

# OpenTheo

## Song of Songs - Introduction



### Song of Songs - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg provides an insightful analysis of the biblical book of Song of Songs, highlighting its allegorical meanings and the representation of God's love for Israel. He draws parallels between the story of Solomon and the relationship between Christ and the church. Gregg emphasizes the sacredness of sexuality within marriage and argues that the book celebrates the beauty and goodness of human relationships. He explores different interpretations of the narrative and suggests that the structure of the book resembles ancient cultural idylls.

## Transcript

I'd like to begin with a confession, that is that I never have enjoyed teaching Song of Solomon. For a number of reasons. One is I'm a guy.

And it seems like a girly book to me. Sorry, that's just how it's always seen. It's probably a guy book too, but it's mainly the sayings of a woman about how beautiful her boyfriend is.

And, you know, for the most part I can't relate because I don't have a boyfriend. Never have. But sometimes he tells how beautiful she is.

That I can sometimes relate to. But the point is the story is hard to make out. It's hard for a teacher to teach this book without getting all mystical.

Because it's really just a love story, it would appear. And in order to justify its existence in the Bible, in the canon of Scripture, teachers, both Jewish and Christian throughout history, have tried to find an allegorical meaning to it, which may be legitimate, but is questionable. Because the book itself does not suggest any allegorical meanings to it.

It simply, on the surface, is a story song about a romantic relationship. And I said I don't like teaching it for one reason, because I feel like we're kind of intruding into a couple's privacy at times. You know, it's kind of hard to read the words out loud in a group.

And so much so that the Jews, from what I'm told, did not allow their children to read this

book until they were 18 years old. Or something like that. Because it's really not suitable for children.

It's a sexually explicit book about, well, it's not even altogether clear whether the relationship was confined within marriage. Certainly there is a marriage in the book. And the marriage appears to be that of Solomon and his favorite wife.

There's another thing that makes it rather difficult. He talks about how in love he is with this woman, yet we know that he eventually had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Which kind of takes away from the romance.

If you watch a romantic movie and you're cheering for the hero and the heroine to get together, and then you find out that he's got a thousand other women on the side, it just kind of takes something away from it. And so these are reasons I haven't always enjoyed the book. Now, lots of people do enjoy it.

And especially teachers who like to find a lot of allegorical meanings in it. And I don't mind allegorical meanings in it. I just feel like a lot of them are very speculative.

And that's an area of teaching that I've never preferred. I don't prefer to be real speculative in my teaching. So this is a difficult book to read and to expound on.

The big question is, is it an allegory? We'll talk about what the story itself contains in the course of this introduction. But is the book intended as an allegory? Did Solomon, who apparently wrote it, intend for us to understand this as a picture of something other than himself and his girlfriend? Whom he apparently married, because there is a wedding in this. I don't know that he did, and I don't know that he didn't.

It is not the easiest thing to connect in an allegorical way. And so, apparently the Jews tended to make this a story about God and Israel. God being like Solomon, the husband, and Israel like the Shulamite woman, the lover slash wife.

We do know that in the Old Testament, God speaks about his relationship to Israel in terms of marriage. The covenant that God made at Mount Sinai with Israel is thereafter referred to as a marriage covenant that God made with Israel. In Hosea and in Jeremiah and in other places, God mentions his marriage to Israel.

In Jeremiah 31, when he actually predicts he'll make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah, he says, it won't be like the last one I made at Mount Sinai, which they broke even though I was a husband to them. So, Israel is likened to a wife of God in the Old Testament. And so, the rabbis, many of them, like to see in Solomon and the Shulamite woman a picture of God and Israel.

And of course, there's very passionate, enamored, obsessive love between this couple. And so, this would speak to them of the great love that God has toward his people and

that which his people should have toward him. Actually, if you read Israel's history, you never really find many instances of Israel returning this kind of love to God.

And in that sense, it does not appear that it's a very good analogy of God and Israel. Although, one might argue that eschatological Israel will someday love God in the way this Shulamite woman loved Solomon, and that may be what one is supposed to find in this love song. At least, so say the rabbis.

Now, Christian teachers have very commonly done the same kind of thing, but of course, making the bridegroom be Jesus. And the woman has been sometimes seen as the church, for obvious reasons. The church is the bride of Christ.

So, Paul says in Ephesians chapter 5 that the creation of marriage in the Garden of Eden was to be a picture of Christ and the church. Revelation 19 talks about the bride, the wife of the Lamb, making herself ready, and we see the new Jerusalem adorned as a bride coming down from heaven to meet her husband. And that's the church.

So, it would appear that there would be at least as much justification to see this as a picture of Christ and the church as there was for Israel to see it as a picture of God and Israel. And it seems to me that many commentators, even if they question whether this analogy is intentional in the book, like to point out that it works in some ways. And so, it does.

I mean, obviously, love between a married couple is something that God created and intended to reflect Christ's love for the church. That's why Paul said, when he said, for this cause, a man should leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and the two should become one flesh, he said, this is a great mystery, but I speak between Christ and the church. Now, there may be even another justification for seeing this book as being about Christ and the church.

If you look over at Psalm 45, Psalm 45 is a song written on the occasion of a royal wedding. The particular identity of the king in question, who's getting married, is not clear. It's not ever actually stated which king this is about.

But Psalm 45 is clearly about a wedding of a king. Now, it would appear that it is a king in the southern kingdom. Many flattering things about this man are said, which we would be more inclined to apply to one of the non-apostate kings of Israel.

Although I suppose that a scribe writing a song for a king's wedding, even if it was a nasty king, might say very generous remarks about the king, since that would be expected. In any case, some have thought that Psalm 45 could have been written on the occasion of Solomon's wedding, one of them. The writer of Psalm 45 says, my heart is overflowing with a good theme.

I recite my composition concerning the king. My tongue is the pen of a ready writer. And

he says to the king, you are fairer than the sons of men.

That means more handsome. Grace is poured upon your lips. That means you speak, you know, winsomely and graciously.

Therefore, God has blessed you forever. Now, God had in fact blessed Solomon forever, according to the Davidic promises in 2 Samuel 7, when the prophet Nathan told David that after David would die, a son of his would sit on his throne after him, and God would establish his kingdom forever. Solomon was the son of David, who sat on his throne after David died, and there is thus a promise that his kingdom would be established forever.

This could apply to Solomon, possibly. Therefore, God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one, with your glory and your majesty.

And in your majesty, ride prosperously because of truth, humility, and righteousness. And your right hand shall teach you awesome things. Your arrows are sharp in the hearts of the king's enemies.

The peoples fall under you. Now, actually, Solomon didn't ever wage any wars. But if this were written for Solomon, it's not surprising that, you know, the scribe would speak about his military prowess.

After all, this could be idealized or it could be potential. And early in Solomon's reign, perhaps no one would know that he would live an entire lifetime without waging any wars. After all, kings usually did.

His father David waged wars through his whole lifetime, and for all anyone knew, maybe Solomon would too. In any case, we don't know that this is about Solomon, but the important thing about this psalm is in verse 6. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom.

You love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness more than your companions. Now, this certainly could apply to Solomon because in the early days, he did love wisdom and righteousness.

And most of the later kings did not. There were a few who did. Certainly, Uzziah and Jotham and Hezekiah and Josiah were kings after Solomon who loved righteousness.

But most of the kings of Judah and none of the kings of Israel, I should say, most of the, you know, they all, none of them did righteously. Just a few, a few Judean kings did. None of the Israel kings did.

So there'd only be a few kings that this could apply to. Solomon would be a good one to consider because it says that God had anointed him with the oil of gladness above his companions. And Solomon did exceed all others of his generation in wisdom and wealth

and power and prestige.

But of course, you may be aware that verses 6 and 7 are quoted in the New Testament. In the book of Hebrews, chapter 1, verses 8 and 9. And there they are applied to Christ. Now, it's obvious that in the Old Testament, Solomon is a type of Christ.

Even in the original proclamation about Solomon in the passage I mentioned earlier, 2 Samuel 7, 12 and following. 2 Samuel 7, verses 12 and following. That's when Nathan the prophet made the statement about David's son.

And the statement that Nathan made clearly applies to Solomon and to Jesus. The things that are said about that son of David came true in a lesser sense through Solomon and in a greater sense through Jesus. And as the quintessential son of David, ruling in David's place, Solomon is always recognized as a type of Christ.

Now, whether he should be seen as a type of Christ with reference to the song of Solomon is another story. But in at least one respect, we know Solomon is a type of Christ. And this king in Psalm 45 is something that is said about him, which the writer of Hebrews took to be about Christ.

And therefore, suggests strongly that this king might have been Solomon. It's not clear whether Uzziah or Jopham or Hezekiah or Jehoshaphat or Josiah or any of the other good kings of Judah were ever considered to be a type of Christ or not. But we know Solomon was.

And that would justify, if the writer of Hebrews believed this psalm was written about Solomon, he would easily see it as a type of Christ and apply these words to Christ. It's not certain, and I'm not going to argue that this is necessarily Solomon, but of all the kings that it could be, Solomon seems to be the best candidate. And if it is, it is a wedding psalm and would be a wedding psalm of Solomon.

If Solomon is the character in view here. In verse eight in the psalm, all your garments are scented with myrrh and aloes and cassia of the ivory palaces by which they have made you glad. Now, these smells of the bridegroom are also mentioned in Song of Solomon by the bride or by the lady.

And it says king's daughters are among your honorable women. Well, probably his wives were mostly king's daughters. He entered into many political marriages, making treaties with other kings around him.

At your right hand stands the queen in gold of offer. Now, which queen? We do not know. But this could be the bride herself.

Or it could be the queen mother. It's always possible this could be a reference to Bathsheba, the queen mother, because she'd be called queen in some context as well.

Listen, oh daughter.

Now, this addresses the girl. Now, if this happens to be the Shulamite that's in Song of Solomon, it'd be interesting because it says, listen, oh daughter, consider and incline your ear. Forget your own people also in your father's house.

So the king will greatly desire your beauty because he is your lord. Worship him. The daughter of Tyre will be there with a gift.

The rich among the people will seek your favor. The royal daughter is all glorious within the palace. Her clothing is woven with gold.

She shall be brought to the king in robes of many colors. The virgins, who may well be the daughters of Jerusalem who pipe in from time to time in the Song of Solomon, who are like a chorus in the song, it says, the virgins, her companions, who follow her, shall be brought to you. With gladness and rejoicing they shall be brought.

They shall enter the king's palace. Now, this, verses 16 and 17, are an exhortation to the bride. And whether Song of Solomon is taken as a type of Christ in the church or not, this psalm apparently should be because, of course, of verses 6 and 7, which are quoted as being about Christ.

And it's a wedding psalm. So Christ's only wedding was to the church or is to the church. And so speaking to the bride, it says in verse 16, instead of your father shall be your sons, whom you shall make princes in all the earth.

I will make your name to be remembered in all generations. Therefore, the people shall praise you forever and ever. The woman will be giving up her relation to her father in order to identify with her new family, which will be made up of her sons.

And so this wedding psalm is about a king, a Jewish king, one who is said to be righteous, one who loves righteousness and hates iniquity. That would hardly apply to someone like Ahaz or many of the other evil kings of Judah and could apply to Solomon. Since there is a passage in this psalm that is quoted in the New Testament as being about Christ, it's clear that the king in question in Psalm 45 is a type of Christ.

And as far as we know, the only son of David that was was Solomon. Although it could be argued that any son of David could be seen as a type of Christ since he's the son of David par excellence. But certainly Solomon is the one singled out in Old Testament scripture as the one who is a type of the Messiah.

So it's interesting that we might have a wedding psalm of Solomon that somebody else wrote, as well as the song of Solomon that he wrote, which also includes a wedding theme. Now of course it would not follow necessarily that the woman in Psalm 45 is the same woman in the song of Solomon since there were many women in Solomon's life.

And 1 Kings chapter 11 says Solomon loved many women and many of them turned his heart from God.

He did marry the daughter of Pharaoh, notably. Apparently upon his accession to the throne, he almost immediately married the daughter of Pharaoh, entering into a political arrangement with Egypt. And it may be that Psalm 45 is about that wedding.

But in any case, it's possible that since there is that song, possibly about Solomon in a wedding, that seems to be treated in the New Testament as a picture of Christ. That it would be equally legitimate to see this song of Solomon about a wedding as a picture of Christ, too. That's all I'm getting at here.

I don't know how much we should assume about the song of Solomon, but many people assume a great number of things about it being a picture of Christ in the church. And it may be that there's some justification for that. Many modern commentators would just prefer to take the song of Solomon at face value.

What a concept. Just look at the book and take it for what it says. And in which case that would simply be a description of how two people love each other when they're courting and when they marry.

And essentially, since it has a very positive view of sexual activity between the couple, it would sort of counterbalance what you mostly find in the Bible about sex. Because usually when sex is described in the Bible, it's usually its aberrant forms. I mean, it's usually in laws and commandments about don't have sex with animals, don't have sex with your father's wife, don't have sex with your sister.

I mean, the laws about sex in the Bible typically are on the negative side. And so most of the time, not all the time, but most of the time when you read about sex in the Bible, you're looking at it from sort of a negative side. And that is why I think among religious people and Christians even, historically, sex has been considered to be rather a dirty subject.

Now, there is something to be said for keeping talk about sex private, but not because it's a dirty or embarrassing subject, but because it's a sacred subject and you don't want to cheapen it. God made a sexual relationship between a man and a woman to reflect the picture of Christ and the church, as Paul said in Ephesians 5. And that being so, it's a rather sacred type of thing, more sacred than friendship or most other kinds of relationships. And the sexual part is the unique part because there are other very important God-ordained relationships.

Father-son relationship is also a picture of God and us. Brother-sister relationships is a picture of our relationship in the body of Christ, family relationships. So there's lots of relationships among human beings that in one way or another picture a spiritual

counterpart, but none of them involve sex.

Sex is the unique aspect of a marriage relationship, and therefore it kind of stands alone in terms of how it's considered. If you had only the laws and rules against sexual sin, which we have abundantly in the Old Testament law, and the New Testament of course speaks against sexual sin a great deal too. When Paul lists many things like the works of the flesh or just sets of sins that the Gentiles are guilty of, always at least a third of the things listed are sexual sins of one kind or another.

No wonder the world gets the impression that Christians are prudish or Christians don't like to, you don't think sex is a good thing. Well it's not that we don't think it's a good thing, we just don't think it's a cheap thing. We don't think it's a vulgar thing.

We think that sex is a sacred thing, and to remove a sacred thing from its holy precincts where it belongs is a sacrilege. It's not that we're embarrassed about it, it's that it's a matter that God has made to be very personal, very private, and very guarded, very protected, and kept in certain boundaries. And you know, all the negative things the Bible says about sex at all are simply things that are taking what is the sacred act that belongs between a married couple and dragging it out into the streets.

And putting it on display, or spreading it around, cheaply. That's what the Bible objects to, it's not a dirty thing but a sacred thing, being cheapened. And you know, Christians these days, because there's now a lot of political talk about homosexual rights and homosexual marriage and things like that, and when Christians stand up for biblical standards they're often said to be homophobic, as if there's something specifically about homosexual behavior that we're uptight and phobic about.

The truth of the matter is Christians are not homophobic. Christians are not even specifically interested in targeting their criticism toward homosexuality. What we're against is the reinterpretation of what sex and marriage are supposed to be.

Because God has created both sex and marriage, and defined them, and has a sacred intention for them. That they should reflect Christ in the church. And it's not simply that homosexuality is a bad thing, it's simply that it's the wrong use of something that God made.

It's not any more wrong than adultery or incest or bestiality or other forms of sexual misbehavior. Any kind of sexual misbehavior is taking something that is sacred and cheapening it. Which is a sacrilege, it's like when people blaspheme the name of God in the Old Testament, or broke the Sabbath.

Whenever they violate some sacred thing, or touch the Ark, when they're not supposed to touch the Ark. It's the violation of something that is to be kept very guarded, and very set apart. And so, you know, it's a shame, it's really a shame that because of the



particular political emphasis on the homosexual issues today.

That it makes the Christians speak out seemingly against a group of people. Who probably are no more guilty of sexual deviancy than many most heterosexual people are. Because it's not really that Christians are targeting homosexuality as the enemy.

What we're concerned about is upholding biblical norms of marriage. And that should mean that we uphold marriage against the threats of divorce, and adultery, and other kinds of deviancy. Not merely against homosexuality.

There's a specific thing that God has ordained sex for, and when it's used wrongly, the Bible condemns it. But, there are cases, there's witness in the Scripture that God is not against it. In fact, he rejoices in it when it has to do with the proper coupling of a man and a wife.

And this book, perhaps its main value, even apart from any analogy of Christ in the church that might be imagined or found in it. Its value is that it actually presents a positive side of a sexual relationship. And sees it as something to celebrate, and something that's good.

And it is, of course. I have sometimes pointed out that when God made man and woman, to be a picture of Christ in the church, Paul said, in Adam and Eve. That he made them a sexual species, as opposed to an asexual species.

There are species that reproduce asexually. But, when God made man and woman, he didn't make them to reproduce asexually. There's a particular reason that he made them to become one flesh in the manner that they do.

In reproduction, and in marriage, and joining. And that is because, in my opinion, I think the Old Testament certainly confirms this. If we would say, well what does sex in marriage represent in the spiritual realm? It represents worship.

Now how do we know that? Well, it's quite obvious. Every time Israel worshipped other gods, God said they're committing adultery. They're supposed to only worship God.

Why? Because they're married to him, just like a woman's supposed to only have sex with her husband and no one else. She's supposed to worship God, and when they worshipped another god, that was adultery, God said. They're playing the harlot against their husband.

It's obvious that the uniqueness of the sexual relationship in marriage is a picture of the uniqueness of the worship relationship that is offered by God's people to God, alone. And so, once one contemplates that, and perhaps it's better to contemplate it privately than on a recorded message. But once one begins to think about the details of what sex is designed like, and to realize that God intended for that to be a picture of our relationship

with Christ, it may tell us more about our relationship with Christ and our worship than we would otherwise have imagined.

For one thing, we know that the sexual relationship is one that God created between man and wife to be reproductive, to be fruitful. And so also, our worship of God, our worship of Christ, is to be fruitful. It's supposed to reproduce in us Christ's likeness.

The word becomes made flesh in us as the seed is planted in us. The Bible talks about that. We've been born again, not of corruptible seed, but by the word of God.

That's Christ, of course, is the word of God, who lives and abides forever. He is the seed planted in us. The word seed in the Greek is sperma, and that's not intended to be specifically a reference to semen.

That's a reference simply, that's the Greek word for seed. Any plant seed is called a sperma. And so we get the word sperm from that, of course.

But the point is that in the intimate relationship between God and his people, he reproduces himself in us. I've often thought it interesting, too, that other higher animals, when they are reproducing, do not do so face to face. God did not design them to do it face to face.

But humans he designed to be face to face, to be looking at each other, to have an intimate relationship. Not just a biological exchange of genetic materials, but actually a face to face relationship. And worship of God, of Christ, is to be, as it were, face to face, an intimate thing.

And these are things that I think anyone, upon reflection, can see as they consider what the Bible says about the significance of the sexual relationship in marriage. Vis-a-vis the New Testament teaching of Christ in the church. But Song of Solomon is a book that affirms that sexual relationship.

Although it's not entirely clear, I mean, almost all Christian commentators say, well, all the sex in this book took place within marriage. It's not obvious that it did, but it might have. I mean, it depends on how you arrange the chronology of the different songs.

There are seven different songs in this book put together in sort of a patchwork way. And it is possible that you could arrange it chronologically so that there was no sexual activity before marriage. Or even that some of the sexual activity that is described took place in a dream or in the imagination of the girl prior to marriage.

I mean, it is possible in this book to keep this couple chaste before marriage, but it's not obvious. The main thing is, though, they did get married. Actually, in the Old Testament law, and of course this is not popular among Christians because Christians, you know, it's just not popular.

But in the Old Testament law, if a man had a sexual relationship with a virgin who was neither married nor betrothed to another man, they had to get married. Which proves that sex was intended only for married couples and shouldn't be done by people who aren't married. And if they did do it before they were married, they had to get married.

Though that was not necessarily a penalty. There is actually no other penalty attached except they have to get married and they can't divorce. Under the law, most couples could divorce, but if a couple slept together before they were married and got married, they could not divorce.

So the penalty was they had to live with each other forever, you know, for life. If they loved each other, they might not consider that a great penalty. And apparently, under the law, if they slept together and married each other, then no sin was necessarily considered to be committed.

So Solomon may have been laboring under that idea. It may be that once he had decided to marry her and she to him, maybe they were doing something, I don't know. It's hard to tell as you read the book.

And of course, part of this is the Song of Solomon is not in a chronological arrangement. There are seven what are called idylls. An idyll is a poetic, romantic poem, a love song, that's set in a rural pastoral type of setting.

There are idylls of other cultures besides Israel. This is the only example in the Bible of an idyll. Song of Solomon is a unique composition in terms of other biblical books.

It's one of a kind. Just like the Book of Revelation is a unique book in that it's the only, in the New Testament, it's the only fully apocalyptic book that is given to us in the canon of the New Testament. There are some apocalyptic books in the Old Testament.

But as far as idylls go, Song of Solomon is all we've got in the Bible, in the canonical books. And an idyll is a song that kind of takes the normal things of life and gives them sort of a romantic cast. You know how when people are in love, the birds are all singing prettier and the flowers are all brighter and so forth.

And everything ordinary has got a different kind of a sensation that it imparts to the persons in love. And an idyll is a song that kind of communicates all of that feeling. Now, Song of Solomon is made up of seven idylls.

And each one tells a little bit of this relationship. Now, as far as what the backstory is, some modern scholars have considered that there's no backstory at all. That there's not a story that's being played out here, but that there's seven separate love songs written entirely independently of each other.

They're not even necessarily about the same couple in every case. This is just a

collection of love songs that got put together, just like we have a collection of psalms in the Psalter or a collection of Proverbs in the Book of Proverbs. So there's a collection of songs.

We know that from 1 Kings chapter 4 that Solomon wrote a thousand and five songs. And there could be seven of them collected here instead of one. This might be... In fact, it's called Song of Songs.

One could argue the book is a song made up of seven songs, you know, a collection of songs. And so have argued many scholars today that we shouldn't try to find a backstory here at all. It's just a collection of love poetry.

But most scholars feel that's not very likely to be true. For one thing, the way that all the... the way the lovers address each other and talk about each other is pretty similar all the way through, no matter which idyll you're reading. It looks like we're talking about the same couple.

And Solomon is named a number of times throughout, I think seven times, as the lover involved. Of course, that wouldn't necessarily mean it's the same woman every time, but it's, I guess, preferable to believe that. And the term Song of Songs, which is Solomon's, the Song of Songs is a phrase sort of like King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Holy of Holies.

This is a Hebraic kind of a way of saying the best of. The Holy of Holies is the holiest of all. Actually, what we call the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle or the temple is elsewhere called the holiest of all, which is the meaning of Holy of Holies in the Hebraic idiom.

Likewise, King of Kings, Lord of Lords means the supreme among kings, the supreme among lords. And the Song of Songs will be this, the chief, most wonderful song of all songs. Apparently of all songs that Solomon wrote, it's his favorite one about his favorite woman, at least at the time.

I think at the time he wrote this, he only had, what, 60 wives, not 700. But he later, this must have been early in his life when he only had so few wives, such a small harem. But this woman was the best of the bunch, at least for the moment.

And we just don't know much about who she is. She's referred to as a Shulamite. The word Shulamite is thought to mean a woman of shunim.

We have read twice of Shunamite women in the books of Kings. We have, for example, in 1 Kings 1, when David was old and apparently died of consumption, his body would not generate any heat. No matter how many blankets they piled on top of him, he was still cold.

So someone suggested they find the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, a young virgin, so that they wouldn't be violating anyone else's marriage. Find a woman who's

available to marry, and the most beautiful that they could find, and put her in bed with him. Not that he'd have sex with her.

He was old at this time, and the Bible specifically says he didn't have sex with her. And he had plenty of wives for that anyway. This woman was just to keep him warm in bed, to warm the sheets, by being there.

And the woman they found was a woman named Abishag, who said to be a Shunamite. Now the woman in this book is called a Shulamite. But there are some Hebrew words in which the N and L can be interchanged.

That is, that the word is the same whether you spell it with an N or an L. And some have thought that Shulamite and Shunamite are the same, basically the same word. And some have thought even that since Solomon is so smitten by this Shulamite, that she might be Abishag, the Shunamite. After all, David didn't have sex with her.

She remained a virgin until David died and Solomon became king. So she'd be still possibly somebody that Solomon could marry if he wished. And she was the most beautiful woman they could find in the kingdom.

And therefore she might well have captured Solomon's heart as we read of here. And it's kind of an interesting suggestion. There's another Shunamite woman in the Old Testament who certainly isn't this woman.

That's an older woman who Elijah stayed with her and her husband and son and raised her son from the dead. But that was another woman of Shunam. In any case, this woman's name is never given, though Solomon's name is given a number of times in the book.

There are two basic theories that predominate Christian commentators on this about the back story of the song. One is, first of all, it's obvious that there's a man in the story who is described as a shepherd, somebody who tends flocks. The girl herself is apparently a keeper of a vineyard and she may have kept a few goats herself.

This is a farmland kind of setting. And the woman is clearly in love with a shepherd boy or shepherd young man. The question is, who is that shepherd? Two views exist.

One is that there are two men in the story, Solomon and the shepherd, and that they are competing for the woman's affections. The other is that the shepherd is Solomon. So let's consider these two things.

The two major theories that commentators bring forward, and some defend one or the other with great certainty, is that a. there are two men vying for the affection of this one girl, or b. there's only one man, Solomon. Now the first view, that there's a shepherd and Solomon competing, goes like this. This girl is a rural beauty living in Israel, and she has

a boyfriend who's a shepherd boy in her region.

But Solomon happens to be passing through and spots her, and she's someone he is smitten by and he wants and he tries to court her. And he even takes her to Jerusalem to show her his wealth and his glory, Solomon in all his glory, and to try to bring her over to falling in love with him. And she contemplates it.

She thinks about it. She's tempted. But in the end she goes with the shepherd boy and doesn't go along with Solomon.

Those who see it this way find the passages about the shepherd to be about someone different than the passages about Solomon. And they suggest if this is a picture of Christ in the church, then it could be that Solomon represents the world, and the shepherd boy represents Christ. That the church is being seduced, or the world is seeking to seduce her, as Solomon, with all his wealth and all of his beauty and all of his stuff, is trying to seduce this girl away from her shepherd lover boy.

And therefore it's like the church, who should be loyal to Christ the shepherd, is being drawn by the prince of this world off into worldliness. But she finally resists that and marries the shepherd boy. That's how many people see the back story of this.

It works, but is it really what we're supposed to understand? It seems very unlikely that Solomon would write a song like this where he's the bad guy. And where he loses the girl. I mean, the song is a celebration, not a lament.

If he was in love with the girl, and she spurned him and married somebody else, would he write a song celebrating this situation? It doesn't seem like it to me. It just seems it's not likely to be the way it is. That's an intuition of mine, it could be wrong.

The other idea is that there's only one man in the picture, that's Solomon. But why is he a shepherd then? He's a king, and he's clearly the king in the story also. And some have felt that he's just idealizing himself as a shepherd, in the poetic imagination.

He's picturing himself as a shepherd, living out in the same kind of lifestyle as this girl, courting her and so forth. That has never struck me as very likely. There's more opinions about the Song of Solomon than there are about the Book of Revelation, I think.

You could write a book, Song of Solomon, ten views. But the one view that I've heard that strikes me as very probable, and by the way, students have handed in views of their own, and some interesting, thoughtful views have been presented. None of them are necessarily the prevailing views, but that's okay.

The purpose of your work is that you think on your own, and come up with your own ideas. No one knows what the right view is, so who knows, maybe yours has a chance of being the right one. But the one that has seemed right to me is the following.

Now, I have to say, it doesn't seem like a very likely story. It sounds too much like a fairy tale. But Solomon, being the richest, most powerful man in the world, he lived a fairy tale life, and he could have done whatever he wanted to.

He might have even just imagined this happening. But the point is, it seems to me that the story is something like this. Solomon, at some point, with all his royal retinue with him, visits one of his many vineyards and sees a worker girl in the vineyard who is just stunningly beautiful, and he's taken with her.

And he calls to her and says, hey, come, let me look at you, and she runs away because she's shy, and she's intimidated. She's a peasant girl, and he's the king with all these foot soldiers and bodyguard around him in his royal carriage and so forth. And she's just intimidated, shy, and runs away.

And he can see he's not going to get anywhere with this girl as long as he looks like that. So he goes away and then comes and pays occasional visits to the area himself dressed in the garb of an ordinary peasant himself, like a shepherd. And he is the shepherd that she falls in love with.

But he's elusive. He has to rule the kingdom, too. He can't just stay there and pretend sheep all the time.

So he just makes visits occasionally as a shepherd, but he kind of comes and goes, and she's not sure where he is when he's gone. And she's looking for him and longing for him, but where'd my shepherd friend go? And he's gone, but he comes back once in a while, and they seem to get along, to put it euphemistically. And then he disappears again back to Jerusalem, and her heart is pining for him.

And then he returns in all his regalia again, and she recognizes that this is the guy that she fell in love with as a shepherd. And now he proposes to her, and she's not intimidated by him anymore because she's now in love with him. And so she accepts, and he takes her back to Jerusalem, and they get married.

Now, this story, like I said, sounds more like a fairy tale than a Bible story, although some of the Bible stories do have a sound of fairy tale likeness. Well, that doesn't mean they're not true, but I mean sometimes reality can be like a fairy tale. And if this is true, it makes a really interesting analogy of God and his people, too, because when God first appeared in all his power and splendor and so forth at Mount Sinai, the people were terrified.

They wanted to keep their distance. They said, Moses, you go talk to God and tell us what he says. We don't want to hear from anyone.

He scares us. He's too impressive. He's too awesome.

And Israel shrunk back, and they always kept their distance from God, except for those few times when they had some revivals, but they typically were apostate and not close to God. And then when God came to earth as Christ in a peasant shepherd's disguise, as it were, when he emptied himself of all his regal glory and took on himself the form of a servant, that in this way he won the remnant to himself who became his bride. And after going away for some time, he will return again in all his splendor and will call the bride to himself.

And there will be the wedding supper of the Lamb and all of that. So this is the story that could possibly be behind the story of the Song of Solomon. It may not be.

And frankly, I'll tell you that you read so many different opinions about this, and everyone's so sure of their opinion, that it seems to me that if you don't buy this particular story, there's no shame that accrues to having another favorite. But, you know, in order to teach the book, I have to have some kind of a concept, some kind of a structure to hang it on. And this structure strikes me as fitting reasonably well, and of the other – of the options, it strikes me as possibly the most likely.

If it seems not likely to you, then you'll just – you'll read through it with a different set of assumptions than I'm presenting. But as I do go through it, what I want to do is show you that these seven idylls that make up the Song of Solomon, each shows a different snapshot of the relationship. And it kind of starts, really, at the end.

The first idyll is that – is the bride and the groom together on the wedding day. But then the other idylls actually are snapshots that kind of go back. Some of the other idylls seem to flash back to earlier scenes in their courtship or in their story.

So sometimes he's the king, sometimes he's the shepherd, sometimes she's alone, dreaming about him, sometimes she's out in the street looking for him. But these different stanzas, we might say, each give us a different part of the picture. But it's a little artificial how the picture all fits together because you're jumping back and forth in time.

And that's how really – frankly, that's how idylls are in all the ancient cultural literature, is that they kind of – they're kind of scattered around. They're just kind of impressionistic songs that jump from one point in a story to another. And that's what this song does.

Now, the last time I taught Song of Solomon, I did it in one session, including the introduction. The introduction plus the Song of Solomon in one session, but that was a 90-minute class. This one is a shorter class.

And rather than start going through the book in this class and then stopping after chapter one or something, I think I'll hold off until our next class in Song of Solomon to just take the whole book in a sitting. But I have given you in your notes sort of an outline



of the book and where I see the divisions of the idylls. The first one is chapter one through chapter two, verse seven.

And in that one we see the bride and the groom now on the wedding day. And this one ends with these words in verse seven of chapter two. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

This statement is made two other times at the end of two other idylls. Three of the seven idylls end with this very same phrase, with the same exhortation. Do not awaken love until it pleases.

I would say that if you look at other translations of the Bible, you'll find they translate this last line, do not awaken love until it pleases, variously. And at least another alternate reading is do not awaken my love until he pleases. In other words, she's saying don't wake up my love, he's fallen asleep.

Let him sleep. Let him wake up when he wants to wake up. And so a number of translators have rendered it that way.

Do not awaken my love until he pleases. It's the woman speaking. Now the other possibility is the way we have it right here in the New King James.

Do not awaken love until it pleases. In which case, what does that mean? Many people like to quote it this way to make some kind of a point about love, but it's certainly not obvious what it means until love pleases. Usually, certainly we would say people don't ever become infatuated until they're pleased to do so.

And yet, if you're not supposed to awaken love within yourself, within your heart, until it's pleased to be awakened, well how do you differentiate between the time when it naturally rises and the time when it's pleased to rise? Isn't it pleased the moment it rises? I mean, isn't that what love is? Isn't it pleasing? Doesn't love enjoy awakening at any time that you happen to awaken it? It's hard to know exactly what it would mean if it's translated as we have it here. Do not awaken love until it pleases. Now, some of the Christian commentators say this means that this is an urging of chastity until marriage.

Don't awaken love, meaning don't have sex. Until it pleases, meaning until marriage. Though, one would have to admit that it's not obvious.

I mean, it may seem kind of natural for don't awaken love to mean don't have sex. That could easily be seen to be correct. But until it pleases, meaning until marriage, well, it sounds like we could certainly impose that on it from the morals we get from the rest of the Bible, but it's not clear that until it pleases would be an obvious reference to marriage.

But if it's until it chooses, sometimes they say don't awaken love until it chooses, which might mean chooses to marry, in which case that could possibly be its meaning. What I'm saying is we're three times encounter this particular phrase. In the New King James, it's going to read, do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

But there are other translations that see it as a reference simply as her asking those around them not to wake up her husband or her lover until he wants to get up. And so I think even the King James renders it that way. But there's other modern translations that do also.

So there's going to be ambiguities throughout this thing. The whole thing is poetry, of course. And poetry is written in non-literal images to a very large extent.

The very sexual relationship is going to be described to like a vineyard being broached or a garden being entered or fruit being eaten and enjoyed. I mean, all those kinds of images are what we're going to be finding throughout this book. And it's going to be in many cases referring to the sexual relationship.

So there's a lot of non-literal stuff here and therefore subject to a variety of interpretations as can be seen when you look at the commentaries, how many interpretations there are. But the second idyll is chapter 2, verse 8 through chapter 3, verse 5. It ends the same way the first one did with those same words. This is the bride reminiscing about the courtship.

So she's kind of flashing back as she sits at the banqueting table at the wedding. She's flashing back remembering when they first met and when they courted. Chapter 3, verse 6 begins the third idyll and it goes through chapter 5, verse 1. It's a recollection of him proposing to her.

This is when he came back in all his regalia as king and revealed who he was. That's that idyll, the third one. The fourth one is chapter 5, verse 2 through chapter 6, verse 3. And there she, the bride is speaking, she's relating a troubled dream that she had back when she did not know who her courter was, who her suitor was.

And he had disappeared on one of his disappearances and she had a troubled dream about him possibly disappearing for good. The fifth idyll is chapter 6, verse 4 through chapter 7, verse 10. The king's meditation on his bride, one of the few times that he's actually the speaker and describing how beautiful she is.

And then the sixth idyll, chapter 7, verse 11 to chapter 8, verse 4. There she is missing her home. She's living in the palace apparently and this is maybe after they've been married for some time. And she's actually jealous for some reason.

And she actually says jealousy is crueler than the grave and so forth. And she's not so sure that her husband loves her so much. I mean he only had 60 wives when they got

married and now he's got 700.

So why would she have insecurity about that? And she acts very jealous and she expresses that jealousy that there's some tension there in the marriage. And so we come to the last idyll which is chapter 8, verses 5 through 14 where they go back to Lebanon where they first met. And they renew their vows again and he assures her that she is certainly one in a thousand.

So and that's exactly what she is. So now in any translation that's in any sense modern, that is anything that's not a King James version, like the one we're using which is New King James, you'll see that throughout the book, the editors, the translators have put in like who's speaking in verse, above verse 6, it says the Shulamite, she's the one speaking. And then her beloved is speaking in chapter 1, verse 8. And from time to time you have the daughters of Jerusalem piping in or her brothers.

Or you know it goes back and forth. And certainly if you just read it in the King James without these notations, it really gets confusing. You can't tell who's speaking about what.

Now you might say well are these notations in the original Hebrew? Does it say the Shulamite here or Solomon here or the brothers or the daughters of Jerusalem speak up here? No, those words are not found in the Hebrew. So how do the translators know where to put them? How do the translators know that they should see a change of speaker? This is actually not left to too much guesswork. Because in the Hebrew the pronouns have gender and number.

So a pronoun is either masculine or feminine, singular or plural. When it's a masculine singular, it's the man speaking. When it's a feminine singular, it's the woman speaking.

When it's a feminine plural, it's the daughters of Jerusalem speaking. And when it's a masculine plural, it's her brothers. Now we know they're her brothers because they say our sister.

They're talking about her as their sister. So in other words, although it's confusing to us reading in English, the Hebrew scholars do not have any trouble knowing when the speaker is changed because the pronoun has a different gender or a different number than in the previous passages and therefore it's not rocket science to figure out who the speaker is. So it is actually very helpful that the editors of every modern translation have stuck in these things to help us out because it's a very confusing thing just to read it straight through in English and not know who's talking.

It's confusing enough when you do know who's talking. So it's helpful to have that additional assistance given to us. Okay, so with that we'll consider the book Introduced and we'll go through it in our session tomorrow morning.