

1. How Do We Interpret the Song of Songs?¹

Common Questions

1. How should we interpret the Song? Literally? Allegorically?
2. Who is the Bridegroom?
3. Who is the Bride?
4. When is the marriage consummated? Is it?
5. What do we make of the erotic imagery in the Song?

1. The Erotic Love Interpretation

Émile Osty: *The Song celebrates love, human love, and only human love....* The tons of comments poured over this booklet did not succeed in hiding the truth which is so clear to the eyes of the unprepared reader: *in its literal, first and direct meaning, the Song deals with human love uniting man and woman in marriage.* (Émile Osty, cited in B. Arminjon, 1988, p. 34)

2. The Divine Love Interpretation

Rabbi Akiba: He who sings the Song of Songs in a banquet hall and makes it into a kind of ditty has no place in the world to come. (Tosefta, *Sanhedrin* 12:10).

Origen of Alexandria: Located in the middle of the Bible, the Song lifts to its height *the great fundamental image*, going from the first chapters of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation: *mankind has become the bride of God.* (Origen of Alexandria; cited in B. Arminjon, 1988)

3. The Christological Interpretation

St. Augustine: The Canticle of Canticles sings a sort of spiritual rapture experienced by holy souls contemplating *the nuptial relationship between Christ the King and his queen-city, the church.* But it is a rapture veiled in allegory to make us yearn for it more ardently and rejoice in the unveiling as the bridegroom comes into view... (Augustine, *City of God*, 17.20; trans. J. R. Wright, 2005, 294)

4. The Mystical Interpretation

St. Therese of Lisieux: If I had time, I would like to comment on the Song of Songs. I have discovered in this book such profound things about *the union of the soul with her beloved.* (cited in B. Arminjon, 1988, p. 39)

5. The Liturgical Interpretation

Ellen Davis: The image of the bride [in the Song of Songs]... is like one of those pictures whose contents shift before your eyes.... Looking closely, we see at one moment a human love scene.... Then we blink, and now we see *the special intimacy between God and Israel, which reaches its high point in Temple worship.* (E. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, 2000, p. 269)

¹ See Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom: the Greatest Love Story Ever Told* (New York: Image Books, 2014), 20-27.

2. Who is the Bride in the Song of Songs?**The Descriptions of the Bride**

Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like *a flock of goats*, moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like *a flock of shorn ewes* that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved. Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck is like *the tower of David*, built for an arsenal, whereon hang a thousand bucklers, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like *two fawns, twins of a gazelle*, that feed among the lilies. (Song 4:1-5)

How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is *a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine*. Your belly is *a heap of wheat*, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like *two fawns, twins of a gazelle*. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are *pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim*. Your nose is like *a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus*. Your head crowns you *like Carmel*, and your flowing locks are *like purple*; a king is held captive in the tresses. How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden! You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. (Song 7:1-7)

The Temple in Jerusalem

And [Solomon] made the [curtain in the Temple] of blue and purple and crimson fabrics and fine linen
(2 Chronicles 3:14)

[Solomon] built the house of the Forest of Lebanon; ...upon three rows of cedar pillars, with cedar beams...
(1 Kings 7:2)

In front of the house [Solomon] made... a hundred pomegranates and put them on chains.
(2 Chronicles 3:15-16)

On that day there shall be a fountain opened for... inhabitants of Jerusalem... On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem...
(Zechariah 13:1, 14:8)

You are *beautiful as Tirzah*, my love, *comely as Jerusalem*... (Song 6:4)

The Bride in the Song of Songs

I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.
(Song of Songs 1:5)

The scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.
(Song of Songs 4:11)

Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choices fruits.
(Song of Songs 4:13)

A garden locked is my sister, my bride... a garden fountain, a well of living water.
(Song of Song 4:12, 15)

Tirzah: capital of Northern Kingdom.
Jerusalem: capital of Southern Kingdom.

3. Who is the Bridegroom in the Song of Songs?**The Descriptions of the Bridegroom**

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love... The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle, or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. (Song 2:3-9)

YHWH, the God of Israel

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul... (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

The Bridegroom in the Song

Him whom my soul loves... (Song of Songs 1:7, 3:1, 2, 3, 4)

This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! (Psalm 118:24)

The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you! (Song of Songs 1:4)

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures... (Psalm 23:1-2)

Tell me... where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down... (Song of Songs 1:7)

More to be desired are they [the ordinances of the LORD] than gold; sweeter also than honey... (Psalm 19:9-10)

His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable... (Song of Songs 5:16)

4. Is the Marriage in the Song Ever Consummated?**The Bridegroom Disappears**

I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark! my beloved is knocking. “Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.” I had put off my garment, how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet, how could I soil them? My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt. *I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone.* My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love.* (Song 5:2-8)

The Ending of the Song

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please... Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death... Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned. *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 will build upon her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar. I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace... O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it. Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices. (Song 8:4-14)

5. The Song of Songs and Jesus the Bridegroom²

St. Cyril of Jerusalem on the Nuptial Bath of Baptism

Immediately, then, upon entering [the waters of baptism], you removed your garment. This was a figure of “stripping off the old man with his deeds” (Colossians 3:9). Having stripped, you were naked, in this also imitating Christ, who as naked on the cross... *May the soul that has once put off that old self never again put it on, but say with the Bride in the Song of Songs: “I have put off my garment: how shall I put it on?”* (Song 5:3). (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 2:2; trans. L. P. McCauley and A. A. Stephenson, 1969-70)

St. Ambrose on the Wedding Banquet of the Eucharist

You have come to the altar, the Lord Jesus calls you, for the text speaks of you or of the Church, and he says to you: “Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth” (Song 1:2)... You see that you are pure from all sin, since your faults have been blotted out [in baptism]. This is why He judges you to be worthy of heavenly sacraments and invites you to the heavenly banquet: “May he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth” (Song 1:2)... Seeing yourself pure from all sins and worthy to come to the altar of Christ... *You see the wonderful sacrament and you say: “May he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth,” that is, may Christ give me a kiss.* (Ambrose, *On the Sacraments*, 5:5-7)

The Catechism on the Nuptial Mysteries

The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath, which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist. (CCC 1617)

The Catechism on the Song of Songs

Tradition has always seen in the *Song of Solomon* a unique expression of *human love*, insofar as it is a reflection of God's love—a love “strong as death” that “many waters cannot quench” (Song 8:6-7) (CCC 1611)

What is contemplative prayer? ... *Contemplative prayer seeks him “whom my soul loves”* (Song 1:7; cf. 3:1-4). It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. (CCC 2709)

The Song of Songs: the “Holy of Holies” in Scripture

Rabbi Akiba: All the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for *all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.* (Mishnah, *Yadayim* 3:4; trans. H. Danby, 1933)

² See Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 136-168.

