

## **A Return to the Garden and a Vision of Relational Healing**

The Song of Songs, with its vivid and erotic language (Song of Songs 1:1-4), moves even the most casual reader to ponder the meaning and purpose of this song. Did the author intend for his poem to be an allegory, symbolizing the passionate exchange between God and his people? Or was he painting colorful depictions of intimacy between two lovers? Or is there perhaps a deeper meaning, which modern translators have largely overlooked?

Ellen Davis, Old Testament scholar and professor at Duke Divinity School, offers a unique perspective for understanding the Song of Songs. She proposes the poet has a vision of healing in mind on multiple relational levels: divine-human, male-female, and human-creation.

### **The Garden**

If you read through Song of Songs, you'll notice the poet draws from lush garden imagery to describe the lovers' interactions and surroundings. The language in this chief metaphor echoes the creation accounts found on the first pages of the Bible.

Why does the author draw on garden imagery? What is the effect? In the first garden story of Genesis, a strong relational harmony exists between Adam and Eve as well as between God and humanity (Genesis 2:25 and Genesis 3:8). The garden also symbolizes a time when all creation enjoyed a unique proximity to their Creator. Tragically, this harmony comes to an abrupt end. In the aftermath, we discover the brokenness of these three relational areas: humans relinquish their intimate dwelling with God (Genesis 3:23-24); distrust and an imbalance of power erupts between Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:12, 16); and the fertile ground is cursed (Genesis 3:17-19).

### **The Temple**

The garden of Eden is an important starting point. It provides our first glimpse of the temple concept—a holy space, which served as the interim meeting point between the Creator and his people. Although Adam and Eve surrendered their unique proximity to God, Yahweh graciously provides an alternative avenue for dwelling through the temple. The poet picks up this storyline, drawing striking parallels between the temple's exotic furnishings and the lovers' surroundings (e.g., 1 Kings 6:18; 7:18-19; Song of Songs 1:17; 2:16; 3:9-10; 4:3). The completion of Solomon's temple marked the beginning of a prosperous era, a period when Israel enjoyed Yahweh's glory and presence once again. But just like Eden, Israel degrades herself by forsaking Yahweh and his abiding presence, resulting in exile in Babylon.

## **A Re-envisioned Outcome and Relational Healing**

So where does this story leave us? Humanity faced tragic banishment from the intimate dwelling spaces of the garden and the temple. Both resulted in a devastating loss of relationship. The author of Song of Songs, however, envisions an alternative outcome: a reciprocal love story and healing of these three relational areas.

### **1. God and Humanity**

The poet depicts a restored, mutual longing between God and humanity by quoting from various prophets who talk about God's love for Israel. For example, the painful yearning between lovers found in chapter 5 has a similar feel to Hosea and Jeremiah's expression of Yahweh's yearning and pursuit of his lost child, Israel (e.g., Jeremiah 31:20). Through these allusions, the poet invites us to imagine the long awaited relational healing between God and his people.

## **2. Man and Woman**

The author of Song of Songs also depicts a restoration of male and female desire for one another. The direct echo of Genesis 3:16 in Song of Songs 7:10 reveals a redemptive reversal of desire through use of the rare Hebrew word “desire” (Heb. *teshu^ qa^h*). In Genesis, Eve’s desire for Adam indicates a tension and imbalance of power between the created beings, “your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). In the Song, this same word is used of the man toward the woman to communicate a profound mutuality and shared desire: “I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me” (Song of Songs 7:10). Mutuality in terms of male and female relationships was God’s intention all along.

## **3. Man and Creation**

While the third area of healed relationship is more difficult to detect in the Song, the poet offers glimpses of a restored and flourishing creation. For the ancient Hebrew people, creation’s well-being directly corresponded to Israel’s covenant faithfulness or lack thereof (Psalms 65, 72, and 85). The prophet Isaiah describes a terrible languishing and desolation of the land as Yahweh responds to Israel’s unrelenting sin (Isaiah 20). However, the Song pictures a time of prevailing faithfulness and creational healing. For example, the poet writes,

“for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land” (Song of Songs 2:12).

As the lovers’ respond to one another and cultivate a deeper intimacy, creation thrives and mirrors the former Edenic harmony.

### **Reading the Poem as the Poet Intended**

How should we read the Song of Songs today? Perhaps we do not need to try to fit the Song into just one category of relationship. We can understand the Song to depict both our relationship with God as well as the intimate relationship between husband and wife. In addition, like Davis, we can envision alongside the poet the ultimate relational healing between humanity and all of creation. Davis summarizes, “the poet of the Song understood that the well-being of our world—not just of the individual person, but of the world as a whole—depends upon the human capacity to cultivate intimacy, indeed, love, in all three relational areas.”

So how do we faithfully respond to the poet’s vision? How do we begin to heal these deep relational rifts and cultivate this profound love in all areas?

When we embrace our identity as God’s beloved, we come home to our original creative purpose and begin to foster a deep love for God, ourselves, and others. Standing as the beloved involves an acute awareness of his presence. This requires intentionality—an acknowledgement of his gracious pursuit, but also a response reflective of the woman’s (Song of Songs 5:4-6). Arising to open the door gives way to a trusting relationship and nurtures a divine overlap or oneness—what the poet and the apostle John call mutual abiding (Song of Songs 2:16; 6:3; John 14:20). In this kind of abiding, our hearts become his, and our deepest desires and perspectives align with God’s. Only in this way can we effectively love others deeply and see creation for what it could and one day will be.