

SONG OF SONGS 1:1 - 2:7

The Title (1:1)

¹The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

The title 'Song of songs' is an indication of the esteem which the editors held for this book. They are claiming that it has a preeminent place among all the other 'songs' attributed to Solomon. In the Book of Kings we read:

Solomon composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five.

– 1Kings 4:32

The link with 'Solomon' associates the Song with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible and Wisdom in the Greek Septuagint Bible – all linked to the man whom tradition saw as the wisest of men.

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore.

– 1Kings 4:29

King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.

– 1Kings 10:23

We find this tradition present in the New Testament.

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

– Matthew 12:42

The editors are claiming that the Song of Songs offers authoritative wisdom that exceeds the wisdom found in other books. Since the subject of the book is love between a woman and a man, with the primary perspective being that of the woman, the link with Solomon, and so with Wisdom, prepares us for a song that will offer us wisdom in relation to sexual love.

As noted in the Introduction, this song has a long history of being interpreted as offering a lyrical expression of the intimacy that God offers the community as well as the personal communion with God that can be enjoyed by each believer.

A woman's ardent yearning (1:2-4)

She is longing to be excited by an ecstasy of kisses that invite mutual, unrestrained love. – or better 'love-making', for the Hebrew for 'love' in verse 2 is plural (dôdîm). She is giving expression to her longing and speaks of him and to him in his absence. Her focus is on herself and how her lover excites her. The kisses she wants are kisses that intoxicate her like wine. Their lovemaking for which she longs fills up her senses. His name (Hebrew šēm) is as the fragrance of anointing oils (Hebrew šemen, verse 3). She enjoys the fact that other women admire and are attracted to him, for she knows that he is hers. She longs for him to draw her into his private room. Here her longing is consummated in the arms of her 'king'. The lovemaking that she experiences is proof of how right she and her maiden companions are about him. The pleasure and the intoxication of wine cannot compare with the ecstasy of his loving her.

²Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, ³your anointing oils are fragrant, poured out perfume, your name; therefore the maidens love you. ⁴Draw me after you, let us make haste! The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine! Rightly do they love you.

The long tradition of Christian reflection invites us to feel in her longing for love our own yearning for a love that transcends even the most intimate expressions of sexual union. Because God is transcendent, inevitably one of our most profound experiences is our sense of God's absence. Jesus experienced this most acutely in the garden and on the cross. It was this sense of absence that impelled his prayer: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Matthew 27:46). He experienced God's absence, but he knew his longing and he yielded to it as he cried out to the one he called 'my God'.

We have this same yearning. The more profound our longing, the more space there is in our hearts for God's response. We think of Mary of Magdala at the empty tomb (John 20:1-18). The others went away mystified. She stayed. Persisting in her search, she found him for whom her whole being longed.

It is God, the one Jesus called 'Father', who draws us to his Son (see John 6:44), and Jesus promised that when he was 'lifted up' into the eternal embrace of God he would 'draw everyone' to himself and so to God (see John 12:32). The prophet Hosea knew God's 'warm and tender' longing to enjoy our communion (see Hosea 11:8). Zephaniah knew God's delight in us (see Zephaniah 3:17-18). Jesus, too, knew this, and he promised to share with us his own Spirit: his own love-communion with God.

We enjoy this communion most intimately in the 'chambers' of the Church where we are formed by grace into the Body of Christ with our brothers and sisters. It is especially there that we are offered the Spirit of Jesus. As Paul says: 'we have this treasure in clay jars' (2Corinthians 4:7). If in our weakness we dare to cling to the vine, it is this divine communion that will be 'poured into our hearts' (Romans 5:5).

She addresses the chorus of maidens (1:5-6)

⁵Black am I, and beautiful, O Daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Qedar, like the pavilions of Solomon. ⁶Do not stare at me because I am dark, for the sun has burned me.

My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!

⁷Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture, where you rest at noon; for why should I be like one who is veiled near the flocks of your companions?

⁸If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow the tracks of the flock, and pasture your kids near the tents of the shepherds.

⁹To a mare of Pharaoh's chariots I compare you, my love: ¹⁰Lovely are your cheeks with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels. ¹¹Ornaments of gold we will make you, studded with silver.

The 'Daughters of Jerusalem' function like a chorus. They speak (and listen) for us, the audience. They look down on her because of her dark complexion. They are fair because they have locked themselves away from life, afraid of the effect of the sun on their complexion. She compares her dark complexion to the tents of Qedar, tents of the merchants who carry gold and spices from Arabia, and to the luxurious pavilions of Solomon. She is dark, she claims, because the sun itself cannot stop gazing upon the beauty of her countenance.

Her brothers put her in charge of their vineyards. It is there that the sun kept gazing at her as her vines (symbol of female sexual fecundity) were maturing. They are angry with her for she is being too free in offering herself to her lover. Such is her yearning that she will not accept their restraint. She wants to be 'like a fruitful vine within your house'(Psalm 128:3).

She speaks to her lover (1:7)

She longs for him and loves him with her whole being (Hebrew *nepeš*, 'soul', 'life force'). When he rests from work to 'browse'('pasture') she wants to be there with him to receive from him the attention for which she hungers. She lets him know that she will stop at nothing to find him, even to risk moving among the other men – where, of course, she will be veiled, so that they will know that she is spoken for.

The chorus (1:8)

On one level the words of the chorus seem straightforward enough. However, it is to be noted that 'kids' is sometimes used to refer to 'breasts'.

Her lover responds (verses 9-11)

'My love' is a translation of the Hebrew 'my friend'(ra'yāti). He uses this special term of endearment throughout the song (see 1:15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1 7; 5:2; 6:4). They are soul companions. The chariots of Pharaoh were legendary. A mare would throw the stallions into confusion. He is telling her that she excites him. Her presence stirs him and he loses control. He finds her sexually irresistible. The horses drawing the chariots were richly adorned. Her beauty is her dazzling adornment.

The woman speaks (1:12-14)

The 'couch' was where a person reclined for eating, or for sex. She speaks of assuaging her 'hunger' in sharing a banquet of love with her 'king', her 'lover'. He was stirred as by the exotic perfumes that were used as aphrodisiacs, enveloped by the scent of her allurements. Nard comes from the root of a tree in Nepal. It was transported to Judah by caravan. Myrrh was obtained by tapping trees in Arabia and elsewhere. It was pulverised, placed in a sachet and, as the text states, hung between a woman's breasts. Henna was used to colour hair. En-gedi is an oasis midway down the west coast of the Dead Sea. In their love making he is the sachet of spices resting between her breasts.

¹²While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.

¹³A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me; between my breasts he lies.

¹⁴A cluster of henna is my lover to me, in the vineyards of En-gedi.

Her lover responds (1:15)

The shape and delicacy of her eyes evoke the image of a dove – or is it the fluttering of her eyelashes that recall the gentle motion of its wings?

¹⁵How beautiful you are, my love; how beautiful. Your eyes are doves.

She exclaims (1:16 - 2:1)

She is lost in admiration of his beauty, and speaks of their trysting place – a love nest in a forest, as regal as the chamber of the king.

¹⁶How beautiful you are, my lover, how lovely! Indeed, our couch is verdant; ¹⁷the beams of our house cedars; , our rafters, cypresses.

Sharon is the fertile plain on the Mediterranean side of Palestine's central mountain range. Their lovemaking evokes the image and perfume of spring flowers.

¹I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

Her lover speaks (2:2)

Other maidens are as brambles compared to her.

²As a lily among thorns, so is my love among women.

She exclaims (2:3)

She compares him to a sweet-smelling, fruit-bearing tree growing wild in a wood. She delights in his protective shade, in his lovemaking and sweet kisses.

³As a wild apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my lover among men. With great delight I stay in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.

She speaks to the chorus (2:4-7)

⁴He has brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love.

The 'banqueting house' further identifies the 'chambers'(1:4) and the 'couch'(1:12). The 'banquet' of which she speaks is the feasting of love, the kisses that are 'better than wine'(verse 2). The word translated here 'intention' is used for the sign-board outside an inn inviting passers-by to enter. She is enjoying the lovemaking, and it is he who has invited her into his embrace.

⁵Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love.

'Raisin cakes' were associated with fertility cults (see Hosea 3:1). 'Apples' are the fruit of the tree to which she has just likened him (verse 3).

In his commentary on the Song, Origen writes (n. 162):

If anyone has been pierced with the dart of love, to the extent that later on, day and night, he sighs with desire and knows nothing else, wants nothing else, is attracted by nothing else except to desire it, want it, and hope for it, such a one can rightly say: 'I am faint with love'.

⁶His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me!

In verse 6 she rests in his embrace (see 8:3).

⁷I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the fields: do not disturb or interrupt our love until it is spent!

'God' is not explicitly mentioned in the Song (though see 8:6), but here she is insisting that they take an oath. The word 'gazelle' also means 'beauty'. The plural of 'gazelles'(šebā'ôt) is identical in form to the word 'hosts' in 'God of hosts'. She calls, too, on the 'hinds', untamed and free.

Verse seven functions as a refrain (see 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). They must be left to consummate their love.