

THE SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs (or Canticle of Canticles) is an exquisite collection of love lyrics, arranged to tell a dramatic tale of mutual desire and courtship. It presents an inspired portrayal of ideal human love, a resounding affirmation of the goodness of human sexuality that is applicable to the sacredness and the depth of married union.

Although the poem is attributed to Solomon in the traditional title (1:1), the language and style of the work, among other considerations, suggest a time after the end of the Babylonian exile (538 B.C.) when an unknown poet collected extant love poems, perhaps composing new material, and arranged the whole into the masterpiece we have before us. Some scholars argue the possibility of female authorship for at least portions of the Song.

The structure of the Song is difficult to analyze; this translation regards it as a lyric dialogue, with dramatic movement and interest. In both form and content, sections of the Song bear great similarity to the secular love songs of ancient Egypt and the “Sacred Marriage” cult songs of Mesopotamia which celebrate the union between divine partners.

While the lovers in the Song are clearly human figures, both Jewish and Christian traditions across the centuries have adopted “allegorical” interpretations. The Song is seen as a beautiful picture of the ideal Israel, the chosen people whom the Lord leads by degrees to a greater understanding and closer union in the bond of perfect love. Such readings of the Song build on Israel’s covenant tradition. Isaiah (Is 5:1–7; 54:4–8; 62:5), Jeremiah (Jer 2:2, 3, 32), and Ezekiel (Ez 16; 23) all characterize the covenant between the Lord and Israel as a marriage. Hosea the prophet sees the idolatry of Israel in the adultery of Gomer (Hos 1–3). He also represents the Lord speaking to Israel’s heart (Hos 2:16) and changing her into a new spiritual people, purified by the Babylonian captivity and betrothed anew to her divine Lover “in justice and uprightness, in love and mercy” (Hos 2:21). Similar imagery has also been used frequently in Jewish mystical texts. The Song offers a welcome corrective to negative applications of the theological metaphor of the marriage/covenant in some prophetic texts. It frequently proclaims a joyous reciprocity between the lovers and highlights the active role of the female partner, now a pure figure to be cherished rather than an adulterous woman to be punished and abused. See also Is 62:3–5.

Christian tradition has followed Israel’s example in using marriage as an image for the relationship with God. This image is found extensively in the New Testament (Mt 9:15; 25:1–13; Jn 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:23–32; Rev 19:7–9; 21:9–11). Thus the Song has been read as a sublime portrayal and praise of this mutual love of the Lord and his people. Christian writers have interpreted the Song in terms of the union between Christ and the Church and of the union between Christ and the individual soul, particularly in the writings of Origen and St. Bernard.