

Temporal Love: Singing the Song of Songs

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I HAVE TAUGHT FROM THE GOSPEL DOCTRINE MANUALS for a total of sixteen years, over a period of about twenty-five years. Not one of those manuals mentioned the Song of Solomon. In defiance, I read through (rather than around) the text, but a wealth of recent research calls for a more thoughtful consideration of the worth and significance of this book which calls itself the "Song of Songs."

For two thousand years, the Song has been viewed predominantly as an allegory, not an erotic poem. That is a shame. For religious, God-fearing people it has also meant, I think, a debilitating loss. The *Targum* written between 700 and 900 A.D. is typical of Jewish writings about the Song from the time of its first inclusion in the canon during the first century A.D. According to this text, the woman in the poem is Israel, the man is God, and their story begins with the Exodus and ends with the coming of the Messiah. Other historical allegories have also been suggested. With that in mind, many Jews still read the Song on the eighth day of Passover. Maimonides's work in the twelfth century offered a competing interpretation, substituting an individual man for Israel. Levi ben Gershom, whose work has recently been reprinted and reviewed, followed with a labored Aristotelian explanation of the desired union between God, man, and knowledge.¹

Hippolytus produced the earliest extant Christian discussion of the Song in about 200 A.D. Not surprisingly, pious Christian scholars saw the allegory as God's (sometimes as Christ's) relationship with the Christian church. Origen met with Hippolytus in 215 and studied under the great Jewish scholar Hillel. It was Origen, with his Neoplatonic and

1. Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides), *Commentary on Song of Songs*, trans. Menachem Kellner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

Gnostic belief in the incompatibility of body and soul, and a lifestyle so ascetic he chose castration, who established benchmarks of interpretation for Christians for centuries to come. Jerome and Bernard of Clairvaux carried on the tradition that the language of the Song was so sexual it could only be interpreted as historical and spiritual allegory. They contended that the blatancy of the sexuality screamed of code. As for the Protestants, from whose ranks came the early Mormons, we note with interest that Luther and Wesley differed little from the Catholics in their allegorical interpretations. John Calvin, however, joined the historical minority to teach that the Song was about physical love but still appropriate for the Canon.²

In the last few decades the trend of scholarship, both Jewish and Christian, has been an exploration of the literal meaning of the text, a meaning which is both intensely sexual and material. The Song celebrates sensual love in all its flavors—sight, touch, smell, sound—and toward all its objects—flora and fauna of rich variety. Some have argued that popular translations such as the King James purposefully downplay the sensuality of the original. For example, in the King James, a Hebrew word which specifically means sexual love is translated simply as “love.”³

My starting point in trying to understand any scripture is always as literal a reading of the text as I can find. I understand that the tasks of getting the Hebrew right, getting the translation into English right, and—through it all—maintaining the poetry can yield only an approximation. I have read numerous translations and commentaries and note with respect the very rational yet differing treatments. My personal favorite translation is that by Ariel and Chana Bloch,⁴ although I would always recommend the comparison of multiple translations. The New International Translation is especially useful for its clear delineation of the speech of each character in the Song. Overall, there are few sure answers to be found and much to learn in the crossfire of ideas.

Some scholars have argued the poem is a unified whole, while others claim the Song of Songs is comprised of as many poems as one per line. To the great majority of scholars, the Song appears to have no pivotal crisis, no “first” or “second” half; in fact, most scholars find the poem to be an assemblage of one to three dozen poems. They do not always seem to

2. For an excellent history of the various interpretations of the Song, see Tremper Longman, III, *Song of Songs, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2001), 20-47.

3. Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs, A New Translation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of Calif. Press, 1995), 124.

4. *Ibid.*

be in the right order. The sexual language is strong throughout the poem. Even when, in the second half (7:13), the word for love relates to an emotional rather than a sexual relationship, it is followed immediately by the scent of mandrakes, an aphrodisiac. Both lovers describe each other sensually, pursue one another, and relish their trysts in her garden and his nut grove.

The incident at the bedroom door is an excellent example (5:2-7) of precisely this sensuality. It can be interpreted many ways, but I am most convinced by interpretations which stay as close to the text as possible. To that end, the Bloch and Bloch translation is most instructive: "Open to me, my sister, my love." The moistness of his body, his thrusting his hand into the "hole" of her door ("hand" arguably being a euphemism for penis, as in Isa. 57:8-10, and the door elsewhere being a likely statement of protection against sexual activity, if not of virginity), and her reluctance to dirty her feet ("feet" being a common scriptural euphemism for genitalia, e.g. male: Exod. 4:25, Judg. 3:24, 1 Sam. 24:4, Ruth 3:4,7; and female: Ezek. 16:25 and Deut. 28:57), all suggest that he is approaching her door expressly for sex, which she is reticent to engage in at the time. Robert Alter describes her behavior as coy—reticence in a sexual context.⁵

Bloch and Bloch translate the woman's reaction to the lover's last move—thrusting his hand through the keyhole—as her "innards stirred for him." They conclude that the combination of the inner organs and the verb *hamah*, "to stir," expresses "emotions, intense excitement, love, desire, yearning, but also sorrow, regret, anxiety. . . ."⁶ This translation alone is broad enough to encompass both the concepts of sexual longing and compassion.

Mixing the emotional and the physical seems natural, more common than not, and I believe the poem does so both explicitly and implicitly. Her love, perhaps both *eros* and *agape*, has overcome her hesitancy, and she moves to the door, but apparently too late. Perhaps he has arrived in unheroic "distress" so that his head is literally "filled with drops of dew" and he urgently wishes to dry himself from the dews common in Judah at some times of the year. Perhaps she has been selfishly and vainly annoyed at this and, therefore, has not opened the door. But such suppositions read a good deal into a text which more directly says, "I want you," and answers, "Not now." The word for the tunic she wears indicates a dressy and fine garment, or possibly an undergarment. It

5. Robert Alter, "The Song of Songs, An Ode to Intimacy," *Bible Review* 18 (August 2002): 24-32.

6. Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 181.

seems unlikely that she holds back because she thinks herself less than attractive.⁷ She is certainly crestfallen and utters an expression elsewhere used for dying: "My soul failed at his flight," or "My soul went forth," or "I nearly died." We should also remember that in ancient Israel soul meant both body and spirit. The Greeks and the Gnostics, not the Jews, contributed the pernicious doctrine that the body and spirit could be only at war.

Her abuse at the hands of the watchmen who "smote" and "wounded" her exasperates but hardly daunts the young woman. The poem glosses over the incident quickly and finally. The only convincing difference between her first and second outing past the city watchmen is the fact that in this second version where she is attacked she wears a veil, the word for which is used only once elsewhere, in Isaiah 3:23, to describe fashionable apparel worn by wanton women. The tunic garment, noted above, may have been particularly seductive.⁸ Her provocative dress might well explain the attack. Meanwhile, nothing in the text indicates she is made to suffer either for her reluctance to open the door to her lover or for a lack of a deeper more spiritual love. She is "faint with love" in 2:5 prior to her commitment to the lover, and she is "faint with love" in 5:8, seeking him after the rejection at the door.

Throughout the poem these two adore one another and the sensuous world in which they find themselves. Throughout the poem they take turns as pursuer; longing leads to pursuit, then to discovery, then to joy. There is little sense of time passing. The Song may take place over days or weeks. While it may take time and corresponding experience to develop all-encompassing love, here we see no evidence of time, experience, or maturity. The lovers have no earthly cares beyond a little extra sun-exposure while guarding the vineyard, the watchman incident, and perhaps the threat of discovery. They speak only of love, and the "love" of which they speak is almost exclusively that of sexual attraction and fulfillment. In fact, in the entire Song "love" is used in only two ways other than as physical pleasure: three times as warning, and once philosophically.

As a lesson to other young women, the woman warns them of the power of love: "Swear to me. . . that you will never awaken love before it is ripe" (2:7, 3:5, 8:4).⁹ Lasting love, this appears to suggest, requires a readiness beyond hormones. Late in the poem—in what some think should have been the final stanza—we find "love" used philosophically:

7. Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 182.

8. *Ibid.*

9. See *ibid.*

"For love is strong as death, jealousy fierce as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, a flame of God himself. 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" (8:6-7). Those caveats made, the Song relishes the physical.

Oscar Wilde once said, "Those who see any difference between body and soul have neither." I'm not sure what Wilde had in mind with his clever ditty, but it speaks to me of distinctive Mormon doctrine. All is material. Body and soul are material. Material is good. The earth is good. The body is good. The spirit is good. Sex is good. Marriage is good (though, to be fair, there is little scholarly support for any indication of marriage in the Song of Songs). The sheer newness, the intense curiosity of a beginning relationship must develop into a commitment capable of weathering storms large and small, and of weathering familiarity as well. Physical attraction alone cannot carry the weight of a full life. But there are only fleeting intimations of such commitment in the Song. Their love is faithful and exclusive, but from first kiss to last voice in the garden, the love and the poem remain intensely sensual. Praise be! For herein lies a truth the text speaks to me: The relationship which cannot sustain sexual passion as it takes on additional, essential qualities of love is not to be envied. I love the Song of Songs for its clear statement of God's blessing on earthly and sexual beauty.

It has been my experience that sexual pleasure softens the blows of life and binds husband and wife when the world would wrench them apart. The absence of sexual pleasure usually strains all other aspects of marriage. I don't want to de-sex this book in the Bible, the only scripture we have in the Canon to celebrate that truth. It's almost all we have. The subject is virtually absent elsewhere in scripture, and certainly taboo in Mormon religious discussion. Brigham Young liked to point out that the "virgin birth" was myth. The Savior had two physical parents. His parents were literal lovers.¹⁰ But you'll find no chapter on that topic in your Gospel Doctrine manual. To celebrate physical love, we have only the canonical Song of Solomon. As the ancients recognized, the poem is blatantly sexual throughout, and as a result, it speaks not of or in code, but of and as delight in its subject.

We live in a culture most confused about love, sex, and marriage. Part of our confusion comes from the failure of religion to accept what this poem boldly and beautifully celebrates: the unity of body and soul,

10. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool and London: various publishers, 1886), 4:218; 11:268.

the natural affinity of the material and spiritual, and the sheer and righteous joy in sensual and sexual pleasure. Redemption is not about denying the flesh or discarding it for the eternities. It is about using the body for good not evil so that we earn the capacity to use it forever. The Song of Songs sings what, so far in Mormon theology, has been only nervously whispered.