**Song of Songs Commentary**

**Song of Songs Chapter 1**

Sos 1:1

**“Song of Songs.”** This is a Semitic way of saying, “the best song.” The Semitic languages had no way to express the superlative degree. For example, they could speak of a song, a good song, and a better song, but they had no way to say, “the best song.” So to express the superlative degree, the word is doubled, and “the best song” was described by the phrase, the “song of songs.” This explains why God is called, “the “*elohim* of *elohim*” (normally translated, “God of gods”) and Jesus is “King of kings” and “Lord of lords.” God is the “best God,” and Jesus is the “best King” and “best Lord.”

The Song of Songs is like a layer cake with a number of layers of meanings. It is a love song, but it is not just that. The whole Word of God is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), and fulfills His purpose, and the Song of Songs uses the intensity and passion of young love to good effect to express His love for His people. Although we can see why the Rabbis say the Song expresses God’s love for Israel, while many Christian teachers say it expresses Christ’s love for the Church, both those views are myopic. God loves all His people individually, and to exclude any of them from the message of intense love that God was trying to communicate to His people misses the point. The Song, as an allegory, expresses God’s love for His people—any and all of them. They are all special to Him and loved by Him. Furthermore, as the true expression of God’s love and following in His footsteps, we are also intensely loved by Christ.

The Song is also a teaching text, showing us that, although believers are to be modest and self-controlled in public, God created us as sexual creatures and so openly expressing and being free with our sexual feelings when we are alone with our spouse was part of God’s plan. The Devil has aggressively worked against the pleasure of sex that a couple can have together, and has manipulated religion so that some people cannot marry; some people believe that sex is a sin unless the couple is trying to get pregnant, many people believe that sex is somehow “dirty,” and so forth.

The extent to which the Christian Church has maintained a false or ungodly modesty is shown by the fact that the allegorical interpretation of the Song as God’s love for His people has been rejected by most scholars today, who feel that the sexual language in the Song is so graphic that it cannot represent the love between God and His people. For example, Duane Garrett writes: “Such language is simply inappropriate as a description of the love between God and his people….”[[1]](#footnote-24591) We disagree, and remind the reader that the language in the Song is allegorical and on one layer shows the intense passion of His love for them (it does not describe how God will interact with His people), while on another layer describes how men and women can act with one another in a marriage without guilt or shame.

There are many proposals set forth by scholars to explain the Song of Songs. It has been called an allegory, a dramatic storytelling, a historical record of an encounter in Solomon’s life, literature from the fertility cult background of the ancient Near East, a kind of liturgy for a wedding of text to be read at a wedding ceremony, and more. Most of the interpretations can be rejected offhand because they do not take into account that God is the Author of the Song of Songs, and it expresses His purposes.

May we learn from the Song the wonderful freedom in married love and sex, and the amazing and intense love that God and Christ feel for their spiritual family.

Sos 1:2

**“kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.”** The imagery in Song of Songs is unabashedly sexual. Although sex has traditionally and until very recently been something that was not openly talked about and was kept “behind closed doors,” in the biblical world sex and sexuality were openly understood and referred to, and sexual desire and acting on that desire was considered normal and natural. In the biblical culture, sex was to be enjoyed.

There were a number of reasons that sex was considered normal and natural, and was openly expressed. One reason was that the biblical world was agricultural, and sex between the livestock and animals that were around was in open view to people of all ages. Also, most families lived in small houses, so the parents and children at home slept together in the main room of the house. Thus, sex between the father and mother was considered normal and was just ignored by any children who were awake. Similarly, the attraction between men and women and the aggression men often showed toward women was considered normal (for example, this was why Boaz had to instruct his men not to “touch,” sexually touch, Ruth who was a lone and unmarried woman among them. Ruth 2:9). So women were kept separated from the men and dressed modestly in public. The desire that men had for women was also openly expressed by the fact that prostitution was common (and women were sometimes known to “display their wares” to attract customers). Also, some of the pagan religions had cult prostitution as part of their worship service and added adherents through the attraction of ritual sex. Thus Israelites living by a Canaanite city or people living near a Greco-Roman city such as Corinth would be exposed to that kind of open sexuality on a regular basis.

Looking at sex and reproduction as normal and healthy (and also because life expectancy was shorter in biblical times) was one reason why girls were given in marriage very young, sometimes as early as 12 but very often by 14. Thus, just as a young woman’s breasts and body shape were fully developing and she was drawing the attention of men, she was given in marriage.

Sex was considered natural and pleasurable, and that is reflected in the Song of Songs. All the senses get involved: taste (Song 1:1; 2:3; 4:11; 5:16); smell (Song 1:2, 12, 14; 3:6; 4:14); sight (Song 1:10, 15; 2:14; 4:1-5; 5:10-15; 6:5-7, 10; 7:2-8); sound (Song 2:14; 5:6); and touch and sexual touching (Song 1:13; 2:6, 16-17; 4:6; 5:1; 6:2; 8:14). Sex in pleasant surroundings was sought after and enjoyed (Song 1:16-17; 3:9), and openly expressing one’s desire and excitement was part of the love between the couple (Song 4:9-10, 16-17; 5:4-6; 6:5, 8-9; 7:9-12; 8:6). Proper timing for lovemaking and the exclusivity of the beloved was also stressed in the culture and part of the honorable love between them (Song 4:12; 8:8-9). Also, although it was common for a man to have more than one wife, the desire to be “the only one” existed in both men and women and was sometimes preserved in the culture (Song 6:3; 7:11).

Sos 1:3

**“*fragrant* oil poured out.”** The meaning of the Hebrew text is unclear and many translations have been set forth. If our translation is close, the woman was saying that even the mention of her lover’s name excited her senses like smelling aromatic oil.

Sos 1:5

**“lovely.”** The Hebrew word means “lovely,” but its verbal stem is “to desire” and that meaning may also be brought into play here. In his commentary on Song of Songs, the Hebrew scholar Robert Alter translates it: “I am dark but desirable.”[[2]](#footnote-15613)

**“the tents of Kedar.”** Kedar was the name of an ancient Arabian Bedouin tribe. The Arabs traditionally lived in tents, and their tents were made of goat hair, and the goats in the ancient Near East were black, not white as many modern Western goats are. The goat hair tents started a beautiful dark black, but over time the sun bleached them somewhat so that many tents were “dark” but not strictly black. The Shulamite woman (Song 6:13) had worked in the sun and her skin was darker than it normally would have been.

The tents in the Bible Lands were made the same way out of black goat hair for millennia. In 1855 Horatio Hackett made a tour of Israel, and he wrote about the black tents. “The goats of the East are commonly black, and a species of cloth is made from their skins [actually, their “hair”] having the same color. [This cloth is] commonly used by the Arabs for covering their tents. In approaching Bethlehem from the direction of the desert, I passed an encampment of this people, whose tents were all made of this black cloth…. At Tekoa, Amos’ birth-place, six miles south of Bethlehem, I beheld a similar scene. The settlement there consisted of two small groups of tents, one larger than the other; they were covered with the black cloth before mentioned, supported on several poles, and turned up in part on one side, so that a person from without could look into the interior. The Arab tents which I saw on the Phoenician plain, between Tyre and Sidon, were covered with the same material.”[[3]](#footnote-27438)

Sos 1:6

**“darkish.”** This is the same word as in Song 1:5, but in the diminutive form, so we translated it “darkish” instead of “dark.” It seems like in 1:5 she speaks about being “dark” in contrast to what she might have been if she had not been in the sun, but now, speaking of being in the sun, she refers to herself as “darkish” instead of “dark.”

**“looked upon me.”** An idiom meaning burned or scorched me.

**“My mother’s sons.”** The Shulamite’s speech reveals that she feels distant from her brothers, whom she calls her “mother’s sons.”

**“burned *in anger*.”** The Shulamite’s brothers burned in anger (the Hebrew can mean “scorched”) at her behavior so they made her work in the sun which burned her skin.

**“I have not kept.”** The Shulamite has a problem that is common to humanity; we often do not take care of ourselves the way we know we should. In this case, exactly what she means is debated. Some scholars say she had given away—and not “kept”—her virginity and so her brothers were angry at her. However, it is more likely that she was simply more interested in a man than her brothers were comfortable with or there was another reason for their actions. In any case, she was not careful about herself and did not do what she needed to do.

Sos 1:7

**“as one who covers herself.”** The meaning of this phrase is not explained here. It is possible that she means that if she wanders off near strange men she would seem like she was being a prostitute, for they often covered themselves (Gen. 38:14-15). If that is the case, and it is likely, then she was asking her lover where he would be so she would not wander among strange men looking for him but seeming to act like a prostitute.

Sos 1:9

**“darling.”** A term of endearment. When referring to a woman, it occurs only in Song of Songs (Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4). The woman calls the man “my darling” in Song 5:16.

**“a mare among Pharaoh’s chariots.”** It was not uncommon in ancient literature to compare a woman to a beautiful mare. Horses were highly valued. Also, it is likely that this Israelite woman is compared to a mare among “Pharaoh’s chariots,” and not the Israelite king’s chariots, because the horses in Egypt were highly valued and Egypt even exported them to Israel (1 Kings 10:28; 2 Chron. 1:16).

Sos 1:10

**“looped earrings.”** A translation suggested by Robert Alter.[[4]](#footnote-22815) The Hebrew word means “circlet, turn, plait, succession, order,” but it is not clear exactly what the jewelry was or how it looked. Lots of possibilities have been set forth, including a looped earring that lay on the cheek or a “row” of jewels or beads that might have even come from some kind of headdress. In any case, the woman’s jewelry caught the eye and imagination of her beloved.

Sos 1:11

**“ornaments.”** The vocabulary used for this jewelry is not at all clear, and many different translations have been proposed. It is obvious from the “gold” and “silver” that the lover wanted the very best for his beloved.

Sos 1:12

**“reclining upon his dining couch.”** It was the custom in biblical times to recline while eating, and that is represented here, although a person would not necessarily have to eat while on the couch just as we don’t always eat when at the table. The couch was well suited for relaxing or making love as well.

**“my nard.”** The Hebrew text translated “nard” is another name for spikenard. Spikenard is an aromatic oil from a plant that grows in Nepal, China, and India, but in biblical times was imported from India. Both the Old Testament and New Testament mention spikenard. This verse portrays a sexy prelude to lovemaking, with the man relaxing on a divan and ostensibly snacking, while the woman is nearby and her perfume is filling the air. Her perfume is quite likely in a little sack hung around her neck and resting between her breasts. The sense of smell has always enhanced sexuality and sensuality, and perfumes of various types have been associated with lovemaking for millennia (cf. Prov. 7:17). It is worth noticing that in the next verse, Song 1:13, the woman portrays her lover being the perfume that rests between her breasts. On that basis, M. Fox postulates that in this verse also her lover is the spikenard between her breasts that is giving off its perfume.[[5]](#footnote-28397) While that may be possible, it seems more likely that the woman is wearing perfume that is attracting the lover, who then comes and lies between her breasts.

Sos 1:13

**“that lies all night between my breasts.”** It was common for a woman to wear her perfume in a little sack or sachet that was hung around her neck and rested between her breasts. Here she imagines her lover being a sachet of spice lying all night between her breasts. The verb translated “lies all night” is *lun* (#03885 לוּן), which can either mean “to stay; to dwell for a while” or “to spend the night; stay overnight.” In this context, it seems like the woman wants to spend the night with her lover, not just have him be with her for a short time.

Sos 1:14

**“henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-gedi.”** The henna was a good-smelling plant from which an aromatic perfume oil was made, and they grew well in the oasis of En-gedi, which was near the Dead Sea. The Beloved was saying that her lover looked and smelled good to her. It is possible, but not as likely, that she was making another point as well: En-gedi was an oasis in the Judean desert surrounded by miles and miles of barren land. By bringing En-gedi into the picture, she may have been intimating that there was not another one like him anywhere around.

Sos 1:15

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

**“your eyes are doves.”** This is a metaphor, a comparison by representation, and metaphors can be powerful and expressive, but also confusing. In this case, although it was obviously powerful when the Love spoke to his Beloved, almost 3,000 years later we don’t really know what he meant. We do know that since women were usually very modestly covered, her eyes were very important. Jacob’s wife Leah, for example, is only described by the fact that she had “weak” eyes (or “tender eyes,” the meaning is not clear; Gen. 29:17). There are many suggestions as to the Lover’s meaning, including: the color of her eyes was a beautiful light brown like a dove or they glistened like a dove’s feathers glisten in the light; her eyes were peaceful and gentle like the dove is; her eyes were alert and quickly moving like the quickness of a dove’s movement; or, she fluttered her eyes like a dove quickly flutters its wings.

[For more on the figures of comparison simile, metaphor, and hypocatastasis, and how metaphor and hypocatastasis can be confusing, see commentary on Rev. 20:2, “dragon.”]

Sos 1:16

**“lush *foliage*”** The Hebrew word is “green” (KJV, ESV) or “luxurious, lush, verdant” (NAB, NASB). It refers to “lush foliage” (HCSB, NET). The imagery is unclear as to whether or not the woman is speaking of being with her lover in the forest with the lush green vegetation as her bed, and the forest over her being her roof (thus the “beams” and “rafters” over her are cedar and fir; Song 1:17), or whether that wonderful forestlike setting is the way she is imagining her being with him in the bedroom.

**Song of Songs Chapter 2**

Sos 2:1

**“rose of Sharon, a lily”** As with many plants, animals, rocks, etc., in the Hebrew text, the exact identity of these plants is unknown. We follow the traditional translation.

Sos 2:2

**“a lily among the bramble”** The lover magnifies the good thoughts the beloved has about herself. She calls herself a lily, he calls her a lily among the thorny bramble.

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

**“young women.”** The Hebrew is “daughters,” but that translation would give the English reader the wrong impression here; the point is that they were young, unmarried women.

Sos 2:3

**“his shadow.”** More literally, but less easily understood by Western readers, “his shade.” In the biblical word shade or shadow represented protection. The woman felt protected and relaxed when she was with her lover.

**“his fruit was sweet to my taste.”** An unspecific but obviously sexual reference. Perhaps to kissing and foreplay.

Sos 2:4

**“house of wine.”** While it is true that a banquet hall was sometimes called a “house of wine” because of the wine that was enjoyed there, that is likely not the emphasis here. The association between wine and sexual pleasure is well-known and made in both the Old and New Testaments (Hab. 2:15; Rom. 13:13; Rev. 17:2). The couple would drink wine and make love.

**“his banner toward me.”** We agree with Garrett and House[[6]](#footnote-18013) that the Hebrew word *degel* (#01714 דֶּגֶל) has its normal meaning of “banner,” and portrays the sense of an army or military unit under a commander and which carried a banner. The woman has not been “conquered” yet (and portrays herself in another place as a “walled city” (Song 8:10). The king, her lover, brings her to the house of wine, but does not force himself upon her but instead approaches her lovingly.

Sos 2:5

**“faint from love.”** The condition often known as “lovesick,” when a person is physically and emotionally drained and weak due to excessive desire and preoccupation with the love for another.

Sos 2:7

**“until it so desires**.” We agree with Duane Garrett and Paul House[[7]](#footnote-29488) that this phrase in the context refers to not awakening the intense feelings of love or experimenting with sex until the proper time (cf. “until the time is right” NLT; “until the appropriate time” HCSB). God holds marriage and proper sexual behavior in very high regard, which is why the adjuration not to prematurely awaken love occurs three times in the Song of Songs (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4).

Sos 2:10

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

Sos 2:11

**“winter is past.”** In this context, it seems that the “winter” refers to the whole rainy season, including both the former (fall) and latter (spring) rains. If that is the case, then the rains are over for the year and the earth will begin to heat up in earnest, but it is not unreasonably hot yet; late spring is upon them and it would be about mid to late April. On the other hand, it may be that he is referring to the cold rains of winter before the latter rain in March and April when the air is heating up and the flowers are appearing. If that is the case, there would still be rain expected through April, but it would not be the cold rain of winter.

[For more on the former and latter rainy seasons, see commentary on James 5:7.]

Sos 2:13

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

Sos 2:14

**“in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places of the mountainside**.” The Beloved seems to be playfully hiding from her Lover (or she seems somehow inaccessible to him), and he is expressing his desire to see her and hear her voice.

Sos 2:16

**“grazes among the lilies**.” The same phrase occurs in Song 6:3. This is a sexual metaphor, and the Beloved is speaking of her Lover enjoying the bodily pleasures of his beloved. In this verse he is grazing among the lilies, in the next verse he is the gazelle or young stag on her cleft hills. Throughout the Song of Songs, the “lilies” are connected with the body (Song 2:16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2, 3; 7:2). While it is true that the Hebrew word translated “grazes” can mean “pastures his flock” (cf. ASV, CJB, NASB) that meaning does not seem likely here. She is focused on the singular attention he gives her.

Sos 2:17

**“day awakes.”** This is an idiom; the literal Hebrew is “until the day breathes.” This idiom has been interpreted by scholars in two opposing ways: one is that it refers to the coming of night when the evening breezes arise and the shadows of day flee (ASV, NAB, NASB); the other is that it refers to the dawning of the day when the day “wakes up” and starts to breathe, and the shadows and darkness of night disappear (HCSB, KJV, NET, NIV, NLT). Some versions avoid the controversy by keeping more literal and saying something such as, “until the day breathes” (ESV), but that is not helpful to the reader even though it preserves the idiom. We contend that in Solomon’s day, the reader knew what the idiom meant in this context: the dawn, at which point the lover would leave his beloved and attend to his daily business.

We ordinarily associate breathing, as the ancients did, with coming to life, and it seems most natural that the beloved wanted her lover to spend the night with her, not the daytime, and as the dawn broke the earth would come to life and the day began to breathe. Also, although some commentators associate the lengthening of the shadows in the evening as them “fleeing away,” that seems most unnatural because they don’t really flee, they become more and more intense and dark until the world is consumed in darkness; and why would the lover leave then? It seems he would stay longer, into the night, not leave just as it was getting dark. It is well expressed in Scripture that when the dawn breaks and the sun rises higher and higher in the sky, the shadows flee and the world becomes light, while in the dark of night, people stumble and get into trouble.

**“cleft mountains.”** The sexual imagery in Song of Songs makes the interpretation of this verse quite clear. “The phrase הָרֵי בָתֶר [*har bether*] fairly conspicuously refers to the split between a woman’s two breasts.”[[8]](#footnote-27126)

**Song of Songs Chapter 3**

**Song of Songs Chapter 4**

Sos 4:1

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

Sos 4:7

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

Sos 4:12

**“locked up garden.”** It is important to understand the cultural difference between a biblical “garden” from this time period and our modern “garden.” A biblical “garden” was more like a small park, with water, shade trees, and plants of all sorts, where the owner could go and relax and enjoy himself (cf. Eccl. 2:4-6). In contrast, too often our modern “gardens” are simply rows of vegetables or flowers. The fact that the Beloved is described as a “locked up garden,” indicates the woman has not as yet opened herself up to the Lover.

Sos 4:13

**“an orchard of pomegranates.”** It is highly unlikely that the Lover is trying to compare the different parts of the woman’s body to the many different kinds of fruit and spices in his list. What is much more likely is that he is simply making the case that as many different pleasures “shoot forth,” or come from a garden, so his Beloved provides many and varied pleasures.

**Song of Songs Chapter 5**

Sos 5:2

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

Sos 5:4

**“my bowels.”** In the biblical culture, the bowels and abdominal organs were the seat of emotion. The woman’s emotions were stirred by her lover.

Sos 5:14

**“lapis lazuli.”** Lapis lazuli was blue, but the text is not referring to the color here, but the attraction and beauty of lapis lazuli. That the man’s body was said to be overlaid with lapis was a way of saying it was glorious. Lapis lazuli was then and is still now greatly desired for its deep and glorious blue color.

**Song of Songs Chapter 6**

Sos 6:3

**“grazes among the lilies**.” The same phrase occurs in Song of Songs 2:16; See commentary on Song of Songs 2:16, where the same phrase occurs.

Sos 6:4

**“darling.”** See commentary on Song of Songs 1:9.

**Song of Songs Chapter 7**

**Song of Songs Chapter 8**

Sos 8:11

**“1,000 shekels.”** 1,000 shekels is roughly 25 pounds (11.3 kg). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

1. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [NAC], 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-24591)
2. R. Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15613)
3. H. Hackett, *Illustrations of Scripture*, chap. 1, “The Tents of Kedar,” Kindle. [↑](#footnote-ref-27438)
4. R. Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-22815)
5. Michael V. Fox, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28397)
6. D. Garrett and P. House, *Song of Songs and Lamentations* [WBC], 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-18013)
7. D. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [NAC]; D. Garrett and P. House, *Song of Songs and Lamentations* [WBC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-29488)
8. Garrett and House, *Song of Songs and Lamentations* [WBC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-27126)