

Song of Solomon

Song of Solomon 1:5,6 I am dark but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem. Like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not look upon me because I am dark, because the sun has tanned me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept.

I have been preaching for forty years and I have never taught Song of Solomon. I am probably not alone in this regard, I think that the book presents challenges of interpretation that are not easily resolved and the love story that is the subject of the book has been a stumbling stone for many leading to what could be called strategies of avoidance.

The early history of the interpretation of the Song of Solomon relied almost exclusively on an allegorical approach. This was the case for both Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Song. Where Jewish interpreters saw a story that represented God's love for Israel, the Christian interpreters saw a story of Christ's love for His church. It is difficult to resolve this argument when the book does not specifically name God, Israel, Christ, or the church.

It is fascinating to consider the popularity of the song in the middle ages. There are 32 Latin commentaries on the Song that were written between the 4th and 11th centuries. During the same time period 6 commentaries were written on Galatians and 9 on Romans. Origen who saw no profit in a literal reading of the Song wrote 10 volumes of allegorical commentary on the book. Jerome laid out a course of study for the daughter of a friend in which he advised her to become well acquainted with all of the Bible, memorizing much of it, before venturing to read the Song of Solomon for, "were she to read it at the beginning, she would fail to perceive that though it is written in fleshly words, it is a marriage song of a spiritual bridal. And not understanding this she would suffer from it." Tremper Longman, the source of this quote concludes that Jerome's motive was to make sure that the young woman never got to the Song in her studies.

So the irony is that when interpreters regularly ignored the literal reading of the Song, they read the book often and taught it to the church. Now that a literal reading is the more common interpretation, the book is largely ignored by the church.

Of the four current commentaries that I have consulted so far, each takes a different approach to the Song. All four of the commentaries agree that the song is a love poem, two of which see the song as a collection of poems but cannot agree about how many. One sees the song as the most spiritual of books that purposefully draws from the Biblical record. Two see the Song as primarily meant to be read as a poem about romantic love. One of these wants to emphasize the spiritual values of the song and the other less so. Three of the commentaries see no possible way to unify the structure of the Psalm or tie it together. The fourth sees a chiasmic structure throughout and argues for the book's singular message.

Interpreters still argue about the characters in the book. Is the male lover Solomon or not? Is there a love triangle or just a single romance with what might be called the typical ups and downs of a relationship? Does the book have a dramatic plot or not? All of these questions are in the air as we begin our study. So, let's get started!