



Song of Songs (also known as Song of Solomon)

A book of poetry on the theme of human love, featuring the developing love of two young lovers. The lovers talk to each other but the woman also addresses her friends, the 'daughters of Jerusalem'.

You can take this simply as an erotic love poem or, as people have done throughout history, or read it as an allegory describing God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the Church. It is one of the most unusual books in the Bible and people often shy away from it because of its explicit language.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 20 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-2.7; 5.2-6.3



Genre

Love poetry



Anything tricky?

That would all depend on how you feel about sensual love poetry. Some find the language difficult; others find it beautiful.



Inspiring quotes

My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land."

(Song of Songs 2.10-12)

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

(Song of Songs 8.6-7a)



About the Author

The author is said to be Solomon. There is, inevitably, huge disagreement about whether Solomon actually wrote this or not. The problem is that there is very little proof either way.

What do we know about him?

King Solomon, son of David, known for consolidating the nation of Israel and making it very wealthy and also for having, according to the Bible, 700 wives and 300 concubines.

The main reason why the book is in the canon is because it is attributed to Solomon. Later Jewish teachers contested whether the Song of Songs should be included in the canon because of its love language, but eventually included it because they believed that Solomon had written it.



About the times

If it does date back to the time of Solomon then this was during the 'golden era' of Israel's history. The nation was established (and only split apart into the north – Israel – and the south – Judah – during the time of Solomon's son Rehoboam), it was wealthy and successful.

Another suggested date is the fourth-third centuries bc.

Other books set around this time

1 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, and possibly also Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.



How is it structured?

Because there are a number of voices speaking it is not always easy to work out who is speaking when; this is one possible structure but there are many others.

- 1.1 The title and description of the book
- 1.2-2.7 The lovers talk to each other and begin to describe their longing for each other
- 2.8-17 The woman hears the voice of her lover and declares her love for him
- 3.1-5 The woman tells her friends how she left her bed to go looking for her lover
- 3.6-11 A royal wedding procession is described
- 4.1-5.1 The man describes how beautiful his lover is
- 5.2-6.3 The woman again tells her friends how she went looking for her lover and they wonder where he has gone
- 6.4-12 The man describes, once more, the beauty of his lover
- 6.13-8.4 Other observers (probably the daughters of Jerusalem) describe the woman's beauty
- 8.5-14 The brothers talk of their sister's beauty and she responds about her love for her lover



What kind of Book is it?

It's a book of love poems, and maybe also an allegory of the relationship between God and his people.



Look out for...

The different voices speaking in the text make this quite difficult to keep up with. Keep alert for the different people speaking (don't worry, there is no 'right answer' here) and see if you can work out who might be speaking at any one moment.

Strong connections are made in this book between love and creation; look out for them as you read.

The descriptions of beauty given are not always what we would consider beauty today (e.g. 'your nose is like a tower of Lebanon') you could make a list of the least flattering compliments!



What could this mean for me?

This is an extensive reflection on sexual attraction and love. What do you agree with and what do you disagree with? What would you want to add to this? Is there anything you would like to remove?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- How did you relate to the imagery used? Did you find it affective or off putting? Share your list of least flattering compliments – which one is the worst?
- Why do you think this ended up in the canon? You might want to talk about whether this is 'just' about human love or whether you saw anything of divine love described.
- Other than at weddings, when can you imagine using this book in worship?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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