



Women in the Bible

Theme: Sex and Desire

Song of Solomon 1–2, Proverbs 7, Numbers 5:11-28, Matthew 5:27-28

Song of Solomon

The Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs, is one of the writings in the Hebrew Bible attributed to Solomon. Where Proverbs, also attributed to Solomon, is a collection of Israel's greatest wisdom, we can look at the Song of Solomon as a collection of Israel's greatest love poetry. Even the Hebrew title Song of Songs reflects this: the song of songs is the best song in the way the king of kings is the best king.

The content of the book has been allegorized since the early centuries of the Common Era. Jews have interpreted it as a story of the love between God and Israel, and Christians interpret it as a story of the love between Jesus and his bride, the Church. The Church as bride is a common trope in early Christian writing. For example, in Revelation the author writes that the new Jerusalem, that is, the Church, is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2).

There is nothing inherently wrong about these allegorical interpretations, but they may be incomplete if they discount the genre in which this work would have located itself: erotic poetry. The poem is not a story in that its "narrative" can seem disjointed or unintelligible. It is lyric poetry, building a picture over the course of the whole work through metaphor and exotic and erotic imagery.

The poem invites the reader to simply dwell in the desire of these two lovers:

"Ah, you are beautiful, my love;
ah, you are beautiful;
your eyes are doves.
Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
truly lovely.
Our couch is green;
the beams of our house are cedar,
our rafters are pine" (Song 1:15-17).

Their desire for each other is so great, that it seems their only option is to pour out an abundance of words. But they do not seek to *explain* their love; it may be more accurate to say they are describing it for the sake of reveling in the description.

The genre of the text invites slow reading and reflection with its dense imagery and wandering structure. One of the most remarkable aspects of this text is the extended passages of the female lover expressing her own desire. Female desire is notably absent in the vast majority of the biblical canon, and an ecstatic phrase like “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” is uncommon, to say the least (Song 1:2).

Another Woman from Proverbs

In an earlier lesson, we looked at the upright woman, the capable wife of Proverbs 31 who is so difficult to find. Proverbs 7 tells the story of a very different woman. The text calls her “the loose woman” or “the forbidden woman.” As in the rest of Proverbs, the father speaks wisdom while the son silently absorbs. The words are understood almost as material objects: “keep my teachings as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers, writ them on the tablet of your heart” (Prov 7:2-3). The eye, fingers, and heart imply that the whole person is covered with these teachings, almost as if the words themselves have protective value.

In this teaching, the father tells the story of a foolish youth who gives into desire and abandons wisdom. At the appearance of a woman dressed like a prostitute, he is persuaded by her smooth speech. The nighttime provides the cover for their folly; they probably imagine that no one can see this interaction. Only the wise father, watching from above, can see and hear them. The woman’s husband “will not come home until full moon” (Prov 7:20). The darkness of this night is all the more dangerous because of its moonlessness, which corresponds to the woman’s aloneness.

The woman in Proverbs 7 has entirely given into her own desire, not just for sex but for luxury and food, as well. “She seizes him and kisses him” (Prov 7:13), although he is a stranger, and invites him back to her house to eat and revel in the luxury of her linens. She is the opposite of wisdom, who is personified as a woman throughout Proverbs. This is why the father advises, “Say to wisdom, ‘You are my sister,’ and call insight your intimate friend” (Prov 7:4). The wise woman will guard the son from the loose woman.

The speech of the woman in Proverbs 7 is not so different from the speech of the lovers in the Song of Solomon. “Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love,” she says (Prov 7:18). The problem, therefore, comes not from her desire directly but from its incorrect direction. Her husband is away, and she has allowed her desire to land on this stranger rather than expressing it in its proper context.

Consequences and the Agent of Punishment

The father’s warning in Proverbs 7 is that the man who gives in to the loose woman “is like a bird rushing into a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life” (Prov 7:23). Who is the one who will punish him, though? Throughout Proverbs, the idea of natural consequences is important. God is supposedly the agent of punishment, that is never stated explicitly.

The idea of natural consequences – that people’s wicked deeds will naturally result in bad circumstances, without God even needing to act – appears in one instance in Numbers 5:11-28. This passage explains what to do when a woman is suspected of having “defiled herself” (by having sex with someone other than her husband) but there is no proof. The husband can bring her to the priest, who will concoct “water of bitterness that brings the curse” (Numbers 5:18). If she is immune to the drink, her innocence is proven. If not, she, especially her reproductive organs, will be cursed.

The consequences in this case are different than in other cases of adultery because the judges (the husband and the priests) do not know what has happened. The woman’s actions are undetectable without intervention from a higher level.

The laws in the Hebrew Bible are primarily concerned with actions, rather than with policing interior life. Improper desire is not much of a problem unless it is acted upon. In the New Testament, though, Jesus gives a different perspective.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’” Jesus teaches. “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27-28). Here, Jesus says that not only one’s actions must be attended to but also one’s desire. Is this a new law, as some have interpreted? Or is it, perhaps, a new understanding of the level at which “natural consequences” become relevant?

Of course, Jesus’ speech returns to the biblical default of attention to men’s needs (in this case, men’s desire) and erasure of women’s needs. Unlike the Song of Solomon, Jesus does not seem to be concerned with women’s desire in the Sermon on the Mount.