

Song of Solomon: A Defense of the Three Character Interpretation

Presented to the 55th Meeting of the Midwest Region of the Evangelical Theological Society
St Paul, Minnesota, March 19-20, 2010

by
Myron C. Kauk
Liberty University

No book of the Old Testament has been subject to more diverse interpretations than the Song of Songs.¹ The book has been understood as an allegory, either of God's love for Israel (from a Jewish perspective) or of Christ's love for the church (from a Christian perspective), as a literal description of human sexual love (perhaps also typologically referring to God's love for His people), or as remnants of myth drawn from pagan fertility cults. It has been treated as an anthology of disparate poetic pieces stemming from different authors and different times, or as a unified and coherent work stemming from a single author, who may have incorporated earlier material. Authorship has been ascribed to Solomon or to an unknown author from much later time. The Song of Songs has been called a drama, a wedding song, or a lyric poem.

This paper will be limited in focus to a historical survey and defense of the three character interpretation, otherwise known as the shepherd hypothesis. It will be argued that Solomon is the author of the Song of Songs and that it is best understood as a literary unity, which has reference to real

¹ For a general survey of literature, see Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (1857; Repr., New York: KTAV, 1970), 20-126; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 89-229; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 352-366; J. Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 23-46; Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2003), 451-510; Mark E. Biddle, "Song of Songs: A Selected Annotated Bibliography." *Review and Expositor* 105 (2008): 481-490.

historical characters and real historical events. The main characters in the story include King Solomon, a shepherd girl, and her beloved shepherd, who is understood to be someone separate from the king.

Survey of Literature

The three character interpretation of the Song of Songs has itself been presented with considerable variety. Perhaps the earliest known proponent was the twelfth century Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra, who saw the shepherd as a “separate and distinct person” from the king, though he continued to interpret the overall message of the book allegorically.² In 1771, J. Jacobi authored *Das durch eine leichte Erklärung von seinem Vorwürfen gerettete Hohelied*, in which “[h]e saw in the Song a panegyric on conjugal fidelity, for he considers that its subject is the steadfastness with which a wife who had been carried off from her husband maintained her fidelity to the latter, in the face of the seductive attempts of Solomon.”³ Jacobi was followed by Ewald, who in 1826 argued that the woman was not married but espoused to her shepherd lover. She encounters Solomon on one of his northern journeys and is taken into his harem. She steadfastly resists the king’s advances and repeatedly imagines or dreams that she is in the presence of her shepherd lover. In the end, she is set free and returned to her distant lover.⁴

One of the earliest and most significant works in English to adopt this position was produced by Christian Ginsburg in 1857. He considered the Song of Songs to be “an example of virtue in a young woman who encountered and conquered the greatest temptations, and was, eventually, rewarded.”⁵ Ginsburg divided the book structurally into five sections based on the refrain “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,” repeated in 2:7, 3:5, and with minor modification in 8:4, and on the closing statement

² Ginsburg, 46.

³ J. W. Rothstein, “The Song of Songs,” in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), 4:591 http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hastings/dictv4/Page_589.html (accessed February 13, 2010).

⁴ Rothstein, 4:591-592.

⁵ Ginsburg, 4.

“Eat, friends; drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers” in 5:1. He argues that lines spoken by or to the woman can be distinguished by the feminine gender of the words involved, lines pertaining to the shepherd by the use of pastoral language, and lines pertaining to the king by express allusions to his position. Thus, the first section (1:2-2:7) tells how Solomon met the girl on one of his journeys and brought her into his tent. There the king tries to win her affections (1:9-11), but she expresses her devotion to another. In the second section (2:8-3:5), the girl further explains about her relationship with her beloved. Ginsburg understands that she had met him while pasturing her flock and that he had invited her to “enjoy together the charms of nature” (2:8-14).⁶ Her brothers, seeking to preserve her honor, assign her to work in the vineyards in an effort to keep the two apart (1:6; 2:15). But she plans an evening rendezvous with him and takes him to her mother’s house. Section three (3:6-5:1) describes how Solomon took the girl to his palace in Jerusalem with luxurious style in an effort to impress her. But her beloved has followed her there, gains access to her, and offers to help her escape. In section four (5:2-8:4), the girl relates a dream she had about her beloved and describes her beloved to the ladies of the court. Then Solomon appears and seeks one more time to flatter her. He offers to give her first place in the harem, but she rejects him and speaks wistfully to her beloved. In the final section (8:5-14), she is set free by the king and is seen reunited with her beloved and returning to her country home where her virtue is praised.⁷

A similar approach to the Song was taken by Frederic Godet in 1894.⁸ Godet divides Song of Songs into three acts (1:1-3:5; 3:6-8:4; 8:5-14) with each act subdivided into several scenes. In his view, the beloved shepherd does not actually appear until the third act, but is merely imagined and spoken to by the woman in the first two. The first scene (1:1-8) opens with the harem girls praising King Solomon and the girl lamenting the fact that she has been brought into the king’s chambers and expressing her

⁶ Ginsburg, 9.

⁷ Ginsburg, 4-11.

⁸ F. Godet, “The Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 151-175.

desire for her shepherd lover. In scene two (1:9-2:7), Solomon appears and attempts to win the girl with flattery, but she continues to speak in her imagination of her distant lover. Scenes three (2:8-17) and four (3:1-5) are further dream sequences where the girl is thinking of her absent lover.

In the second act, Solomon's attempts to woo the girl continue. The first scene (3:6-11) depicts her ceremonious arrival in Jerusalem. Solomon continues his flatteries in scene two (4:1-6:3), but when the woman responds with "May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits," (4:16) her words are intended for another and not him. According to Godet, "Solomon, in his excitement, takes courage and dares to apply to himself this outburst of love."⁹ Thus, he exclaims, "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride" (5:1a), and he invites those around him to "Eat, friends; Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers," (5:1c) but it is not to be. She is in a trance, thinking and speaking of another. Solomon renews his advances in 6:4 but she continues to speak only of her beloved.

The third and final act is the victorious climax of the Song, consisting of four short scenes. In the first (8:5-7), the woman is seen coming from the wilderness accompanied by her beloved. The language here recalls her arrival in Jerusalem in 3:6 and stands in contrast to it. The next scene (8:8-10) concerns the younger sister of the woman, who may someday face a similar ordeal. Will she prove to be a wall or a door? The woman presents herself as an example of moral purity. In the face of Solomon's advances, she was a wall and eventually won peace. The next scene (8:11-12) concerns King Solomon and his vineyard, which Godet apparently understands quite literally. The final scene (8:13-14) concerns the woman and the shepherd who are finally united at the end of the Song.

Another similar analysis is provided by Andrew Harper, who divides the Song into thirteen dramatic lyrics in three groups.¹⁰ Whereas Godet understands 2:8-17 to be a dream and Ginsburg

⁹ Godet, 166.

¹⁰ Andrew Harper, *The Song of Solomon*. The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: University Press, 1902) <http://books.google.com/books?id=Eil2AAAAMAAJ&output=html> (accessed February 13, 2010).

understands it to be a report about a previous encounter with the beloved, Harper understands it to speak of an actual appearance of the beloved in the story. He understands 3:6-11 as a description of Solomon's arrival on his litter (הַטֹּרֶן), as does Ginsburg, rather than the arrival of the woman as in Godet. Harper attributes 4:8-5:1 to the beloved and not to the king, again agreeing with Ginsburg but contrary to Godet.

In 1913, S. R. Driver avowed that the three character view was "accepted by the majority of modern critics and commentators" in his day.¹¹ In the main, he follows the analysis of Ewald, which he finds preferable to the two character analysis of Delitzsch, which appears to have been the main competitor at the time. Driver concludes that "though much of the poetry is lyrical in character, the Song, as a whole, is of the nature of a *drama*, with dialogue, and action, and character consistently sustained, constituting a rudimentary kind of plot."¹² He analyzes the speeches attributed to Solomon (1:9-11, 15; 2:2; 4:1-7; 6:4-10; 7:1-9) and those attributed to the beloved (2:10-14; 4:8-15; 5:1; 8:13) and concludes that "The speeches attributed to the king are somewhat stiff and formal; those of the lover, on the contrary, breathe a warm and devoted affection."¹³ The climax of the poem is the description of love found in 8:6-7.¹⁴

In 1932, John Patterson took the three character view in a new direction when he proposed that the surface plot of the song was a dream by a peasant girl, who comes to meet her shepherd lover at an outdoor rendezvous but falls asleep while awaiting him. In her sleep she imagines that she is carried away to Solomon's harem. Thus, the Solomon character exists only in the dream and the real story is about her love for her shepherd lover.¹⁵

¹¹ S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 9th ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 437.

¹² Driver, 443.

¹³ Driver, 447.

¹⁴ Driver, 444.

¹⁵ John L. Patterson, *The Song of Songs Arranged Conjecturally as a Lyrical Drama* (Louisville: Standard Printing Company, 1932), 2-5.

Leroy Waterman developed a view that had been hinted at before,¹⁶ namely, that the woman in the Song should be identified as Abishag, the girl from the city of Shunem, who became David's nurse in his old age (1 Kgs 1:3-4, 15).¹⁷ In his view, the book originated in the north, after the division of the kingdom and was written by an author with a disparaging attitude towards Solomon. The book was reworked by a Judean editor with a more favorable attitude toward the king. Thus, Waterman rearranges the text, placing 3:6-4:6 before 1:2 in the original form of the Song. He understands 3:6-11 to be a depiction of Solomon's coronation, which was orchestrated by his mother, and his "wedding" in which he inherits the royal harem. Since Abishag's relationship to David was never consummated as a marriage, she is not a part of this harem, but she is nevertheless a part of the king's household. Adonijah's request (1 Kgs 2:13-25) makes it clear that marrying her would have increased his claim to the throne. Although, Adonijah is eliminated, Solomon now sees the advantage of adding her to his harem. Waterman notes that, "Solomon never offers the maiden any alternative. It is assumed that the King's favor is an advancement and an honor that no one of her position could refuse. Solomon's attitude and actions in regard to her are seen to be a part of the political situation of the time, a feature of domestic state policy motivated by the girl's importance because of her association with David."¹⁸ In the Kings account, Abishag is very prominent until 2:22, after which she disappears completely. There is no indication that she became a member of Solomon's harem. According to Waterman, "This evaluation, along with her prominent introduction, is all the more reason for expecting that if she did become the bride of Solomon the fact would be recorded. Absence of such a record is good evidence that the marriage did not take place."¹⁹ The Song of Songs fills out the story presented in 1 Kings 1-2 by

¹⁶ Cf. Rothstein, 4:595.

¹⁷ Leroy Waterman, *The Song of Songs* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1948). Waterman (25) understands 6:9b-13 to be a recollection, in Solomon's mouth, of how Abishag was selected by an entourage of David's women to be his nurse.

¹⁸ Waterman, 27.

¹⁹ Waterman, 31.

depicting the girl's resistance to Solomon and how she eventually won her freedom. In the process, it presents Solomon in a most unflattering light and serves the purpose of northern propaganda.

Hassell Bullock accepts the main lines of Waterman's historical analysis²⁰ and the essence of Ginsburg's structural analysis.²¹ Thus, he regards the book as "a satirical composition written in the north during the later years of Solomon's reign or soon thereafter."²² He assigns to Solomon 1:9-11; 4:1-5; 6:4-10; 7:7-9 and to the Shepherd 1:15; 2:2, 10b-14; 4:7-16b; 5:1; 8:13, which differs only slightly from the analysis presented in Driver. Bullock understands 3:6-11 as a description of Solomon's arrival in royal splendor and sees this passage in deliberate contrast to 8:5 where the woman and her beloved arrive in the simplicity of committed love. He assigns 4:7-16b to the Shepherd and 5:1 becomes a "climactic point in the Song" where "love has been mutually offered and accepted."²³ But the final climax comes in 8:6-7 where the love that overcomes all obstacles and cannot be bought, even by such a one as Solomon, is praised.

Andrew Hill has also offered an analysis along these lines.²⁴ Hill suggests that the book is best understood as an anonymous work with a northern provenance and a pre-exilic date.²⁵ Contrary to Bullock, Hill understands 3:6-11 as a reference to the woman's arrival in the capital city. "The king has returned to the royal city in all his splendor with yet another beautiful woman from the kingdom for his ever expanding harem."²⁶ All of 4:1-11 is assigned to Solomon, which gives full force to the woman's words in 4:12. According to Hill, "The girl remains a virgin, a garden locked up and a sealed spring."²⁷ He argues that 5:1 cannot depict the consummation of her marriage to Solomon since she remains a virgin

²⁰ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 258

²¹ Bullock, 260.

²² Bullock, 264.

²³ Bullock, 273.

²⁴ Andrew E. Hill, "The Song of Solomon," in *The Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 452-466; Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 467-479.

²⁵ Hill, "Song of Solomon," 455.

²⁶ Hill, "Song of Solomon," 461.

²⁷ Hill, "Song of Solomon," 461.

in 7:12-13. Her invitation in 4:16b is not offered to Solomon, but imaginatively to her beloved, and 5:1 represents the response she imagines she receives from him. But Hill finds his strongest support for the three character interpretation in the final section of the book. Hill argues that throughout the book “vineyard” has been used as a metaphor for the woman’s body. Here, in 8:11-12, it is said that Solomon also had a vineyard, but he let his out to tenants. The woman, on the hand, “has preserved her ‘vineyard’ from the exploitation and corruption of harem love and now experiences the joy of freely giving it to her *one* lover.”²⁸

Finally, a somewhat different variation of the three character view is offered by Iain Provan.²⁹ He regards the woman in the story as already married to Solomon and a member of his harem. But she is committed to another to whom she longs to return. Key to his analysis is his distinctive reading of 3:6-11. Provan understands the feminine **זֹאת** “this” of v 6 as a reference to a “sacrificial female victim” who lies on the altar of Solomon’s bed.³⁰ In support of this, he suggests that there is a distinction between the **מִטָּתוֹ** of v 7 and the **אֶפְרָיִן** of v 9. An **אֶפְרָיִן** is a stationary object, a “bedchamber,” and it has a **מִטָּתוֹ** or “bed” inside of it.³¹ It is paved with acts of love (3:10) by the daughters of Jerusalem and surrounded by sixty warriors “as much to keep the women in as to keep intruders out.”³² The image is one of sexual conquest. Solomon’s sexual activity is characterized as a “wilderness,” a barren, uncultivated place in contrast to the garden imagery that describes the intimacy of the woman and her beloved.

²⁸ Hill, “Song of Solomon,” 465.

²⁹ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

³⁰ Provan, 303.

³¹ Provan, 302.

³² Provan, 303.

It is within this context that Provan reads the rest of the book. Thus, in 1:4 “The king has brought me into his chambers” Implies that he has already been intimate with her and she is appealing to her beloved to rescue her. He argues that 1:12 does not describe “any ongoing intimacy between the woman and the king” but “an isolated incident in the past,” while 1:13-14 “imply ongoing intimacy” with her beloved.³³ The word “bride” occurs only in 4:8-5:1 and Provan assigns this section to the beloved. It represents a contrast between a true marital relationship and what happens in Solomon’s bed.³⁴ It is the beloved who gains access to the garden in 5:1 and not Solomon.³⁵ Amorous language in 6:4-12 and 7:1-9 is assigned to the beloved rather than the king. Finally, in 8:5, the “wilderness” is another reference to Solomon’s bed.³⁶ The woman has been victimized by the king, but now at last she is free to return to her beloved.

While there is considerable variety in regards to details represented in the views surveyed above, some common themes emerge. Most regard the climax of the book to come with the return of the woman with her beloved in 8:5, the strong statement regarding love in 8:6-7; the endorsement of her virtue in 8:8-10, and the contrast with Solomon in 8:11-12. All regard the book to be a literary unity from a single author. Regrettably, most deny that Solomon is the author of the book, though some would place the book in the time of Solomon but written by another. With the exception of Patterson, all regard the book to have reference to real events in the life of Solomon. The earlier writers here seem to interpret much of the pastoral language of the Song in fairly literal terms while more recent treatments seem more willing to unpack this figuratively in increasingly sensual ways. Some of this makes sense, though in the extreme it can become as subjective and arbitrary as the allegorical interpretations of another generation.

³³ Provan, 270.

³⁴ Provan, 318.

³⁵ Provan, 320.

³⁶ Provan, 365.

Authorship

The main point on which the analysis presented here differs from those surveyed above is on the question of authorship. The first verse of the book, **שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה**, is most naturally understood as making a claim that Solomon is the author of the book and should create a presumption in that direction. This has been “the uniform tradition of the Christian church until modern times,”³⁷ but in recent times it has been increasingly rejected by critical and conservative scholars alike, including most of the proponents of the three character view. Some who question Solomonic authorship are quick to point out that the construction **לְשֹׁלֹמֹה** can be understood in other ways, perhaps “to Solomon” or “about Solomon” instead of “by Solomon,” and technically this is true. But it must be recognized that this is largely an expedient employed by those who wish to maintain a semblance of commitment to a high view of Scripture. Nobody would argue against Solomonic authorship based on the superscription alone. The superscription naturally favors seeing Solomon as the author. Others are willing to excise v 1 as a later addition to the text on the basis that the relative **אֲשֶׁר** is nowhere else used in the book. But there is no evidence that the book ever circulated without this superscription. Verse 1 is part of the canonical text and must be taken seriously.

Three main arguments are usually adduced against seeing Solomon as the author of this book, and in the case of those who favor the three character view, perhaps a fourth. First, there is the incidence of allegedly late vocabulary. For instance, the use of the relative **שׁ** instead of **אֲשֶׁר** is regarded to be a late Aramaism. But evidence for this form is as early as Gn 6:3 and Jgs 5:7; 6:17; 7:12;

³⁷ Gleason L. Archer *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 489.

8:26 to name a few.³⁸ The word פְּרִי־ט in 4:13 occurs elsewhere only in Eccl 2:5; Neh 2:8 and is regarded as a Persian loan word. Likewise, אֶפְרַיִם in 3:9 occurs only here and is regarded to be Greek in origin. But the Solomonic period is one of the most cosmopolitan periods in Israel's history and the incidence of loan words from as far away as Persia and Greece is not unlikely.³⁹ Garrett correctly notes that "[a]ttempts to date the book from vocabulary and grammar are inherently weak because of our limited knowledge of the history of the Hebrew language."⁴⁰

Second, it is suggested that the mention Tirzah alongside Jerusalem in 6:4 indicates a time following the division of the kingdom and before Samaria became the capital in the north. But Tirzah is known as a Canaanite city as early as Josh 12:24 and there is evidence to suggest that it was a significant city long before it became the capital.⁴¹ In fact, the juxtaposition of these cities may actually provide a stronger argument for authorship in the time of Solomon. There is elevation in the lines "you are as beautiful as Tirzah, as lovely as Jerusalem," which suggests that Jerusalem is viewed as the more significant city. This is unlikely from the pen of a writer from the northern kingdom. At the same time, after the division of the kingdom, Tirzah would represent apostasy and rebellion to a writer from the southern kingdom and would not have been mentioned positively at all. So the only time when both of these cities could be mentioned favorably together is before the division of the kingdom.⁴² Furthermore, the very name Tirzah means something like "pleasure, beauty,"⁴³ which would make an apt comparison

³⁸ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Johann Jakob Stam, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, CD-ROM ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1994), BibleWorks, v.8.

³⁹ Archer, 490.

⁴⁰ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 349. Cf. also Bullock, 261; Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 4.

⁴¹ Hill, "Song of Songs," 454; Bullock, 261.

⁴² Mitchell, 102-103.

⁴³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an appendix containing Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), BibleWorks, v.8.

for a pretty girl even if the city were not of great importance. There is nothing here to preclude the book being written in the time of Solomon and actually much to commend it.

The third objection to Solomonic authorship is that Solomon is actually a fairly minor character in the book. He is only mentioned by name seven times (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12) and the title “king” appears only five (1:4, 12; 3:9, 11; 7:5). But the Solomon who is presented in the Song is certainly “in harmony with the larger biblical picture of Solomon” and not “merely a literary figure or a pious fiction.”⁴⁴ The author is familiar with “all the major regions of the nation at its greatest extent.”⁴⁵ The character of the Song fits “Solomon’s reputation as both a poet and naturalist (1 Kgs 4:32-33).”⁴⁶ There are “many evidences of royal luxury and the abundance of costly imported products.”⁴⁷ The reference to Pharaoh’s chariots agrees with Solomon’s known interest in Egyptian horses (1 Kgs 10:28). The evidence for connecting this Song with Solomon is pervasive.

Finally, those who adopt the three character view of the book often find it inconceivable that Solomon would write a book that is so disparaging of his character. They regard the book as a satire or a polemic against the reign of Solomon. But this is not the purpose of the book. The purpose of the book is to exalt marital faithfulness. This is a lesson that wise King Solomon learned, not by practicing it, but by observing it in another whom he could not seduce with all of his power and all of his wealth. And so, much as in the book of Ecclesiastes where Solomon tries everything “under the sun” in his search for meaning and finds it all “vanity,” so here Solomon writes about his own mistakes so that others might learn from them and avoid them.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, 112.

⁴⁵ Garrett, 351.

⁴⁶ Garrett, 351.

⁴⁷ Archer, 491.

Literary Unity

Just as the first verse of Song of Songs should create a presumption in favor Solomonic authorship, so also there should be a presumption in favor of literary unity. The phrase שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים does not refer to several songs, but is best understood as a superlative referring to one song. Many attempts have been made to discover the literary structure of the Song, and while the sheer number and variety of these has led some scholars to question whether such an underlying structure exists and to propose instead that the Song is a loose anthology of disparate parts, Michael Fox is correct to state, “because the book has come to us as a unity, without titles or other indicators separating songs as we have in the Psalter or the Egyptian love song anthologies, the burden of proof lies primarily on those who wish to assert disunity.”⁴⁸ Fox points to four features that argue strongly for unity.

- 1) Repetends – “phrases and sentences recur in the same or somewhat varied form in different parts of the book.”⁴⁹
- 2) Associative sequences – “Groups of words, sentences, or motifs ... that recur in the same order even though that order does not seem required by narrative sequence or logical continuity.”⁵⁰
- 3) Consistent character portrayal.
- 4) A loose narrative frame.

Carr concludes,

True, there are a number of individual units that can stand alone, but the composition as we now have it reveals a very careful arrangement of these units in a way that certainly forbids seeing it as a haphazard collection and almost as certainly precludes mere editorial arranging of some previously selected poems. Some of the units may have their origin elsewhere, but even if that is true, the final form of the Song indicates a single hand at work – and that hand the hand of a master craftsman.⁵¹

Who Is the Shulammite?

Critical to the three character interpretation of the Song of Songs is the understanding that the Song has reference to real historical characters and real historical events. Solomon, according to this

⁴⁸ Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985), 202.

⁴⁹ Fox, 209.

⁵⁰ Fox, 215.

⁵¹ G. Lloyd Carr, “Song of Songs,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 291.

understanding, is obviously King Solomon. The beloved is an unknown shepherd boy. But who is the woman? She is referred to once, in 6:13, as Shulammite, and this term has attracted a great deal of discussion. A lengthy footnote in *The Net Bible* identifies eight possible interpretations.

Eight major views have emerged in the history of interpretation of the Song. They are arranged, as follows, in order from most likely (views 1–2), plausible (views 3–5), unlikely (view 6), to bizarre (views 7–8):

(1) שׁוֹלָמִיִּית is a substantival use of the adjectival form *qatal* שׁוֹלָם (*shulam*, "perfection") with the gentilic suffix יִית- from the root שָׁלַם (*shalem*, "to be complete, perfect"): "the perfect, unblemished one" (Fox). This approach is reflected in rabbinic exegesis of the 12th century: "The meaning of the Shulammite is 'perfect, without spot'" (Midrash Rabbah).

(2) שׁוֹלָמִיִּית is Qal passive participle with the feminine adjectival suffix יִית- from the root שָׁלַם ("peace"): "the peaceful one" or "the pacified one" (Andre, Robert, Joüon). This is reflected in Vulgate *pacificus* ("the pacified one"), and Aquila and Quinta ἡ ἐηρυνεούσα (*heō eeōruneousa*) "the peaceful one" (Andre Robert, Joüon).

(3) שׁוֹלָמִיִּית is an alternate form of the gentilic name "Shunammite" (שׁוֹנַמִּיִּית) used to refer to inhabitants of Shunem (1 Kgs 1:15; 2 Kgs 4:12). This is reflected in LXX ἡ Σουλαμιτι (*heō Soulamiti*, "O Shulamite"). This is supported by several factors: (a) Gentilic names are formed by the suffix יִית- and the prefixed article to a place-name, e.g., הַיְרוּשָׁלַיִמִיִּית (*hayy^rrushalamit*, "the Jerusalemite") is from הַיְרוּשָׁלַם (*y^rrushalam*, "Jerusalem"); (b) the interchange between lateral dental ל (l) and nasal dental ג (n) is common in the Semitic languages (S. Moscati, *Comparative Grammar*, 32, §8.26); (c) the town of Shunem was also known as Shulem, due to the common interchange between ג (n) and ל (l) in Hebrew (Aharoni, 123), as seen in Eusebius' *Onomasticon* in which Shunem = Shulem; and (d) later revisions of the LXX read ἡ Σουναμωτι ("the Shunamite") instead of the Old Greek ἡ Σουλαμωτι ("the Shulamite"). Shunem was a town in the Jezreel Valley at the foot of Mount Moreh near Mount Tabor and situated about nine miles east of Megiddo, fifteen miles northwest of Beth-shean, and five miles north of Jezreel (Josh 19:18; 1 Sam 28:4; 2 Kgs 4:8). During the Roman period, the town was called Shulem. See Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 24, 152, 172, 442, 308. Some scholars suggest that "Shul/nammite" refers to Abishag, the beautiful virgin from the village of Shunem who warmed elderly King David and was sought by Adonijah (1 Kgs 2:13–25). Other scholars argue that Abishag has been imported in the Song on too slender grounds.

(4) שׁוֹלָמִיִּית is the feminine form of the masculine name שְׁלֹמֹה (*sh^llomoh*, "Solomon"), just as Judith is the feminine of Judah: "Shulamith" or "Solomonette" or "Solomoness" (Lowth, Goodspeed, Rowley). The feminine ending יִית- may be suffixed to masculine personal names to transform them into feminine names. A similar form occurs in the Ugaritic designation of Daniel's wife as Lady Daniel (e.g., *mtt dnty*). An anonymous Jewish commentator of the 12th century wrote: "The Shulammite was beloved of Solomon, for she was called after the name of her beloved." The 16th century commentator Joseph Ibn Yahya wrote: "And the calling of her 'Shulammite' was determined by reason of her devotion to the Holy One (Blessed be He) who is called Shelomoh."

(5) As a combination of views 1–2, שׁוֹלָמִיִּית is a wordplay formed by the combination of the feminine name שְׁלֹמִית (*sh^llomit*, "Shelomite") from שְׁלֹמֹה ("Solomon") and the gentilic name הַשׁוֹנַמִּיִּית ("the Shunammite") denoting a woman from Shunem: "Solomoness/Shunammite."

(6) שׁוֹלָמִיִּית is related to the Arabic root *salama* "consummation gift" (given to a bride the morning after the wedding): "O Consummated One" or "O Bride" (Hirschberg).

(7) Those espousing a cultic interpretation of Canticles take שׁוֹלָמִיִּית as the name or epithet of the Canaanite moon goddess Ishtar, designated by the feminine form of the name Shelem, the name of her lover Tammuz, called Dod or Shelem (T. J. Meek).

(8) An alternate cultic interpretation takes שׁוֹלָמִיִּית as a conflation of the name of the Assyrian war-goddess "Shulmanith" (Ishtar) and the gentilic name "the Shunammite" for a woman from

Shunem (Albright). See M. V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Egyptian Love Songs*, 157–58; T. J. Meek, "Canticles and the Tammuz Cult," *AJSL* 39 (1922–23): 1-14; E. J. Goodspeed, "The Shulammitte," *AJSL* 50 (1933): 102-104; H. H. Rowley, "The Meaning of 'The Shulammitte'," *AJSL* 56 (1938): 84-91; W. F. Albright, "The Syro-Mesopotamian God Sulman-Esmun and Related Figures," *AfO* 7 (1931–32): 164-69; W. F. Albright, "Archaic Survivals in the Text of Canticles," *Hebrew and Semitic Studies*, 5; H. H. Hirschberg, "Some Additional Arabic Etymologies in Old Testament Lexicography," *VT* 11 (1961): 373-85; M. H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB), 596-600.⁵²

Proponents of the three character interpretation generally favor the third possibility listed above, and usually agree with Walter Kaiser that Abishag "is a likely candidate."⁵³ While this is an attractive proposal, it must be emphasized that the success of the three character interpretation does not depend upon it, nor even upon the identification of the Shulammitte as a woman from Shunem. All that is required is that she be one of the many women who came under Solomon's influence, only in this case, a woman who resists Solomon's advances and remains faithful to her beloved.

Analysis

What follows here is a brief running analysis of the Song of Songs based on three main characters who will be referred to as King Solomon, the girl (Shulammitte), and the beloved. In addition to these, there will also be reference to the harem girls and to the brothers.

After the first verse, which identifies the Song as a single song written by King Solomon, 1:2-4a are best taken as words spoken by the harem girls who delight in Solomon's love.⁵⁴ They are interrupted briefly by the Shulammitte's cry for help in 1:4b, "the king has brought me into his chambers," after which the harem continues their praise of the king in 1:4c. In 1:5-7, Shulammitte speaks, lamenting her appearance and expressing her desire for her beloved. The harem answers in 1:8. Then in 1:9-11, Solomon enters and begins to praise the girl. Shulammitte speaks in 1:12-14, but there is a contrast between what she says about the king in v 12 and what she says concerning her beloved in vv 13-14. Her

⁵² *The NET Bible, New English Translation Bible (NET)* (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, LLC, 1996), BibleWorks, v.8; For discussion of four main views, see Pope, 596-600.

⁵³ Walter C. Kaiser, "True Marital Love in Proverbs 5:15-23 and the Interpretation of Song of Songs," in *The Way of Wisdom*, eds. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 113. Kaiser expresses his support for the three character view also in Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 194-195; Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 144-146.

⁵⁴ Godet, 157.

perfume goes out to the king, but draws her beloved in.⁵⁵ The king speaks in v 15, but Shulammitte continues speaking about her beloved in vv 16-17.

Chapter 2 opens with words from the Shulammitte in v 1, to which Solomon responds in v 2.⁵⁶ Then the remainder of the chapter is given over to a description of the beloved by the Shulammitte, interrupted only in v 7, where she addresses the harem girls directly. This refrain, repeated in 3:5 and 8:4, expresses her commitment to remain pure for her beloved. The beloved speaks in 2:10b-15, but only indirectly as reported by the girl.

The first four verses of Chapter 3 contain a dream in which the girl searches for her beloved, followed by a repetition of the refrain addressed to the harem. The feminine pronoun in 3:6 is best understood as a reference to the Shulammitte who is being escorted into the city as Solomon's next bride to be.⁵⁷ The speakers in 3:6-11 are unclear, perhaps the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

All of 4:1-15 should be assigned to Solomon. He again flatters the girl, hoping to make her his bride.⁵⁸ But she is "a rock garden locked, a spring sealed up" (4:12). Solomon gains no access. When she speaks in 4:16, it is not to him that she offers herself, but to her beloved.

It is probably better to understand 5:1 as Solomon's misunderstanding of the girl's invitation rather than as the consummation of a marriage either with the shepherd or with the king. Solomon's hopeful words are not fulfilled. Instead, the rest of chapter 5 is occupied with the girl's thoughts about her beloved. First she has a dream in vv 2-7. Then speaks to the harem girls about him in v 8 and they reply in v 9. After that, she launches into a lengthy description of him in vv 10-16.

The harem girls speak again in 6:1 and Shulammitte replies in 6:2-3. Then King Solomon shows up and once again seeks to flatter her with his words in 6:4-10. In 6:11-12, she remembers how she came to be under the king's influence in the first place. It is perhaps the harem that calls for Shulammitte to return in 6:13a. She replies in 6:13b.

⁵⁵ Provan 270.

⁵⁶ Hill, "Song of Songs," 459.

⁵⁷ Godet, 164-165; Hill, "Song of Songs," 461.

⁵⁸ Godet, 165-166; Hill, "Song of Songs," 461.

Solomon's last appeal occurs in 7:1-9, but she affirms once again her commitment to her beloved in 7:10. In 7:11-8:3 it appears that she has been set free and at last speaks to her beloved directly. The refrain occurs one more time in 8:4, emphasizing that she has kept herself pure for him. In 8:5-6, the Shulammitte is finally seen coming with her beloved, and though the words of 8:7 are probably put on Shulammitte's lips, they come from Solomon's pen. He has learned a hard lesson. The speakers in 8:8-9 are perhaps the girl's brothers. She is the speaker in 8:10-12. In 8:13, the beloved speaks for the first and only time in the entire song and then Shulammitte replies in the final verse.

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