

VOLUME 24

OLD TESTAMENT

THE NEW COLLEGEVILLE  
BIBLE COMMENTARY

SONG OF SONGS  
RUTH  
LAMENTATIONS  
ECCLESIASTES  
ESTHER

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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### Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles

Amos—Amos

Bar—Baruch

1 Chr—1 Chronicles

2 Chr—2 Chronicles

Col—Colossians

1 Cor—1 Corinthians

2 Cor—2 Corinthians

Dan—Daniel

Deut—Deuteronomy

Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes

Eph—Ephesians

Esth—Esther

Exod—Exodus

Ezek—Ezekiel

Ezra—Ezra

Gal—Galatians

Gen—Genesis

Hab—Habakkuk

Hag—Haggai

Heb—Hebrews

Hos—Hosea

Isa—Isaiah

Jas—James

Jdt—Judith

Jer—Jeremiah

Job—Job

Joel—Joel

John—John

1 John—1 John

2 John—2 John

3 John—3 John

Jonah—Jonah

Josh—Joshua

Jude—Jude

Judg—Judges

1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings

Lam—Lamentations

Lev—Leviticus

Luke—Luke

1 Macc—1 Maccabees

2 Macc—2 Maccabees

Mal—Malachi

Mark—Mark

Matt—Matthew

Mic—Micah

Nah—Nahum

Neh—Nehemiah

Num—Numbers

Obad—Obadiah

1 Pet—1 Peter

2 Pet—2 Peter

Phil—Philippians

Phlm—Philemon

Prov—Proverbs

Ps(s)—Psalms

Rev—Revelation

Rom—Romans

Ruth—Ruth

1 Sam—1 Samuel

2 Sam—2 Samuel

Sir—Sirach

Song—Song of Songs

1 Thess—1 Thessalonians

2 Thess—2 Thessalonians

1 Tim—1 Timothy

2 Tim—2 Timothy

Titus—Titus

Tob—Tobit

Wis—Wisdom

Zech—Zechariah

Zeph—Zephaniah



# *The Festival Scrolls*

Five Old Testament books are identified in the Hebrew Bible as the Festival Scrolls, or *Megilloth* (Hebrew: “scrolls”): Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes (also known as Qoheleth), and Esther. These short books are read at important Jewish festivals during the year: The Song of Songs is read in the spring on Passover as a testimony of God’s love for the chosen people. The book of Ruth is read on Pentecost (Weeks) because the date of this festival is set by counting the seven weeks between the beginning of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest; the story of Ruth is set in that time frame. Lamentations is read in some Jewish communities on the ninth of Ab, the commemoration in late July or early August of the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C. and A.D. 70. Ecclesiastes is read on the feast of Booths, the last harvest festival of the year (September–October). The book of Esther provides the foundation for the celebration of Purim in the winter month of Adar (February–March).

These five books have a tangled history in Jewish and Christian Bibles. Jews debated into the first century A.D. whether Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther belonged in the Scriptures at all. Esther is the only book of the Hebrew Scriptures that was not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Hebrew version of Esther (see Introduction to Esther) and the Song of Songs are the only two biblical books that never mention God, which may be why they were questioned. All five books have been put in different places in different versions of Scripture. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of Jewish Scripture) placed Ruth where the story fits chronologically, between Judges and 1 Samuel, which is where it is found in Christian Bibles. In the Septuagint (followed again by Christian Bibles) Lamentations is found after Jeremiah, who was traditionally considered its author. All five books have always been included in the third section of the Hebrew Scriptures, called the Writings, where they are found in Jewish Bibles today. Even in the Writings, however, their arrangement has varied in different manuscripts. The Hebrew text used by scholars has an arrangement from the eleventh-century Leningrad manuscript: Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations,

Esther. Hebrew Bibles used by most Jews today arrange the books in liturgical order as they are in this commentary. In Christian Bibles Esther is found with the historical books—after Tobit and Judith in the Roman Catholic canon and after Nehemiah in the Protestant canon. Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are found after Proverbs among the wisdom books.

Despite their “wandering ways,” each of these little books has a poetic beauty and a powerful message. Having them gathered in one small volume gives the reader a wealth of God’s word to ponder.



## INTRODUCTION

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# *Song of Songs*

### **Title**

“Song of Songs” is the Hebrew way of conveying the superlative: the best song (compare “king of kings” or “holy of holies”). The Song is attributed to Solomon. This attribution is more like a dedication than a declaration of authorship. The work is put under the patronage of Solomon, who is mentioned in it seven times (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12). This dedication links the Song to the wisdom literature. The wisdom books Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are also dedicated to Solomon, who is said to have “uttered three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five” (1 Kgs 5:12). Wisdom is based on common human experience and its goal is the good life. God is found in ordinary life. When the Song of Songs is read through a wisdom lens, it reveals the goodness of God in the experience of human love.

### **Genre and structure**

The Song is a collection of love poetry, celebrating the joys and longings of human love. The songs are so skillfully woven together that there is no agreement on how many songs are collected or where each song begins and ends. Repeated phrases act as refrains, however, giving some indication of structure. Different voices, evident in the Hebrew verb forms, are marked in many translations: M = the man; W = the woman; D = Daughters of Jerusalem.

### **Poetic artistry**

The Song is rich in poetic beauty, especially metaphorical expressions. The comparisons are from both nature and human achievement such as architecture. Themes common to love poetry, such as searching and finding, weave throughout. Repeated words and phrases bind the whole work together.

### **Date**

The Song of Songs is difficult to date. Parts of the work undoubtedly circulated orally before the book was written. Analysis of the language suggests that the writing occurred sometime after the Babylonian exile, perhaps around the fourth century B.C.

### **Interpretation**

Early in Jewish tradition the Song of Songs was interpreted as an allegory of the love between God and the covenant people. In Christian tradition too the Song was understood to describe the love between God and the church or the individual soul. This tradition of interpretation flourished in the Middle Ages, especially among the Cistercians. In recent times interpreters have returned to the original sense of the Song as a celebration of human love.

# Song of Songs

1 <sup>1</sup>The Song of Songs, which is  
Solomon's.

**The Woman Speaks of Her Lover**

W <sup>2</sup>Let him kiss me with kisses of  
his mouth,  
for your love is better than wine,  
<sup>3</sup>better than the fragrance of  
your perfumes.  
Your name is a flowing perfume—  
therefore young women love you.  
<sup>4</sup>Draw me after you! Let us run!  
The king has brought me to his  
bed chambers.

Let us exult and rejoice in you;  
let us celebrate your love: it is  
beyond wine!  
Rightly do they love you!

**Love's Boast**

W <sup>5</sup>I am black and beautiful,  
Daughters of Jerusalem—  
Like the tents of Qedar,  
like the curtains of Solomon.  
<sup>6</sup>Do not stare at me because I am so  
black,  
because the sun has burned me.

**A DECLARATION OF LOVE**

***Song of Songs 1:1-6***

**1:2-4 The woman speaks of her lover**

After the title (1:1, see Introduction), the Song begins with the woman's passionate outcry of love. She speaks to her lover and about him in the same breath. He is eminently desirable and his love is intoxicating. The sound of his name fills her with sweetness. (In Hebrew "name" is *shem* and "perfume" is *shemen*.) She is certain that every woman loves him!

**1:5-6 Love's boast**

The woman's description of herself inserts a note of tension. She speaks to the "Daughters of Jerusalem," a group that functions as a chorus throughout the Song (2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 8:4). She is black and beautiful. The woman's color is compared to the desert tents made of black goat hair and to curtains either of Solomon's own tent or of Solomon's temple. The wealthy tribe of Qedar (a word which means "dark") lived in the Arabian Peninsula and is associated with Ishmael (see Gen 25:13; Isa 60:7), so "black" here

The sons of my mother were angry  
with me;  
they charged me with the care of  
the vineyards:  
my own vineyard I did not take  
care of.

### **Love's Inquiry**

- ◀ W <sup>7</sup>Tell me, you whom my soul loves,  
where you shepherd, where you  
give rest at midday.  
Why should I be like one wandering  
after the flocks of your  
companions?

M <sup>8</sup>If you do not know,  
most beautiful among women,  
Follow the tracks of the flock  
and pasture your lambs  
near the shepherds' tents.

### **Love's Vision**

- M <sup>9</sup>To a mare among Pharaoh's  
chariotry  
I compare you, my friend:  
<sup>10</sup>Your cheeks lovely in pendants,  
your neck in jewels.  
<sup>11</sup>We will make pendants of gold for  
you,  
and ornaments of silver.

suggests beauty and luxury. But the woman's blackness came at a price. She has been forced by her brothers to work outdoors and the sun has burned her. What does the "vineyard" mean? Her sun-blackened skin indicates work in a literal vineyard. Throughout the Song, however, the vineyard also symbolizes the woman herself, her beauty and fertility (see 8:12) and the love between the man and the woman (see 2:15; 7:13).

## **A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE LOVERS**

### ***Song of Songs 1:7-2:7***

#### **1:7-8 Love's inquiry**

Now the woman begins a conversation with her lover. She will seek him at the time of the midday rest. She names him "you whom my soul loves," a phrase that becomes a refrain in 3:1-4 where the theme of seeking is intensified. The agricultural metaphors continue. She cared for the vineyards; they both are shepherds.

#### **1:9-11 Love's vision**

A dialogue of mutual admiration ensues. In this first speech the man compares the woman to a mare among pharaoh's chariotry. Comparison to a beautiful horse is a great compliment in the worldview of the Song. She is adorned with precious jewelry like the trappings of a horse. In addition, a mare turned loose among the chariot horses—all stallions—would cause chaos. Her beauty, her strength, and her desirability are all praised in this metaphor.

► This symbol indicates a cross reference number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See page 142 for number citations.

**How Near Is Love!**

W <sup>12</sup>While the king was upon his  
couch,  
my spikenard gave forth its  
fragrance.

<sup>13</sup>My lover is to me a sachet of  
myrrh;  
between my breasts he lies.

<sup>14</sup>My lover is to me a cluster of  
henna  
from the vineyards of En-gedi.

M <sup>15</sup>How beautiful you are, my friend,  
how beautiful! your eyes are  
doves!

W <sup>16</sup>How beautiful you are, my lover—  
handsome indeed!

Verdant indeed is our couch;  
<sup>17</sup>the beams of our house are  
cedars,  
our rafters, cypresses.

2 W <sup>1</sup>I am a flower of Sharon,  
a lily of the valleys.

M <sup>2</sup>Like a lily among thorns,  
so is my friend among women.

W <sup>3</sup>Like an apple tree among the trees  
of the woods,  
so is my lover among men.  
In his shadow I delight to sit,  
and his fruit is sweet to my  
taste.

<sup>4</sup>He brought me to the banquet hall  
and his glance at me signaled  
love.

<sup>5</sup>Strengthen me with raisin cakes,  
refresh me with apples,  
for I am sick with love.

<sup>6</sup>His left hand is under my head  
and his right arm embraces me.

<sup>7</sup>I adjure you, Daughters of  
Jerusalem,  
by the gazelles and the does of  
the field,

Do not awaken, or stir up love  
until it is ready.

**1:12–2:7 Love's union**

The woman returns to the subject of sweet smells (1:12-14; see 1:3). In her longing for him she gives off the sweet scent of spikenard, an aromatic herb from India used in making ointments. This is probably the ointment used in the various anointings of Jesus (see Mark 14:3; John 12:3). The man is a cluster of fragrant spices lying between her breasts. Myrrh is a sweet-smelling gum resin from various trees of Arabia and India. Henna is a shrub of the loosestrife family that has fragrant white or reddish flowers. Spices were valuable in the ancient world for fragrance, flavoring, and as an embalming agent. Stores of spices were a sign of wealth (see 2 Kgs 20:13).

The two lovers exchange compliments: "How beautiful you are" (1:15-16). He calls her "my friend." The feminine form of this word occurs nine times in the Song and only one other time in the Hebrew Bible (Judg 11:37). She calls him "my lover," a term she uses twenty-six times. He again uses a visual metaphor: her eyes are like doves. Soft, gentle, gray-brown? She responds with a metaphor of fragrance: their house is made of sweet-smelling wood. Inside a building or in a grove of trees?

The conversation between the man and the woman continues (2:1-3), building on the plant metaphors of chapter one. She compares herself

### Her Lover's Visit Remembered

W <sup>8</sup>The sound of my lover! here he  
comes  
springing across the mountains,  
leaping across the hills.  
<sup>9</sup>My lover is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.  
See! He is standing behind our wall,  
gazing through the windows,  
peering through the lattices.  
<sup>10</sup>My lover speaks and says to me,  
M "Arise, my friend, my beautiful  
one,  
and come!

<sup>11</sup>For see, the winter is past,  
the rains are over and gone.  
<sup>12</sup>The flowers appear on the earth,  
the time of pruning the vines  
has come,  
and the song of the turtledove is  
heard in our land.  
<sup>13</sup>The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines, in bloom, give  
forth fragrance.  
Arise, my friend, my beautiful one,  
and come!  
<sup>14</sup>My dove in the clefts of the rock,  
in the secret recesses of the cliff,

to the first flowers of spring: the crocus or narcissus growing on the fertile coastal Plain of Sharon and the lotus flower (a lily) growing in the valleys. He emphasizes her uniqueness, "a lily among thorns." She responds with her own metaphor of his uniqueness. He is a fruit-bearing tree among the other trees of the wood. This tree is not our common apple tree, which is not native to Israel, but an undomesticated fruit tree. She proclaims her lover the bearer of sweet fruit and the giver of pleasant shade. These images lead to metaphors of eating and finally a direct statement of love. He brings her to the place of eating, the place of love. She is weak with passion and longing. He takes her in his embrace.

The final verse in this section (2:7) is a refrain that occurs several times in the Song. The woman puts the Daughters under oath not to arouse love until it is ready. Is this a plea not to disturb the two lovers? Or is it advice that genuine love has its own time and we must wait for it? The oath—"by the gazelles and the does of the field"—is a euphemism for names of God. The Hebrew words for "gazelles" and "does" (*tsebaoth*, *ayeloth*) sound like the words for "hosts" in the term "LORD of hosts" (*tsebaoth*) and for "God" (*eyl* or *eloah*). This is similar to our use of "gosh" for "God" or "jeepers creepers" for "Jesus Christ."

### HER LOVER'S VISIT REMEMBERED

#### Song of Songs 2:8-17

This section is a passionate description of the delight of lovers in spring-time. The song is beautifully structured. It is linked to the previous song by the images of gazelle and deer (2:7, 9). The end of the song echoes its