

Wise Sex: The Affirmation of Human Sexuality and Female Desire in the Song of Songs

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Love: it is a powerful force that can propel one to the heights of ecstasy or to the depths of despair. A cherished lover can feel entirely invincible. A rejected lover can feel utterly broken. Every human will most likely experience both the joys and the disappointments of love. Whether a heart feels hope or regret, the longing for authentic love is natural. The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures illuminates this truth and speaks of love in a most unexpected manner. Due to its explicit sexual nature, the Song of Songs is a biblical book that many interpreters have struggled to tame. Perhaps the book was never meant to be tamed.

When the lovers in the Song are allowed to speak in their lovesick humanity, the wisdom of God's Word proves more potent. One is able to see how God intended human love to be—raw, passionate, and mutual. “How beautiful you are, how fair, my love, daughter of delights!” the lover speaks to his darling.¹ This statement could be considered a standard declaration of love, but his next entreaty exposes the daring of the poetry: “Your very form resembles a date-palm, and your breasts, clusters. I thought, ‘Let me climb the date-palm! Let me take hold of its branches! Let your breasts be like clusters of the vine.’”² Such graphic portraits of desire are characteristic of the Song and should not be tempered by allegorized explanations. As part of the canonized Scriptures, and the wisdom tradition in particular, the Song of Songs has a divinely sanctioned voice that speaks biblical truth, however shocking. The wisdom of the Song is this: human love and sexuality are gifts from God that flourish best in a relationship of mutual respect. Even further, the Song endorses the celebration of sexuality and intense longing, especially from a woman—a reflection of wisdom in the Scriptures that is unique, unsettling, and wholly needed.

The History of the Song

¹ Song of Songs 7:7 (New American Bible; all Song of Songs citations will be taken from the NAB unless otherwise noted).

² Song of Songs 7:8-9.

The Song of Songs is a collection of ancient love poems that date anywhere from the 10th century BCE to the Hellenistic period.³ The specific date, author, purpose, and place of origin for the Song remains unknown. Its mystery, though, adds an irresistible quality to its poetry. The source of the Song may be obscure, but its theme is not. Sex, yearning, and love abound in the language. The Song does not seem to be written as a single story with a uniform storyline, but is more likely a compilation of poems, possibly from various authors and time periods.⁴ Biblical scholar J. Cheryl Exum, nonetheless, argues for an underlying unity to the Song, as is evidenced in the coherent images, themes, and attitudes throughout the book's eight chapters.⁵ The Song resembles, but is not identical to, other love poems in the ancient Near Eastern milieu. Scholars have interpreted the Song as a consecrated marriage text, a love song for members of the royal household, a ritual text, or simply as secular poetry.⁶ If interpreted literally, the Song is obviously dramatic and erotic. The lovers unabashedly describe each other's bodies and the pleasure derived from physical longing and union.

In the religious world, however, the Song has usually been interpreted allegorically, sparing Jews and Christians the perceived embarrassment of discussing and defending seemingly unbridled sexuality. In its allegorical sense, the Song denotes the love of God for his people, whether Israel, the Church, or individual believers. This spiritual reading certainly warrants regard. In the New Testament, Paul uses marriage to illustrate the relationship between Christ and his Church, and Jesus himself alludes to an eschatological marriage feast.⁷ The allegorical interpretation of the Song may have superficially veiled its substantial eroticism, allowing for its inclusion in the biblical canon.⁸ Professor David Carr summarizes the scholarly consensus, however, concluding that "Though the Song may draw on forms and/or specific cultic traditions that depicted divine love, the Song itself shows no clear signs of having been written to depict God's relation with God's people or the soul."⁹ This conclusion might be an uncomfortable thought for Church authority and conservative laypeople. As Biblical scholar

³ J. Cheryl Exum, "Song of Songs," in *Woman's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newson, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 247.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kenton L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs: Wisdom for Young Jewish Women," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (April 2008): 277-278. Sparks notes the Song's comparison to Inanna/Dumuzi texts from Sumer, and love texts from ancient Babylon and Sumer.

⁷ Eph. 5:21-30 and Matt. 22:1-14 (NAB).

⁸ Sparks, 278.

⁹ David McLain Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and its Interpretation," *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (June 1, 2000): 246.

Carey Walsh underscores, although the Song lends itself to an allegorical reading, the evident lust interwoven throughout the poetry of the Song is not easily concealed—even less so the blatant *female* lust.¹⁰ Why does sexual desire, particularly womanly desire, cause such anxiety in the religious realm? Perhaps this anxiety would dissipate if the Song of Songs were allowed to speak for itself. The woman's communication of longing offers wisdom to those who are willing to receive it. As Exum notes, throughout the Song, the woman conveys her sexual needs and desires as unreservedly as the man.¹¹ The Song seems to speak of the wisdom of mutuality in a loving relationship—a grand vision indeed in a historically patriarchal world.

The Content of the Song

The woman's voice begins the Song with a burning wish: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine."¹² Her ache is no less palpable at the Song's conclusion: "Swiftly, my lover, be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices."¹³ Between these two statements of intense longing that open and close the Song are expressions of admiration, heartbreak, euphoria, and most importantly, as Walsh argues—desire. For Walsh, the Song is "a poetic and sapiential exploration into human want" and the horticultural metaphors throughout the Song represent the woman's desire and arousal.¹⁴ The woman tells her lover: "your love is better than wine."¹⁵ She continues, "My lover is to me a cluster of henna from the vineyards of En-gedi."¹⁶ For the male lover, she is an "enclosed garden" into which she invites him: "Let us go early to the vineyards, and see if the vines are in bloom, if the buds have opened, if the pomegranates have blossomed; there I will give you my love."¹⁷ Though the lovers often speak metaphorically throughout the Song, most readers can probably intuit the topic: sex. They clearly want each other, and they clearly want the physical satisfaction the other can offer. According to Walsh, the horticultural language the Song employs is fitting for several reasons:

¹⁰ Carey Ellen Walsh, "A Startling Voice: Woman's Desire in the Song of Songs," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 1999): 129.

¹¹ Exum, 249.

¹² Song of Songs 1:2

¹³ Song of Songs 8:14.

¹⁴ Walsh, 129, 131.

¹⁵ Song of Songs 1:2.

¹⁶ Song of Songs 1:14.

¹⁷ Song of Songs 7:13.

First, a vineyard produces heady liquid and sweetness. Sexual arousal and wine are both powerful, dizzying, and destabilizing. Second, the properties of the fruit itself suggest genitalia and sexual pleasure. Grapes and grape clusters are dark purple, triangular, surrounded by foliage, engorged with juice at the height of their ripening, with supple, taut, yet vulnerable skins. Third, the horticultural metaphor here turns on a biblical pun. Using fruit and its juices for woman's desire, the song plays off and subverts the procreative functionality of sex expressed elsewhere in the Bible's command to "be fruitful and multiply."¹⁸

The sexual overtones of the Song are definite. The lovers praise each other, search for each other, dream of togetherness, and celebrate their love. The content of the Song, though, is not exclusively sexual, as the famous verses from chapter eight testify: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; For love is as strong as death, longing is fierce as Sheol. Its arrows are of fire, flames of the divine. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away."¹⁹ The lovers pine for physical union and are not shy in expressing that overpowering desire. Ultimately, though, what binds them together is not only sexual satisfaction but a profound commitment to their relationship.²⁰ The Song extols love's vigor and potency. The acclaim of human sexuality and insight into the power of love are both aspects of the wisdom that the Song has to offer its audience.

The Culture of the Song

The Song's uniqueness cannot be overstated, especially when one considers the culture from which it arose—ancient patriarchal Israel. In patriarchal societies women and children are obedient to the absolute authority of men. The patriarchal community views female sexuality as threatening within the group, as well as threatened from without by strangers or enemies. Therefore, women need male oversight.²¹ In the ancient Mediterranean world, men regulated the sexuality of women through the practices of female seclusion and veiling.²² Generally, women had few rights and were subject to the power and influence of their male counterparts. C.D. Ginsburg reports that buying wives was a conventional practice

¹⁸ Walsh, 133.

¹⁹ Song of Songs 8:6-7a.

²⁰ Dianne Bergant, "'My Beloved is Mine and I am His': The Song of Songs and Honor and Shame," *Semeia* 68 (1994): 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

in the ancient Middle East, and quotes Herodotus describing such a sale.²³ Ginsburg concedes that Jewish women did not suffer to the extent that perhaps Assyrian or Greek women did under male authority. The cultural customs of seclusion, veiling, and using the protection of eunuchs, nevertheless, would not have been unknown to the Israelites.²⁴ Ginsburg defends the Scriptures as originally intending that women would be to equal men in intellectual and moral capacities, but acknowledges that throughout history, “woman, instead of being the help-mate or companion of man became his slave, and was kept for the gratification of his carnal appetite, or at best regarded as a plaything for leisure hour. Her rights were denied, her education was neglected, her intellect degraded, her moral character questioned.”²⁵ Perhaps Ginsburg speaks hyperbolically, as true love relationships could not have been completely unfamiliar to the ancients. That women’s status was less significant, though, was commonly the case in the ancient Mediterranean region. Marriage for “love” is a modern concept, and in patriarchal societies, marriages tend to be arranged to improve political and economic situations.²⁶

The patriarchal society in which Israel existed is evident in the Hebrew Scriptures. The role of women is often overlooked or only highlighted in reference to reproductive capabilities—after all, women were a sort of male-owned property.²⁷ Exum notes that sexual desire in the Bible, the Song notwithstanding, is depicted as risky, in need of control, under strict codes, and a predominantly male characteristic.²⁸ Walsh explains several standard descriptions of biblical sex that contrast with the Song of Songs, making it an even more extraordinary addition to the Hebrew Scriptures. First, Walsh points out that males are usually the active agents of sexual initiation and deeds while women are simply the recipients. Second, the procreative function of sex is a biblical emphasis. An observation from scholar David Carr is fitting here. He remarks that even when women are acclaimed for instigating sexual action, like Tamar in Genesis 38 and Ruth in the book of Ruth, such actions are associated with creating and sustaining a male dynastic line.²⁹ Typically, Hebrew women in the Bible are sexually passive and valued as “vessels of Israelite seed.”³⁰ Continuing with Walsh’s biblical

²³ C.D. Ginsburg, “The Importance of the Book,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 50.

²⁴ Ibid., 52.

²⁵ Ginsburg, 51.

²⁶ Walsh, 130.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Exum, 248.

²⁹ Carr, 238.

³⁰ Ibid.

descriptions of sex are the sexual taboos for men. Lastly, Walsh notes the description of womanly desire in Genesis 3, though that instance is a result of God's curse in the Garden of Eden.³¹ The Song of Songs does not typify biblical descriptions of sex, which generally mirror patriarchal norms. The Bible would seem brusque in its treatment of women and inordinately in favor of men if the Song of Songs were absent from the canon. Its inclusion suggests that patriarchy is not the wisest way to order society.

The wisdom that the Song offers, namely, the excellence of desire and mutuality between lovers, is better appreciated in light of the dangers patriarchy posed to women. Catholic ethicist Shaji George Kochuthara discusses the vulnerability of women when they operate under the assumption of the "active/passive polarization" that has dominated sexual roles throughout history.³² Kochuthara acknowledges that most societies place women under damaging gender restraints.³³ Patriarchal cultures are especially prone to exploiting an underlying notion of the active/passive mode of thinking—those who are active, or masculine, are more significant than those who are passive, or feminine.³⁴ In the active/passive paradigm, not only are women less important, but women who initiate sexual activity are improper and tasteless.³⁵ Kochuthara highlights that the active/passive polarization endangers women by objectifying them. If a woman's role in sexual activity is simply passive, then her "no" might be understood as inviting more aggressive action on the part of the man, since that is his role.³⁶ If a man operates in his active role to the extreme, he might see pursuing sex beyond a woman's refusal as his right. Clearly the active/passive mode of thinking is not ethical, as Kochuthara emphasizes. As he points out, modern science has demonstrated that neither male nor female reproductive organs are exclusively active or passive.³⁷ If either sex should be deemed active, it seems that the woman's ability to nurture a child within her womb proves the vigorous power of her body—she engenders life. According to Kochuthara, under patriarchy a woman's sexual enjoyment is forbidden.³⁸ Perhaps this is due to a fear of loss of control. The Song of Songs, however, demonstrates that this denial of sexual pleasure for women is unnatural. For Kochuthara, much is at stake: "Creating an

³¹ Walsh, 129-130.

³² Shaji George Kochuthara, "Patriarchy and Sexual Roles: Active-Passive Gender Roles versus an Ethic of Mutuality," *Journal of Dharma* 36, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2011): 437.

³³ *Ibid.*, 435.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 438.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 437.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 442.

³⁷ Kochuthara, 438.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 452.

awareness of women's sexual desire and fulfillment is a matter of justice."³⁹ Incorporating the insight of Kochuthara, the wisdom of the Song can also be interpreted as a vital call for justice in sexual ethics.

Before examining the radical manner in which the Song departs from the cultural norms of its time, noting the importance of the anthropological categories of "honor" and "shame" will further illumine the patriarchal mindset. As biblical scholar Dianne Bergant explains:

The preoccupation with female chastity probably grew out of competition over land and other scarce natural resources. Just as the survival of the family or clan was contingent on the quality and measure of water, food, and materials for shelter and protection, so its strength and future was seen as residing in the fertile potential of its women. Where sexuality is an expression of competition and superiority among men, the fruitfulness of women becomes a resource to protect.⁴⁰

Ensuring that women's sexual activities and reproduction are guarded and regulated is necessary in patriarchal societies where "honor" and "shame" are the standards for one's reputation. The difficulty for women is that in patriarchal societies, shame is a female attribute whereas honor is a male attribute.⁴¹ Men's honor is either bolstered or undermined by the actions of female family members. Group dynamics complicate the issue of honor and shame in patriarchal culture because individual reputations affect the community's reputation. The behavior of community members, especially women, is carefully delimited for the preservation and flourishing of the entire group.⁴² Interestingly, as Bergant remarks, patriarchal Israel created the Song of Songs, which departs in every way from the prescriptions of regulated female sexuality. Is the uninhibited and gratuitous sexuality that the Song portrays God's exemplar for love?⁴³

The Uniqueness of the Song

The Song of Songs is an exceptional inclusion in the biblical canon. As David Carr explains, "Into this world of reproductively focused sexuality, hierarchies, male

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Bergant, 33.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bergant, 34.

⁴³ Ibid., 37. Bergant raises the possibility that if the sexuality portrayed in the Song is more typical than has been previously thought for the Hebrew culture, then the Song's viewpoint could be a hermeneutical tool for re-reading other texts.

rights, and vilified sexually proactive women comes the Song of Songs.”⁴⁴ When assessed in light of the patriarchal culture which produced it, the sensual and sexual text of the Song is nothing short of shocking. To further add to this astonishment is the common scholarly agreement that there is no textual evidence that the lovers are married. Even more amazing in the Song is that a woman expresses longing and desire for (unmarried) sex.⁴⁵ Jewish feminist poet and scholar Alicia Ostriker brands the Song of Songs a “countertext,” which she defines as “any biblical text which in some sense resists dominant structures of authority, divine and legal, as defined by the Bible as a whole and by the history of its interpretation.”⁴⁶ Everything about the Song challenges patriarchal expectations and modern assumptions about “Christian” sexuality. For example, there is no mention of a father’s authority, but several allusions to the mother’s house in verses 3:4 and 8:2 as a place the woman desires to bring her beloved.⁴⁷ The man in the Song declares that his lover is her “mother’s special one, favorite of the one who bore her.”⁴⁸ Ostriker proposes the idea that verse 8:2 implies that the mother has instructed her daughter in matters of love and sexuality.⁴⁹ The woman in the Song is not ashamed of her sexuality and does not hide her longing from her mother—indeed, her mother’s home seems the ideal place to consummate their love. The man visits the woman at her home in the exchange in 5:2-6, and as Bergant notes, it appears that the man has ready access to the woman’s sleeping chambers, even though he does not enter in this instance.⁵⁰

While the relationship between the lovers in the Song lacks parental oversight, Bergant and Ostriker highlight two instances in the Song that hint at the patriarchal culture of honor and shame that paradoxically gave rise to the Song. The first instance is the woman’s mention of her brothers in 1:6 and their anger towards her for not keeping her own vineyard. The brothers reappear in 8:8, concerned for the well-being of their sister: “We have a little sister; she has no breasts as yet. What shall we do for our sister on the day she is spoken for?” The brothers’ involvement in their sister’s affairs would have been familiar in a

⁴⁴ Carr, 240.

⁴⁵ Exum, 248.

⁴⁶ Alicia Ostriker, “A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext,” in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, eds. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 43.

⁴⁷ Bergant, 35.

⁴⁸ Song of Songs 6:9.

⁴⁹ Ostriker, 46. 8:2 reads, “I would lead you, bring you to my mother’s house, where you would teach me, where I would give you to drink spiced wine, my pomegranate juice.”

⁵⁰ Bergant, 31.

patriarchal culture, as Bergant notes.⁵¹ What is very uncommon is the woman's response to her brothers' protectiveness.⁵² She boldly asserts her adulthood and acts independently of her brothers' attempted control. "I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers," she proclaims. This intellectually and sexually mature woman challenges her brothers' jurisdiction and finds fulfillment in the company of her lover; the woman's actions are incredibly defiant of cultural norms. Bergant emphasizes this feature of the Song of Songs: "No one and nothing in the Song suggests that she should be censored for such an independent attitude."⁵³ The brothers' appearance in the Song hints at the patriarchal culture that undergirds the text. The woman's rejection of male meddling in her love affair, however, attests to the Song's wisdom that mutually passionate relationships should perhaps supersede tradition.

The second instance in the Song representing patriarchal norms is the patrolling of the watchmen in 5:7. The woman desperately dashes into the streets in search of her lover after his departure from her sleeping chambers. The watchmen do not help her, but beat her instead, possibly as a consequence of her disregarding the rules of female seclusion.⁵⁴ This illustration of physical abuse is disturbing, but as Ostriker points out, the woman is little deterred from her mission. She continues to unhesitatingly praise the delights of her lover to the daughters of Jerusalem only a few short verses later.⁵⁵ Bergant believes that the Song implicates the behavior of the watchman as detestable, not the woman's solitary midnight pursuit.⁵⁶ In fact, the woman does not mention the pain from the watchman's beating, only the acute lovesickness she feels due to her lover's absence.⁵⁷ In sum, though there are patriarchal traces in the text, the woman's defiant response to them testifies to the unique message of the Song.

The poetic genre of the Song and the bold qualities of its female character also contribute to this book's uniqueness and the wisdom it has to offer. The Song is not very "holy" or "biblical" for a number of reasons. As Walsh and Ostriker observe, the Song does not mention God, emphasize Mosaic Law, prescribe rituals, teach morality, or discuss Israel's destiny.⁵⁸ The exhortation to complete obedience that dominates the chronicles and laws of the Hebrew Scriptures is absent in the poetry of the Song, which offers a variant tone and theme. Here, the lyrics portray

⁵¹ Bergant, 28 and 34.

⁵² Ibid., 34.

⁵³ Ibid..

⁵⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁵ Ostriker, 47.

⁵⁶ Bergant, 35.

⁵⁷ Song of Songs 5:8

⁵⁸ Walsh, 129 and Ostriker, 43.

a graceful invitation for a reciprocal relationship.⁵⁹ “My lover belongs to me and I to him,” the woman declares.⁶⁰ Neither lover rules the other dictatorially. Acceptance and praise characterize their relationship.

If one of the parties seems to tip the balance and wield more power, it is the female. Verse 4:9 exposes the male’s defenselessness when in the presence of his beloved: “You have ravished my heart with one glance of your eyes.” The proud and conquering Israelite warrior has been easily undone, and he freely admits it.⁶¹ In the Song, the woman’s value is intrinsic and unrelated to her reproductive capacity. Many scholars note this dissociation of sex and procreation in the Song, an unusual feature considering “normative models of sexuality in the Bible, in which women are property and wives are essentially breeders.”⁶² The Song illuminates an edenic existence where the curse of Genesis 3:16—womanly desire directed toward and at the mercy of a husband—vanishes.⁶³ The woman remarks that “I belong to my lover, his yearning is for me.”⁶⁴ The woman voices her desire while also acknowledging that she creates desire. Without a hint of shame or reticence, the woman receives the man’s adoration. She inspires wonder and longing, and pursues pleasure with her lover—erotic overtones in the Song that interestingly, as Bergant notes, were never mitigated by the final editors of the book.⁶⁵ The wisdom of the Song is its advocacy of mutual desire, love, and affirmation of the goodness of human sexuality. For such powerful insight to flourish, this historically patriarchal world (and Church) must validate and appreciate the Song’s female voice. Ostriker forcefully recounts the woman’s influence: “Elsewhere in the Bible we are admonished to fear God. But in this text it is the woman who is awesome, even terrifying, her eyeglance dazzling to the lover, her presence ‘terrible as an army with banners.’”⁶⁶ For Ostriker, the woman’s powerful mystique in the Song borders on the divine.

The Wisdom of the Song

⁵⁹ Ostriker, 43.

⁶⁰ Song of Songs 2:16.

⁶¹ Kochuthara, 445.

⁶² Ostriker, 44.

⁶³ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁴ Song of Songs 7:11.

⁶⁵ Bergant, 35.

⁶⁶ Ostriker, 45. She is quoting Song of Songs 6:4 in the King James Version, which is translated in the NAB as “fearsome as celestial visions.” The military metaphors used here and elsewhere in the Song are more evidence of this book’s uniqueness. The woman is described in soldierly terms, a reversal of typical gender roles, briefly discussed by Walsh in her article (131).

The Song of Song's classification as biblical wisdom literature may seem surprising given its sexually charged themes. Scholar Kenton Sparks argues that the Song is correctly categorized. The editors of the Song attribute its authorship to King Solomon, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, even though it is unlikely he wrote these works. The tradition stands, however, of associating Israel's wisest king with its wisdom literature, and as the Song is connected to Solomon, it was viewed as legitimate wisdom writing.⁶⁷ As Sparks contends, who better to expound on matters concerning women, sex, and love than King Solomon? Associating the Song with Solomon grants the work an authoritative air—with 700 wives and 300 concubines, certainly this king had experience.⁶⁸ The Bible attributes Solomon's ruin to the influence of his foreign wives—so those who desire to avoid his fate would do well to learn from the wisdom the Song offers. Further evidence of the Song's credibility as wisdom literature, Sparks observes, is its similar composition to other Hebrew wisdom books.⁶⁹ Sparks's reading of the Song clearly renders it a rightful member of the Hebrew wisdom tradition, but for different reasons than this paper suggests.

Whereas this paper argues that the Song's wisdom lies in its call for mutuality in relationships and affirmation of human sexuality, Sparks argues that the Song was meant for a rather limited audience—adolescent Jewish women—and that it focuses on “how young women can avoid being hurt and disappointed in the world of young love.”⁷⁰ In the Song of Songs 8:8-12, Sparks interprets a chastity lesson, which would be fitting for the book's patriarchal setting.⁷¹ Although Sparks admits that protecting virginity is not the foremost message of the Song, he believes that the Song's editors acknowledged the sexual potency of young people and wanted to relay this moral: “Better to wait patiently for marriage and to avoid letting young love get the best of you.”⁷² Sparks construes an instructional understanding of the Song for young Jewish women in the female's plea to the daughters of Jerusalem to “not awaken, or stir up love until it is ready.”⁷³ For Sparks, the woman conveys regret for the separation she must endure from her lover, the beating she receives while searching for him, and the lingering lovesickness she combats due to his repeated absences. Sparks reasons that the

⁶⁷ Sparks, 284.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 287.

⁶⁹ Ibid.. Sparks also notes that Proverbs and Ecclesiastes utilize juxtaposition to frame their wisdom messages. In his interpretation of the Song, Sparks sees this same juxtaposition—lessons on chastity and patience in love compared with the consequences of female proactivity (289).

⁷⁰ Sparks, 295.

⁷¹ Ibid., 289.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5, 8:4.

woman in the Song is an adolescent Jewish girl who has been frequently disappointed in young love and wants her friends to learn from her experience. “She has fallen in love too quickly,” Sparks writes, “and is paying a high price for that; she hopes to protect her friends from the same fate.”⁷⁴ Sparks acknowledges that his interpretation of the Song—teachings for young Jewish women on wise and proper conduct in regard to love and sex—situates the Song back in its patriarchal context.⁷⁵ According to Sparks, an emancipatory reading for women in the Song of Songs is a “partial illusion.”⁷⁶ Sparks’s reading of the Song seems to render a deeply emotional and evocative text as rather juvenile and flighty. Could adolescents express such profound desire and insight into love as the characters in the Song articulate? Perhaps, but it seems more likely that the lovers are mature adults and that an emancipatory reading of the Song is no illusion.

In an examination of the similarities and differences between the mutual love of the Song and the illicit sexual activity described in Proverbs 7, Hebrew scholar Daniel Grossberg upholds a reading of the Song that emphasizes the wisdom of mutuality in relationships. Grossberg identifies likenesses between the two wisdom texts that allow for enlightening comparison. The seductive “foreign” woman of Proverbs 7 entices her young male victim with similar biddings as the lovers in the Song. Grossberg compares Prov. 7:18, “Come, let us drink our fill of love” with Song of Songs 5:1 “Eat, friends; drink! Drink deeply lovers!” Grossberg highlights other affinities between the texts, like the application of spices in preparation for sexual encounter (Prov. 7:17, Song 1:13-14), the use of the “bed” and “couch” as locations for intimacy (Prov. 7:16, Song 1:16 and 3:1), and the motif of “seeking” lovers, whether for secret and dishonest purposes, as in Prov. 7:10, 12, and 15 or to experience genuine love, as in Song of Songs 3:1-4 and 8:1.⁷⁷

While Proverbs 7 and the Song may use similar language and themes, the portrayals of sexuality are starkly unlike. Grossberg explains: “A positive joy and delight permeate Canticles, whereas an ominous foreboding and condemnatory tone suffuse the wisdom lesson. Song of Songs and Proverbs 7 treat two different aspects of sexual relationships—the enjoyment of sexuality in the one and the misuse of sexuality in the other.”⁷⁸ He further highlights the differences between two types of sexual experiences in the wisdom literature. In Proverbs 7, the woman does not have a specific young man in mind—her choice here is arbitrary. She just

⁷⁴ Sparks, 286.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁶ Sparks, 299.

⁷⁷ Daniel Grossberg, “Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible,” *Hebrew Studies* 35 (1994): 9-11.

⁷⁸ Grossberg, 9.

needs a man—her victims have been countless, as verse 26 relays. “For many are those she has struck down dead, numerous, those she has slain.” As Grossberg illuminates, the lovers in the Song are exclusive and bound to a specific individual, as the phrases “My lover belongs to me and I to him” and “One alone is my dove, my perfect one” testify.⁷⁹ While the seductress in Proverbs 7 lies in wait for any man, and repeats her violent ambush again and again, the lovers in the Song are totally committed to each other and experience a peace and hope that is wholly lacking for the other couple.⁸⁰ For the man and woman in Proverbs 7, “The direction is clear—death is the end.”⁸¹ The love shared by the man and the woman in the Song, though, cannot be overcome by anything, even death.⁸² To explain the success of the love in the Song, Grossberg emphasizes the mutuality in actions and speech between the lovers.⁸³ In Proverbs 7, the man is silent and dominated. Grossberg asserts: “Proverbs through a negative image and Song of Songs through a positive image give a similar impression of the link of mutuality and equality to true intimacy.”⁸⁴ The relationship in Proverbs 7 is imbalanced. The man is passive and therefore captive. He follows the foreign woman on “a highway to Sheol, leading down into the chambers of death.”⁸⁵ In contrast, the lovers in the Song are full of life and merriment. The Song has no bleak ending. The lovers are separated at the end of the book, but if the preceding chapters are a pattern, they will be reunited and their love consummated. “The sharing of undifferentiated roles regardless of gender,” Grossberg notes, “imparts to the Song a favored quality.”⁸⁶ The mutual relationship of the lovers displays the wisdom of the Song. Giving of oneself physically and emotionally to another should be within the bounds of an exclusive relationship committed to respect and love.

Conclusion

When left untamed, the Song of Songs offers beautiful wisdom for humans navigating the often confusing and disappointing rivulets of love. Although the Song has most often been interpreted allegorically, which can tender interesting spiritual insight, the plain meaning of the Song is reassuring for beleaguered believers weary of works-based righteousness, excessive self-denial, and rigid

⁷⁹ Ibid., 16. Song of Songs 2:16 and 8:9.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁸¹ Ibid., 18.

⁸² Ibid., 19; Song of Songs 8:6-7.

⁸³ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁵ Prov. 7:27.

⁸⁶ Grossberg, 24.

sexuality. The Song is in no way advocating sexual license, but its inclusion in the divinely inspired canon must tell us something about God. God gives good gifts. The Song tells of a great gift of God—human sexuality. The poetry of the Song relates its wisdom in a sensual and provocative manner that might cause a human heart to skip a beat or two with desire and anticipation. “Enjoy and celebrate your sexuality,” the Song seems to say, “and let this enjoyment and celebration be lovingly shared.” A mutual and reciprocal relationship, especially a sacramental marriage, is the wisest way through which to love another, and the Song beautifully portrays this truth.

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