

The Half Hour That Changes the World

Song of Songs

Book 22

Basic Question behind the book:

Is sex a beautiful or a sordid thing?

Summary of book:

There is really only one way to describe this book of the Bible: It is erotic love poetry. There is little question in the mind of those who study this book, seriously and with integrity, what it was about. Originally it was intended to gather strands of poetic verse written between two lovers; to give expression to the love between them; to speak of the devotion and longing they had for each other when they were apart; and to speak of being very intimate as lovers with very graphic metaphors. Those metaphors are lost on us, but they wouldn't have been lost on the original readers. Metaphors are context bound. What I mean by this is that when I use a metaphor, we both must understand the comparison that is being made. So, for example, if I wanted to say you were acting in a hypocritical way in Londonderry where I come from, you would say that 'you had as many faces as the Guildhall clock'. To get the metaphor, you would need to understand that I am referring to a famous landmark in our city that has four large distinct clock faces. Therefore, don't expect to understand what the metaphorical language means, but scholars are agreed that it is 'steamy stuff'!

So, how did it end up in the Bible? The answer to this seems to be two-fold. Firstly, it was linked traditionally with Solomon. You might have heard or seen the book referred to as the 'the Songs of Solomon'. Linking it with a famous person would have got it noticed. Secondly, as people read it, they allegorised it. That is, they gave it a symbolical reading beyond its surface meaning. It became a story of the Lord's (Yahweh's) love for Israel, and could be compared therefore to books like Hosea. When it came to the New Testament times, it becomes a matter of allegorising it as a story of the love between Christ and his church. Whether such allegorical interpretation of the book is finally justified or not is a big question which is beyond the scope of a few lines here. Suffice to say, that there has been a lot of debate over the years as to whether the book should be in the canon of the Old Testament Scripture or not. Such debate goes right back to the earliest centuries of the Church and has continued in every generation.

Vital Statistics:

Purpose: To tell of the love between a bridegroom and his bride; to affirm the sanctity of sex in marriage; and to picture God's love for his people.

Author: Anonymous, though traditionally thought of as Solomon.

Recipients: The Jewish community and then the Church.

Dating: Around the time of Solomon or some time just after his reign.

Setting: Israel. The bride's garden. The King's palace.

Other Reflections:

Imagine finding a whole book of erotic poetry in the Bible! Remember that sex is like nuclear energy: It can be used to power or flatten a city! It isn't a good or bad thing in or of itself. It is how it is used that matters. Sex is not evil. It is a gift of God to be used within the safety and protection of a committed and exclusive relationship, which in many cultures means marriage between one man and one woman. It is a beautiful and a good thing.

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies." (6:3)
"He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love." (2:4)
"I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys." (2:1)