

SESSION FIFTEEN

THE MESSAGE OF THE SONG OF SONGS

NOTE: The following is an article that was originally published by *BibSac* in 1997 [See J. Paul Tanner, "The Message of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:614 (Apr–Jun 1997): 142-61]. The material presented here is the same as in the original article, with only slight formatting changes to conform to the style of these notes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bible students have long recognized that the Song of Songs is one of the most enigmatic books of the entire Bible. Compounding the problem are the erotic imagery and abundance of figurative language, characteristics that led to the allegorical interpretation of the Song that held sway for so much of church history. Though scholarly opinion has shifted from this view, there is still no consensus of opinion to replace the allegorical interpretation. In a previous article this writer surveyed a variety of views and suggested that the literal-didactic approach is better suited for a literal-grammatical-contextual hermeneutic.¹ The literal-didactic view takes the book in an essentially literal way, describing the emotional and physical relationship between King Solomon and his Shulammitte bride, while at the same time recognizing that there is a moral lesson to be gained that goes beyond the experience of physical consummation between the man and the woman. Laurin takes this approach in suggesting that the didactic lesson lies in the realm of fidelity and exclusiveness within the male-female relationship.²

This article suggests a fresh interpretation of the book along the lines of the literal-didactic approach. (This is a fresh interpretation only in the sense of making refinements on the trend established by Laurin.) Yet the suggested alternative yields a distinctive way in which the message of the book comes across and Solomon himself is viewed.

II. REEXAMINING THE LITERAL APPROACH

A literal approach to the Song of Songs has become a popular alternative to the allegorical and typical interpretations. Nevertheless the expression "literal approach" is a large umbrella for a number of variant forms. For instance, one tendency is to regard the Song of Songs as an anthology of separate love songs that have been brought together into one collection.³ This position suffers for lack of solid

¹ J. Paul Tanner, "The History of the Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (January–March 1997): 23–46.

² Robert B. Laurin, "The Life of True Love: The Song of Songs and Its Modern Message," *Christianity Today*, August 3, 1962, 10–11.

³ Representatives of the anthology view include J. G. von Herder, *Lieder der Liebe* (1778); W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Song of Songs* (1936); H. H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," in *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1952), 189–234; Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, rev. ed. (New York: KTAV, 1974); F. Brent Knutson, "Canticles," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1 (1979), 607; George A. F. Knight, *The Song of Songs*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); and John G. Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 6–8.

evidence and also flies in the face of much evidence to the contrary.⁴ The Song reflects an attempt by a single author or editor to compose his literary piece with artistic skill and rhetorical unity (some of which this article will highlight).

The opening scene in chapter 1 is interlocked with the conclusion in chapter 8 by way of the vineyard motif and the role of the brothers of the Shulammitte. In her seemingly apologetic address to the “daughters of Jerusalem” (1:5–6), the bride attempts to explain the cause for her darkened skin: “Do not stare at me because I am swarthy, for the sun has burned me. My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me caretaker of the vineyards, but I have not taken care of my own vineyard.” The brothers reappear in 8:8–9 in what amounts to a flashback that bears out their commitment to defend the integrity of their younger sister: “We have a little sister, and she has no breasts; what shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we shall build on her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we shall barricade her with planks of cedar.”

In light of the sexual themes and consummation of marriage in the book, the meaning of the metaphorical language of these two verses is not difficult to determine. The focus of much of the book is on the bride as she entered into the joys of love and marriage. Verses 8–9 of chapter 8 look back to the time when she was a sexually immature young girl, implied by the reference to having “no breasts.” The brothers were contemplating the future of their young sister and the temptations that would undoubtedly come her way as she went through adolescence. The question in their minds was whether she would keep herself sexually pure until the day of her marriage. The “wall” and the “door” describe the alternative paths she might follow on her way to adulthood. A wall suggests a boundary and barrier that forbid entrance. A door on the other hand is designed for admitting others and giving access to the interior. As the guardians of family honor, the brothers wanted their sister to grow up as a “wall,” meaning that she would resist the sexual advances of her suitors and keep herself chaste. If she became a “door” (easily succumbing to advances), the brothers acknowledged that they would have to make extra effort to barricade her, so as to make sure she was not in a situation where she could easily give in to the desires of the moment.

The flashback of 8:8–9 stands in contrast to 8:10, which views the girl in her time of maturity. She said, “I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I became in his eyes as one who finds peace.” Reaching sexual maturity (having advanced from “no breasts” to “breasts like towers”), she can say to her credit and to the relief of her brothers, “I was a wall.” That is, she kept her moral purity until her marriage day. She remained a chaste virgin, for which she was blessed as “one who finds peace.” While “peace” may suggest her well-being and the esteem her groom had for her, one cannot miss what appears to be a play on words in the Hebrew text. In the eyes of Solomon she is seen as one who finds *שָׁלוֹם*, a connection triggered by the appearance of the name *שְׁלֹמֹה* in the following verse (not to mention that she is a *שְׁלֵמָה*).

In 8:11–12 the vineyard motif becomes prominent. “Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he entrusted the vineyard to caretakers; each one was to bring a thousand shekels of silver for its fruit. My very own vineyard is at my disposal; the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon, and two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit.” Apparently the vineyards in chapter 1 were actually the property of Solomon, which he contracted out for their care and harvest. In return, he was due a certain sum of money, in this case a thousand shekels. Yet in this acknowledgment of Solomon’s ownership, there is a careful play on the vineyard motif. Solomon had his earthly vineyard, but metaphorically she had her vineyard, namely, her own person and sexual love, which had been carefully guarded throughout her life. Neither Solomon nor anyone else could “own” this, for it was

⁴ G. Lloyd Carr gives an insightful defense of the unity of the book (*The Song of Solomon*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984], 44–49).

hers alone to give to the one she so desired. As the story unfolds, she willingly gave this, her most prized possession, to Solomon. In light of the context (8:8–9), which speaks of the brothers' concern for her chastity, the reference in verse 12 to "the two hundred shekels for those who take care of the vineyard's fruit" is probably an acknowledgment that the brothers are due credit not only for the care of Solomon's literal vineyard but also for their oversight of her "vineyard" as well.⁵ In their desire to protect her sexual purity they kept her engaged in the work of the vineyard to eliminate idle time and keep her close to their careful watching eyes.

Thus the perplexing introduction to the vineyard and brothers in chapter 1 is resolved in the final chapter, whereby the author has artistically framed his composition. This example of literary technique serves to discount the anthology view and supports the literal-didactic approach by underscoring the concern for the bride's preservation of herself exclusively for her husband.

III. THE PHYSICAL CONSUMMATION

The most obvious feature of the Song of Songs is the sexually explicit nature of the material, sensitively guised in figurative language. If the physical consummation of the marital relationship were all that was involved, however, one might expect the story to conclude at the end of chapter 4. As many have recognized, the wedding day of Solomon (3:11) occupies a lengthy and central place in the book, namely, the section from 3:6 to 5:1. This major subunit of the book develops in three movements:

- 3:6-11 The wedding day procession
- 4:1-15 The king's praise for his bride
- 4:16–5:1 The physical consummation of the relationship

In the latter part of this unit is a play on the garden motif, in which a garden is used as a figure for the bride's intimate sexual love. The king exalted the bride's virginity and her faithfulness in keeping herself solely for him: "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a rock-garden locked, a spring sealed up. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, henna with nard plants, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all the trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices. You are a garden spring, a well of fresh water, and streams flowing from Lebanon" (4:12–15).

The fruit and spices of the garden refer to the pleasures of her sexual love, but this "garden" has been kept locked all her life—waiting for that special man who would one day be given access. His praise and delight in her is met with a mutual response in 4:16: "Awake, O north wind, and come, wind of the south; make my garden breathe out fragrance, let its spices be wafted abroad. May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits!"

There was no restraint on the bride's part to ward off Solomon; he was welcome to her "garden." In the third play on the garden motif (5:1), the physical consummation is complete and the king expresses his satisfaction: "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh along with my balsam. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk." Then in wrapping up this section an editorial insert is included to "legitimize," as it were,

⁵ For an alternative view that she is declaring her emancipation from her brothers, see Robert L. Alden, "Song of Songs 8:12a: Who Said It?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31 (September 1988): 271–78.

the acceptability of this intimate exchange within the bond of marriage: “Eat, friends; drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers” (5:1b).

On reading 3:6–5:1 one might think this was the perfect relationship enacted in perfect harmony. Yet the literary structure reveals that not all is ideal. This is not to suggest that there was no exaltation of the beauty of the consummation of the two primary characters. Indeed there was—great joy and mutual pleasure had been achieved. Two adults had made their commitment in marriage before God and had rightfully partaken of the physical blessings. There was no shame here, for they were encouraged to “drink and imbibe deeply.” However, some hidden currents complicate this relationship, a problem that is reflected by the literary structure in which the “wedding day” section is cast.

IV. THE DREAM SECTIONS: HINTS OF TENSION

One of the interpretive theories of the Song of Songs is the “dream theory,” suggested as early as 1813 by a Roman Catholic priest.⁶ To suggest that a great extent of the book is actually a dream is going too far. Nevertheless certain smaller sections do reflect a dream. This is evident in 3:1–5 and again in 5:2–8, units with strikingly similar parallels. A dream in 3:1 is suggested by the opening line, “On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but did not find him,” and again in 5:2 by the opening line, “I was asleep, but my heart was awake.” That she was dreaming is also a logical conclusion inasmuch as it is unlikely that the king’s wife would be struck and wounded by the city’s watchmen, and have her shawl taken from her (5:7).

The two sections have several parallel features: (1) Each begins with a line hinting at a dream by such terms as “bed” and “asleep.” (2) In each case the bride goes out into the city at night searching frantically for her lover (whom she is unable to find). “I sought him but did not find him” (3:1), and “I searched for him, but I did not find him” (5:6). (3) In both cases she encounters watchmen of the city in her search (3:3; 5:7). (4) Both units conclude with an adjuration to the “daughters of Jerusalem.”⁷

Such parallels cannot be easily dismissed as mere coincidence. What is more intriguing is the fact that these parallel dream sections perfectly frame the wedding day unit of 3:6–5:1. The dream section of 3:1–5 precedes the wedding day (3:6–5:1), which in turn is followed by the dream section of 5:2–8.

However, the dream passages also include important differences. In the first dream section (3:1–5) the bride eventually found the one she loves, but in the second one (5:2–8) she did not. In the first one she spoke briefly with the watchmen of the city, but in the second one they mistreated her. This would suggest that the second dream is progressive in relation to the first.

In the first dream some important repetitions occur. “He whom my soul loves” (אֵת אֲשֶׁר־אֶהְבֶּה) occurs four times. The ideas of “seeking” (בִּקֵּשׁ) and “finding” (מָצָא) each occur four times. There is an obvious preoccupation in the dream with finding the one she loves, as though she were fearful of losing him. This insecurity is also reflected in 3:4 by her actions when she found him: “I

⁶ Johann Leonhard von Hug, *Das Hohe Lied in einer noch unversuchten Deutung* (Freyburg and Constanz, 1813); and idem, *Schutzschrift für seine Deutung des Hohen Liedes, und derselben weitere Erläuterungen* (Freyburg, 1816). For a more recent statement of this theory, see S. B. Freehof, “The Song of Songs: A General Suggestion,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 39 (1948–49): 397–402.

⁷ In Hebrew the initial lines of 3:5 and 5:8 are the same: הַשְּׁבִיעֵתִי אֶחְכֶּם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם.

held on to him and would not let him go.” This contrasts with the second dream, in which she did not find him.

Paradoxical to her desire to be with the one whom her soul loved and the latent fears of losing him, she seemed to precipitate the “misunderstanding” in the second dream. He came to her bedroom chamber, but she made an excuse to avoid letting him in, in contrast to her previous dream. The fact that her avoidance of him in her dream immediately follows the consummation section (4:16–5:1) makes this even more surprising. Is there something about their relationship that is troubling her, a worry that surfaces in her dreams? Is he responsible for her indifference?⁸ The broader context of the book helps answer these questions.

V. FURTHER SIGNS OF TROUBLE IN THE RELATIONSHIP

Two important clues in the book may be linked to the dreams and the apparent fears and insecurity the bride seems to have been experiencing. One of these immediately precedes the first dream, and the other immediately follows the second dream.

The earlier hint of trouble occurs in 2:15, “Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom.” In Hebrew, there is an interesting symmetry to these lines:

שׁוּעָלִים קְטַנִּים	אַחֲזוּ-לָנוּ שׁוּעָלִים
וּבְרִמֵּינוּ סְמֹדֵר	מִחֲבָלִים כְּרָמִים

In the first line, the word “foxes” (שׁוּעָלִים) occurs twice, with the two occurrences placed back to back. The same feature happens in the second line with the word “vineyards” (כְּרָמִים). This device calls attention to the verse. There is some uncertainty, however, as to who is speaking and who is being addressed. There is general agreement that verse 14 is from the lips of the king, while verse 16 is from the bride. The New International Version assigns verses 14–15 to the king. The imperative verb “catch” (אַחֲזוּ) that opens verse 15 is in the masculine plural. This casts a certain vagueness on the verse, but it indicates that the bride is not being addressed (though she could be the speaker). Delitzsch took the position that the bride was speaking, since the verse was really a “vinedresser’s ditty.”⁹ The play on the vineyard motif does seem to point back to 1:6 and the bride’s labor in the vineyards.

Most commentators agree that the request (or exhortation) pertains to the relationship of the king and the bride, though there is no consensus as to what the concern might be. Just as foxes were known for their destructive tendencies in crop fields, so something was troubling the love relationship of Solomon and his bride. Delitzsch was content to let the problem remain vague and unspecified.

⁸ Deere assumes that the woman is responsible. “In her dream this action by the watchmen may indicate that she was to blame for her separation from her lover. More importantly the dream symbolized the pain of separation brought about through her selfishness and the dream dramatized her need of the lover for her well-being and protection” (Jack S. Deere, “Song of Songs,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985], 1021).

⁹ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, vol. 6 of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, by Franz Delitzsch and C. F. Keil, trans. M. G. Easton, 10 vols. (n.p., 1875; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 54. Deere (“Song of Songs,” 1015) and Pope take the position that 2:15 represents the words of the bride (Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977], 405).

“The vineyards, beautiful with fragrant blossom, point to her covenant of love; and the foxes, the little foxes, which might destroy these united vineyards, point to all the great and little enemies and adverse circumstances which threaten to gnaw and destroy love in the blossom, ere it has reached the ripeness of full enjoyment.”¹⁰ Deere takes the position that the bride was asking her lover to take the initiative in solving the problems that were potentially harmful to their relationship.¹¹ Glickman suggested that the “foxes” might be any number of things that posed some potentially destructive problems for their relationship.

The foxes represent as many obstacles or temptations as have plagued lovers throughout the centuries. Perhaps it is the fox of uncontrolled desire which drives a wedge of guilt between a couple. Perhaps it is the fox of mistrust and jealousy which breaks the bond of love. Or it may be the fox of selfishness and pride which refuses to let one acknowledge his fault to another. Or it may be an unforgiving spirit which will not accept the apology of the other.¹²

A problem with these suggestions is that they make no appeal to the immediate context or the larger context of the book. On the other hand a much more obvious problem has been precipitating from the beginning of the book. For instance in 1:3 the bride declared in regard to the king, “Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, your name is like purified oil; therefore the maidens love you.” Who are these maidens who love Solomon? Solomon’s bride had been brought to the king’s “chambers” (1:4) and had been allowed to sit at his table (1:12) and even to grace the banquet hall (2:4). She had been given the high honor of entering the king’s palace. Yet she was not entirely comfortable there, for numerous women were present in the palace who stared at her and made her feel self-conscious.¹³ That is why she addressed the “daughters of Jerusalem” with the words, “Do not stare at me because I am swarthy, for the sun has burned me” (1:6). These women spoke of the king in 1:4, “We will rejoice in you and be glad; we will extol your love more than wine.”¹⁴ Observing this situation in the palace, the bride remarked in the final line of 1:4, “Rightly do they love you” (i.e., these women love the king).¹⁵ All this suggests that if the “foxes” of 2:15 mean anything in light of the preceding context, they may refer to these “other women” who frequented Solomon’s court.

The second hint of trouble in the relationship is seen after the second dream, when the women of the court are referred to in 6:8, “There are sixty queens [מְלָכוֹת] and eighty concubines [פְּיִלְגָּשִׁים], and maidens [עַלְמוֹת] without number.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 54.

¹¹ Deere, “Song of Songs,” 1015.

¹² S. Craig Glickman, *A Song for Lovers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 49–50.

¹³ Commenting on 1:5–6, Knight sees a tension between the Shulammitte and the women of Solomon’s harem: “It would seem that ‘Solomon’ was holding a kind of beauty parade, and that SHE is hurt. At this event SHE addresses the harem. Moreover, the harem women seem now to have second thoughts about her. They reveal their ‘upper-class snobbishness’ at the idea of a peasant girl being admitted to their ranks” (George A. F. Knight, *The Song of Songs*, International Theological Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 12 [capital letters his]).

¹⁴ That the king is in view rather than the bride is attested by the masculine pronominal suffix on דָּרְיָךְ.

¹⁵ “You” is masculine singular (אַתָּה בְּרִיךְ).

¹⁶ The New International Version renders עַלְמוֹת “virgins.” In Isaiah 7:14 עַלְמָה has traditionally been translated “virgin” in keeping with its New Testament fulfillment, although lexically the word has more latitude. Carr offers a helpful summary: “Maidens (AV, ASV *virgins*) are unmarried young women of marriageable age. The word itself does not necessarily mean ‘virgin’ (i.e., sexually inexperienced), but the common Old Testament

Who were these women and what was their connection to the Song? One might argue that the מלכות were simply women among the nobility of Jerusalem (rather than “queens” in legal marriage to the king), but that does little to account for the פִּילְגֶּשִׁים.¹⁷ The idea that these women comprised Solomon’s personal harem is certainly within reason. He had “seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines [פִּילְגֶּשִׁים]” (1 Kings 11:3). The difference in number between Song of Songs 6:8 and 1 Kings 11:3 is accounted for simply enough on the basis that they reflect different times in Solomon’s life. Delitzsch said that the three groups (queens, concubines, and virgins) reflected the composition of Solomon’s harem in an earlier part of his reign.¹⁸ Similarly Kinlaw, Murphy, and Knight have taken the position that Song of Songs 6:8 is a reference to the harem of Solomon, though not all commentators agree.¹⁹

VI. INDENTIFYING THE “DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM”

There is little consensus on the identity of the “daughters of Jerusalem” mentioned in 1:5; 2:7; 3:5,10; 5:8,16; and 8:4. Harrison quickly dismisses the suggestions that they are either Solomon’s harem or a professional chorus.²⁰ Some have said they are “perhaps friends or ‘bridesmaids’ (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, etc.); citizens of Jerusalem, who describe the royal entourage as it approaches the city (3:6–11); and citizens of Shulam (8:5).”²¹ Deere suggests that they most likely refer to the female inhabitants of Jerusalem.²² For him, however, their function in the Song is more significant than their identity.

The chorus is a literary device in the Song whereby the beloved and her lover express their emotions and thoughts more fully. By praising Solomon (you is masc. sing.) in Song of Songs 1:4 the “daughters” seemed to be agreeing with one another that the couple had an ideal romance.²³

After acknowledging that the “daughters” could serve the role of a chorus who advance the action by posing rhetorical questions or making interpretive comments on the action between the principals,

position on pre-marital sexual purity is clear (cf. Dt. 22:13–29). Every ‘maiden’ (‘alma,h) is assumed to be virgin and virtuous until she is proven not to be” (*The Song of Solomon*, 74 [italics his]).

¹⁷ Carr explains that “*concubines* in ancient Israel were not mere bed-partners. They were actually ‘wives’ (cf. Jdg. 20:3–5), albeit of secondary rank, with certain protections and privileges that set them apart from those outside the wife/concubine categories” (*The Song of Solomon*, 148–49 [italics his]).

¹⁸ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 112.

¹⁹ Dennis F. Kinlaw, “Song of Songs,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–92), 5 (1991), 1235; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 66; and Knight, *The Song of Songs*, 11–12. Carr takes the position that 6:8 has a harem in view, but not necessarily that of Solomon: “More probably, no particular harem is being considered. Note the text does not say ‘Solomon has’ or ‘I have’, but it is a simple declaration: *There are . . .*, and my beloved ‘is unique’ (v. 9, NIV)” (*The Song of Solomon*, 148 [italics his]).

²⁰ Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 1054.

²¹ William S. LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 605.

²² Deere, “Song of Songs,” 1012. He points out that the city is frequently referred to as the “mother” of its inhabitants (cf. Isa 51:18; 60:4; Ezek 19:2,10; Hos 2:2,5).

²³ *Ibid.*

Carr seems to favor the idea that “daughters” could be used in the sense of character (cf. 1 Sam 14:52), that is, women who display the characteristics of the city girls.²⁴

The request to “catch the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards” signals a problem in the relationship, and in light of 1:2–6 and 6:8–9 the most likely problem would be the tension the bride would feel in relation to the women of Solomon’s harem. If that is so, then the “insecurity” element of the dream sections is a reflection of her concern for their relationship in the palace harem.

Despite the attention she received as the most recent bride, in the back of her mind was the hopeless feeling that she could not expect to have the king all to herself. This is not one of those stories in which the perfect couple fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after. This is a story in which a couple fall in love, get married, and she has to adjust to the fact that most nights of the year he will be sleeping with some other woman! Under this set of circumstances, the health of the relationship is in dire jeopardy, a matter to which she is keenly sensitive but he is not.

It seems that the “daughters” may well be the women numbered in 6:8–9. The New American Standard Bible reads:

There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
And maidens without number;
But my dove, my perfect one, is unique:
She is her mother’s only *daughter*;
She is the pure *child* of the one who bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her blessed,
The queens and the concubines *also*, and they praised her, *saying*,...

The words in italics in the New American Standard Bible are not in Hebrew, and this reflects the difficulty in translating these verses. Reading this, one might think that the word for “maidens” occurs twice, but that is not so. The first occurrence of “maidens” (v. 8) is a translation of *עַלְמוֹת*, but the second occurrence (v. 9) is a translation of *בָּנוֹת*. This latter Hebrew word is the common word for “daughters,” and is the same word used elsewhere in the Song in the phrase “daughters of Jerusalem.”

In verse 9 the initial verb, *רָאָהָ* (“saw her”), does double duty for both lines. The other verbs, *וַיִּאָּשְׁרוּהָ* (“called her blessed”) and *וַיְהַלְלוּהָ* (“praised her”), each of which concludes a colon, are lexically similar (terms of praise and blessing) and are parallel. The result is that *בָּנוֹת* (“daughters”) is precisely parallel with “queens” and “concubines.” Thus these two primary terms for the harem refer to the “daughters” (*בָּנוֹת*). This suggests that the expression “daughters of Jerusalem” throughout the Song is a summarizing term for the women of the harem, whether they are *מְלָכוֹת* (“queens”), *פְּיִלְגָּשִׁים* (“concubines”) or *עַלְמוֹת* (“maidens”).²⁵

VII. LITERARY STRUCTURE

As already observed, the book is framed by an *inclusio* involving the “brothers” and the “vineyard,” and at the heart of the book is the wedding day, framed by two “dream” sections with noticeable

²⁴ Carr, *The Song of Songs*, 77.

²⁵ One should not make too much of the fact that *עַלְמוֹת* is not emphasized in the parallelism. That too appears to be summarized in the more general expression *בָּנוֹת*, as can be seen in the close proximity of the terms in Song of Songs 1:3–5. After reading, “Therefore the maidens (*עַלְמוֹת*) love you,” the reader is quickly introduced to the “daughters [*בָּנוֹת*] of Jerusalem.”

parallels. Others have observed that the book is characterized by the presence of chiasmic devices, parallelisms, and the repetition of words, refrains, and motifs that surface at crucial junctures.²⁶ Numerous attempts have been made to identify the structure of the book in light of such rhetorical aspects. The studies of Exum, Shea, Webster, and Dorsey have been particularly insightful. Despite the detailed analysis to which the literary structure has been subjected, however, there has been no consensus, and the results are often contradictory. Evaluating Exum's work, Murphy concluded,

These remarks by no means refute the case Exum makes for the Song's artistic design, but they do illustrate the difficulties encountered in detailed rhetorical analysis. The problem is to determine whether or not minute stylistic features are sure signs of structure, assessing them in light of other factors, such as seemingly incongruous content and lack of coherent sequence, which weigh against literary unity.²⁷

Murphy's point is well taken. While rhetorical features have been used to seek to identify the book's literary design, this approach has been helpful in determining sectional boundaries but less helpful in determining the appropriate paralleling of units. The following illustrate several attempts at noting parallelisms in the book.

Exum	Shea
A 1:2–2:6	A 1:2–2:2
B 2:7–3:5	B 2:3–17
C 3:6–5:1	C 3:1–4:16
B' 5:2–6:3	C' 5:1–7:10
C' 6:4–8:3	B' 7:11–8:5
A' 8:4–14	A' 8:6–14

²⁶ For studies dealing with the Song's literary structure and composition, see F. Landsberger, "Poetic Units within the Song of Songs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954): 203–16; R. Kessler, *Some Poetical and Structural Features of the Song of Songs*, ed. John Macdonald (1957); J. C. Exum, "A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1973): 47–79; F. Landy, "Beauty and the Enigma: An Inquiry into Some Interrelated Episodes of the Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980): 55–106; W. H. Shea, "The Chiasmic Structure of the Song of Songs," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (1980): 378–96; Edwin C. Webster, "Pattern in the Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 22 (1982): 73–93; David A. Dorsey, "Literary Structuring in the Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46 (1990): 81–96; and Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986).

²⁷ Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 63.

Webster	Dorsey
A 1:2–2:6	A 1:2–2:7
2:7–3:5	B 2:8–17
B Interlude 3:6–11	C 3:1–5
4:1–7	D 3:6–5:1
4:8–15	C' 5:2–7:10
C 4:16–6:3	B' 7:11–8:4
B' 6:4–10	A' 8:5–14
6:11–7:10	
A' 7:11–8:3	
8:4–14	

Though space does not permit a detailed analysis of these findings, there is an inherent danger in rhetorical criticism *forcing* a pattern in an attempt to deduce an overall scheme. Dorsey, for instance, argues for a composition of seven units with the first and final units consisting of seven subunits. In doing so, however, he must argue that 8:5b is a subunit distinct from 8:5a and 8:6–7.²⁸ He concludes that Solomon is speaking in 8:5b and the bride is speaking in 8:6–7, but grammatically this conclusion is problematic, because 8:5b begins with the line “Beneath the apple tree I awakened you.” The pronoun “you” in English translations is in Hebrew masculine—not feminine (עוֹרֵרְתִיךָ). In other words the bride is speaking to Solomon, and thus verses 8:5b–7 are one unit, not two. Dorsey has noted this, but to make his case, he has to opt for a Syriac reading that supports a feminine suffix. Were it not for his quest to have seven subunits to this last section, this text critical option would probably not have been proposed.

While the book has numerous repetitions of words and key phrases, inclusios, and parallels, the difficulty is in knowing how much to make of the macrostructure. For instance several scholars have noticed parallels of the first section (1:1–2:7) with the final section of the book (8:5–14). However, one could also say that the second major section (2:8–17) has observable parallels with the last as well. Song of Songs 2:8 begins with an announcement of the lover’s coming: “Listen! My beloved! Behold, he is coming,” which has some similarity to 8:5, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” And 2:17 (which ends the second section) contains the line, “Turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag,” and the final section concludes in similar fashion: “Hurry, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag” (8:14).

Although the nature of the macrostructure is difficult to ascertain, the rhetorical elements are helpful in delineating the major units of the book. The following paragraphs discuss some of these features.

1:2–2:7

Dorsey admirably demonstrates the sevenfold chiasmic structure of this section,²⁹ in which a longer speech by the bride frames the entire unit.

1. Young woman’s long speech expressing her desire to be with her lover in his home (1:2–7)

²⁸ Dorsey, “Literary Structuring in the Song of Songs,” 91.

²⁹ Ibid., 84.

- a. Aside to the “daughters of Jerusalem”
 - b. “He has brought me into his chambers”
 - c. Theme-word: “love”
 - d. Mention of “wine” (1:2,4)
7. Young woman’s long speech expressing her desire to be with her lover in his home (2:3–7)
- a. Aside to the “daughters of Jerusalem”
 - b. “He has brought me into the house of wine”
 - c. Theme-word: “love”
 - d. Mention of “wine” (2:4)³⁰

2:8–17

This section is composed of three subunits. The bride speaks in 2:8–9, Solomon speaks in 2:10–14, and the bride speaks again in 2:15–17. Also there are several word repetitions in these subunits that serve to frame the entire section: “my beloved” (אֱהָבָאִי), “gazelle” (צִבְיָה), “young stag,” (עֵצֶבֶר קָאֵלִים), and “mountains” (הַרְרָאִים).

3:1–5 and 5:2–8

The rhetorical nature of these units was discussed earlier in connection with the dream sections.

3:6–5:1

In light of the statement in 3:11 (“gaze on King Solomon . . . on the day of his wedding”), most would agree that this portion of the book deals with the wedding of Solomon and the bride, which is followed by the consummation of the relationship. The dream sections frame this section. Within the 3:6–5:1 wedding section, five subsections are identifiable. The first (3:6–11) depicts the procession to the wedding, the key thought being anticipation. The final section (4:16–5:1) depicts the physical consummation, the key thought being fulfillment. In between are three sections in which Solomon praises the bride: in 4:1–7, he praises her physical beauty, in 4:8–11 he praises the excitement of her love, and in 4:12–15 he praises her virginity. Each praise section is bounded by a word or phrase repetition:

4:1, “How beautiful you are, my darling.”

4:7, “You are altogether beautiful, my darling.”

4:8, “Come with me from Lebanon, my bride.”

4:11, “The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.”

4:12, “A garden locked is my sister, my bride . . . a spring sealed up.”

4:15, “You are a garden spring.”

5:9–6:13

Though scholars disagree on where the section following the wedding begins and ends, 5:8 may end the dream section, with a new section beginning in 5:9. Just as the first dream section ended with an “adjuration” for the “daughters of Jerusalem” (3:5), a similar address concludes the

³⁰ The words “banquet hall” are literally “house of wine” (בֵּית הַיַּיִן).

second dream section (5:8). Furthermore 5:9–6:13 includes several questions and responses, reflecting an uncomfortable interaction between the bride and the “daughters of Jerusalem.”

5:9	Question:	The “daughters of Jerusalem” ask, “What kind of beloved is your beloved?”
5:10–16	Response:	The bride praises the beauty and desirability of Solomon.
6:1	Question:	The “daughters of Jerusalem” ask, “Where has your beloved gone . . . that we may seek him with you?”
6:2–3	Response:	The bride says he has gone to his garden to pasture his flocks and gather lilies.
6:4–9	Solomon:	He praises the bride (“as awesome as an army with banners”), but attention is called to the other women.
6:10	Question:	The “daughters” (presumably) ask, “Who is this that grows like the dawn, . . . as awesome as an army with banners?”
6:11–12	Response:	The bride (?) leaves for the orchard in the valley.
6:13	Conclusion:	The “daughters” are calling for her to come back, but apparently Solomon gently rebukes them (which ends the interaction between the bride and the “daughters”).

7:1–8:4

The material in 7:1–8:4 consists primarily of dialogue between the bride and Solomon. In 7:1–9a, Solomon praises her beauty, and in 7:9b–8:2 she responds by expressing her desire for him. The section concludes in 8:3–4 with her wish for his embrace followed by an admonition to the “daughters of Jerusalem.” This section of 7:1–8:4 is strikingly similar to the conclusion of the first major section (1:2–2:7).

2:6	“Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me.”	8:3	“Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me.”
2:7	“I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you will not arouse or awaken my love, until she pleases.”	8:4	“I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem, Do not arouse or awaken my love, until she pleases.”

8:5–14

The question in 8:5, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” signals the beginning of the last section. This is similar to the question that initiated the wedding section in 3:6: “Who is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke?”³¹

³¹ The New American Standard Bible has the interrogative “what” rather than “who”; the New International Version translates the word as “who.” For the position that “who” is the preferable translation of מַה in 3:6, see Peter B. Dirksen, “Song of Songs III 6–7,” *Vetus Testamentum* 39 (1989): 219–25. He also argues

Based on these observations, an overall structure emerges which corresponds to the chronological development of the relationship. The section 3:6–5:1 reports the wedding day and physical consummation of the relationship. Section 1:2–3:5 depicts the prewedding phase, and 5:2–8:4 depicts the postwedding complications. This leaves 8:5–14, which stands as the conclusion to the book and holds the key to the book’s message.

VIII. THE CONCLUSION TO THE BOOK (8:5–14)

The conclusion begins with a rhetorical refrain reminiscent of the one that opened the wedding section: “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” Following this question is a homily provided by the bride in 8:5b–7. Of the ten verses in the conclusion section, only one of them is clearly spoken by Solomon, namely, verse 13. Most of the verses in the conclusion are spoken by the bride, and even the contribution of the “brothers” (vv. 8–9) is probably her reflection of their superintendence over her life. If the bulk of the conclusion to the book comes from the bride, and if she is the one who provides the moral lesson, then more of the book should be seen through her eyes.³²

The moral lesson from the bride is aimed first at Solomon. In 8:6, she pleads, “Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm.” The word “seal” (חֹתָם) refers to an engraved stone used for authenticating a document or other possession. This could be suspended by a cord around the neck (over the heart) as in Genesis 38:18. The word חֹתָם can also refer to a “seal ring” worn on the hand (in Song of Songs 5:14 “hand” is used to mean “arm”). The חֹתָם was something highly precious to the owner and could be used symbolically for a person whom one valued. In Haggai 2:23, the Lord said to Zerubbabel, “I will make you like a signet ring [חֹתָם], for I have chosen you” (cf. Jer 22:24). The bride was asking Solomon that he treasure her, that he regard her as a prized seal.³³

But why should she want to be like a seal over his heart? Was she not his legal wife by marriage and treasured by him? The answer is given in 8:6, “For love is as strong as death, jealousy is as severe as Sheol” (the NIV translates the last phrase, “its jealousy unyielding as the grave”). The particle כִּי introduces a reason for the request. Why did she want to be like a seal over his heart? Because love has a jealous side. “Jealousy” (קִנְיָה) need not be viewed as a carnal attitude, for the same word is often used of God in His jealousy for what is rightfully His. In Proverbs 6:34 the word is used in a context of adultery in which it is said of the offended husband, “Jealousy enrages a man.” There is a sense, then, in which one can be legitimately jealous for what rightfully belongs to him. This is especially true in the marriage relationship. In 8:6 אֶהְבֶּבָה (“love”), parallel to קִנְיָה (“jealousy”), often includes much more than sexual pleasure; it also includes the emotions and deep bond of commitment between two individuals (note the use of “love” [אָהַב] in Deut 6:5). In the Song of Songs this love includes a legitimately jealous desire, and the most obvious implication is that the bride has a jealous

that the subject is the bride who is approaching in the litter.

³² Failure to observe the role the bride plays in the conclusion is a critical mistake. One commentator concluded, “These verses exhibit little coherence and lend support to the claim that the Song is simply a collection of disparate love poems” (Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 66).

³³ For the suggestion that the bride is alluding to burial seals such as those known from Mesopotamian funerary offerings, see William W. Hallo, “For Love Is Strong as Death,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 22 (1993): 45–50. He contends that “love is strong as death” in the sense that Solomon’s status as her lover will persevere even in the grave. Furthermore he commends the work of Dominique Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 108–12.

love for Solomon.³⁴ Yet this is also a true love, a love that wishes to go beyond the physical pleasures of sexual intimacy. Throughout the book much attention had been given to the aspect of sexual intimacy, but now in the conclusion her expectations go far beyond this. “Many waters cannot quench love, nor will rivers overflow it; if a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, it would be utterly despised” (8:7). With this homily, the bride has delivered the great moral lesson of the book.

IX. UNRAVELING THE DETAILS

The literary structure of the book has highlighted the wedding day and sexual consummation as the center of the book (3:6–5:1). Throughout this section, a mounting excitement crescendoes at 4:16–5:1 as the bliss of marital union is enjoyed. One would think the story would end at this point, now that the relationship has achieved its deepest physical fulfillment. But that is the point: This book is not just about the enjoyment of God-ordained sex in marriage. That is certainly part of the message of the book—that two people can enter into a marriage covenant and fully enjoy their physical intimacy—but the book has a deeper plot.

The literary structure also directs attention to the two dream sections that form an inclusio to the wedding day. These dreams reveal an insecurity and reservation about their relationship. In light of the mention of the numerous queens and concubines in 6:9, there is little wonder. All her life, she had kept herself a virgin for the man whom she would marry (4:12–15). Even her brothers carefully watched over her to ensure this was so (8:9). She was prepared to be a loyal and faithful wife, but Solomon ultimately had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). No wonder she, not he, delivers the moral lesson of the book. He was totally unqualified to speak on the issue of godly dedicated love. He knew the physical side of it, but apparently he did not know the love she cherished.

Once this inherent tension within the book is recognized, many of the details begin to make sense. She longs for him, but she longs to have him alone (without the threatening intimidation of others in Solomon’s harem). Solomon was mutually infatuated with her, but he was blinded from seeing the possibility of an exclusive relationship. Hence he exclaimed in 2:2, “Like a lily among the thorns, so is my darling among the maidens” (lit., “daughters”).

The word “vineyard” speaks at times of Solomon’s literal vineyards, but at other times it suggests the love Solomon and the bride experienced. Cognizant of her female rivals, the bride hinted in the earlier stages of their relationship, “Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom” (2:15). This problem comes to the fore immediately after the marriage, and this is the reason (in light of the broader context of the book) for the bride’s cool response in the second dream section (5:2–8). She truly loves him, but the continuance of this arrangement is emotionally crippling to her, and she suffers from a wounded spirit. Rightfully she wants him all for herself, which explains her fondness for saying, “I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me” (7:10; cf. 2:16; 6:3). If she could have her way, they would run off to the country and relish in their love without the complications of palace life (7:11–8:2).

³⁴ If “jealous love” is the intention of 8:6, this could help explain the repeated literary refrain directed at the “daughters of Jerusalem.” She bids them not to arouse or awaken love (הַבְּרָאָה; 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The New International Version’s translation, “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires,” is preferable to the New American Standard Bible’s “That you will not arouse or awaken *my* love, until she pleases.”

X. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Solomon was a man of many lovers, and the Song of Songs is a record of one of the relationships that stood out above all others. A fiery love developed between Solomon and the unnamed Shulammitte woman referred to as the bride. Their background was remarkably diverse. He grew up in the kingly courts of Jerusalem, while she was accustomed to labor in the vineyards beneath the blistering sun.³⁵ He had known many women (his father David had not been monogamous), whereas she had been kept a virgin under the careful scrutiny of her brothers.

Solomon could offer her a life in the royal courts, but she had something much greater to offer him. She could teach him about a godly love based on commitment, a love that needed to be mutually exclusive to experience its highest attainment. Such love was costly (8:7). It was more than money could buy, more than even Solomon was capable of. So, she becomes the heroine of the book, and she (rather than Solomon) renders the moral homily in the book's conclusion.

Unfortunately Solomon followed the way of many worldly kings, establishing a large harem to propagate a large royal lineage. As a result, too many women—the “daughters of Jerusalem”—were vying for his attention. She made an earnest attempt to love him in such a context, but she knew there was a higher level to which their relationship could ascend if only they could be exclusively each other's. That is what led her to request, “Put me like a seal over your heart” (8:6). The development of her life had been one of moral purity, retaining her virginity for the exclusive satisfaction of the one who would become her husband. She was prepared to be exclusively his. He, however, had a great obstacle to overcome. He needed to recognize the detrimental effect his lifestyle imposed on the development of their relationship.

In this literal-didactic view, the relationship of Solomon and his bride should be understood literally (speaking approvingly of their marital bliss), but it also presents an important lesson: There is a level of love far beyond sexual satisfaction, a love that is exclusive and possessive, having no room for intruders. Only two may ascend alone, but in so doing they will find that “its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord” (8:6). The Song of Songs hearkens back to God's prototypical design in the Garden of Eden of one man and one woman, in marriage, a relationship God designed to be mutually exclusive. This book, then, presents a most relevant and urgent message for today.

³⁵ In light of the statement in 7:1, she did not necessarily have an impoverished background. Victor Sasson suggests that the darkened lady of 1:5–6 is a poetic reference to Pharaoh's daughter (“King Solomon and the Dark Lady in the Song of Songs,” *Vetus Testamentum* 39 [October 1989]: 407–14).