

**LITERARY OVERVIEW**

- **Title:** Song of Solomon, or literally “Song of Songs” (compared to King of kings/Lord of Lords).
- **Author:** Solomon (1:1 1Kings 4:32), a poet in Solomon’s court (1:1 alt. trans. “to” or “for” Solomon, i.e. dedicated to in honor of)
- **Form/Genre:** *Pastoral-love-poetry*. Fundamentally, highly expressive poetry. Secondly, love poetry (concerning physical love and desire). Particularly, pastoral (related to rustic/country life).
- **Main Characters:** There are differences of opinion: (1.) Solomon/woman/chorus (2.) shepherd/woman/chorus (3.) Solomon vs. shepherd/woman/chorus (known as the “shepherd hypothesis (4.) Christ/church/chorus.
- **Purpose:** “To express the feelings of *romantic love* between a man and a woman and to celebrate *romantic passion* and its culmination in marriage.” (*Ryken’s Bible Handbook*)
- **Challenges:**
  - 1.) This book is unique in Scripture and highlights (like no other book of the Bible) what Lewis calls “Eros”<sup>1</sup> (not merely sexuality, but love of the person including romantic/physical love). Without this, there seems to be almost a complete absence of such a love in Scripture.
  - 2.) In the original there are no headings, so one must interpret who is talking at any time. This is made easier with a knowledge of the original language, which is gender/number specific in its pronouns (the ESV titles are helpful here).
  - 3.) Working through whether there is a general chronology (the first outline), chronology with a parenthetical dream sequence, or an anthology of lyric poems (i.e. subjective thought/feelings). Regardless, it is not intended to teach a proper theology of courtship/dating as much as an invitation to share in the excitement of romantic love.
  - 4.) Interpreting the highly poetic and pastoral language. As poetry, it is intended to excite the emotions. “It does not assert ideas, it embodies emotions” (Ryken). Those who do not care for poetry will be particularly challenged.

**EXPLORING THE LITERARY FEATURES OF THE SONG OF SONGS**

*The Song of Solomon is a small anthology of love lyrics. For people who relish poetry in general and love poetry specifically, this is a high point in the Bible. For many readers, however, the book is something of an embarrassment because it is so unrestrained about romantic passion and physical attractiveness. That is a great pity, because God is the one who gave the gift of poetry to the human race, and romantic love is one of the most universal and deeply felt human emotions. To relish reading the Song of Solomon, we need to get rid of our inhibitions about extravagant expressions of romantic passion. Further, we need to forget about prose literalism and take flight on the wings of the fantastic and poetic imagination. The writer of the Song of Solomon is a poet who pulls out all the stops. The genius of intense poetry like this is that the poet is our representative, saying what we want said, too, only saying it much better than we can. (from the ESV Literary Study Bible)*

- Fundamental to reading and experiencing the book is to know how to enter into love poetry. Ryken suggests being familiar through an anthology of English and American love poetry (which is given justification by Song of Songs, remembering that it is inspired and the Word of God).
- The pastoral element means that we are dealing with creation, cycles of life and death, animals, horticulture, herding.
 

*Beauty is everywhere in the Song of Songs – in the exalted poetry, in the pictures of nature, in the attractiveness the lovers find in each other. (Ryken)*
- There is also the difficulty (for some) of the celebratory and public nature of the affections and of feasting/drinking.

*Many interpreters have allegorized Song of Songs, either because they do not know how to assimilate love poetry or because they believe that the Bible is more “spiritual” than to endorse physical, sexual love....The most important thing is to read this anthology of lyrics as love poetry. You and your students need to get over any inhibitions about romantic passion, as well as any feelings that love poetry is silly. Love poetry is one of the largest categories of literature. (Ryken’s Bible Handbook)*

**OUTLINE<sup>2</sup> (progressive structure)**

- I. Title: The Best of Songs (1:1)
- II. The Lovers Yearn for Each Other (1:2–2:17)
- III. The Shepherdess Dreams (3:1–6:3)
- IV. The Lovers Yearn for Each Other Again (6:4–8:4)
- V. The Lovers Join in Marriage (8:5–14)

**ALTERNATE OUTLINE<sup>3</sup> (ABCBA structure)**

- I. The Early Stages of Love (1:11-8)
- II. Love Poems – Courtship Overtones (1:9-2:7)
- III. Wedding Poems (2:8-5:1)
- IV. Love Poems – Marriage Overtones (5:2-7:13)
- V. Early Stages of Love (8:1-14)

<sup>1</sup> See C.S. Lewis’ *The Four Loves*, ch.5 “Eros.”

<sup>2</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, Crossway Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> *Ryken’s Bible Handbook*, Tyndale.