

Preachers' Gatherings 2023

Preaching The Song of Songs

Unleashing Song for
Twenty-first Century Hearers

**Introduction
and
Sermon Resources**

C Peter White
May 2023

Preachers' Gatherings 2023

Preaching The Song of Songs

Introduction and Sermon Resources

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Torrance, Glasgow
revcpw@gmail.com

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9 Nov 2024

Analysis of the Song of Songs

Title	1:1
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Facets and phases of committed love

Desire, insecurity and delight	1:2 – 2:7
Navigating love's ups and downs	2:8 – 3:5
The wedding: deciding our values	3:6 – 5:1
The excluded lover: healing love's nightmares	5:2 – 6:3
Keeping love alive: admiration, desire, response	6:4 – 8:4
Reflection: love's power, source and value	8:5-14

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The Vision

For preachers to be thrilled by,
keen to unfold and unleash, the
Song of Songs; and to feel able to
do so.

The Remit

‘To equip preachers, over four
hours, to be able to start
teaching a book of the Bible
within two weeks.’

The Resource

Part 1 Introduction to Song

Part 2 Sermon Resources

Introduction

There is surely no more complete love song in the world, nor a more whole-hearted and powerful. The woman and the man speak as equals; family and friends are involved; the frankness is incredibly erotic yet so bathed in metaphor as to preserve modesty (almost!). How fitting the title: Song of songs.

Those who have tried to copy this completeness have found themselves rather speechless. Robert Browning's poem 'Any wife to any husband' follows Song's approach, on the same basis and indeed quoting it:

Thanks to Him

Who never is dishonoured in the spark

He gave us from his fire of fires ... (taken from Song 8:6)

Yet compared with Song, how dull. How inaccessible. Song's vitality, its power to grip and move – even excite – us, is inspiring.

Unfold the Song of Songs and you will find it as thriving a series as any you've done. Its 117 Bible verses comprise less than four in a thousand of the 31,093 total. But in providing the vision of a couple's place in society as exclusively bone of each other's bone, playfully naked together without inhibition, Song is holy Scripture's only sustained exposition of what love between a man and a woman looks like at its best. Society, and the Church, need it.

That natural reading of the text as human physical love, with its unique contribution to Biblical theology, does not exhaust its fecundity. The whole Bible is a love letter from God. 'Your Maker is your husband,' Isaiah told Israel. 'As a bridegroom rejoices over a bride, so will your God rejoice over you.' That is exactly how the man speaks about his bride in Song: there is a natural affinity between the two.

That affinity does however need expounding responsibly. Rabbi Aqiba (50-135AD), known as 'chief of the sages,' put the balance in these words. On the one hand, and you can see what he means, 'All the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. All the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.' On the other, and surely he is wrong here, 'whoever sings it in banqueting halls and so treats it as a song, a love song, has no share in the world to come.' Well, it would be wrong to cheapen it by singing it immodestly in a tavern; but there is no doubt that it is a boy-girl love song. Follow the natural reading even while recognising it has 'its end and full accomplishment in Christ.'¹ Song is about two lovers. But it has its end and full

¹ Thus Calvin on the double meaning of Psalm 72 ('His large and great dominion shall ...'): it referred immediately to Solomon and ultimately to Messiah.

accomplishment in the love between believers and the triune God. To the Christian who loves their Husband King Jesus it breathes the mutual adoration of their walk together.

It is not surprising that Song has inspired love songs beyond count. To take but one fairly modern example, Jimmy Rogers's 1957 'Kisses sweeter than wine' comes straight from Song 1:2, and there can be scarcely a love-of-Jesus song, ancient or modern, that has not picked up something from it.

Song is far closer to the heart of Biblical Christianity, therefore, than maybe first appears. On Scripture's first page God discloses himself creating humankind as the crown of creation, male and female uniquely like him, given to be fruitful and to care for the earth. On page 2 he tells us it was not good for the **man** to be alone and gives him his counterpart, his other half: **wo-man** (Hebrew has the same play: *Ish* and *Ishah*). *Vive la difference*. By page 3 they have tasted the difference between good and evil and their perfect complementarity is marred and vulnerable. Singleness is as high a calling as marriage; but what, in a fallen world, does the best and purest love between a man and a woman look like? Notwithstanding its contribution in regard to spiritual love, **that** is the chief contribution of the Song. 'It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is.'²

Other passages in Song warn us, as does every day's news, of love's dangers (as though we didn't know...). Perhaps Song is developing the warning in Proverbs, 'Rejoice in (stick to) the bride of your youth, let her breasts satisfy you always. Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?'³ Other scriptures spell out summary principles. 'Subject yourselves each to the other out of reverence for Christ: wives to your husbands, husbands to love your wife as your own body. I am talking about Christ and the Church,' says Paul. But what is hinted at elsewhere, is spelled out in frank detail in Song. What we see elsewhere briefly enjoined, we see here comprehensively enjoyed. It is full of desire, tender, poetic, modest in its exclusivity; fun, physically passionate; and God approves all. As he says at the very centre and climax (yes)⁴, 'drink your fill, lovers.'

² E.J. Young, *Introduction to the OT*, 2nd edn 1960, Eerdmans p. 354 quoted by Carr p.36.

³ Proverbs 5:18f.

⁴ Excluding the title there are 111 lines of Hebrew before the two verses 4:16-5:1 ('let my lover come into' ... 'I have come into' ... plus God's 'enjoy'), and 111 after.

That very fact brings to our attention how considerate a line the preacher must take. In our generation single people, predominantly women many of whom long to be married or have been, are disproportionately represented in our congregations. I have preached Song in three congregations. In the first, a young man told me it was the first time marriage had appealed to him; he was soon, joyfully, married. Job done, Song! In the second, an older woman said she would have to stop attending the series if I continued as I had been doing: it was just too painful. As nowhere else in Scripture, we are dealing in dynamite. By the third time I had learned to include the whole congregation: as, in a quiet way, Song itself does by the mention of friends, brothers and mother.

Song's vocabulary

No other book of Scripture comes close to Song in the proportion of words either unique to it or rare elsewhere. Song contains 470 different words; 47 occur only in Song, 51 occur five times or less elsewhere. The meaning of many is uncertain, hence the differences between translations. Most commentators therefore provide their own translation, including my top-rated three (see Bibliography, p64). This frees the ordinary preacher from being too concerned about the exact identity of the flora and spices mentioned. As in Burns's 'O my luve is like a red red rose' the point is the delight not the botanical detail. None of the OT religious words appear, in contrast with Egyptian and Middle Eastern love poetry which have a 'strong religious element'.⁵ This argues against a 'cultic drama' understanding of Song in favour of its natural sense: boy-girl, and married couple, love poetry.

The importance of the issue

You don't need me to tell you what an important role unfolding the joys and skills of marriage can play in our day. The love in Song, as we shall see, is not casual. She loves him with heart and soul (3:1,2,3,4). The repeated use of 'bride' (4:8-12) after the word wedding and the reference to family continuity through the generations (8:5f) portray love (in line with all of Scripture) as lifelong, heterosexual, exclusive and marital. This puts Song in sharp dispute with today's zeitgeist and makes it a prophetic message for today.

Even though Christian marriage is humankind's best health and happiness, it is being abandoned and denigrated as never before. Its espousal of chastity before marriage and uninhibited, equal pleasure in caress and intercourse within it is under dogmatic and sustained attack. In about 40 years we have travelled a long way from a widespread preference for man-woman marriage as the site for

⁵ Carr 36-44; the quote is from p. 43.

intercourse and the best environment for bringing up children. “The gospel allows no rule against the following, in and of themselves: nonvaginal heterosexual intercourse, bestiality, polygamy, homosexual acts, or erotic art and literature.”⁶ “The bottom line (for queer theory) is just to completely smash heteronormativity, that’s what we want to do so our kids can grow up and be who they are.”⁷ But that fails to take the Fall into account.⁸ What if we can mislead ourselves? There is a way that seems right to a person, but its trajectory is heartbreak and death (Prov 14.12).

We have a better story! Space forbids adequate treatment of this momentous change; part of our calling in this day is surely to affirm that God’s design for marriage and sex is good, and living according to it is beneficial; to show the research evidence that over the piece this produces the happiest and most stable marriages and children; and to play our part – in the course of which we will certainly be traduced – in ensuring at least a respected place for this view in education, politics and the media. “The promotion of strong marriages and families is potentially one of our most fruitful contributions to the common good.”⁹

The Church has not always espoused Song’s view. David Field comments ‘With very few exceptions, patristic and mediaeval writers condemned the sensual pleasure of intercourse as sinful. Their attitude to marriage, too, was at best ambivalent. They certainly regarded celibacy as preferable – and mandatory for clergy.’¹⁰

The Reformers did much to restore the Bible’s teaching. They condemned compulsory celibacy, upheld marriage as a good gift from God and encouraged a relational approach to marriage and family.

The entail of these incongruent approaches is very much alive. The continued influence of negativity about sex is nicely illustrated in Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s novel ‘The Leopard.’ The Prince of Salina’s wife crosses herself for forgiveness whenever they make love. Surely the Catholic prohibition of priestly marriage feeds this ‘asceticism is more holy’ approach, beside the strain which it puts on so many priests and the heartbreak that results upon failure (I say this from my own pastoral experience).

⁶ William Countryman ‘Dirt Greed and Sex’ Minneapolis Fortress Press 1988 p. 243

⁷ Elly Barnes, CEO of *Educate and Celebrate*, in April 2017.

⁸ See Kevin De Young *Do Not Be True to Yourself* Wheaton Crossway 2023

⁹ Glynn Harrison ‘*A Better Story: God, Sex And Human Flourishing*’ IVP 2017 p. 107. His book is a good and encouraging start.

¹⁰ D.H. Field, article ‘sexuality’ in *New Dictionary of Theology* Leicester IVP 1988 p. 638. The brief paragraph that follows the quote is also in his debt.

In the West, at least, equality of man and women in sexual initiative and recognition that both sexes have pleasure in it are surprisingly recent. in 1838 The Revd Dr James Bennett wrote in the *Congregational Magazine* ‘That this is **not** a song of human loves is clear from the beginning to the end ... What writer with the reason of a man (!) would begin a poem on his fair one by describing *her* as courting *him*? (my brackets and italics) The bridegroom puts into her lips this speech: “Let him kiss me!” Never would human love speak thus. The very first word of this song, then, stands a witness against the notion of its being a human love-song.’¹¹

That might be more a western than a middle eastern attitude and please God we have progressed since then. The Christian broadcaster Anne Atkins writes, ‘Versions of the Bible which ascribe speeches in SofS to one partner or the other tend to call the man the lover and the woman the beloved: it is assumed that he does the loving and she the receiving. But this is not the picture of the goat swain and her shepherd at all. She starts the song. She frequently refers to him as her beloved, and as ‘him whom my soul loves.’ She searches for him repeatedly. She holds him and refuses to release him. She takes him to her mother’s bedchamber. She woos him and makes love to him. He is not slow to respond; but the initiative is hers; she is the lover. Our society puts great pressure on men to ‘perform’ in bed, to be the expert and the one who does all the wooing; but (unless the one I know is abnormal) men sometimes long to be made love to, and to be allowed the passive, receptive role.’¹² Atkins adds the following note at this point: ‘Wives take note: 80%-90% of men initiate sex almost every time, but 30-33% wish that women did! – *The Hite report on male sexuality*, S. Hite 1981, quoted in the *New Internationalist* April 1986 p. 10. Time for God’s word to resource our sex lives.

This matter of mutuality really matters. The research done by Gregoire (see bibliography) shows that many Christian marriages fall seriously short in this department, most often with men’s alleged needs trumping wives’. Mutuality means putting our spouse’s pleasure and interests before our own.

If Song has a lot to offer Western society, think what it offers via the Gospel in some Middle Eastern cultures characterized by the subjugation of women and the deception and repression of men, single and married. Even Hamid Karzai, erstwhile President of Afghanistan, said about the mujaheddin takeover, ‘I can never get married in this country because I don’t want to subject my wife

¹¹ Congregational Magazine 21, 1838, 148f. quoted in Pope p. 135. Cp bklt II n.7

¹² Anne Atkins *Split Image* London Hodder 1987 p. 151

to this kind of life.¹³ What joy and freedom is on offer via Christian conversion and Song.

We might be confident about marriage but our members feel the pressure of those who oppose it. It is hard to swim against the flow. Preaching Song has an immense, immense contribution to make for Christians in our day, treated as they are as bigots for commending and enjoying orthodox marriage.

Date, Title, Author

Scholars have dated it all the way from the third millennium BC, before the patriarchs even arrived in Egypt, to the third century. The careful summaries by Professors Rick Hess and Iain Duguid¹⁴ show that a mid to late 10th century BC date is neither ruled out nor proven, by the evidence; but there is a significant body of evidence supporting a Solomonic date. Solomon is mentioned as though he is still alive. The place names suggest the kingdom at its greatest extent, as it was under Solomon. Tirzah is mentioned as though it was a significant city at the time of writing; this was most true in the late 10th century. The social conditions reflected in Song – village life, the king apparently close by both geographically and socially, mention of the luxurious products of the trade routes – are compatible with the period of the monarchy. The narrative (whether factual or in dreams) of the woman going alone through the city streets at night harmonises best with an early date. With regard to the Hebrew the language is alleged by some to suggest a later date but early attributions are not unknown and Ian Young provides linguistic evidence that the Hebrew is early.¹⁵ On the matter of dating, therefore, authorship during Solomon's lifetime is possible.

The attribution or dedication of the title ('The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's' [ESV]) is expressed slightly differently from those referencing David in the Psalter. In the latter the expression is a simple (excuse the language mixture) *le* David. In Song it is *'asher li* Solomon. *'Asher* is the relative pronoun that combines all the component words we use in English: who, which, (s)he who, that, which, giving us 'The song of songs, which is Solomon's'. The title is stating that the eight chapters form a unified whole with a link of some sort to King Solomon. The author(ess?) is thereby classifying it within the wisdom literature and either claiming Solomonic authorship or dedicating it to him.

¹³ Christina Lamb, *The Sewing Circles of Herat*, HarperCollins 2004 p.45

¹⁴ Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2005 p.17-20; Iain M Duguid, *Song of Songs*, IVP, 2015 p.19-24.

¹⁵ Ian Young, *Diversity in pre-exilic Hebrew*, Tübingen, Mohr 1993 p. 161-165

Since the woman is the speaker for 53% of Song, and the man 34% with the remaining text almost certainly representing others (daughters of Jerusalem etc), in the light of earlier songs such as Miriam's and Deborah's,¹⁶ female authorship is possible. We just do not know.

The title, therefore, indicates either Solomon as author or dedication to Solomon in some way by an anonymous author almost any time from Solomon's time onward, but with good evidence supporting a date not much later. It places Song in the wisdom literature of the Bible.

Lines of interpretation

Song has “tantalized the young, troubled the orthodox, and evaded the exegetical grasp of scholars for centuries.”¹⁷ There is plenty that makes it difficult to understand. What kind of writing is it? I limit my list to a few main approaches.

1. Allegorical. The assumption here is that the words say one thing but mean another. The allegorical meaning is what the story is about, like *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Animal Farm* (see note 41). See Durham's introduction, summarised below. Thus the man represents God or Christ, the woman represents Israel, the Church or (for RCs) the virgin Mary. ‘The bride's two breasts in 4:5 and 7:8 have been variously interpreted as the church from which we feed; the two testaments, Old and New; the twin precepts Love of God and of our neighbour; the blood and the water; and the outer and inner man, united in one sentient being.’¹⁸ Ambrose of Milan (fourth century CE) identified the woman's teeth, compared to freshly washed, ready-to-be-shorn sheep, as new Christians who have laid aside their sins with the washing of baptism. ‘He browses among the lilies’ (2:16), says Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) indicates that sinners have to be masticated with Christ's teeth of suffering and trial in order to be incorporated into his mystical body¹⁹; and so on. Prof. John Murray exposes the weakness of this approach: ‘I cannot now endorse the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon. I think the vagaries of interpretation given in terms of the allegorical principle indicate that there are no well-defined hermeneutical canons to guide us in determining the precise meaning and

¹⁶ Exodus 15 and Judges 5 respectively

¹⁷ Connie Whitesell ‘Behold thou art fair, my beloved’ *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* 20, 1995, p.92 quoted Gault p.1.

¹⁸ Longman p. 37 quoting Tanner, *History of Interpretation*.

¹⁹ St Bernard sermon 72 quoted in Pope 407. To be fair, commentators right up to the present all express difficulty in understanding the clause.

application if we adopt the allegorical view. However I also think that in terms of the biblical analogy the Song could be used to *illustrate* the relation of Christ to his church. The marriage bond is used in Scripture as a pattern of Christ and the church. If the Song portrays marital love and relationship on the highest levels of exercise and devotion, then surely it may be used to exemplify what is transcendently true in the bond that exists between Christ and the church. One would have to avoid a great deal of the arbitrary and indeed fanciful interpretations to which the allegorical view leads and which it would demand.²⁰ Contrast, for example, Isaiah 5 on the Lord's vineyard. He spells out the parable, and there is a clear correspondence between the image and the reality. But allegorical interpreters differ on what they identify as what; and the images don't fit. The portraits of both bride and bridegroom are openly erotic; surely we are not to be praising the Lord's, let alone God's, body parts?

2. Typological. In typology there is a link between the reality the text speaks of (the type), and its fulfilment in the NT (the antitype). Typology is widespread and thought-provoking in Scripture. The OT sacrifices, for example, took place historically on a premissive basis. Sins were overlooked for the time being, pending the planned antitype or fulfilment which actually worked, Christ's death once for all on the Cross.²¹ The chief weakness with interpreting Song typologically is as for allegory: there is no canon for controlling it. The voice of the turtle dove means the preaching of the apostles; the mountain of myrrh means Calvary's hill (even though none of the Gospels state that Jesus was crucified on a hill); the navel means the baptismal font. Song 'is presented simply as an account of the relationship between the lover and his beloved'²² without Scriptural indication that it has a Messianic reference, without a single reference to Song in the NT.²³

3. Dramatic. Origen called Song a marriage-song that Solomon wrote in the form of a dramatic script to be acted or sung. The idea has been revived in varied forms since then including by the formidable Delitsch and others. It has been seen as an enthronement festival, a cultic ritual, an oratorio. A question arises as to how many central protagonists are evident: are there just two (the Shulammite woman and either her shepherd lover or King Solomon), or three, in which the woman and shepherd who love each other have the problem of

²⁰ *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* Mar 1983 p.52 quoted Carr p. 24f.

²¹ Thus Romans 3:25.

²² Carr p. 31.

²³ Although, does Rev. 3:20 (I stand at the door and knock) flow from Song 5:2 (the sound of my lover knocking 'open to me, my sister, my darling')? cp Hess p. 167.

Solomon's unwanted attentions.²⁴ However Song has no agreed story line with beginning, middle and end, very little character development, no overall resolution of tension or conflict, no stage directions or agreed identification of speakers. It does not present itself as having been written to be performed. It does not observably meet dramatic criteria.

4. Solely natural. Whatever we make of the fact, Song presents itself as a series of poems expressing a range of facets of man-woman love: the longing, the insecurity, the reassurance, the role of friends and family, the features that thrill each about the other, love's ebb and flow. If we are to follow responsible rules of exposition, that must be the heart of the way we expound it.

The trouble is, the outstanding modern progress in hermeneutics, along with the critical skills that unlock meaning: textual, historical and form criticism and so on,²⁵ has centred on other genres of literature than Song. We are less able to interpret human love poetry, as the gulf between commentators vividly demonstrates.²⁶

As we read Song literally – i.e. as the love poetry that it is – it becomes clear that it performs as a development of very important themes which the OT more briefly addresses elsewhere: especially in Genesis ch. 1-3 and Proverbs ch. 5. As the title indicates, love poems though it is, it is also wisdom literature, not just recording two people's love but teaching us about issues in love and how to cope with them.²⁷ ‘The life setting is suppressed so as to provide a universal appeal for this love poetry.’²⁸

And yet. Does Jesus not love us with a true love that is even greater; that calls us his bride; and of which even marital adoration and sex are but the pale reflection? On the Emmaus Road Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. Did he speak of Song that evening and if so

²⁴ Thus John Balchin in *NBCR*, and *Search the Scriptures*.

²⁵ I briefly summarise these along with the benefits they bring, in my ‘Isaiah’ booklet 1 p. 23.

²⁶ “The critical tools honed and sharpened in the analysis of the Pentateuchal, prophetic and historiographic literature of the Bible have been inadequate to deal with a biblical book that differs in essential ways from the rest of the scriptural corpus.” Carol Meyers, ‘Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs’ in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* ed. Brenner Sheffield 1993 quoted Hess p. 25 n.49.

²⁷ I’m not convinced that the couple are ‘idealized’ but apart from that I think Iain Duguid’s analysis is right as far as it goes: Song ‘is best understood as a wisdom piece about two idealized people, a man and a woman, whose exclusive and committed love is deep but, like all loves in this fallen world, far from perfect.’ Duguid p. 36.

²⁸ Hess p. 29.

in what way did he say it concerned himself? The -Yah at the end of 8:6 is a quiet hint that the love of God for us is a dimension in Song just as it is in the book of Esther, even though he is not otherwise named in either book. From the early second temple period right through that of the Tannaim²⁹ the rabbis understood Song to be a divine love song, reading the woman as ideal Israel, the male as her beloved, God; and correlating Song to the Exodus, Sinai and the wilderness wanderings.³⁰ The Church from earliest days found it speaking to them of God's love for her. Scripture tells us that God our maker is our husband and that the Spirit has engaged us to Christ. The solely natural understanding cannot exhaust the meaning of Song. We have to add a further dimension.

5. Natural-spiritual, or Holistic, or Three Dimensional. Each of us is a body-soul-in-community. God loves us passionately and a full-orbed interpretation of Song will take into account the spiritual message in Song. The skill is in doing so without omitting its natural literary message and in a way that does not give rein to unjustified fancy. Duguid quotes Samuel Rutherford: 'lay head and soul down in the bosom and between the breasts of Jesus Christ: that bed must be soft and delicious, it is perfumed with uncreated glory.'³¹ This is devotional but Jesus is the bridegroom in this relationship and breasts are a feature not of the bridegroom but of the bride. Hudson Taylor comes close to the same eisegesis when he exclaims of Christ 'let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth;' but Scripture permits metaphorical description of the mouth (Rev 1:16) and God grant us the same passion of personal love for Christ as evinced in his '*Union and Communion*'.³²

James Durham's (1622-58) allegorical approach is summarised below (p21-24) as representing a careful attempt to interpret justifiably, although he mistakenly denies the natural reading.

²⁹ The Tannaim (Heb. "repeaters") were the rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah from approximately 10–220CE. The Mishnah is the first major written collection of the Jewish oral tradition, redacted early 3rd century CE.

³⁰ Jonathan Kaplan, *My perfect one: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs*, OUP, 2015, p. 184f.

³¹ Duguid p. 33 quoting S. Rutherford *Christ dying and drawing sinners to himself* Glasgow 1803 p. 14.

³² J. Hudson Taylor *Union and Communion: thoughts on the Song of Solomon*. My copy has no note of publisher or date but it is available from ICM books in Craigavon, N.Ireland.

Structure and analysis

The enormous variety of proposals puts dogmatism out of court. **Longman** calls it an anthology of twenty-three poems forming a progression; he groups the poems into eight chapters. **Garrett** says Song ‘is a unified work with a chiastic structure with 4:16-5:1 as the dramatic climax, composed of thirteen individual songs, or *cantos*, for presentation by a male and a female soloist with a chorus.’ He labels the parts soprano, tenor and chorus. **W.O.E. Oesterley** denies it is a unity and divides it into twenty-eight distinct poems.³³ **Marcia Falk** divides it into thirty-one poems with 3 speakers (male, female and group) set in four settings: country wild / cultivated, and city indoor / outdoor. She classifies five themes in Song’s portrayal of love: beckoning, banishment, search, self in a hostile world, and the praise of love itself.³⁴ **The Bible Project** calls it a spiral of poems with no clear structure.

It seems to me that identification of the author’s method is a work in process, but there is evidence in the text that he must have some kind of structure in mind. There is inclusio in the ‘take me away / come away’ and vineyard themes at its beginning and end. 4:16-5:1 is surely the centre,³⁵ and not only mathematically. Either side of it there are two spells of importunate searching. Repeatedly a unit of thought is identified by verbal clues at beginning and end to form an inclusio, eg 2:14 voice-face … face-voice. All these are evidence of intentional, sophisticated design.

As to what structure, I would defend a ‘progression of thought’ view of Song. After the title we are catapulted straight into the woman’s desire for him. At the end we watch them ride into the sunset agreeing to stay talking and belonging bodily to each other. In between we watch her first unsure of her attractiveness but reassured by him. Then they go from eagerness to shyness and declarations of love to the thrice-repeated refrain ‘don’t arouse love till it’s right to’. In 4:8ff they have just married. He calls her ‘bride’ for the first time, six times in ten verses, and in scripture that always means a ‘legal marriage’.³⁶ Soon after that we see the archetypal ‘go away’ that takes place in almost every marriage,³⁷ and how they heal it (5:2-6:3). They then explore how to keep love alive, and conclude with Song’s defining and most profound statement about

³³ W.O.E. Oesterley *Song of songs* Waltham St Lawrence, Golden Cockerel Press 1938 p. 6

³⁴ Marcia Falk *Love lyrics from the Bible* 1982.

³⁵ The climax in Kingsley Amis’s *Take a Girl Like You* has an identical emotional relief, strengthened once their mutual commitment is made clear.

³⁶ Hess p. 28

³⁷ I say ‘almost.’ Alex Aitken told me he and Catherine had never had a cross word but that does seem to be some kind of a record.

love before departure. Through the course of Song we observe her maturing from the regretful ‘My own vineyard I have neglected’ (1:6) to the confident ‘my own vineyard is mine to give.’

In addition to this overall (if uneven) progression of thought, Song includes three types of refrain that contribute to the structuring:

1. 2:7 = 3:5 ≡ 8:4 daughters of Jerusalem I charge you ...
2. 2:16 ≡ 6:3 ≡ 7:10 developing declaration of mutual belonging
3. ‘who is this’ / friends’ comment eg 1:4; 3:6; 5:1d; 5:9; 6:1; 6:10; 6:13?; 8:5 and 8:8?

The first is around the vulnerability and power of love: do not awaken love ‘until it so desires.’ It is expressed in such poignant terms, the theme obviously meant a great deal to the writer. The wording is identical in 2:7 and 3:5; 8:4 omits the second verselet.

Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires

In other words, by all that’s natural, don’t stir up sexual response and arousal until the right time. The repetition is more than mere evidence of Song’s unity. The danger it recognises is that sex and desire are such fun and so powerful, it would be wrong to arouse it in someone outside of the commitment which Song illustrates. That would be abusive and cruel.

The second refrain, this time repeated in developing terms, concerns their belonging to each other. In 2:16 she says ‘my lover is mine and I am his;’ Taylor suggests this represents her first thought as being of her claim on him. That progresses to 6:3 ‘I am my lover’s and my lover is mine.’ now her first thought is of his claim on her. In the third instance, 7:10 ‘I belong to my lover and his desire is for me,’ her first thought is that she is altogether his. ‘It is inasmuch as the lovers humbly submit to the refining fire of their love, that they surrender themselves to love’s commands, that they are themselves made holy by that love. It is inasmuch as the flame of the Lord (Song 8:6) progressively consumes their selfish egos that the lovers find themselves sanctified by that love.’³⁸

What then – and the argument here depends on the whole shape of Song and its inscripturation – of the issue of virginity in Song and therefore of its message

³⁸ Abi Doukhan *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs*, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham 2019, p93f.

in our day where the acceptance of premarital sex is almost universal even in the majority of churches? There are texts that seem to show them more detailed in their physical knowledge of each other than we might have expected of a middle-eastern couple.³⁹ In Doukhan's words, 'they seem to be completely oblivious to the prudence of the ancients. Societies have laws, principles governing relationships—and this in order to ensure that love does not find itself spoiled, marred, destroyed by the reckless passions of youth. There are clear laws of modesty, appropriate times and ways, proper rhythms. Here too the lovers fail. Every law is broken or ignored. They lack modesty. They do things too soon or too fast.' Doukhan resolves this by redefining her standards: 'Even though the lovers are seen transgressing the rules and customs of their society, even though their love is wild and free, even though they have broken every rule in the book, one cannot say that the lovers are lawless! It is just that they have submitted to a more profound law than that of society—the law of love.' Virginity is likewise redefined: 'Virginity is thus not a state of being which can be altered or ruined, but a mode of giving of oneself that is entire and whole-hearted. Virginity defined as such is thus indissociable from a woman's agency. Only inasmuch as she gives of herself freely, consensually, can she give of herself whole-heartedly and give to her gift of self a virginal quality. As such, it becomes impossible to "give up" one's virginity, or have it be "taken." Virginity in this sense can only be offered! To give oneself completely to another is thus to give oneself virginally.'⁴⁰

The problem with this modern reading is twofold: it fits neither Song's ethics nor Scripture's. On the day of the wedding the bridegroom says how proud and grateful he is that she has kept herself for him: 'You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride. You are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.'

The same issue was important to her brothers, who played a role in watching over sisters' lives in that culture⁴¹ as Song indicates at both beginning and end.

We have a young sister, breasts not grown:

What shall we do for her in preparation for the day she is spoken for?

If she is a wall (she says no to sex before marriage)

We will proudly build towers of silver on her

If she is a door (lets the men in, easy virtue)

We will enclose her with panels of cedar (we won't allow her out to parties)

³⁹ Eg 1:6 and 16; 2:4 and 16; 3:4; 4:5; and certainly 7:7-11 although on my understanding that has followed after the wedding.

⁴⁰ Doukhan pages 90, 94 and 25 respectively.

⁴¹ Eg, unworthily, Genesis ch. 34.

Garrett comments that the preservation of virginity until the wedding night was far more important in ancient Israel than now (in the West, anyway). From the Pentateuch he quotes Gen. 24:16, Lev.21:13-15 and Deut.22:13-21. Likewise in Song, whether she is a virgin is important; he adduces 1:7, 2:9, 2:14, 4:8, 4:12a, 5:2-8, 8:8f, 8:10. He quotes Josephus' understanding of Gen.24:16: "Laban is my brother and, together with my mother, he takes care of all our family affairs and is the guardian of my virginity."⁴²

Expounding this issue clearly but with sensitivity has the potential to guide young men and to save young women much heartbreak (it's most commonly that way round). Important not to arouse further guilt in those who have a different sexual history.

One of Song's significant contributions is to show how boy-girl love fits into its larger context. Hess draws attention to the repetition in 8:5b (verselets 2 and 3):

Under the apple tree I aroused you:
There your mother conceived you
There she who was in labour gave you birth

'There is no doubt that the repetition in 8:5b is designed to emphasize the generational aspect, so that the erotic sense of lovemaking is set in the context of the family ... in which generation after generation is envisioned as safeguarding the family ... Hence the erotic tenor of the whole song here moves beyond the inevitably selfish tendencies of pleasure seeking to describe the broader vista of the fulfilment of the goal that God wishes for his people, to be fruitful and to fill the earth ... The reference to the previous generation and the expectation of one to come assume that the erotic love of the couple does not lie outside the bounds of marriage but is integral to it.'⁴³

In order to rightly divide Song the structure that can be concluded from that bare outline remains up for grabs but a six-stage analysis has been gaining acceptance. The GNB espouses it as do Hess, Duguid and Gledhill. The NIV study Bible's is the same except that it divides the sixth stage into two, making seven sections plus the title verse. This analysis follows Song's sequence of themes and I have chosen it for my own analysis and when preaching right through Song recently. See Appendix I (p30) for a comparison of Hess's, Duguid's and mine; notice the different functions of our three analyses.

'Sequence of themes' is not the same as story line. Rather, facets of love – initial attraction, insecurity, reassurance, reluctance, delight – are steadily exposed.

⁴² Josephus I.246. Garrett's discussion is p. 164-168.

⁴³ Hess p. 237.

Given that 3:6 – 5:1 is widely called ‘the marriage’ it is natural to regard the relationship prior to that as courtship and engagement, and after it as that of a married couple. We end up with the outline:

1:1. Title. Affirms unity and aligns itself with Solomon as wisdom writing.

Song: facets and phases of committed love: human and spiritual

Note: this is not history or doctrine, it is poetry. If we haven’t moved and warmed and potentially aroused our hearers we have misrepresented Song!

1:2 – 2:7. Love’s desire, insecurity and mutual delight.

She experiences longing and desire, 2-4a

Friends give encouragement, 4b

She feels and justifies her flaws, 5f

They arrange to meet and delight in each other, 1:7 – 2:6

First refrain: do not arouse such passion until the right time, 2:7

2:8 – 3:5. Navigating love’s ups and downs

It’s spring, the time for love, and he calls her to meet him, 8-13

She hides in the cleft of the rock. Is she shy, his lovely one? 14

Catch the ‘foxes’ that threaten their vineyards, 15-17

She goes searching for him at night (in her dreams?), 3:1-4

First refrain repeated, 3:5

3:6 – 5:1. The wedding, the values chosen for it and its consummation.

The controlling question: who (fem., used of persons) is this? 3:6

A sharp disjunction follows, signposted by two contrasting ‘beholds’ in 3:7 and 4:1 (NIV leaves the second of them untranslated)

The flashy choice: Solomon’s bodyguard, wedding bed and crown, 3:7-11

The ‘person and character’ choice, 4:1-15

- The first formal *wasf*⁴⁴ song, 4:1-7
- The personal delight, 4:8-15

The consummation, 4:16 – 5:1a

God’s (and/or their friends) ‘enjoy!’ 5:1b

5:2 – 6:3. Excluding our lover: healing love’s nightmares

The pain: by excluding him she causes the problem, 5:2-8

Her friends help by asking what’s so special about him anyway, 5:9

The healing: she rehearses his attractions by her only *wasf*, 5:10-16

Her friends help again: “Where has he gone, then?” 6:1

They are reunited and bliss is restored, 6:2f

⁴⁴ *Wasf* is conventionally structured praise of the body. See Appendix II, the *wasf*, p35

6:4 – 8:4 Keeping love alive

He revels in her afresh: his second *wasf*, 6:4-9

His friends: ‘who is this woman?’! 6:10

At work he daydreams of her, 6:11f

His friends again: ‘hey, Shulammite lady, can we take a look at you?’! 6:13

She: why would you want to?

He praises her: his third *wasf*, 7:1-9a (is this her dancing? See Appx on *wasf*)

She responds in fresh love, invitation and pleasure, 7:9b – 8:3

First refrain repeated, 8:4⁴⁵

8:5-14 Reflection: love’s power, source and value

Who’s this coming? (to catch our attention), 8:5a

She: Love is a family succession, seal, flame from God, priceless, 85b-7

She remembers her brothers’ concern and her excellent answer on when we are ready for love. She was ready, and (unlike Solomon) her love was not for sale, 8:8-12

Final agreement to retain friendships, stay talking and maintain their love, 8:13f.

‘Come, my Lover’: Maranatha, 8:14 = Rev.22.20

Is God here?

Where is God in this? Indeed is he mentioned at all? There is an intriguing NIV footnote on 8:6d. Its text says love is, among other things, ‘a mighty flame’ (there is no ‘like’ in the original). The footnote reads ‘Or, the very flame of the Lord.’ I don’t think we should be talking Hebrew words during a sermon, but forgive a brief comment for the total non-Hebraist (I’m little more than that).

The word in question is *shalhebetyah*. Hebrew verbs modify their meaning through prefixes and suffixes. Taking the standard paradigm verb *qtl* (to kill), to get the passive you add the prefix *ni-* (= verb stem *niphal*) and get *niqtal*: he was killed. To get the causative you can add the prefix *sha-* (= verb stem *Shaphel*) and get *shaqtal*: ‘he caused to kill or caused death.’⁴⁶ That causative sense is probably the meaning of the prefix *sha-* here.

The 3-letter root at the centre of *sha-lhebet-yah* is *lhb*, → flame.

⁴⁵ See p. 16 for note of the three repeated refrains

⁴⁶ The causative more commonly uses the *hiphil* stem (prefix *hi-*) producing *hiqtal*, he caused to kill. In 8:6 the author employs the *shaphel* stem, in line with their striking and unusual use of the relative pronoun *she* throughout the book (eg 1:7 *whom* my soul loves). It is cognate with the Akkadian *sha* and other semitic dialects and probably reflects a northern provenance. Deborah’s song includes it: Jdg.5:7 (Pope p.33).

Suffixes show other things such as personal pronouns. A common one is 'yah' (God), as in Hallelujah: praise God. Our word has this suffix.

Putting the whole word together, adding the prefix sha- (cause) and the suffix -yah (God) to lhbt (flame) gets us the whole word shalhebetyah: a flame caused by God. The last four words of 8:6 about love are literally 'its flames (are) flames (of) fire, a shalhebetyah:' a flame caused by God.⁴⁷ Or as we might paraphrase: believers' marriage love is a blaze kindled by God. Jerusalem Bible: 'a flame of Yahweh Himself.'

Most commentators take the NIV interpretation but Barry Webb translates it as I suggest⁴⁸ and Prof. Richard Hess supports the reading 'flames of God:' 'It may well be that here at the climactic point of the whole song, the poet chooses to mention the name of God, a name otherwise hidden and reflective of his operation behind the scenes.'⁴⁹ Think, you married folk: your love for your spouse is a flame that God, operating behind the scenes, set alight. Think, all of us: our love for God is a blaze that he himself graciously set on fire. All is of grace.

James Durham: a good example of the allegorical approach

Appointed Professor of Divinity at Glasgow in 1650 upon the recommendation of David Dickson, James Durham (1622-58) never took up his post because in the same year the General Assembly appointed him chaplain to King Charles II. His diligence was legendary and his commentary on Song, *Clavis Cantici*⁵⁰ or, *an exposition of the Song of Songs* shows his painstaking approach.

(A). **Durham's introduction** occupies the first 32 pages (1723 edition). Whether or not we agree with him throughout, it is so clear and so loving of Christ that I summarise his approach very briefly (too briefly: you lose his dripping-adoration warmth of love for Christ).

Durham says: How excellent Song is! Those get most benefit from it who watch over their own hearts and are much in conversation with the Bridegroom.

Scripture has two possible senses: (1) **the natural**, which would read Song as Solomon marrying Pharaoh's daughter; (2) **the figurative**, e.g. as shown by Jesus in Matt. 22:2: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.' Song has this second sense.

⁴⁷ TWOT Vol. I p. 1077f translates it this way as does Davidson's analytical lexicon.

⁴⁸ Webb *Garments* p. 32 'Love – this kind of love – is the very flame of Yahweh.'

⁴⁹ Hess p. 240 on 8:6. Longman suggests that God's name is hidden but also present via a play on words in the refrain of 2:7 and 3:5, but it strikes me as a pretty obscure word-play.

⁵⁰ *Clavis Cantici* is Latin for 'Key to the song'

Within the figurative senses of Scripture are (a) **the typical** and (b) **the allegorical**. The former presuppose a historical basis (Durham's example is Jonah).⁵¹ Song has none, it is not about Solomon's wedding. It is an allegory just as Matt.22.2 is. Its interpretation calls for particular care, rightly dividing the Word, because not everything in Song is fitting for interpretation. We can however say what the chief figures represent:

1. The bridegroom is Christ, John 3:34; 2 Cor.11:2; Matt.22:1&2
2. The bride is the church, and every believer
3. The friends are 'honest ministers' who rejoice to see Christ magnified, John 3:29
4. The virgins or daughters of Zion are immature Christians ready to stumble
5. The mother is the universal, visible Church
6. The children of the promise (I'm not sure where he finds these in Song? But I take it he means, those who inherit the blessings of which Song is so full) are the true lovers of Christ, as distinct from unrenewed professors of the faith.

The great scope of Song, what we now call its rhetorical intent, is the desirability of fellowship with our Bridegroom. Oh how sweet and loving is this relationship, even though sometimes painful (as when we greatly feel our unworthiness); how privileged we are.

(B). Examples of Durham's exposition.

1:1: it *is* a song (compare Deut 32 Moses' song), → singing to the Lord of his love and singing our responsive love are good exercises which God approves. That includes penitent songs. Such singing can lead us further than we currently experience. It glorifies God, edifies others and refreshes our own spiritual life. 'Song of songs' = the most excellent of songs: God commends it to us.

1:2: 'let him kiss me' – it is fitting for us to long for Jesus

'kisses of his mouth,' cp 5:16 'his mouth is sweetness itself' – kisses = the lovely manifestations He gives of his love cp Ps.27:4

'love' is plural as per previous line

'loves more desirable than wine' – those manifestations are so cheering!

1:3: 'pleasing, the fragrance of your perfumes' – there are many excellencies in Christ. His grace is savoury, Christ abounds in it.

⁵¹ Tony Thistleton 'Many draw a firm distinction between allegory which depends on a correspondence between *ideas*, and typology which depends on a correspondence between *events*.' (his italics) *NDT* art. *Hermeneutics* p.294. To illustrate the distinction, *Animal Farm* is allegory, a non-historical story which means something else; '*That rock was Christ*' is typology, an historical event with a later fulfilment to which it has spiritual similarity.

‘your name is like ointment poured forth’ – (a) poured = there’s no scarcity in Christ, he is liberal in grace. (b) the heart that knows Jesus Christ will love to dwell on thoughts of his worth. (c) Christ is as full of spiritual refreshing as a box full of ointment. They (spiritual graces) show him to be lovely and evoke our thanks / appreciation.

1:4: ‘draw me after You’ – as John 6.44 no one can come to me unless the Father draws him: we need him to do this, do let’s ask him to.

‘Into his chambers’ – what a privilege. There are degrees and steps in communion with Christ: sometimes we are closer than at other times (CPW: how realistic, what a relief to have him say so). Exercising faith in him can improve this.

1:5 ‘dark am I yet lovely:’ ‘dark’ = blemished with crosses and corruptions, yet ‘lovely’ = I also have graces, comforts, and beauty in Jesus’ eyes → let’s confess we are a mixture, but not so as to disdain ourselves.

1:6 ‘mother’s sons angry with me’ Durham links to John 15:18 ‘if the world hates you, keep in mind it hated me first’ -?. That’s forcing it. ?Conceivable spiritual parallel with Luke 12:53 ‘they will be divided father against son’ but truly that isn’t exposition.

‘vineyard’ = the graces and talents which God gives a believer. ‘take care of // Matt 20 workers in vineyard. ‘not kept:’ she regrets her spiritual infirmity. Our duty is to improve our talents, our sin is how we fail in this. Her misery: it is healthy to bewail our shortcomings. (CPW: it’s a relief to realise that others grieve how poorly they have stewarded God’s mercies.)

1:7 ‘you whom I love:’ Christ is lovely, let the Christian be ardent: for Jesus loves being him whom our souls love.

1:8ff = Christ’s words to us. Wahey, he sees us as fairest to him!

1:9,10 like a mare = Jesus sees our stateliness, strength and courage, he sees us as lovely. Re cheeks, neck, earrings: ‘don’t enquire into the details.’

2:6 left arm under head, right arm embrace = she expresses Christ’s care of her. Christ’s love is a sensible (you can feel it), sustaining thing, able to support the heart in its weakness. → observe Christ’s love at all times, especially when you are weak. It will prove a profitable exercise.

2:2,16 ‘he browses among the lilies.’ Lilies = all believers; Christ is kind to his people and present with them.

4:5 two breasts = we are fit to edify others⁵² and to take them and Christ to our bosom.

⁵² Durham takes this spiritually. Scripture identifies the breasts as givers of milk and life (Is.28:9; Joel 2:16; Ps.22:9; Job 3:12) as well as being attractive (Ezk.16:7; 23:3&21; Hos.2:2.), but I do think this is illegitimate interpretation.

4:8f ‘come with me from Lebanon, my bride; you’ve stolen my heart’ = Christ shows his love for his bride in 3 steps: his kind invitation; he shows he is taken with our love; he gives fresh commendation of her. From lions’ den = she (we) has rejected covetous and worldly men in favour of him.

4:12 garden enclosed, flowers = believers are set apart from others and Christ takes much pains with them. They are his delight and furnished with special graces (flowers).

6:5 her eyes = Church’s love to him and faith in him. ‘Overwhelm him’ !!

Ch. 8 overview:

1. 1-4: she wants more intimate familiarity with Christ. That open brother-sister sweetness(1); ‘mother’s house’ (2) = I want to usher you into the Church for all the family.
2. 5a: her friends commend her
3. 5b-8: She wants more fixedness in her fellowship with him. ‘place me like a seal’: she prays against the decline in that. ‘Young sister: what shall I do?’ = praying for those not yet brought in.
4. 9: Jesus says yes, comforts us
5. 10: she’s comforted
6. 13: ***His*** farewell request
7. 14: All she wants is that he comes and makes her happy: she has no more to say than that, Rev 22:17. → pray for Christ’s second coming: then, we will not need to cling to his promises, but will possess and experience them. Even so come, Lord Jesus.

Reflection on Durham. I’m not worthy to tie his shoelaces and the attractiveness of his love for Jesus is encouraging and insightful. And yet. It is revealing that his approach requires ***not*** interpreting major features of the text. Song contains much frank eroticism. Clearly that is not appropriate to our relationship with Jesus. To deny that the book’s content is in harmony with its intent, does not quite cohere.

Reading Song as Poetry⁵³

What is it that makes a piece of writing poetry? The essential feature is sustained rhythm that freely mixes semantics, syntax and accent; and organisation. Take the third verse of Song with its three verselets:

Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes,
Your name is like perfume poured out:
No wonder the maidens love you! (1:3)

Regularly, the first verselet is in fairly ordinary language while the second is more striking, an epithet ('intensification'). Repetition is not just the same thing twice. It adds a dimension: poignancy, desperation, ecstasy. The choice of epithet is significant. It might be simple dramatization, but it might be making a point: 'your very name makes me all gooey inside!' It can help our hearers if we draw attention not just to the intensification of the second line, but to the point it is making.

That second line can be synonymous, complementary, focussing, or indicate significant consequentiality as in 2 Sam 22.4:

I praised God
And was saved from my enemies

There is a whole theology there.⁵⁴ The system is most commonly dyadic but adding a third line (triadic) indicates either closure or special emphasis, as in 1:3 above.

Song is in some ways not typical of Scriptural poetry. It is the only secular (apparently!) love poetry in the Bible, and unlike (eg) the Songs of Miriam and Deborah we do not find its life-setting. That is not its value to us. Song's imagery is a remarkably diverse mixture of rural and urban allusions. Alter affirms that it was sung at weddings: there is a popularity to the flowers, the beauty of male and female bodies and the delights of lovemaking. Unlike the historically-based songs there is no narrator's voice, just two lovers yearning and enjoying, albeit with encouragement and question supplied by people or groups not identified in the text itself.

Song utilises semantic parallelism and verselet explanation freely:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth - not just a peck, the real thing!
For your loves (plural: caresses) are more delightful than wine (1:2)

⁵³ What follows is my notes arising from Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. I have changed his examples from all over scripture to ones taken almost exclusively from Song, although I could not resist taking 2 Sam 22.4 as the example of consequentiality.

⁵⁴ Cp 2 Chronicles 20:19 in context verses 15-24.

Another feature of Song: the first verselet introduces the simile, while the second indicates what it refers to: what Gault (below) calls the target:

Like a lily among thorns
Is my darling among the maidens;
Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest
Is my lover among the young men.

This introduces another help in identification. He mostly calls her **רַעִית'** = Ra'iti, noun fem sing with suffix 1st pers sing: my friend / companion / lover / love / NIV darling.⁵⁵ She mostly calls him **דָּוִד'** = Dodi (same root as David), noun masc sing with suffix 1st pers sing: my beloved.⁵⁶ Her term is definitely warmer than his. It is the same word (but for the suffix) as in 1:2 your love is better than wine. Of the 38 uses in OT with this meaning, 37 are in Song and the other, significantly, is when Isaiah uses it of God: 'my Beloved had a vineyard' (Is.5:1).⁵⁷

In the rest of the Bible's poetry there is a limited stock of imagery such as 'apple of your eye' and 'shadow of your wings.' In Song however the imagery is innovative and often startling: 'I liken you my darling to a mare harnessed to one of Pharaoh's chariots.' That simile is much discussed and possibly used because chariots usually used stallions. A mare among them could have caused havoc. 'The beloved in poem after poem is gentle, dovelike; but the sexual attraction she exerts drives males to distraction.'⁵⁸ The imagery is often an explicit simile 'to be like.' Song has five of the thirty OT occurrences of the phrase and it is often followed by its ramifications, adding to the implications in the message:

⁸ Listen! My beloved!

Look! Here he comes,
leaping across the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

⁹ My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look! There he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice. (2:8,9)

⁵⁵ He also calls her most beautiful, dove, sister, bride, my perfect one, Shulamite, noble daughter.

⁵⁶ She also calls him my friend and 'whom my soul loves.'

⁵⁷ The sickness both are suffering from (!), 'I am sick with love,' is a third word **אהבָה** = 'ahaba, as also in 'his banner over me is love', 'love is as strong as death', 'many waters cannot quench love'. 2:4,5,7; 3:5,10; 5:8; 7:6; 8:4,6,7.

⁵⁸ Alter on 1:9: p.192.

What a gift to the preacher! Compare the ‘wow’ ramifications in 7:7-11, which the author has led up to by the flamboyant elaboration of metaphors in the preceding verses: from artisanry to agriculture to architecture, concluding with dyed textiles.

The author thus manages to combine explicitness with decorum. As he moves up the body from private parts to parts seen by others, so he draws his similes from the public realm. The metaphors carry the action forward: from her hair, to being entwined in it, and from the palm tree, to climbing it and holding its fruit, her breasts.

1:12-14 likewise progresses from the initial statement about her ‘king’ to the metaphor of her lover as a sachet of myrrh, on to other aromatic herbs and the specialness of En Gedi, as those who have visited it will be aware: a wonderful, permanently green waterfall area between the Judean desert and the Dead Sea.

The poetry abounds in ch.4: animals wild and domesticated, dyes, food, architecture, perfumes, flowers. Mountain and hill become metaphors for her body (her body as landscape) to the actual landscape around them with lions that ravish just as he finds her ravishing (15f). Thereafter fruit, honey, milk, wine, a spring of water, spices. He comes to enter⁵⁹ fragrant flowing and enjoys luscious fruit. It’s all a bit exciting.

The to and fro of double meaning is of course intentional. ‘Though we know, and surely the original audience was intended to know, that the last half of the poem conjures up a delectable scene of love’s consummation, this garden of aromatic plants, wafted by gentle winds, watered by a hidden spring, is in its own right an alluring presence to the imagination before and after any decoding into a detailed set of sexual allusions. The poem by the end becomes a kind of self-transcendence of double understanding (*double entente*). The beloved’s body is, in a sense, ‘represented’ as a garden, but it also turns into a real garden, magically continuous with the mountain landscape so aptly introduced at the midpoint of the poem.

‘It is hardly surprising that only here in biblical poetry do we encounter such enchanting interfusions between the literal and the metaphorical realms, because only here is the gratification of love through all five senses the subject. Preconceptions about the Hebrew Bible lead us to think of it as a collection of writings rather grimly committed to the notions of covenant, law, solemn obligation, and thus the very antithesis of play.... Only in the Song is the writer’s

⁵⁹ ‘come to’ and ‘enter’ “often have a technical sexual meaning in Biblical Hebrew:” Alter p. 202.

art directed to the imaginative realisation of a world of uninhibited self-delighting play, without moral conflict, without the urgent context of history and nationhood and destiny, without the looming perspectives of a theological world-view. ... Metaphor transforms the body into spices and perfumes, wine and luscious fruit, all of which figurative images blur into the actual setting in which the lovers enact their love, a natural setting replete with just those delectable things.”⁶⁰

All those metaphors!

What exactly does the Beloved mean when she says, ‘My own vineyard I have neglected’ or ‘my lover is mine, and I am his; he browses among the lilies’? What is she encouraging when she says ‘let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits’? For the sake of this section we are treating metaphor and simile alike.

The most thorough recent exploration is that of Brian Gault, ‘*Body as Landscape, Love as intoxication: conceptual metaphors in the Song of Songs*’ 2019. After analysing the history of interpretation into three types, he proposes a ‘conceptual-comparative’ approach. He identifies three categories of body imagery: figurative self-description (I am a wall and my breast are like towers); sexual euphemism (mountains, gardens, vineyards, fruit); and descriptive lyrics with quite standard metaphors: fauna, flora, architecture, agriculture. The principle is that the words of the text (eg ‘shorn sheep’) do more than just evoke emotion, they firmly represent particular body parts. “The more we know about both literary and cultural context, the greater our chance of yielding an unambiguous result.” (p. 44). Gault compares especially the cultures of Israel, Mesopotamia, Akkadia, Arabic poetry, Egypt and Greece. In respect of universal archetypes such as the desire for privacy he adds Rome, Shakespeare and even Keats, Burns and the Rolling Stones! He then takes each expression and identifies (1) its vehicle or source, the words of the text; (2) the target: the body part it refers to; and (3) the ‘mapping’: what point it is making. Here are his tabular summaries.

⁶⁰ Alter p. 202f. Italics his.

VERSES	TARGET	SOURCE	mapping	RELATION	FORM/FUNCTION	METAPHOR
1:5-6	Female Skin	Qedar/Solomon	Dark Beauty	Shared-Universal	Form	LANDSCAPE
8:8-10	Female Body, Breasts	Wall/Door, Towers	Purity, Reward	Shared-Universal	Function	LANDSCAPE
2:3	Male Body	Apple Tree, Fruit	Protection, Pleasure	Borrowed (East)	Function	LANDSCAPE, INTOXICATION
1:9	Female Cheeks, Beauty	Egyptian Mare	Distinction, Decoration, Attraction	Borrowed (Egypt)	Form, Function	VALUABLE OBJECT
2:17; 4:6; 8:14	Female Breasts	Mountains	Size/Shape, Seclusion	Shared	Form, Function	LANDSCAPE
4:12-5:1, etc.	Female Body	Vineyard/Garden	Privacy, Prosperity, Pleasure	Universal	Function	LANDSCAPE
7:8-10 8:2; 7:3	Female Body, Breasts, Mouth Navel	Palm Tree, Clusters; Grapes, Apple, Wine, Pomegranates	Height, Size, Intoxication	Shared, Universal	Form, Function	LANDSCAPE, INTOXICATION

Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication

VERSES	TARGET	SOURCE	mapping	RELATION	FORM/FUNCTION	METAPHOR
1:15, 4:1; 5:12	Male/Female Eyes	Doves	Shape? Timid, Distance, Messengers	Shared	Form? Function	LANDSCAPE
7:5	Female Eyes	Pools in Heshbon	Size, Vitality	Borrowed (Heshbon)	Form, Function	LANDSCAPE
4:1, 6:5; 7:6; 5:11	Male/Female Hair	Goats, Crimson, Raven	Wavy, Dark, Rich	Shared, Universal	Form	LANDSCAPE, VALUABLE OBJECT
4:2, 6:6	Female Teeth	Sheep	White, Whole, Well-Aligned	Shared	Form	LANDSCAPE
4:3	Female Lips	Thread	Color	Universal	Form	VALUABLE OBJECT
4:3, 6:7	Female Cheeks	Pomegranate	Color, Pattern/ Shape	Universal	Form	LANDSCAPE
4:4, 7:5	Female Neck, Nose	Tower	Size, Color, Ornament, Straight, Peace/ Strength?	Shared, Universal, Borrowed (Lebanon)	Form, Function	LANDSCAPE, VALUABLE OBJECT

7. Conclusions: Method, Metaphor, Beauty, and Unity

Verses	Target	Source	Mapping	Relation	Form/Function	METAPHOR
4:5; 7:4; 5:13	Female Breasts; Male Lips	Fawns, Lotus	Symmetry, Shape/Shade, Sexual Passion, Sensual Intoxication	Universal, Borrowed (Egypt)	Form, Function	LANDSCAPE, INTOXICATION
7:3	Female Belly	Heap, Wheat, Lotus	Shape/Shade, Superior Beauty, Sexual Satisfaction	Shared	Form, Function	LANDSCAPE
7:2	Female Thighs/ Hips	Gems	Shape?	Shared?	Form	VALUABLE OBJECT
6:4, 10; 5:15	Male/Female Form	Cities, Luminaries	Supreme Beauty	Universal	Form	VALUABLE OBJECT
5:11, 14–15	Male Head, Arms, Legs	Gold, Topaz, Alabaster; Rods, Pillars, Bases	Supreme Value, Color/Sheen, Strength	Universal, Shared	Form, Function	VALUABLE OBJECT
5:13	Male Cheeks	Spices	Scent	Universal	Function	LANDSCAPE, INTOXICATION
5:14	Male Loins	Ivory, Lapis Lazuli	Virility, Value, Color, Shape?	Shared	Form, Function	VALUABLE OBJECT

Gault says we can draw additional conclusions from his evidence.

“These natural motifs also contribute to the continuing debate over the Song’s literary unity. The recurrence of similar themes throughout the Song, such as the female body as a pleasure garden (1:6; 2:15; 4:12–13, 16–5:1; 6:2, 11; 7:13; 8:12–13) and love as intoxication (1:24; 2:4–5; 4:10–11; 5:1, 13; 6:2–3; 7:3, 8–10, 13; 8:1–2), provides a coherence not normally found in an anthology. Also, mention of the girl’s brothers at the beginning (1:5–6) and end of the book (8:8–10) suggest an authorial aim to present a balanced, unified work.” (p135f.)

Reflection on Gault

Inasmuch as the *wasf*, for example, is a standard offering to love and the wedding in that part of the world, using comparative data has a great deal to offer. A wedding took place in Ibillin in the Galilee when I was staying with Fr Elias Chacour and after the service in church – followed by the bride’s mother dancing us all home to her house⁶¹ – the singing of an extended *wasf* one night was a high point in the traditional celebration. Elias told me when to nod and smile as the cantor even sang the praises of his western visitor! On the cautionary side, taking the exact import of a Song metaphor by comparing similar wording all the way from ancient times and distant places to the Rolling Stones is an exercise that demands a critical faculty. ‘Love poetry in different cultures will articulate its metaphors in ways that might strike us as strange.’⁶² Preaching Song in six sermons hardly allows for identification of every metaphor, but noted with a pinch of salt, Gault has done us a favour.

⁶¹ Was that an echo of Song ch. 7? See appendix on *wasf*.

⁶² Longman p. 141.

Singles, mother, brothers, ‘daughters of Jerusalem’: Song and the role of ‘friends’

The participants in Song other than the man and woman are not identified in the text. The titles given in modern translations are attempts by the translators to make Song easier to understand. Who those people are and where their contributions start and finish are identified differently by every version and I would want to make slightly different identifications and start-finish points.

Nonetheless it is clear that other parties are involved in this couple’s burgeoning love and I want to suggest that this is more significant than most commentators spell out. To illustrate with a couple of examples, NIV implies that the friends in 1:4b delight in the woman while acknowledging (its note *b*) that the ‘you’ is actually masculine singular: not about her. Surely they are not telling the girl they are fond of her, but giving her encouragement by saying that they too think he’s marvellous. Friends can help guide our choices.

In 5:1 it might be friends who say ‘Enjoy’ to the couple at virtually the climax of consummation but I can’t but think it is quietly God.

In 5:9, 6:1, 6:10 and 6:13 they, whoever they are, play a most useful part in, respectively, helping the (now) wife to come to terms with having excluded him (5:9), helping look for him (6:1), responding with a question to his enthusiasm so that he has the chance to confirm it (6:10) and finally calling her back so as to give her a chance to listen again to his praises (6:13). This is really helping her to heal her regrets and the two of them to praise each other and reunite.

I draw attention to this because such ministries are important in the life of the church. Good listening, asking the right questions, expressing caution and encouragement as appropriate – even for those who find singleness painful these activities remind the church how significant they all are for supporting marriage in its good and bad times. Preaching through Song is a word for the whole church as the stamp upon human relationships of God’s love for all and his special love for believers; but it also dignifies every member and gives all of us a role in this fundamental social unit (Gen. 1 & 2).

Purpose (rhetorical intention) and Conclusion: the ‘value added’

Song is in Scripture in order to help us maintain love in all our relationships, with God and with one another. ‘It is a splendid garment, to be worn not with awkwardness and embarrassment, but festively, with joy and deep thankfulness to him who gave it to us as Holy Scripture.’⁶³ It corrects all our cultural biases: the modern abandonment of chastity, the Victorian assumption that women are devoid of desire, the nuclear family that denigrates the wider family and leaves single people out in the cold... If we have unleashed it well and God has blessed, we shall see our people confident about Christian marriage and giving themselves to live it. They will be able to explain our better story among their friends and Christianity’s detractors and play their particular part in the health of marriage in their congregation.

Since our Maker is our husband and we are engaged to Christ, they will also be more hugely thankful for God’s fatherly and ‘mother-hen’ly love, and eagerly give time and effort to grow in their responsive love for our Lord Jesus and their enjoyment of his great love for them.

⁶³ Webb p. 35.

The Song of Songs

Facets and phases of committed love (Repeated from p 3)

Title,	1:1
Desire, insecurity and delight,	1:2 – 2:7
Navigating its ups and downs,	2:8 – 3:5
The wedding: deciding our values,	3:6 – 5:1
The excluded lover: healing love's nightmares,	5:2 – 6:3
Keeping love alive: admiration and response,	6:4 – 8:4
Reflection: love's power, source and value,	8-5-14

Selecting passages for a sermon series

If a series is to represent Song it must include its key concerns:

- God's encouragement of physical love within marriage, and that as the stamp in marriage of the love of God who arouses it.
- Exploration of love's insecurities.
- Recognition of the immense power of love, for good or evil, and our responsibilities in the light of that.
- The role of others, both family and friends: and by extension, the Church and in particular those we are close to.
- The significance of the values we choose for marital love.
- Believers are promised to one husband, to Christ. In talking about marriage, we are also talking about Christ and the Church.

In the life of a congregation there will be many who are not married and it is vital to be sensitive to all of them: the young, the teenagers, the never-married, the previously married whether through divorce or bereavement, those who are experiencing the abuse of love, the LGBT+ in the church.

I have sometimes explicated the rationale behind my selection of a passage. Possible series are shown on page 35.

For sermon passages I have suggested its '**glowing heart**' and '**OHL**': the **Objective** it has for **Hearers' Lives** including ours.

Suggested titles and passages for a *six* sermon series

1. The desire, the insecurity and the delight of true love, 1:1 – 2:7
2. Negotiating love's ups and downs, 2:8 – 3:5
3. The wedding: choosing our values in love, 3:6 – 5:1
4. The excluded lover: healing love's nightmares, 5:2 – 6:3
5. Keeping love alive: admiration, desire and response, 6:4 – 8:4
6. Reflection: love's power, source and value, 8:5-14

Possible *alternative* sermon series

This book provides notes for a series of six sermons, as above.

Chapter 8 verses 5-14 contains a great deal of important matter, however, and could well be split into 8:5-7 and 8:8-14 in line with the NIV Study Bible's analysis, giving seven sermons in total.

To provide say three additional sermons making ten, one could explore the two repeated refrains: that on not arousing love prematurely (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) and the progress in a relationship – both human and spiritual – hinted at in 2:16, 6:3 and 7:10; and finish with an overview that addresses the influence Song could have in the light of today's moral confusions in the realm of relationships and easy sex.

If a longer series is wanted it would not be difficult to make at least two sermons out of all six offered above by dividing their passages appropriately. Bernard of Clairvaux preached 86 sermons on Song, which Liturgical Press (Cistercian) describes as 'among the most famous and most beautiful examples of medieval scriptural exegesis' – and still got only as far as 3:1!

Resource notes for sermons

Sermon 1. The desire, the insecurity and the delight of true love, 1:1 – 2:7

Introduction. Song is the only place in the Bible which talks to us directly about the love between a woman and a man. It encourages us that every part of that love, including the sex, is good and joyful when we engage in it with the right person in a permanent, exclusive relationship. Mentioning family and friends as it does, it reminds us that all of us have a part to play in supporting married love whatever our age and marital status.

But it is a delight for another reason. Married love is the stamp in human relationships of God's love for us. 'Your Maker is your husband,' says Isaiah. Song reveals his love for us, his commitment to us and his pleasure in us. It invites us to respond passionately to his love and to love him back with all our hearts: whether we are young or old, single or married, male, female, intersex or sexless. We all belong here.

Is Song the experience of a particular woman and man (and if so, does it follow the progress of their relationship?), or is it wisdom literature saying, 'this is what wholehearted love is like, and God gives his 'Yes!' to it.' The title words 'which is Solomon's' probably indicate the latter and connect Song to other passages such as Proverbs 5:18-20. It develops in detail Genesis 1:28 and 2:18-25, and Prov. 30:19 ("The way of a man with a maid"). The wording 'Song of Songs' pronounces it the best love song ever.

This section divides out:

- She desires him; her friends agree he's gorgeous, 1-4
- She is attractive but regrets being so darkened by the sun, 5 & 6
- She looks for him by taking her goats to where the shepherds are, 7 & 8
- The two of them take turns at admiring each other, 1:9 – 2:6
- Refrain: do not arouse love until it is right to do so, 2:7

Glowing heart. Desire is good, give yourself to it ... at the right time.

OHL (Objective for Hearers' Lives) Be glad and confident to fancy your spouse/fiancé(e) and say so; and if you are single and therefore an observer in these things, you have a role to play in supporting couples who love in God's will.

Sermon Thoughts

If I preach this book as it deserves, we're going to have an emotionally charged journey! It records a woman and a man being very frank about being attracted to each other's bodies, and we know from advertising how powerful a force that is. Human sexuality runs so deep because it connects us to the rest of the animate world; to the created order; and it links us with God's own self, since marriage shows forth the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32). No wonder it evokes visceral responses in us.

It is really interesting to notice, in our passage, the difference between her and him when it comes to what they each delight in about the other.

- Her arousal is about the totality of him. All five senses are involved along with the joy in their relationship. She mentions taste, touch, mouth (2), like the effect of wine (2), the smell of him (3); he's like myrrh between her breasts (13), he's handsome (16), he's protective (2:3), proud of her (2:4), she loves his caresses as she lies in his arms (2:6).
- His arousal is all visual: she's like a mare (9), has beautiful cheeks, neck, eyes (10, 15), like a lily among thorns (2:2).

There is practical wisdom in knowing about this difference. 'It is a well-known fact that men assign far greater salience to the attractiveness of a potential mate when considering their mating preference than women do.'⁶⁴ When it gets to bedtime what will turn him on can be something instant such as the flimsy nightdress. What will have turned her on is the previous 24 hours' wooing: the protection, the expressed pleasure in her, the touch, all her senses.

As we look over the whole passage we notice three headline features of true love and the importance of other people. They are as true spiritually as physically: true of the love between a man and a woman, and the love between Christ and the believer.

1. True love yearns.

The song begins without a beginning: she is already yearning for him. Desire is good: God gave it to us. She wants not just kisses but the full kisses of his mouth. His loves ('love' in 2b is plural), i.e. caresses, are more delightful than wine.

This is practical! Down with physical inhibition! The couple who go on touching, kissing, caressing, complimenting and wholeheartedly relishing each

⁶⁴ Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. *Sexual strategies theory: an evolutionary perspective on human mating*. Psychological Review, 1993, 100(2), p.204.

other will bless each other, are more likely to stick together and are an advert for the love of Christ for his Church. ‘May her breasts satisfy you always ... may you rejoice in the wife of your youth ... may you ever be captivated by her love.’ (Proverbs 5:18-19). Love is a commitment, give ourselves to it.

Authentic love for Jesus is likewise full of desire. ‘As the deer pants for water, so my soul longs for you.’ (Psalm 42:1) ‘My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you.’ Astonishingly, God loves us even more than the man loves this woman. ‘The Lord takes pleasure in his people.’ (Psalm 149:4) ‘From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride.’ (hymn ‘The church’s one foundation’, Samuel John Stone, 1839 - 1900)

2. True love feels unworthy.

She is anxious about her unattractive features (5a). She regrets neglecting her own ‘vineyard.’ How often true love feels unworthy in different ways, undeserving of such a spouse. Kindly he reassures her (8-10).

In our love walk with Jesus the spiritual person feels they are the ‘chief of sinners’ and is amazed that the Son of God loves them and gave himself for them.

3. True love expresses admiration.

Repeatedly he speaks of her beauty; repeatedly she delights in him. Love your spouse like these two.

Likewise, let our praise and appreciation of Jesus occupy our thoughts and prayers as much as our requests. ‘His name is as ointment poured forth: **Jesus.**’ (v3) Let the Godhead’s acceptance of and pleasure in us lift our heads and hearts. I recommend John Owen, Vol. 2, p.31-38; I summarise it in Appendix 1.

4. The help of the whole Church (v.4). ‘The community of faith thus adds its own ‘Amen’ of approval at the outset to the love story of the couple ... true love has a communal aspect to it: it is not just a vehicle of personal satisfaction for the individual man and woman.’⁶⁵ Let the congregation play its part in praying for them and including them – and vice-versa.

⁶⁵ Duguid p. 82

Sermon 2. Negotiating love's ups and downs, 2:8 – 3:5

We come to our second study in this great book, which is God's picture for us of wholehearted love between a man and a woman committed to each other. It has a message for all of us, married or single, because supporting, protecting and standing for God's best in the vital area of love is all our responsibility.

There is a second way in which Song is about all of us. Authentic love is a gift from God (1 John 4:7), a reflection on earth of God's love for us. And God's love of us is all our business, and the privileged experience of every believer. Just as the man says to the woman 'as a lily among brambles, is my love among women,' so also the Holy Spirit says to each of us that we are special to him, he finds us bonny, he absolutely loves and has pleasure in us. Hence the appendix on John Owen's advice how to build, as our first thought about God, that he truly and freely loves us.

Song, however, is first and foremost a song of man-woman love. It is not only yearning, it is frank and erotic; and the love between God and us is not. But both of these loves are true love, and Song teaches us about both.

In this section, 2:8 – 3:5, we are shown five phases through which love passes, and pointers how to respond to each.

Glowing heart: living through the ebb and flow of love. 'The course of true love never did run smooth.' (Shakespeare: *Midsummer Night's Dream* Act 1, Sc. 1)

OHL: Maturity about love, so that we see its vicissitudes in perspective and do not despair when it goes through difficult times.

Notice the phases Song identifies as it points to mature coping with them.

1. Love's eagerness: show it, 2:8-13.

Isn't this phase a joy to enjoy? 'Here he is, leaping across the mountains, peering in through the window, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me: Spring is in the air!"'

Alan Reid, in his booklet of sermons, quotes an article about an engaged couple in their 70s.

'One icy day last winter, we headed down to the Bureau of Licences in lower Manhattan. There was a security guard at the door - a big, beefy fellow - and Albert asked him where to go for a licence. 'What kind of licence?' the guard said. 'Marriage,' Albert replied. Marriage! The guard stared at our faces, which clearly

belonged to a pair of 70 year-olds. And then he went totally gaga. 'You folks are getting married? Fan-tastic!'

He pulled off his cap and waved it in the frigid air. He took off a glove, grabbed Albert's hand in his massive paw. You've made my day! Hey, Mike, come over here. Get this! These folks are getting married!'

Let couples be like this and give themselves to shared eagerness in love. Work to keep romance in our marriages. Keep up the date nights. 'When I look at all the women in the world, I find none of whom I could boast as I boast with joyful conscience of my own. This one God himself gave me, and I know that he and all the angels are pleased when I hold fast to her in love and fidelity' (Martin Luther of his wife, Katie).

There is a spiritual lesson here too. The Lord Jesus enjoys your company and conversation. Give him time, just as he escaped to the Father regularly esp early morning. Ask God to draw near and give you an experience of himself.

2. Love's reluctance: melt it, 2:14.

I think this is what's going on in v. 14. She is shyly hiding on the mountain. Is she not yet sure of his love? Or of herself, or her attractiveness to him? Or just nervous about expressing love? Think of C.S. Lewis's point about eros, the way both of you can be full of desire when expressing it isn't possible, but then one party suddenly goes cold once opportunity presents itself: a sense of humour is essential to the frustrations of eros.

When it happens, it needs one party to be patient and the other to be generous. If there is reason for the reluctance, to make a definite time to talk that through.

The same applies spiritually. 'When I go to prayer,' confessed an eminent Christian, 'I find my heart so loath to go to God, and when it is with him, so loath to stay.'⁶⁶ This is a reluctance to melt, and the short book I would most recommend is Eric Alexander, '*Prayer – a Biblical Perspective*' published by Banner, 2012. It breathes reality from the prologue on and following the practical approach on p. 85f is a great achievable roadmap to melting our reluctance. See Appendix II, p. 27

⁶⁶ Quoted by Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, London, MMS, 1967 p. 76

3. Love's dangers: protect it, 2:15.

The foxes that ruin the vineyard's blooming surely represent the hindrances and dangers that love faces. It might be not listening, overspending without joint decision-making, past abuse or sin, temptations elsewhere such as pornography, remembrance of past grievances, exaggeration, a third party, over-busyness, carelessness, insensitivity. But as Song says, the foxes need catching and dealing with lest they ruin the blossoming of love.

Spiritually the same lesson firmly applies. Our intimacy with the Lord can be hindered by compromise with the world, disobedience to his still small voice, self-indulgence, neglect of our duties; let us take heed of all that mars or disrupts the intimacy of love.

4. Love's insecurities – trust it, 3:1-4.

She is in bed, perhaps sleeping, and dreams or fears, 'Does he really love me?' Periods of separation are inevitable; anxiety can arise. I think the message from these verses is, 'Don't panic.' You are committed to each other; assume the best and tread unbelief down.

Again, the same applies in respect of our Lord. 'On my bed I remember You; I think of you through the watches of the night' (Psalm 63:6-8).

When we in darkness walk
Nor feel the heavenly flame
Then is the time to trust our Lord
And rest upon his name.

(Your harps, ye trembling saints, Augustus Toplady 1740-78)

5. Love's great power – don't abuse it, 3:5.

The verse reminds us that there is a right time to arouse love, and it is cynical, cruel and dishonourable to arouse it before then. There is no doubt that this is more frequently a male sin than a female one. It is tempting to trifle with a girl's affections, to arouse a response when we are not serious or before the right time. The harm done to the vulnerable can be lifelong agony:

'An unmarried woman of 33 appeals for help; a Christian worker. During a continental holiday she becomes 'friendly' with a married man, flattered by his attention. One night while dressing for dinner there is a knock on her bedroom door. Thinking it is staff she calls come in. He enters, embraces, kisses her and

since she is half undressed he finds it easy to touch her body in a very intimate way. She comes to me, her mind torn with conflict. On the one hand she wants to return to a normal life of Christian service. On the other she is passionately in love with this man and possessed by (such) uncontrollable feelings of sexual desire that ... it will be a long time before she regains self-mastery.’⁶⁷

‘Daughters of Jerusalem (that includes both sexes), I charge you. Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires:’ until it is the right thing to do.

Spiritually, the warning perhaps applies to putting pressure on a person to profess faith before the right time: before they know what they are doing and want to do it for themselves.

Above all, in this matter of love running hot and cold, we need an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. ‘My Lover – here he comes! He said to me, “Come with me; arise, come, my darling.”’ ‘You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’ (Jeremiah 29:13) Friends, let us seek him, seek him!

⁶⁷ Leslie D Weatherhead ‘*The Mastery of Sex*’ London SCM 19th edn 1964 p. 41. Although old-fashioned in some ways it is outstanding in *this* regard and still the best resource on it that I know.

Sermon 3. The wedding: choosing our values in love, 3:6 – 5:1

In opening our lives to Song we have seen that it is a love song between a man and a woman whom God has made for each other. Let it inspire our conduct of love, and let it remind us to pray for Christian marriages, for there can hardly have been a time when they have been more systematically under threat.

Yet Song reminds us of the even more tremendous and tender love that God bears towards his Church, towards us his people. For consider:

‘I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. In that day, declares the Lord, you will call me ‘my husband;’ you will no longer call me ‘my master.’ (Hosea. 2:19,16)

The NT adds the Trinitarian dimension that we are betrothed to Christ and look forward to the wedding supper of the Lamb (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:9).

The two loves are expressed differently. What in marriage has a strong physical dimension, in the love between Christ and us is obviously not physical but is indeed a true love bond, person to person, spirit to spirit; this is the very core of our life.

In today’s passage the man calls the woman his ‘bride’ for the first time – 4: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. I take it that while previously their memories and reflections have been of the courtship period, and how to keep love strong through the ups and downs of insecurity and reluctance, now they are remembering the wedding and the wedding night consummation. In it they seem to be drawing a contrast between the two possible focusses of a wedding. The flow of thought is a bit obscure and here I am broadly following Iain Duguid’s interpretation (p. 104-125, especially his outline on p.104, 105).

The passage goes like this:

- The man (or just possibly the daughters of Jerusalem) asks, ‘Who⁶⁸ is this, coming from the country, all fragrant?’ v. 6.

He then says ‘look!’, ‘behold’, twice over: 3:7 and 4:1.⁶⁹

- ‘Hey, look (on the one hand) at Solomon’s chariot, all pomp and splendour, soldiers, crown and expense,’ 3:7-11

⁶⁸ feminine singular, a particle (*mi*) normally used of people

⁶⁹ NIV omits the latter but the *hinneh* (behold!) is the same in both places and fairly emphatic

- ‘But just look (on the other) at my beautiful, queenly, gorgeous, feminine, fragrant, desirable, flawless darling. My bride, you’ve stolen my heart.’ 4:1-15
- And then what must be the memory of marriage’s consummation: ‘Arouse my ‘garden’, you winds, let my lover come into it and taste its choice fruits’ → ‘I have come (*sic*) into my garden, eaten my honey, drunk my wine.’ (4:16 – 5:1).

To paraphrase: the man draws a contrast using ‘Behold:’

- ‘Behold, I remember Solomon’s carriage in all its finery as he arrived for one of *his* weddings,’ 3:7-11. No mention of love.
- ‘Behold (not in NIV!), let me tell you what was uppermost in *my* mind: How beautiful you are, you’ve stolen my heart, my bride,’ 4:1-15. No mention of pomp.

What a difference in values, in relationship, in heart.

4:1-15 is in fact a poem of two halves.

- v.1-7 are a special type of poem called a *wasf*. They all say the same kind of thing, describing the charms of your loved one, usually from the head down, occasionally from the feet up. See Appendix 2: The *wasf*.
- v. 8-15 show what is most on his heart: ‘I have a wife!’ Just see the verses. ‘You have stolen my heart, my bride, with one glance of your eyes!’ ‘Your lips drop sweetness, my bride; oh the fragrance of your garments.’ ‘I’m so proud you’ve been a garden locked up, keeping yourself for me.’

Then in 4:16 – 5:1 comes the consummation. She prays for the winds (Spirit?) to bring arousal to her ‘garden’ and invites him in; he does; and God himself approves: ‘Eat, O friends, and drink your fill, you lovers’ (5:1b). Modesty draws a veil over the details but see the joy, one flesh and unashamed, and each of them equal in dignity and desire – which is quite modern in Western thinking.⁷⁰ God says his yes to the fun of play as they get to know each other’s bodies.

⁷⁰ The influential American author Mary Wood-Allen in her popular *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* (1898) ‘assured her readers that it was permissible to take part in intimate physical intimacies within marriage so long as it was done “without a particle of desire”’ – quoted by Bill Bryson *At Home* London Doubleday 2010 p. 348. Does that explain her divorce? Compare comments on ‘The Leopard’ and on nineteenth century assumptions on p. 10 above; and the historical heresy that the single life is somehow more holy.

There is no doubt that that – positive, erotic, physical union and joy – is the meaning of the text. But as we said, Scripture also declares that the Maker of believers is their husband (Isaiah 54:5). There are similarities of spiritual value even at this most intimate point.

Glowing heart. Let our wedding and our marriage be stamped with mortification and aspiration: being dead to the world, and choosing God's will and values.

OHL. To perceive and choose the simplicity of Christian love against the pull of the world and 'keeping up with the Joneses.' especially concerning our weddings, but throughout our lives.

Sermon resources

1. The value contrast between what is flashy and personal qualities. 'Your beauty should not come from outward adornment (gold, jewellery and fine clothes) but that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. Husbands, in the same way be considerate with your wives and treat them with respect, so nothing will hinder your prayers.' (1Pet. 3:3-4,7)
2. Since Jesus says even to us, 'you have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride,' let us exercise that intimacy. Jesus thinks you're bonny; respond! Reflect on Psalm 147:11 and 149:4 and spend time with him. Think of this:
'The Lord your God is with you. He will take great delight in you,
He will quiet you with his love,
He will rejoice over you with singing.' (Zeph.3:17).
3. There is the danger hinted at in 4:12 ('you are a garden locked up') that we will let other attractions than God's steal our hearts, both spiritually and in our general conduct. 'Demas has deserted me, having loved this world.' (2 Tim. 4:10) Jesus calls us to keep ourselves for him. Let us be utterly Christ's. That, like the consummation of this couple's marriage, has God's glad Yes.

Sermon 4. The excluded lover: healing love's nightmares, 5:2 – 6:3

We've been seeing how much wisdom Song brings into our understanding of the workings of love, focussing on that between one man and one woman in marriage. It offers a wider perspective too – through the part that family, friends and city watchmen play in Song – into every aspect of believers loving one another in Church, family and society.

All genuine love has its source in God (1 John 4:7). Scripture allows us to include the spiritual dimension of our fellowship with God. The OT declares to Israel, 'Your Maker is your husband' and Paul reminds the Corinthians, 'I betrothed you to Christ.' It is proper to find in Song an object lesson in the reality that our Lord Jesus truly loves us with all his heart, and wisdom on ways to respond to that tremendous truth. Sometimes we fail abysmally; sometimes we experience glory inexpressible; Song remains our star to steer by.

In our passage today, we read of the woman's nightmare when she dreams her lover is knocking tenderly and she rebuffs him, feeling it's too much effort to respond.

It happens! That is why it is so common in film and song. In 'Pretty Woman' (1990) Edward (Richard Gere) is rudely chauvinistic towards Vivian (Julia Roberts) and she locks the door on him. In the next scene we see him chauffeur-driven down the road outside, horn blowing, standing with his head through the sun roof, carrying flowers and shouting 'I'm sorry!' as she watches. He climbs up the fire escape with a red rose in his mouth.

Vivian: You're late

Edward: You're stunning

Vivian: You're forgiven.

and they are reconciled. The excluded lover is welcomed back.

In Adele's song 'Hello', the shut door is the unanswered phone call:

Hello from the other side

I must've called a thousand times

To tell you I'm sorry for everything that I've done,

But when I call, you never seem to be home.

Hello from the outside:

At least I can say that I've tried

To tell you I'm sorry for breaking your heart

But it don't matter, it clearly doesn't tear you apart any more.

The problem is as old as the human race. In the Greek Aristophanes' (446-386BC) *Ecclesiazusai*, an unnamed youth stands outside a doorstep and shouts

Open the door for me!
If you don't, I will collapse.
Darling, I want to
Fool around in your lap

The same theme surfaces in the Roman poet Propertius' (50-15BC) poem:

Oh if my words flying through a hollow crack,
Could reach the stricken ears of my mistress!
She may be more stubborn than a Sicilian cliff
Or harsher than iron and steel,
But she won't be able to restrain her eyes
And her spirit will swell into reluctant tears.

The pastor is privileged when a member asks for help in this area. Here is a wife upset. During her menopause she found sex unwelcome. Her husband, hurt, now sleeps in another room. How to restore one-bed-ness and its comforts?

Spiritually the same applies. It is possible to grieve or quench the spirit.⁷¹ The relationship remains but the fellowship dies. Can Song help us?

For this sermon resource we offer the structure of formal homiletical exposition: text, context, brief statement of content, relevance, proposition, divisions, development, conclusion.

Text: Song 5:2 – 6:3. As Song continues to expose issues we experience in the course of love, the author now looks at problems we cause when we exclude the other person. And this is as true in respect of Jesus' love for us as it is in marriage, so let's open our hearts to his message.

Context: God gave us Song to help us understand the workings of love better. It helps all of us, married and unmarried, young and old. On a physical level the poem centres on married couples, although we see friends and family playing a part. Christians have the further dimension that we are betrothed to Christ. There is wisdom here for every believer.

⁷¹ Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19.

Content: In her nightmare ('slept but heart awake,' 5:2) he knocks, she is reluctant. Then she responds but by then he's gone! Panic. Watchmen punish her: in the dream, apparently for walking the street at night. I suspect that is dream code for refusing her husband entry. Friends ask 'what's so special about him anyway?' (Notice the role we can all play.) That opens the door for her to rehearse what she sees in him, → they end up enjoying one another and she is comforted and confident again.

Relevance: Excluding your other half, physically or relationally, is not unknown! Love, in marriage as well as out, can be insecure and fluctuating. In this passage the exclusion seems to occur in a nightmare. In the dark watches of the night you can fantasise about excluding your other half and losing them; panicking and seeking them; we can beat ourself up, or imagine people finding out and berating us for it. The excluded lover is part of every marriage.

Proposition: Can our passage help us? Let's open our hearts to its wisdom.

Divisions: Notice the pain as she causes the problem; the healing as she treasures her lover (friends help); and the reward as she finds fresh joy.

Development:

1. The pain: She causes the problem, 5:2-8.

In her nightmare (or is it actually happening? It can!) she keeps her lover out in the cold, literally. He goes away and she is totally miserable: 'My heart sank ... I called but he did not answer.'

It is sad when a man or woman keeps their spouse at arm's length, and it happens all too easily. We can be moody; there is the hurt silence; when he's keen she replies, 'I've got a headache.'

The same issue arises spiritually. 'My heart says of You, "Seek His face"'⁷² – but sometimes we allow busy-ness to silence our heart.

Excluding our lover, shutting down on them, hurts both parties.

2. The healing: She treasures her lover, 5:9-16.

She is so distressed, her friends reasonably ask, 'How is your lover better than others?' (5:9). It's a good question to ask when we have caused the problem, for it gives opportunity to a healing exercise. Remember why you married them and what you appreciate about them. She expresses her answer in her *wasf*: v.10-16. It is a valuable exercise both humanly and spiritually.

⁷² Psalm 27:8

(a) Humanly: 'my lover is radiant, the fairest of ten thousand. I love his hair, the way he looks at me, the shape of his lips, his bodily strength ...' She is rather enjoying her *wasf*! She is repenting her former exclusion by rehearsing her lover's attractions.

(b) Spiritually: what a good idea to do this when we have become distanced from God in Christ or too blasé, taking him or his salvation for granted instead of glorying in them. 'You are my king and my God, who gives us victories. Who is like You, Father, who created the world and everything in it; glorious in majesty, abounding in love and faithfulness, sacrificial in your mercy to us sinners?'

Our Lord is so persevering with us. Francis Thompson wrote:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat---and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet---
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

...

Rise, clasp My hand, and come!' Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.' *(The Hound of Heaven)*

He's that keen on us.

3. The reward: she finds fresh joy, 6:1-3. In reply to her friends she knows exactly where he lives and is to be found. Their delight is mutual and intimate. She has found a new security: 'I am my lover's and he is mine.'

Happy are those who have found this spiritually. In January 1742 in Cambuslang, after an autumn preaching repeatedly on the need to be born again, Rev William McCulloch found a remarkable rise in spiritual concern locally. On Sunday 14 February one Catherine Jackson came back to the manse after the evening service with many others, crying out 'what shall I do?' After his repeated assurances that Christ would accept her he prayed for her. Overwhelmed as Christ told her He had cast all her sins behind her back, she said in the most moving and feeling manner, 'My beloved is the chief among ten thousand, yea he is altogether lovely. O sirs, will you come to Christ. If you cannot cry to him, O long after him ...'⁷³ Notice how experiencing Christ's love was expressed in terms saturated in the Song of Songs.

Conclusion. All love will know times like these, one partner being excluded and hopefully discerning how to restore mutual pleasure and intimacy. It is true in marriage; it is true of the love of Jesus. Song can bring us encouragement and wisdom.

⁷³ A. Fawcett *The Cambuslang Revival*, London, Banner of Truth, 1971 p. 106f.

Sermon 5. Keeping love alive: admiration, desire and response, 6:4 – 8:4

As we have seen, Song is a superlative love song, the greatest ever. It expresses and celebrates the love between a man and a woman in a committed relationship which was preceded by chastity, aroused by desire and consummated on wedding. In this passage we see the couple nourishing their love: an excellent exercise within marriage.

Above all Song's inclusion within the canon announces God's smile of approval and pleasure on this kind of wholehearted, uninhibited, exclusive love in all its facets: inward delight, physical play, sexual union; and to a minor extent its role within family and society. For brothers, mother, family line, friends and city watchmen all appear. What a holistic song.

Indeed, the final passage will show that it is God who creates and sets alight love like this. It is God's will and he smiles upon it.

The mention of other parties to the relationship amounts to an encouragement to the Church, singles as well as married, to pray for and do what we can to protect and support such love.

The irresistible additional dimension is that in Isaiah ch. 62 God says to Zion, the people of God in all generations, 'As a bridegroom rejoices over a bride, so will your God rejoice over you.' Married love is a fruit on earth of this more tremendous love. God loves us with a certain source type of married love. Part of spiritual growth is that we as his chosen bride learn to respond to his love.

Obviously such love is different from physical love. God is spirit and non-physical. But that doesn't mean his love is not real. It is real, genuine, passionate and personal: as individual towards each of us as if there were no one else on earth who mattered to him. We see this in Paul's wondering at 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.' (Gal. 2:10)

We can also say, since love comes from God, love has its proper shape for our every relationship. 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves' (Phil. 2:3).

There is a really stimulating spiritual vision if we take the second of the thrice-recurring refrains in Song. The first is not to arouse love till the right time (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). But the second is about the view we take of the loved one. Notice the development if we take them to refer to Christ and us.

- 2:16 'My lover is mine and I am his:' this person's first thought is of their claim on Christ. 'I've got a Saviour!'

- 6:3 'I am my lover's and my lover is mine:' now their first thought is of Christ's claim on them. 'I am Christ's!'
- 7:10 'I belong to my lover and his desire is for me:' now the first thought is that I am Christ's rightful possession,⁷⁴ like Paul calling himself Christ's bondslave. This person has crucified all past reluctance (2:14; 5:2a; 5:3). One of the late George Verwer's great contributions was to call people to this availability. Our Torrance Parish Church member Anne Davidson received the call of Jesus to go out and tell all nations about him when George spoke at Woodhill Evangelical Church in Bishopbriggs. She left all and is in Zambia with OM helping rescue lost children in a large shanty town. She has nothing and has everything, a liberated happy lady.

Nonetheless Song is first and foremost human love poetry. In today's passage the beloved has become the lover's bride (4:8, 9). Now that they are man and wife they keep their love alive by continuing to speak of their love, and their spouse's body, and their pleasure in each other as they pleasure each other. That is good conduct of love; married folk, do it! 'The best way to compliment your wife is ... frequently!'

Glowing heart: With friends drawing them out through questions, the man and woman express their admiration, delight and desire for each other.

OHL: That each of us will freshly give ourselves to be warmly loving as is appropriate for each of our situations: married, single, and in our walk with Jesus.

Flow of thought:

Again the lover expresses a descriptive poem or *wasf*. He just revels in her: not only beautiful but 'terrible as an army with banners' as the AV has it. There really is something awe-inspiring about her, formidable. She takes his breath away. Hair, teeth, temples – they all do something to him. Solomon is welcome to his sixty queens and eighty concubines; his one girl is unique (6: 8, 9). 'Now we are together, I feel as though I'm in a royal chariot' (12).

All this makes her friends take another look: 'Hey, let's look at you!' (13). She is modest and cannot think why they might want to (13b). But they regard her as being as watch-worthy as took place at 'the dance at Mahanaim.' 'Women danced publicly (and perfectly modestly) in celebration of military victories ... she draws the eyes of all around her in the same way that such dancers do.'⁷⁵ She must have been eye-catching: think how many people love Strictly Come Dancing.

⁷⁴ Hudson Taylor spells this spiritual progress out in his little book '*Union and Communion.*'

⁷⁵ Duguid p. 143 ad loc.

She ended with a question (why gaze on me? 13), which gives her lover a chance to praise her all over again. He is all too keen to. This time he praises her from the ground up: beautiful feet, graceful legs, navel, waist, breasts, neck, eyes, head, hair: she captivates him, he can't see enough of her pleasing delights (7:1-6). But he doesn't stop there. Now he wants to do something about it (7-9a⁷⁶):

Your stature is like the palm tree and your breasts are like its clusters;
I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit –
O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
And the scent of your breath like apples
And your mouth like the best wine
She: May the wine go straight to my lover,
Flowing gently over lips and teeth

His open desire pleases her just fine. She would so like to be able to kiss him publicly, she could wish they were brother and sister so that it would be acceptable (7:9b-8:3).

That is so good a place to be at, she repeats Refrain no. 1 for the third time: such love is so beautiful and guilt-free, do wait till the right time before you arouse it.

Looking back, the key lesson from this passage is very straightforward. Keep love alive! Animated, full of life. Speak and act those versions of love which are your calling.

- If single, give yourself to friendship love with all people, married or single: warm, chaste and uninhibited. You can oil the wheels of a congregation's relationships in a way no other people can.
- If married, let both parties be equal, relishing every part of physical union. Appreciate the privilege of it, don't take it for granted.⁷⁷
- The same principle applies to our spiritual lives whether we are old or young, single or married. Our Lord values intimate walk with us. 'Are you there Lord?' Running to him, valuing him, thanking him, saying sorry when we get it wrong. 'I belong to my Lover, and His desire is for me.' Astounding.

⁷⁶ These are the only verses I skipped over when reading them in a congregation with teenagers well represented.

⁷⁷ I heard the comment recently from a male, 'never say thank you for sex.' What discourteous rubbish! Positive playful sex with the spouse God gave you is one of life's great privileges. Is that not the implication of Song of Songs?

Sermon 6. Reflection: love's power, source and value 8:5-14

We have been seeing that Song is a love poem showing how love is designed to work out in a healthy courtship and marriage. Heterosexual marriage being God's great, foundational unit in the wellbeing of the whole of society it is significant that friends and family are also involved time and time again in the song. That is exceedingly unusual and remarkable, considering this is a boy-girl love poem. Do notice, says Song, that their network of relationships is engaged with them in this, asking questions and encouraging.

It is this passage also which reminds us most clearly of God as the source of all authentic love; and apt, therefore, that we consider the dimension that God calls himself our husband and the NT calls us betrothed to Christ.

The key figures nonetheless are the wife and husband. The passage records three conversations: her to him, her to her brothers, and the final exchange between the two of them as they leave us and ride into the sunset. The story continues: he longs for her voice, she says 'come.'

Above all, today's passage contains the two most important and significant verses in the song, 8:6 & 7:

Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave
It burns like a fire, like the flame of the Lord.
Many waters cannot quench love, rivers cannot wash it away;
If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love,
It would be utterly scorned.

Divisions

Notice the momentous principles as we follow the three conversations:

- She to him: true love will be steadfast, 5b-7
- She to her brothers: true love will be prepared for, 8-12
- He to her: true love will keep up the romance, 13 & 14.

Let's hear the Lord in this passage

1. The bride to her husband: true love will be steadfast, 5b-7

She is saying, 'do you remember how we came to be attracted to each other? – it is the same way as happened to your mother. Now, let me be like an identity seal: this love between us is lifelong, a flame, a burning love that **God** set alight. It isn't going to be swept away by circumstances. It is beyond price.'

Here is the climax and key to the whole Song:

‘The same way as happened to your mother:’ – this faithful love is a family-perpetuating, ongoing phenomenon.

‘The seal’: – people wore an identity seal hung round the neck on a string. She is saying, this bond between us is our identity: we are in covenant commitment. I have taken your very name, and such love is as strong as death, it is a force of nature, more powerful than anything on earth.

‘Jealous’: – it is an exclusive love. We shall be hospitable but you’re the only one for me and I’m the only one for you.

‘As strong as death’: – what’s between us is lifelong and in some way beyond that even in heaven.

Genuine love is a burning flame whose source is God. If v. 6 says genuine love is a very powerful force, v. 7 adds that it endures despite obstacles: neither the ups and downs we shall have, nor opposition can sweep it away.

Song is telling us how to approach love. The way to happiness is commitment by both parties to this kind of love, based on the assurance that it comes as a gift from God and has his pleasure, approval, even his instigation.

The single word translated ‘mighty flame’ or ‘flame of the Lord’ is an interesting composite word. It has three parts. The first indicates causation. The middle part means burning. The last part is ‘jah’ or ‘yah,’ exactly the same as the last syllable in Hallelujah. Halleluyah means ‘praise God.’ This word means a flame that God has set on fire or caused to burn. Isn’t that exciting? If you are married, the love you have for your spouse is a flame that God lit.

We know that this does not work out in every marriage, even every Christian marriage. Some marriages have to be abandoned because love is withheld, abused or trampled on. But here in Song, God gives his encouragement and model to follow.

The NT builds on it, for example in Ephesians ch. 5 where husbands are told ‘love as Jesus loves the Church and gave Himself up for her’; and in 1 Cor. 13 where the pattern continues to be spelled out: ‘Love is patient, love is kind, love always protects. Love is eternal’

Taken with Genesis ch. 1 & 2, Song is saying that here – a marriage with this kind of committed love – is the fundamental unit of human society. It *is* momentous, and therefore it is something to prepare for and to wait until we are ready. That is what the conversation between the bride and her brothers goes on to say.

2. The bride to her brothers: true love will be prepared for, 8-12

If you read v. 8-10 what she is saying is, 'Do you remember the family doubting if I was grown-up enough?! And wanting to be sure I was a pure and modest girl!! Well, (1) I was indeed not a door (let anyone in) but a wall (chaste till married); and (2) my brothers might have been wanting to wait until my breasts were developed before giving their approval; I was mature, developed and prepared, and with this combination of celibacy and maturity I have brought you peace and contentment (v. 10: 'shalom' indicates healthy, happy flourishing).

She goes on (v. 11,12) to contrast her approach with Solomon's whose marriages were frequently business transactions: 'Sure, Solomon had a vineyard to rent for 1,000 shekels; but my 'vineyard' is private. It's mine to give where I please (and I have, and it's great!). It was never for sale.

What peace spouses give each other when they can speak of their preparation for Christian marriage in those kinds of terms. There is forgiveness if we have failed; but here is a standard to live by, young people.

3. Husband and bride to each other: true love will keep up the romance, 13 & 14.

You dwell in such "gardens,"" he says: you are at home in this flourishing marriage. 'Friends attend you:' you have retained a healthy, wide social circle with the church supportive of this marriage. 'Let me hear your voice:' let's make sure we make time for each other, let's continue to communicate and talk through things together, just the two of us.

Failure at that point of keeping up chatting about life is never wise and can be the fly in the ointment that precedes a marriage failing. And the last we hear of them is her voice, just as the first we heard was hers. 'Come, my lover, be that 'stag on the mountains' whose liveliness I so enjoy.

Verses 13 & 14 show the support of friends, his continuing to woo her, and she still welcoming him. That is where we leave them, not cutting themselves off but in the midst of their social circle, yet also keeping up the romance. A great marriage. The way to happiness in marriage is commitment to a genuine love that, we are assured, God has set on fire. His gift to the welfare of human society.

We remember that everything in the Bible speaks to us of Jesus, and 8:4-14 is no exception. We choose to love him back with this same authentic love: steadfast, well thought through, and daily sustained. In relation to him we see:

- '*love is as strong as death*' (6): God commendeth his love towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8) What has the power to separate us from love like that? Nothing in all creation (Rom 8:35); shall we not adore him back?
- '*I am a wall*' (10): just as the girl refused temptation, Christ also did. He knew no sin, in that he might bear ours.
- '*let me hear your voice*' (13), the Bridegroom of our souls says to us. 'Are You there, Lord?' we say as we go about our daily round. You share the ordinary things of life together, you and He. The joy of a royal romance.
- '*Come, my Lover:*' Maranatha (1 Cor. 16:22), we look for his coming, and the day when every eye will see him, and we shall know even as also we are known.(1 John 3:2?)

Even so come, Lord Jesus.

Appendices

Appendix I. Structure of Song

Pas-sage	Hess (exegetical analysis)	Duguid (expository analysis)	CPW (applicatory analysis)
1:1-2:7	First together and intimate	Prologue: intro, state love	Desire, insecurity, delight: + spiritual //
	Longing, response, praise	Intro: desire, uncertainty, reassurance, desire	Desires
	Fragrance → praise	‘A litany of love’	Help of friends
	Paradise → response	Mutual affirmation	Feels unworthy
	Pastoral scene	Delights and dangers	Express admiration
			Spiritual //
2:8-3:5	Joined and separated	Pre wedding: joined and separated	Navigating love’s ups and downs, + spir //
	He pursues	morning	Eagerness: show it
	She invites	night	Reluctance: melt it
	They ‘protect love’		Dangers: protect it
	She: gratification delayed		Insecurities: trust it
	He: search and seize!		Power: don’t abuse it
3:6-5:1	Marriage	The wedding	The wedding: deciding our values
	He: marriage scene	The controlling question	Values flashy or personal?
	He: first male <i>wasf</i>	Solomon’s glory	Consummation
	He: walk in garden	Her glory	God’s ‘yes’
	She: invites	Consummation 1	Spiritual //
	He: tastes		The locked garden: eschew alternative attractions
	Chorus: enjoy!		
5:2-6:3	Search and reunion	After the wedding: separated and rejoined	Excluding our lover: healing love’s nightmares, + spir //
	She: the search	Night	Pain: she causes problem
	Chorus: the challenge qu	<i>His</i> glory	Healing: she treasures him
	She: female <i>wasf</i>	Restoration	Reward: fresh joy
	Chorus: question		
	She: reunion		Spiritual //

6:4- 8:4	Desires her; love in the country	Contemplation and renewed consummation	Keeping love alive: admire and respond + spir //
	He: second male <i>wasf</i>	He contemplates her	He revels in her
	She: lingers in the groves	Her response	Friends look at her afresh
	Chorus calls: return!	He contemplates her	She wonders why
	He: third male <i>wasf</i>	Her response	He explains, she responds
	She: springtime and love	Consummation 2	Spiritual //
8:5- 14	Epilogue: the power of love	Epilogue	Reflection: love's power, source and value
	Chorus: search for them	Power of love	<i>Qualities of love</i>
	She: power of love	Value of love	Bride to him: steadfastness
	Brothers: younger sister	Unending nature of love	Bride to brothers: readiness
	She: her defence		Couple to each other: let's keep up the romance
	Solomon's vineyard		
	Listening		Spiritual //
	Departure		8:14→ even so come, Lord Jesus

Appendix II. The ‘*wasf*’

The *wasf* is a type of descriptive verse most familiar in Arabic but clearly introduced in four places in Song: three by the man, one by the woman.⁷⁸

‘The *wasf*, a feature of Arabic poetry characterized by the minute, thorough description of certain objects, is used to refer to poems recited in praise of the lovers’ bodies. The *wasf* is a distinct literary form known from the ancient Near East, with examples in Mesopotamian sacred marriage rites, the love lyrics of New Kingdom Egypt, a hymn and epic from Ugarit, the poetry of Greece and Rome, and even the Dead Sea Scrolls. This form is distinct in two ways: (1) sequence, from head-to-foot or vice-versa, and (2) list parallelism, in which a part of the body is identified, often in initial position, followed by the source to which it is compared, at times with expanded description. For example, the man opens his first hymn by praising his beloved’s beauty, “Your eyes are doves behind your veil” (4:1).⁷⁹

The images are not literally descriptive; what they convey is the delight of the lover in contemplating the beloved, finding in the body a reflected image of the world in its freshness and splendor.⁸⁰

The English Literature lecturer Ken Hope, in a blog of 4 May 2007, comments, ‘Like the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis 2, the lovers in the *Song of Songs* pass into the world of adult sexual maturity in an idealized and fertile landscape. In the *Song*, however, the only consequences for the lovers—as distinct from in the earlier creation story in Genesis—are the pleasures of sensual love. Indeed, one of the many truly unique qualities of the *Song* is the mutual character of the love and love-making it depicts. There are scores of masterfully drawn women characters in the Bible, of which the Shulamite is among the most fascinating. The lovers in the *Song* are presented as equals; they share space together in their world and in the lines of the poetry, each enjoying the other in a reciprocal and mutual physical attraction. The physical attraction of the verse itself enhances our perception of their bodies. In this one (7:1-9) she may be portrayed as dancing:

7:1 *How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince’s daughter! The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman.*

7:2 *Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies.*

7:3 *Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.*

7:4 *Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like the fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bathrabbim: thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus.*

7:5 *Thine head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair of thine head like purple; the king is held in the galleries.*

7:6 *How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!*

⁷⁸ The man’s: 4:1-7; 6:4-10; 7:1-9a (7:2-10a Heb). The woman’s: 5:10-16

⁷⁹ Brian P Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as intoxication*, Atlanta, SBL Press 2019, p.137f.

⁸⁰ Ariel and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs* London Random House 1995

Appendix III. John Owen ‘Of Communion with God’

Song, we have affirmed, discloses the love of God as it tells of the love between a girl and her man. How are we to grow in our enjoyment of such love? John Owen (1616-83) was one of the greats on this. He writes with sub-subdivision after subdivision but p. 5-274 of his *Works*, Vol. 2 are so rich, it is worth the hard work. Here is a précis of p. 20-38.

Christians are often too little exercised in holding immediate communion with the Father in love; it makes us go heavily when we might rejoice. How anxious! Therefore:

1. Eye (view, regard) him as love. Let this be our first thought about the Father. Consider (i) whose love!!,
(ii) what kind of love: eternal, free, unchangeable, distinguishing.
2. Receive his love. ‘Act thoughts of faith in God as love for you.’
3. Return his love

When considering what he means by God’s love Owen summarises it as including both *benepacit* (goodwill and purpose as in Jn 3:16) and *amicitia* (personal friendship and approval, John 14:23). Communion is the reciprocal action of him giving himself to us, and us giving ourselves to him.

Consider:

1. It pleases him to be received into our souls as full of tender love towards us. It is Satan’s work that we think of him as austere. To think of him as tender in love for us gives him the honour he aims at, Rom.5:8. Don’t be afraid to have good thoughts of God.
2. It will endear your soul to him, enable you to delight in him, heal your indisposedness about time with him. To the extent that we see his love, to that extent will we delight in him.

Put this to the venture (test), therefore: hold daily communion with the Father in love for a few weeks. You who have run from him will not be able, after a while, to keep at a distance for a moment.

What a privilege this is. Here is the distinction between being religious and being Christian. Let’s be holy in this way. Lord, open our eyes to see that walking with You is not a matter of form but of power.

Appendix IV. Melting our reluctance to pray

This is but a précis variation on Eric Alexander's advice.⁸¹ Start small with a time model that is realistic and achievable; we shall each find ourselves developing these times in personal ways.

<u>Minutes</u>	<u>Activity</u>	→	<u>Minutes</u>
1	Enter God's presence		1
2	Recollect with praise		3
10	Read Bible, reflect		12
2	Pray into own life		3
4	Your prayer list		10
1	Seek God's blessing on day		1
<u>20 minutes</u>		<u>30 minutes</u>	

⁸¹ Eric J Alexander 'Prayer: a Biblical Perspective' Edinburgh Banner of Truth 2012 p. 85f

Appendix V. Two prayers applying Song

Tim Chester *Into His Presence: praying with the Puritans* The Good Book Company 2022 includes two prayers which beautifully express the twofold spirit of Song. Here is a small part of each.

Prayer 79 ‘for a married couple’ is by George Swinnock (c.1627-73).

Lord who are the guide of all relationships
may our marriage befit those married to the Lord Jesus Christ.

...

And since you have tied this knot between us,
may we do nothing which might loosen it
through angry thoughts or quarrelsome deeds.
May our thoughts of each other be sweetened by love,
may our words to each other be seasoned with love,
and may our actions towards each other
be given a relish and savour by love

Prayer 69 ‘to make a marriage’ is by Samuel Rutherford (1600-61).

What more could I want
than for my ministry to make a marriage
between the little bride and the bridegroom?

...

Enable me, I pray, to draw up a fair contract of marriage
Between my hearers and Christ

...

Enable me to speak of the Bridegroom’s excellence
His sweetness
His might
His power

The eternity and glory of his kingdom
the exceeding depth of his love
who sought his wife through pain

...

Loving Father, may they consent to the proposal
and say, ‘Even so, I take him.’

Select Bibliography

(1). Top recommendations

If you want just one, the choice is easy:

Iain M Duguid *The Song of Songs* IVP Nottingham 2015 (TOTC series) 160 pages. It is concise, clear enough for understanding and the preacher. Each section of Song is dealt with in three steps: context, comment and meaning. The latter helpfully includes a contribution on the spiritual implications of each passage.

If you want one other you have a choice:

Tom Gledhill *The Message of the Song of Songs* Leicester IVP 1994 (BST series), 254 pages. Common-sensical orientation and social / practical perspective. More wordy than the next one but more helpful if you are not fixed on the exact meanings of words. An end section gives discussion questions on themes in Song (attraction, tensions, arousal, marriage, love).

Richard S Hess *Song of Songs* Grand Rapids Baker Academic 2017, 285 pages, is a masterpiece if you are more technical ('There is a *Piel* imperative followed by the *bēt* preposition'). Every necessary word is analysed in this kind of way. His judgement is impeccable and he gives attention to the spiritual implications of each section.

(2). Other commentaries and writings about Song

G Lloyd Carr *The Song of Solomon* IVP 1984 the original TOTC, now superseded by Duguid. Confined to the natural interpretation.

Abi Doukhan *Womanist wisdom in the Song of Songs*, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham (Switzerland) 2019. It would be remiss to ignore the prolific feminist contribution and Doukhan's stands somewhat against extreme views. I haven't mentioned in the booklet how greatly even she reacts against male chauvinism but it is humbling and challenging to see in what respects this constituency regards much historic orthodoxy on the matter of man-woman relations as abusive. Not 'sound,' but many insights.

Iain Duguid has a larger commentary than his one mentioned above, published by the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company (PRPC).

James Durham *Clavis Cantici*⁸² or, an exposition of the Song of Songs Glasgow 1723. I read the 1733 edition at Uni Library because the modern reprint is something like £70, but for those with a bent to make more of the allegorical approach he would have a lot to offer.

Duane Garrett *Song of Songs* Nashville Nelson 2004. Word series, in one volume with Paul House on Lamentations. A lot wordier than the top three. Each section has three main subsections: (1) form/structure/setting (fairly technical); (2) comment (exposition); (3) explanation (approx. = principles and relevance). Typical of the first of these: 'This canto consists of four strophes. Line 1A is linked to 1B by dependence, and 1B to 1C by matching ...' I don't think he adds enough to my top 3 titles to recommend him.

Brian Gault. *Body as landscape, love as intoxication.* SBL Press 2019 314 pages. I think my summary of his contribution (Bklt 1 p.25, 26) is all most preachers would want.

Stuart Olyott *A life worth living and a Lord worth loving* Durham Evangelical Press 1983. The Welwyn series. Brief commentary on Ecclesiastes and Song. Its value is that Olyott is a good model of plain preaching that gets the message across. Other than that has less to offer.

Marvyn H. Pope *Song of Songs* New York 1977: 743 pages. The Anchor Bible commentary. 760 pages! Was important in its day. Long, eg has 140 pages summarising the history of interpretations of Song. Almost exclusively the natural interpretation. Forget it.

Alan Reid of Kinross published as booklet, and has e-copy, of a winsome and clear series of six sermons on Song he preached in Newcastleton in 2005. Gives full attention to the natural interpretation yet includes 'Jesus and me' dimension too. AReid@churchofscotland.org.uk. Ask him for a copy if you would like to observe a kind heart in action.

Tremper Longman III *Song of Songs* Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: NICOT series. Typical NICOT: workmanlike coverage. 70 pages of introduction as is needed with Song. Apart from an essay in Intro about using Song to illustrate the divine-human relationship, it sticks to the natural interpretation.

James Philip's daily Bible readings are available via The Tron website. His exposition is almost entirely allegorical and for me his engagement with the text is less useful than his other DBRs which are so profound.

⁸² *Clavis Cantici* is Latin for 'Key to the Song'

Luis Stadelmann ‘*Love and Politics: A New Commentary on the Song of Songs*’ New York, Paulist Press 1992. I have only read a review of Stadelmann⁸³ but his thesis is of interest as a subset of allegorical interpretation. He proposes that Song is not theological but political allegory, a disguised programme for bringing back the Davidic dynasty to rule in Jerusalem after the Exile, in the face of Persian control. Longman (p.47) mentions a similar suggestion from Martin Luther.

William Still *Song of Solomon* Aberdeen Didasko Press, n.d. Contains Mr Still’s eleven sermons on Song. Takes the 3-person view: the shepherd, and his love who has to resist Solomon’s advances. Rather wandering but contains gems of relationship wisdom in the passing. Focusses on the devotional aspect, love to Jesus, movingly.

J Hudson Taylor *Union and Communion: thoughts on the Song of Solomon*. My copy has no note of publisher or date but it is available from ICM books in Craigavon, N.Ireland. 67 pages. He confines himself to the allegorical interpretation, our love walk with Jesus. Devotional, heart-warming.

Barry Webb *Five Festal Garments* Nottingham Apollos 2000. Just 18 pages of helpful, balanced overview of what kind of literature Song is, its place in the OT, how Song relates to the Gospel

(3). Significant ‘also reads’ in the ↔ between Song and modern culture

Glynn Harrison *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing* London IVP 2017. Glynn was Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Bristol. Exceptionally competent analysis of contemporary culture and insightful proposals on how to take a stand for orthodox Christian ethics.

Edith Humphrey: The articles on human sexuality prepared for the Faith and Order Commission of the Anglican Church in Canada written by Prof Edith Humphrey, available on www.edithhumphrey.net/articles.htm

Jonathan Kaplan *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs* OUP 2015. Only useful for our purposes as a way into appreciating the combination of spiritual-with-political interpretations that have appeared since. See booklet 1 p.12 and ref to Stadelmann above.

⁸³ Robert L Alden, review in *Journal of Church and State* (OUP) 36.4 1994 p.858

A.M. Pines *A prospective study of personality and gender differences*, Personality and Individual Differences, Volume 25, Issue 1, July 1998, Pages 147-157. Helped me to evaluate whether assumptions I have stated, eg on male-female differences in the area of attraction and arousal, are in fact valid.

(4) Books covering relationship and consummation in marriage

If ever a subject demanded application, surely it is this subject.

Sheila Wray Gregoire *The Great Sex Rescue* Grand Rapids Baker 2021. Based on a survey of 20,000 Christian women. So many Christian marriages fall short of the mutuality of desire and equal physical pleasure pictured for us in Song. Her headline thesis is that husband and wife should both be, and can both be, really enjoying sex. That is a tender issue that involves the whole relationship. Down with the view that one partner has more 'need for release' than the other, it is too often abusive. Instead of saying 'women need to meet men's sexual needs,' say 'each spouse should make the *other's* sexual pleasure their first priority.' (p. 60; my italics). The book is American, and orgasm takes up more space in the 280 pages than many of us would have expected, but I believe Gregoire's book could be a source of liberation for many wives. Men could find it not only an insightful search of their attitudes, but a relief too eg on a happier approach (to other women whom they find attractive) than look-lust-shame. Has significant potential as a discussion starter between couples.

Nicky and Sila Lee *The Marriage Book* London HTB 2000. The subtitle is 'how to build a lasting relationship.' Sections on building strong foundations, communication, love in action, resolving conflict, in-laws, good sex, engagement, budgeting, praying together. A good book.

Leslie D Weatherhead *The Mastery of Sex* London SCM 19th Edition 1964. Although the language is 1930s and some of the debates have been resolved since his day, it remains the happiest and healthiest attitude-former on how to treat the other sex that I know.

Hopefully the Preachers' Gathering might produce book recommendations from others on this visceral subject.