

Song of Songs: Introduction

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Text:

Introduction:

- I. A Song For Lovers
 - A. “No artist could have fashioned two people better suited for one another. He was the king...; she, his chosen bride. Spring had seen their love blossom like the flowers in the palace gardens. Their love had been the talk of the court. It was destined to be a song for the world. For their romance was a romance for all seasons, indeed, for all centuries. And, in fact, so ideal was their love that the song about them was...one of the books of sacred Scripture. It became the only one of the entire collection devoted exclusively to courtship and marriage.” (S. Craig Glickman)
 - B. It was now the night their courtship would end and the marriage begin. The wedding guests had gone. The evening had come. The clamor and laughter had ceased. Upon them was the eloquent silence of anticipation of love fulfilled. All the excitement of their courtship had come to this moment of shy and peaceful silence. He spoke first and when he spoke he praised the loveliness of his bride.
 - C. “It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is...So long as there is impurity in the world, we need, and need badly, the Song of Solomon.” (Edward Young)

Body:

- I. **TITLE**
 - A. Opening verse gives the title “The Song of Songs”
 1. Hebrew superlative
 2. Of Solomon’s 1005 songs (1 Kings 4:32), this was the best.
 - B. Another common title is “Song of Solomon” based on (1:1)
 - C. Or Canticles (“series of songs”) [via the Vulgate translation]
 1. Hebrew superlative
 2. Of Solomon’s 1005 songs (1 Kings 4:32), this was the best.
- II. **AUTHOR**
 - A. Solomon (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12)
 - B. Note: 1:1 may be translated “of Solomon” or “about Solomon.”
 1. It could indicate authorship by Solomon or be a dedication to Solomon.
 2. If “for Solomon” it could indicate it was composed by a court musician.
- III. **DATE WRITTEN**
 - A. Solomon, while still young and prior to seven hundred wives (1 Kings 11:3-4)
 - B. Suggested date: 965 B.C.

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- C. Some date the book very late “on the basis of Persian and Greek loan words, Aramaic influence, and certain Hebrew forms alleged to be late.” (Garrett, 348)
1. Linguistic evidence is not conclusive.
 2. “Attempts to date the book from vocabulary and grammar are inherently weak because of our limited knowledge of the history of the Hebrew language.”
- D. Egyptian love poetry from 1300-1100 B.C. is similar to the Song of Solomon
1. Example: love song in seven stanzas found in Chester Beatty Papyrus I.
 2. The poems are remarkably like the Song of Songs.
 3. “Indeed, the Song of Songs is most reasonably interpreted as being in the same genre as the Egyptian poetry.” (Garrett, 350)
- E. References to places in northern Israel do not preclude Solomonic authorship.
1. Besides references to Lebanon, Hermon, Damascus and Carmel, the author also refers to Jerusalem and Engedi (southern locales) and to the Transjordan (Heshbon and Gilead).
 2. Song of Songs has a *pan-Israelite* outlook.
 3. Solomon’s reputation as a poet and naturalist (1 Kings 4:32-33) agrees with the author’s familiarity with the fauna and floral expressions found within
 4. City of Tirzah was a leading city prior to the reign of Omri (ca. 885-874 B.C.)
 - a. During his reign he built Samaria as the capital of the northern tribes (1 Kings 16).
 - b. The parallelism in 6:4 “O my love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah, Lovely as Jerusalem,” (NKJV) implies that the Song of Solomon antedates Omri.
- F. To summarize, nothing in the book demands a late date.
1. The book is presented as in the life time of Solomon
 2. The diversity of geographic reference and the northern dialect “Aramaisms” reflect a pan-Israelite perspective not likely after the division of the kingdom.

IV. RELATION TO OTHER BOOKS OF BIBLE

- A. **English Bible:** Fifth poetical book
- B. **Hebrew Bible:** First of the “Five Rolls” (*Megilloth – Books read by Jews at various holidays*): Song of Solomon [Passover], Ruth [Pentecost], Lamentations [anniversary of fall of Jerusalem], Ecclesiastes [Tabernacles], and Esther [Purim].
- C. **Canonicity**
1. The sensual expressions in the Song prompted Jewish and Christian readers to question whether this document belonged in the Bible.
 2. Rabbi Akiba said, “The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; all the writings are holy, and the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.” (Garrett, 367)
 3. No one would dream of interpreting the Song of Songs as an allegory of God and Israel if it were not found in the Bible.” (*Ibid.*)

4. Love and sexuality can be a source of great joy or grief and pain.
5. The Bible would be incomplete if it did not address it or if it only spoke of prohibitions and failed to give positive instruction regarding a healthy love life in marriage.
6. Love between a man and woman is not the ultimate or highest good.
7. The relationship between a man or woman and God is more important than any other.
8. For one to regard the Song as unworthy of being divinely inspired because it speaks of romantic love is to miss the crucial importance of a cherished understanding of the love of one's life, his wife.

V. LITERARY STRUCTURE: FORM AND OUTLINE

A. Form of Literature -- Genre:

1. The Song of Songs is unique among the books of the Hebrew Bible.
2. The covenant between God and Israel is not in view as in the Pentateuch and Prophets.
3. Should it be considered as "wisdom literature"?
 - a. It does not explore or teach wisdom in the fashion of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but celebrates human love.
 - b. It does, however relate to other wisdom literature based on authorship (Solomon) and the fact that his other writings make use of sexual language (Prov. 7:6ff.; 9:1ff.)
 - c. Israelites recognized a closer connection between singing songs and "wisdom"; consider the Psalms.
 - d. Wisdom in the Bible is meant to teach the reader how to live in the world.
 - 1) Personal morality, economics, social behavior and other areas of life come under its teaching.
 - 2) Certainly courtship, love and marriage cannot be excluded since these are among the basics of human experience.
 - 3) The Song not only celebrates love, it also teaches love.
4. The Song of Solomon is in a class by itself among the books of biblical wisdom.
5. There are, however, other documents from this time period which share in the literary style of this book.

B. Literary Method

1. Remember at all times that this is Near Eastern love poetry.
2. Similar love songs have been uncovered among the Papyrus Chester Beatty I (Egypt, New Kingdom Period)
 - a. For example, a seven-stanza love poem contains the following description of the young man's beloved: "Upright neck, shining breast, / Hair true lapis lazuli;/ Arms surpassing gold,/ Fingers like lotus buds." (Garrett, 368)

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- b. “Through simile and metaphor, even the strongest and most private of the emotions of sexual love can be expressed in a way that is tasteful, appropriate and descriptive.”
 - c. Song of Songs employs at least two poetic symbols, “king” and “shepherd,” both of which applied to the man.
 - d. The references to a shepherdess and Shulammitte may also be poetic symbols.
3. Literary Forms in Ancient Love Poetry (See Garrett, 369-371)
- a. The Admiration Song {Physical, Mental and Emotional Beauty is extolled} (cf. 5:10-16; 6:4-9)
 - b. The Song of Yearning {Desire for the beloved} (3:1; 8:1-2)
 - c. The Arrival Song (2:8)
 - d. The Invitation (8:14)
 - e. The Prayer for Success in Love
 - 1) This is absent in the Song of Solomon.
 - 2) It is not that God is unconcerned about whom we may choose to marry (Prov. 18:12; 19:14). Rather, God is not an Aphrodite or love charm.
 - 3) “A prayer for success in love, in which one is driven by pure emotion and physical desire, undercuts the wisdom teaching that a man should seek a wife of virtue from God.” (Garrett, 371)
4. Literary motifs (recurrent thematic elements) of Song of Songs
- a. Lovesickness (5:8)
 - b. The Door (5:5-6)
 - c. The Gazelle or Stag (2:9)
 - d. The Kiss (8:1)
 - e. The Breasts (Song 1:12; 8:10; Proverbs 5:19)
 - f. The Authority Figure (5:7)
 - 1) Note: Often in the songs of yearning, the lover speaks of his or her frustration at being kept from the beloved by some authority figure. Often it is the mother, but sometimes it is brothers or in the case of the Song of Solomon it is the civil authorities. These authority figure keeps the lovers apart.
 - g. The Garden or Vineyard – a natural motif of love poetry. Sometimes the garden is used as a metaphor for the woman’s body. It is used in this way as an invitation song. (4:16)
 - h. The Stolen or Entrapped Heart (4:9)
 - i. Horses and Chariots - this motif pictures an entourage arriving in manly splendor and valor. (3:7)
 - j. Limbs described (5:14)
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- k. For every motif listed above, with but one exception (breasts), there are examples in the Egyptian love poetry of the same time period. (Garrett, 371-374)

C. Unity and Structure of the Song

1. The unity of the song is demonstrated by the high number of repetitious and associative sequences, as well as the consistent character portrayals.
2. There are common themes, refrains and phrases.

D. Chiastic Outline illustrates the connected nature of the Song of Songs. (Garrett, 376)

1. A 1:1-4a "Take me away"
 B 1:4b Friends speak
 C 1:5-7 "My own vineyard"
 D 1:8-14 "Breasts," "Silver," "we will make"
 E 1:15-2:2 "House"
 F 2:3-7 "His left arm" "daughters of Jerusalem...so desires"
 G 2:8-13 "Fragrance," "come my darling," "blossoming"
 H 2:14-15 "Vineyards," "show me"
 I 2:16-17 "My lover is mine"
 Ja 3:1-5 "The watchmen found me"
 Jb 3:6-11 Description of carriage "gold" "daughters of Jerusalem"
 Jc 4:1-7 Description of girl, "Your eyes,...hair...teeth"
 K 4:8 – 15 "Myrrh," "spice" "honey"
 L 4:16 "Into his garden"
 L' 5:1a "Into my garden"
 K' 5:1bc "Myrrh," "spice," "honey"
 J'a 5:2-9 "The watchmen found me"
 J'b 5:10–6:1 "gold," "Lebanon," "daughters of Jerusalem"
 J'c 6:4-11 Description of girl, "Your eyes,...hair...teeth"
 I' 6:2-3 "My lover is mine"
 H' 6:13-7:9a [10a] "Vines," "wine," "that we may gaze on you"
 G' 7:9b-13 [10b-14] "Fragrance," "come my darling" "blossom"
 F' 8:1-5 "His left arm," "daughters of Jerusalem...so desires"
 E' 8:6-7 "House"
 D' 8:8-9 "Breasts," "silver," "we will build"
 C' 8:10-12 "My own vineyard"
 B' 8:13 "Friends"
 A' 8:14 "Come away"

E. Suggested Outline:

1. First Meeting (1:2-2:7)
2. Second Meeting (2:8-3:5)
3. Third Meeting (3:6-5:1)
4. Fourth Meeting (5:2-6:3)
5. Fifth Meeting (6:4-8:4)
6. Literary Climax (8:5-7)
7. Conclusion (8:8-14)

F. **Alternative Outline** (Delitzsch)

1. The Mutual Affection of Lovers (1:2-2:7)
2. The Mutual Seeking and Finding of Lovers (2:8-3:5)
3. The Home-bringing of the Bride, and the Marriage (3:6-5:1)
4. Love disdained, but won again (5:2-6:9)
5. Shulamith, the attractive but humble Princess (6:10-8:4)
6. The Ratification of the Covenant of Love (8:5-14)

G. **Alternative Outline** (Kinlaw, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 5:1227)

1. Courtship phase (1:2-3:5)
2. Wedding phase (3:6-5:1)
 - a. Wedding ceremony (3:6-11)
 - b. Wedding night (3:7-5:1)
3. Married phase (5:2-8:14)
 - a. Obstacles (5:2-8)
 - b. Reconciliation (5:9-6:12)
 - c. Renewal (6:13-8:14)

VI. **SETTING OF NARRATIVE (Main Characters)**

A. **Solomon.** King of Israel (1 Kings 1:32-37). Son of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:24)

B. **A Shulamite woman.** Found only at (6:13).

1. Possibly derived from a place called Shunem, located north of Jezreel near the plain of Megiddo (SW of Sea of Galilee).
2. See also (Joshua 19:18; 1 Sam. 28:4; 1 Kings 1:3; 2 Kings 4:8).
3. Shulamite is perhaps a variant of "Shunammite", i.e. a girl from Shunem or a feminine form of the word "Solomon" meaning "Solomon's girl."
4. Note: other commentators deny that Shulamite is a variant of Shunammite.

C. **Daughters of Jerusalem (Chorus)**

1. The identity of these women is not disclosed.
2. They may have been friends of the bride, attendants of the king's palace or interested onlookers.
3. Note: Some commentators assign (3:7-11) to an officer of the guard.

D. **A shepherd-lover** (possible additional character) (1:7; 4:7-15) from whose affection Solomon tries to lure the Shulamite woman away.

1. "Solomon uses all the dazzle and splendor of his court to woo the girl away from her true love, seeking to get her to become one of his wives instead...Solomon is unable to accomplish his goal, however, for the Shulamite resists all his overture and remains true to her beloved shepherd to whom, at last, she is reunited." (See John Phillips, *Exploring the Scriptures*, p. 116)

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- a. (See Song of Solomon 4:1-6, 7-15)
 2. “The abiding value of the Song of Solomon is clear whichever view is taken. As human life finds its highest fulfillment in the love of man and woman, so spiritual life finds its highest fulfillment in the love of Christ and His Church.” (*Ibid.*)
- E. Proposed setting** in view of the historical interpretation:
1. “King Solomon had a vineyard in the hill country of Ephraim, about 50 miles N of Jerusalem, 8:11. He let it out to keeper, 8:11, consisting of a mother, two sons, 1:6 and two daughters – the Shulamite, 6:13, and a little sister, 8:8. The Shulamite was ‘the Cinderella’ of the family, 1:5, naturally beautiful but unnoticed. Her brothers were likely half brothers, 1:6. They made her work very hard tending the vineyards, so that she had little opportunity to care for her personal appearance, 1:6. She pruned the vines and set traps for the little foxes, 2:15. She also kept the flocks, 1:8. Being out in the open so much, she became sunburned, 1:5. One day a handsome stranger came to the vineyard. It was Solomon disguised. He showed an interest in her, and she became embarrassed concerning her personal appearance, 1:6. She took him for a shepherd and asked about his flocks, 1:7. He answered evasively, 1:8, but also spoke loving words to her, 1:8-10, and promised rich gifts for the future, 1:11. He won her heart and left with the promise that some day he would return. She dreamed of him at night and sometimes thought he was near, 3:1. Finally he did return in all his kingly splendor to make her his bride, 3:6-7.” (H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Song of Solomon*, 17-21, summarized by Merrill Unger, *Unger’s Bible Handbook*, 299-300.)

VII. INTERPRETATIONS

A. The Allegorical Interpretation

1. “A literary. Dramatic, or pictorial device in which characters and events stand for abstract ideas, principles or forces, so that the literal sense has or suggests a parallel, deeper symbolic sense.” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*)
 - a. See Galatians 4:21-31 as an example of allegory
 - b. Although not stated as an allegory consider Ephesians 5:22-23; Rev. 18:23-24 as metaphors relating to Christ’s love for his people.
2. Examples of allegorizing interpretations of the Song of Solomon are found in the Mishna, the Talmud and the Targum comments on this book.
3. The New Testament never interprets the Song of Solomon as an allegory.
4. Earliest extant references to interpreting it allegorically are by Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235).
5. Jerome, Augustine and Origen follow this interpretation as well.
6. Philosophic basis of allegorism: Neoplatonic dualism and Gnostic psychology.
 - a. In this system the soul, or higher nature of humanity, was believed to be imprisoned in the physical body with its appetites for food and sex.
 - b. The goal was to free the mind of bondage from these appetites in order to enjoy fully the spiritual life.
 - c. Methods to accomplish this freedom ranged from complete asceticism to complete indulgence.

7. In reality, God's creation is explicitly called good and the human and physical relationship was designed by God and declared good.
 - a. "The Israelites never glorified celibacy as a mark of holiness or set it forth as a requirement for priestly or prophetic service."
 - b. The New Testament teaches that the marriage bed is holy (Heb. 13:4).
8. The strongest refutation of the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs is the obvious sexual nature of the language.
 - a. Such language is inappropriate as a description of love between God and his people. (e.g. 5:1; 7:7-8; 1:2)
 - b. The linking of religious adoration to erotic impulses is a mark of paganism. It is a dangerous intrusion into a proper understanding of both life and worship.
 - c. Although the "allegorical interpretation may appear to be pious, anything that draws the reader away from the intended message of the text is destructive." (Garrett, 358)

B. The Anthology Interpretation (Note: Jeff Smelser will address extensively)

1. Some view the Song as "collection of love poems."
2. "Song of Songs is a single, unified work, as its chiasmic structure demonstrates. It is true that Song of Songs at times seems to function without logical transitions between texts, but this is an aspect of its genre." (Garrett, 366)

C. The Dramatic Interpretation

1. The Song of Songs is interpreted as a drama telling the story of Solomon's love for the Shulamite girl.
2. Two distinct interpretations are proposed:
 - a. The Two-Character Drama.
 - 1) This view supported by John Milton and Franz Delitzsch.
 - 2) Difficulties relate to Solomon's reputation (1 Kings 11:4)
 - b. The Three-Character Drama.
 - 1) This view found early support with Ibn Ezra and was developed by J.F. Jacobi (1772) and further by Ewald in 1826 and is still maintained by a number of conservative interpreters.
 - 2) We will leave it to Calvin Schlabach and Leon Mauldin to further enlighten us on these views.
3. Weaknesses of the Dramatic view:
 - a. No evidence that the drama as a literary genre existed in Solomon's time
 - 1) Greeks developed drama in the fifth century.
 - 2) Greek dramas are unlike Song of Songs
 - b. Dramatic interpretations must read a great deal of detail into the text.
 - c. No clear conflict or resolution is found in the text. There is no plot or story line.

D. The Historical Interpretation

1. This view holds that the Song is an historical and actual romantic attachment in the life of Solomon.
2. The text does not imply that some historical event is being preserved.
3. Could this not be simply a love song, written by Solomon, but with no intention to share historical events in his personal life?
4. Weddings were elaborate affairs that involved the serenading and parading of the groom as a king and the bride as a princess. (Gower, 69)

E. The Cultic Interpretation

1. This interpretation regards the Song of Songs as erotic literature from the fertility cults associated with Babylonian Tamuz and Canaanite Baal of ancient Near Eastern mythology.
2. The cyclical myth involves the death of a heroic god in his struggle against a god of darkness and his resurrection with the help of his lover.
3. Four major weaknesses:
 - a. Song of Solomon lacks several of the motifs related to the fertility cult.
 - 1) There is no mention of a dying or rising god.
 - 2) There is no mention of fertility.
 - b. “Subtle use of erotic imagery in the biblical poem is far removed from the crass ‘explanations’ of the books alleged original meaning.” (Garrett, 362)
 - c. If it was a ritual myth from a fertility cult why did the Jews accept as from God?
 - d. Song of Songs does not share in the fertility cult hymnic genre. “Incidental parallels between the love poetry of Song of Songs and the sensual reference in cultic texts are instructive...but they are far from being common material.” (*Ibid.*)

F. The Funerary Interpretation

1. M. Pope argues that the Song was rooted in ancient funeral ritual.
2. He argues that “funeral feasts in the ancient Near East were love feasts celebrated with wine, women and song” and that such may have been the original setting of the Song of Songs. (Garrett, 363)
3. His textual support for this argument is (8:6), “For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave.”
4. Major problems with this view:
 - a. First, “love is as strong as death” does not necessarily imply a funeral.
 - 1) Gordon observed that the Song of Songs “has nothing to do with death”
 - 2) And it “never raises the question of whether love can triumph over death.”
 - b. Second, no other reference to funerary or cultic rites appears in the Song.

G. The Wedding Interpretation

1. Some conclude that this is a wedding ceremony script.
 - a. It is argued that the bride and groom played the role of queen and king and that songs in praise of the bride or groom were sung.

- b. Syrian wedding rituals are cited as proof of this interpretation.
2. Against this view some point out the Shulammitte is never called a queen.
 - a. It is possible, however, that the name “Shulammitte is a feminine form of “Solomon” and describes the bride as a princess.
 - b. “Shulammitte” may refer to the girl’s royal status and not to her hometown.
3. Observation: There are parallels that can be drawn from wedding ceremonies in the Near East, but it is doubtful that the whole book can be interpreted as the text for a wedding ceremony.
4. “While the song does appear to focus on the wedding of the man and woman, that does not mean that it was sung *at* weddings or describes in any detail the ancient Israelite wedding ceremony.” (Garrett, 364)

H. The Love Song Interpretation

1. Josephus considered this interpretation to be self-evident. (*Antiquities*, viii. 7.3.)
2. Rabbi Aqiba warned against frivolous singing of the Song of Songs. (Garrett, 365)
3. Song of Songs is love poetry and not an historical event.
 - a. “Solomon” is likely a “poetic symbol.”
 - b. Although it seems strange and is difficult for us to consider, the author, Solomon, could have used himself as a poetic symbol for the splendor of the bridegroom.
 - c. This view sees the text as not a record of historical events in Solomon’s life.
 - d. “In love every groom is King Solomon, a shepherd, and even a gazelle; and every bride is a princess and country maiden.”
4. This status of king and princess in the song is easier understood by recognizing them as bride and groom.
5. Evidence that points to this conclusion follows:
 - a. The dramatic arrival of Solomon (3:6-11) can be interpreted as a historical event or as a representation of the ideal groom.
 - 1) The dramatic appearance of the groom in ancient Israel is attested in (Matthew 25:6).
 - 2) Example from modern vernacular: “He’s my knight on a white charger.”
 - b. The processional departure of bride and groom follows in (6:10-13).
 - c. Finally, the man repeatedly refers to the woman as his bride (4:8-12; 5:1)

VIII. A WORD ABOUT MARRIAGE AND THE SONG OF SONGS

- A. “The Song presents sexuality as a good thing protected by marriage and not as an evil thing made permissible by marriage.”
 1. The Song contains no aphrodisiac prayers for success in love.
 2. It never indicates that the sexuality of a couple has any cultic or ritual significance or mythical power of fertility in the renewal of nature.
 3. “Simply put, the act of sex is not a religious act.”

4. The cults of the ancient and twenty-first century world promote sexuality as a ritual of religious devotion.
 5. The modern radical feminist theology seeks to lead us back to eroticism as religion; *i.e.* “the divine feminine”.
 6. “Sexuality falls into its greatest perversion and excess when it is mythologized and given cosmic significance.”
- B. Tell her you love her.
1. In the Song the lovers speak to and of each other frequently and in great detail.
 2. They celebrate their pleasure not only with physical action, but with carefully crafted words.
 3. Love is a matter of the mind and heart and should be declared.
 4. Lesson: We need to speak often of our joy in our beloved, our spouse. Many homes would be happier if men and women would simply *speak* of their love for one another more often.
- C. Sexual Love is Protected in the Marriage of a Man and Woman.
1. There is no “open relationship” in this Song of Songs.
 2. It is the love of a man for a woman, not another man.
 3. “I belong to my lover and his desire is for me” (7:10)
 4. These two belong to each other exclusively.
 5. The ideal of marriage, exclusive love, is present throughout the Song.

Conclusion:

- I. The Song of Songs is a love song written during the time of Solomon. It is neither allegory, drama, hymn, history nor a wedding ceremonial text. It is a song of love with two parts, the man and the woman’s, assisted by a chorus. Other examples of this genre of literature are found from Egypt, *ca.* 1300-1100 B.C. The Song of Solomon shares many common elements with the Egyptian examples. The message is that the mutual pleasures of love are good and possible in our world. The song is a testimony to God’s grace and a rejection of both asceticism and debauchery.
- II. “The literal purpose of the book has often been twisted by those not prepared to read frank and intimate expressions of love. Asceticism and lust – two perversions of the holiness of marriage – are slain by the message of the book. If the reader is licentiously excited when he reads the Song of Solomon, he is out of tune with its purpose. The book’s literal message is perverted by those who do not see the purity and true beauty of all of God’s creative acts.” (Jensen, 311)
- III. “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. ⁷Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.” (Song of Solomon, 8:6-7)

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