"Solomon" and the Shulammite
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Introduction:

I. Few if any books of the Bible have experienced as intensive and varied a history of interpretation as *The Song of Solomon*. Delitzsch begins his commentary with the ominous warning, "The *Song* is the most obscure book of the Old Testament." (1)

   A. Over 500 commentaries exist from the first 1700 years alone.

   B. One commentator, Pope, has a bibliography for *The Song of Solomon* of over 50 pages.

   C. The poetic nature of the book, the exotic vocabulary, the lack of any clear date/occasion/ purpose expressed in the text, and the absence of any straightforward theology have unleashed the imaginations of "expositors."

II. The approaches usually taken fall into four broad categories:

   A. Allegorical (Typical)

   B. Dramatic (Literal)

   C. Liturgical (Cultic)

   D. Lyrical (Love Poems, Anthology)

III. If we retain a biblical approach (2 Tim. 3:16-17), regarding the book to be inspired and Solomon to be the author, we must try to identify the main characters in *The Song*.

   A. Is there one or two male characters?

   B. By whom is the Shulammite maiden being wooed?

IV. Our conclusions about the characters' identities will determine our understanding of the sacred text and the teaching/value that it holds.

Body:

I. **THE CONSENSUS VIEW: SOLOMON AND THE SHULAMMITE**

   A. **A Brief History of This Understanding**

      1. The earliest Jewish approach was allegorical.

         a. They believed that Solomon represented God, and the Shulammite was Israel.

         b. This was the view of the Talmud, Targum, Philo, Rabbi Akiba, Maimonides, *et al.* (Carr, 21; Kinlaw, 1202; Knutson, 606)

         c. Leaving aside the questionable allegorical applications, it is clear that the Hebrew readers plainly saw the main players as Solomon and the Shulammite.

      2. The early church adopted a similar allegorical approach.

         a. Solomon for them was a figure of Christ, and the Shulammite represented the church.

         b. This view was advocated by Hippolytus (A.D. 200), Origin (10 volume commentary), Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Augustine of Hippo (Craigie, 1979; Redford xi; Kinlaw, 1202)

      c. It seems that virtually all early Christian writers saw two central characters, Solomon and the Shulammite.

  3. There have been variations on the allegorical approach.

      a. Luther saw the book as an allegorical description of the land of Israel (the Shulammite) under the peaceful rule of Solomon (Kinlaw, 1203)

      b. Many Catholic interpreters believed the Shulammite represented the "Blessed Virgin Mary" (Carr, 26; Redford. xi; Hubbard, 1473)

      c. Even these unusual views reflect the understanding that there are only two main characters, Solomon and the Shulammite.

  4. Another ancient view saw the book as dramatic literature.

      a. Origen suggested (A.D. 250) that it is, "a marriage-song which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama" (Carr, 32)

      b. This view was later popularized by Delitzsch.

      c. As with the allegorical approach, the writers saw only Solomon and the Shulammite.

  5. The inescapable conclusion is that from pre-christian times until fairly recently the consensus of virtually all expositors has been that the love story at the center of *The Song of Solomon* involves only two characters, Solomon and the Shulammite.

B. **The Plain Reading of the Text**

  1. The text is far from simple to read. Nevertheless, a simple reading of the text leaves one with the impression that there are two main characters.

  2. The Shulammite addresses one suitor, and her suitor alone addresses her.

  3. If this were a story of two men competing for the love of one woman, one would expect there to be conflict or competitive language pervading the book. However, there is none. (see also Kuntz, 995)

      a. No male competes with another male.

          1) "I love you more than he does" (cf. Gen. 29:30).

          2) "You will be happier with me than with him."

      b. The woman never addresses the "problem" of competing suitors (cf. Gen. 30:14ff).

          1) "It is so hard to decide."

          2) "I wish that man would leave me alone."

      c. There is no comparison of the two alleged suitors.

          1) "This one is so handsome, but that one is plain" (cf. Gen. 29:17).

          2) "The king can provide for me better than the shepherd."

  4. In the absence of such competitive language, a natural, uncomplicated reading of the text implies only two main characters.

II. **THE NEW PROPOSAL: A LOVE TRIANGLE**

  A. **What has been Suggested**: Solomon Loves the Shulammite Who Loves the Shepherd.

1. "A maiden was in love with a shepherd lad. King Solomon, however, fell in love with a maiden and took her to his palace. There he tried to win her love with beautiful words, but failed. She remained faithful to the shepherd lad whom she loved. Failing to win her, Solomon released her and allowed her to return to her true lover." (Craigie, 1979)

2. This view was first advocated by Ibn Ezra in the twelfth century (Meek, 93). It was later advanced by Jacobi, Ewald, Driver, *et al*. Currently, Andrew E Hill in the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* takes this approach.

B. **The Problems with This Proposal**

1. There is no real textual evidence for the existence of a third main character (Harrison, 491; Carr, 40). The story is a two-party love story.

2. The Shulammite never clearly resists the advances of a lover (Harrison, 491). If the advances of one of her suitors were unwelcome, we would expect there to be a number of unambiguous refusals in her speeches. The stronger and more persistent the advances, the stronger and clearer would be her snubs and denials.

3. This view turns Solomon into a "villain" (Harrison, 491). He would be seen as a "lecherous" old man (Carr, 40), a "Don Juan" (Delitzsch, 6), a portrayal never reflected in the Scriptures.

4. The three-party view makes Solomonic authorship virtually impossible (Delitzsch, 7; Knutson, 607)

   a. "This . . . puts Solomon in such an unfavorable light that it cannot be correct because such a book would never have been admitted into the canon by the rabbis" (Meek, 93)

   b. Hill, who takes this view, believes *The Song of Solomon* is "an anonymous composition" (455), "a northern kingdom satire on the reign of Solomon and his exploitation of women" (457)

5. Without arrangement as a dramatic reading or performance, this view is unsustainable (Harrison, 492). The Greeks had dramatic literature, but there is no evidence the Hebrews ever did. (Knutson, 607)

6. There is no obvious plot or story line in the book, which would be required by the three-party view (Harrison, 492). "They must overinterpret the text in order to make the plot work." (Longman, 43)

7. Distinguishing one male speaker from another is highly subjective and virtually impossible (Carr, 48)

   a. An admission by one advocate of the three-party view, Seerveld, is, "The identification of voices and [interpretive] phrases . . . are admittedly careful precisions [*sic*] and imaginative extrapolations." (Quoted in Carr, 48)

   b. "The insistence that the shepherd and the king are separate individuals . . . is highly unlikely." (Longman, 43)

III. **A SENSIBLE CONCLUSION**

A. **There Is One Man and One Woman**.

1. The only challenge is in identifying the man.

a. Sometimes he is spoken of as "the king" (1:4, 12; 7:5), or as "Solomon" (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12).

b. Elsewhere he is described as a shepherd who pastures his flocks (1:7, 16; 6:2-3).

2. The man may be Solomon, who is sometimes spoken of by the Shulammite as a shepherd. (Delitzsch, 8; Kenlaw, 1216; Glickman 29; *et al.*)

a. This may be a relationship that sprang from Solomon's youthful, carefree days in the Judean hills, when he is remembered by his Beloved as a "shepherd."

b. Is it inconceivable that David may have included shepherd-experience as part of Solomon's training?

c. Others suggest the shepherd-language is a figure that is typical of ancient middle-eastern kings. (Redford, 5)

d. The identification of Solomon as the Lover cannot be ruled out simply because he is described in shepherd-language. He may have in actuality been a shepherd, and there really is a history of employing the figure of a shepherd to represent a king.

3. Or, the man may be a shepherd, the young woman's "Solomon."

a. "The poem is perhaps best understood as expressing the depth of love between the Shulammite girl and her beloved shepherd in the language of romantic fantasy. She envisions him as a dashing king, the prince of her dreams. . . . Solomon is the archetypal lover, not an intruder." (Sproul, 936)

b. This view was bolstered by the "discovery" of middle-eastern wedding practices.

1) In 1873 J. G. Wetzstein published an article describing wedding customs among villagers in Syria. (Carr, 52-53; Delitzsch, 162-176)

a) The bride and groom were "crowned" as "king" and "queen" (Song 1:4; 7:1).

b) War songs were part of the festivities (Song 3:6-8)

c) A sword-dance was performed by the bride (Song 6:13).

d) Descriptive poems were sung in their honor (Song 7:1-5).

2) The Arab customs and the imagery in *the Song of Solomon* may both have their roots in ancient middle-eastern wedding customs that sound foreign to us.

c. As Jenson points out, even today, "Every lover is a king and every beloved a princess." (17)

d. The Shulammite compares her shepherd lover to many things employing dozens of images (oils, a pouch of myrrh, a cluster of henna blossoms, an apple tree, a gazelle, a young stag, etc.). Why should she not also call him her "Solomon?"

B. **The Value of this Understanding**

1. Love triangles must have surely existed in ancient Israel, as they do today, but this story is concerned with a simpler and purer experience of love.

2. As Solomon elsewhere admonishes, "Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be intoxicated always with her love!" (Pr. 5:18-19)

3. This understanding of the Song of Solomon allows the simplest reader to derive the most direct and edifying message from the book: a healthy and robust sexuality between husband and wife is a blessing from God!

Conclusion:

I. The lesson derived from the three-party view is not untrue.

   A. A genuine love is superior to a relationship driven by wantonness or greed.

   B. But just because the lesson is correct, that does not mean that it is the lesson of this book.

II. However, the simplest reading of the text, the most ancient interpretation, and the overwhelmingly majority view of *The Song of Solomon* is that it describes the passionate relationship between one man and one woman.

III. Understood this way, the book becomes an exposition of Genesis 2:18-25.

   A. When two people are in love, no one else exists in their world.

   B. "The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

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