

Two Year Bible Trek
Week 43
Week 43 - Song of Songs 1-8

Key Concepts: The key concept of this book is that erotic love is not only part of God's plan for humanity but it can be used to help us understand God's love for us and our love for God.

Stories: This book is comprised of a number of poems or fragments of poems which are as follows: a maiden longs for her lover, remarks on her own beauty, asks about her lover's location, the lover praises the maiden, a dialogue ensues, a second dialogue begins, the maiden once again longs for her lover, the lover returns to summon his bride, the maiden is pleased with her lover's presence, the maiden has a dream, a wedding procession for the groom takes place, the bridegroom describes the maiden and invites her to go with him, the maiden still seeks in vain for her lover, the groom once again praises the bride's beauty, the maiden goes to the garden and is invited to dance, and by so doing arouses the desire of her beloved, the maiden invites her lover to go into the fields where he will receive her love, the maiden wishes to be married, they return from the fields, and finally the lover calls and the maiden responds.

Brief Summary: this book is one that has perplexed readers for more than two-thousand years. There are several reasons for this. First it is narrated by a woman...the only book of the Bible to clearly have a woman speaking in the first person. And not only is the woman speaking she is making references to sexuality in ways that many people would have deemed as improper. Secondly, the nature of the language itself often catches us by surprise. Here are some of its opening lines. "O that you would kiss me with the kisses of our mouth! For your love is better than wine..." Third, there is no direct mention of God, the Law or any other specifically Hebraic content. Fourth, the writer makes no attempt at direct analogy. The entire focus of the book is on human love and lust. Finally there is no real progression of story or theme that ties the pieces together. It is simply a collection of poems.

This begs a couple of questions. The first is how did it become part of our canon? Though one cannot be completely sure about this, speculation is that it entered the scriptures because it was ascribed to, or for, Solomon, though unlike the Proverbs it contains no "Solomonic" wisdom. In addition rabbis and others were able to interpret it in a way that did not focus on its overtly sexualized content.

The second question concerns how we are to interpret and deal with this kind of a book. We have two main options from which we can choose.

The first option is that we can take it for what it appears to be, a celebration of human sexuality. This would not be out of line with much of the rest of scripture. If indeed, creation is good, then sexuality is good as well. It is a gift of God and we can rejoice in it. In addition for those of you who have read the previous lessons, sexuality and longing have been integral to many of the stories we have covered.

The second option, and the one favored by generations of Jewish and Christian interpreters, is that the relationship described is an allegory of the relationship between God and the Hebrew people (Judaism) or between Christ and his church (Christianity). This way of viewing the book allows one to avoid all of the sexual innuendos and focus on it as a spiritually oriented text. While this may allow for an easier and perhaps less embarrassing reading, it still begs the question of how do these allegories function? I say that because there is no overarching agreement as to what we are to learn from the allegories. In the end we all make our choices as to how to read this book.

1. What is your first response to reading this book?
2. Which of the means of understanding this book most appeals to you?
3. How does this story change or enhance your sense of humanity's relationship with God?