have to be concerned about the mundane. Nonetheless, the poet assures us, even outside the garden we realize our true abundance and fulfillment in unity and mutual concern, not in the pursuit of other wealth. Placing a priority on love frees us from anxieties and stress about acquiring other things. Isn't the drive for achievement, possessions, consumption, power, and reputation, in the end, no more than a yearning for love and acceptance? If so, why not cast aside that which ultimately doesn't satisfy and strive for love in the first place? The Song of Songs—a lyrical love poem seemingly out of place in the Bible—offers a very biblical message in the end: Love and relationships, not material strivings, offer us greater wealth than we know how to crave. In fact, Jesus uses the imagery of the Song of Songs to make the same point in the Sermon on the Mount:

Behold the lilies of the field: they toil not, neither do they spin. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the fire, how much more will he care for you? (Matthew 6: 28-30)

The Song of Songs steps out of the world in which it was written (the same world, albeit some 2,300 years later, in which we still live today) to portray woman as a provider and protector, her beloved's only one, all he needs. The protection she offers is not that of the sword, but of the comfort and abundance of her devotion. Second Love asks us to be not only passionate and adoring, committed and compassionate, but also fearless and trusting. Then, safe with each other, we can let go of our anxieties and find peace.<sup>10</sup>

With that safety, ardor gains a stirring power. Already we have seen how it provides for all the lovers' needs. The next passage goes deeper still:

#### THE WOMAN

- 8:6 Set me like a seal upon your heart,  
       like a seal upon your arm:  
 For love is strong as death,  
       jealousy fierce as the grave.

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10. Family therapist Marybeth Raynes, who reviewed this paper, cautions that reaching this ideal state requires work, skill, and time. According to her, couples rarely reach this level of devotion until their fifties or sixties.

It burns like a blazing fire,  
 a flame of God himself.  
 7 Love no flood can quench,  
 no torrents drown.  
 If one offered for love  
 all the wealth of one's house,  
 it would be utterly scorned.

#### WRITE MY NAME ON YOUR HEART

In ancient times, people used seals—emblems carved of stone or clay—to mark personal property, just as today we put our name on things to mark them as ours. A seal also functioned like a signature to express one's assent or will. In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart conceived one's will or desire, while the arm carried it out. We can savor the beautiful ambiguity in the Woman's profession, "Write my name on your heart." Your heart is mine, but I am also your heart, your self. If I am your heart, does that make your will mine, or my will yours? As a seal on your arm, do I blindly carry out your bidding, or do you ask me to do only what I desire? Together, the lovers form an endless circle. There exists no object, no wealth, no authority, no acclaim that the lovers desire more than they yearn to be one with each other. Even jealousy burns not as a possessive paranoia, but as the elemental longing for complete and exclusive allegiance. Thus intertwined, joined together by God and by our own choice, our own yielding, we become one in flesh, mind, and heart.

Fearless love, which once exposed the lovers to harm, in its fullness renders them immune to all danger:

For love is strong as death,  
 jealousy fierce as the grave.  
 It burns like a blazing fire,  
 a flame of God himself.  
 7 Love no flood can quench,  
 no torrents drown.  
 If one offered for love  
 all the wealth of one's house,  
 it would be utterly scorned.

The trials of mortality pose serious threats to all relationships: Our children struggle, a loved one becomes ill, we lose a job, our parents grow old. Left unattended, the compelling passions of First Love fade softly away. The Song of Songs, however, promises us that fully developed love indemnifies us against any material danger. Love comes first.

God blesses us with Second Love to provide the safe pasture we need to face down the challenges to our peace. When we desire only unity, and defy the power of material deprivation and the lure of material wealth, fire from heaven itself melds us together.<sup>11</sup> When we are established in this love, no loss, not even the grave, can leave us bereft.

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11. Thanks to Kim McCall for pointing out the divine origin of the flash of fire (as noted in *The American Standard Version* [Norwood, Mass.: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Norwood Press, 1901], 674.