Adoring Shulamite as Foil to Adulterous Israel: A Canonical Theology of the Song of Songs

by Layton Talbert[1]

Lutheran commentator H. C. Leupold remarked concerning Daniel 11: "This chapter might be treated in Bible classes. We do not see how it could be used for a sermon or for sermons."[2] That appears to be a common assumption towards the Song of Songs as a whole, at least among respectable interpreters.

Song of Songs is generally politely avoided in public preaching and teaching for what would seem to be fairly obvious reasons. Surely no portion of sacred Scripture is unsuitable for public use, though certain passages may be more appropriate for some situations and audiences than for others.[3] (When was the last time your pastor preached from—let alone *through*—the Song?)[4] And yet, here it is in our Bibles. Solomon was unashamed about writing it, God's Spirit about inspiring it, and both Israel and the church about canonizing and preserving it.

Its general avoidance in the contemporary pulpit, however, does not mean that it has historically been ignored. "From the late patristic period through the Middle Ages, Christian interpreters wrote more on the Song than on any other Old Testament book."[5] Jewish teachers were no less enthusiastic about the Song's value and beauty. The first-century Jewish rabbi Akiba famously opined: "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Hagiographa are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies."[6]

The Hebrew title, Song of Songs (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים), is a superlative construction, just like "Holy of holies" (Holiest of all holy places) or "King of kings" (King over all kings). Solomon composed 1,005 songs (1 Kgs 4:32), but this one is the pinnacle, the best of them all—and, arguably, the best of all compositions that fall into that category. Surveying the many attempts to express the gist of the book's

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[1] Layton Talbert (PhD, Theology) is professor of theology at BJU Seminary and the author of several books, including *The Trustworthiness of God's Words: Why Every Word from God Matters* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2022) and *Soteriology for Beginners: What Does the Bible Say about Salvation?* (n.p.: Equip Discipleship, 2023).

[2] Cited by Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel,* BST (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 147.

[3] For a valuable recent work on Song of Songs specifically targeting singles (high-school age and above) with a biblical perspective on sexual intimacy designed to counteract the world's promiscuous perversion of the subject, see Tim and Angela Little, *Song of Songs for Singles: Lessons on Love from King Solomon* (Ankeny, IA: Faith, 2023). See also Brian Collins's review of the book in this issue of *JBTW.*

[4] The question is rhetorical and assumes your pastor is not Mark Driscoll. I will, however, counterweight the question with a recommendation: Peter W. Van Kleeck, *A Primer for the Public Preaching of the Song of Songs* (Denver: Outskirts Press, 2015). After completing graduate degrees at Westminster Theological Seminary and Calvin Theological Seminary, Van Kleeck pursued a Doctor of Ministry degree from BJU Seminary. His book largely reproduces his DMin dissertation.

[5] Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 355.

[6] Quoted in Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 323.

title, Mitchell notes that "no single translation can capture the elegance and scope of the original"; he proposes "the consummate Song," underscoring its "uniqueness and perfection, and alluding to the Song's yearning for love's consummation, which is evident immediately in 1:2 and following."[7]

So why is this book in our Bibles? What is its purpose? And what is its contribution to the larger theology of the canon and storyline of Scripture?[8]

Hermeneutical Hurdles

Several features make the Song hermeneutically challenging, beginning with its poetic form. Gordis notes that "the essence of poetry" is to "employ *symbolism* to express nuances beyond the power of exact definition. This is particularly true of love poetry."[9] Consequently, woven into the already inherent complexities of Hebrew poetry is a cornucopia of oriental metaphorical imagery that includes fauna (*doves, ravens, ewes, sheep, fawns, gazelles, foxes, goats, lions, leopards*), flora (*lilies, mandrakes, brambles, cedar, cypress, apple tree, palm tree, grapevines*), food (*honey, wine, milk, wheat, dates, grapes, apples, figs, pomegranates, raisins, nuts*), spices (*oil, saffron, myrrh, spikenard, balsam, calamus, cinnamon, henna, nard, frankincense, aloes*), valuables (*gold, silver, ivory, beryl, rubies, sapphires, marble, jewels*), topography (*clefts, mountains, gardens, parks, pools, fields, orchards, vineyards, valleys*), and even specific locations (*Jerusalem, Tower of David, Damascus, Amana River, Tirzah, Mount Hermon, En Gedi, Lebanon, Carmel, Sharon, Gilead, Heshbon*). The profusion of metaphors evokes and engages all the senses: sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch. No other portion of Scripture is so sensually evocative of all the human means for engaging the physical world as God has created both it and us. Their environment being pastoral and Middle Eastern, most of the metaphors are drawn from nature and, while many of them are strange to our ears, they express the total sensory delight each spouse finds in the other. In addition, the vocabulary of the Song incorporates some fifty *hapax legomena*; four percent of the entire Song consists of obscure words used nowhere else in Scripture. Perhaps most challenging of all, the Song incorporates multiple speakers who are not always clearly identified. The Song's sexual candor (though guileless), secular content (virtually nothing overtly theological), and ambiguous plotline make it ripe for interpretive speculation.

Summaries of the Song's history of interpretation are easy enough to access.[10] The most common and longstanding hermeneutical approach among both Jewish and Christian interpreters has been an allegorical interpretation. The hallmark (and Achilles's heel) of an allegorical approach is not that it recognizes parallels in the Song to the relationship between God and his people but that it assumes or

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[7] Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs,* CC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 548–49. Mitchell's magisterial 1300-page commentary is difficult to top for sheer thoroughness combined with modernity of perspective and research.

[8] Disclaimer: There is much about the interpretation and content of the Song that this article has no intention of addressing. The history of the Song's interpretation, the question of whether the male speaker is Solomon or someone else, debates over the structure, plotline, and outline of the Song—all fascinating and worthwhile pursuits—are peripheral to the specific scope and aim of this article and will be referenced only in passing if at all.

[9] Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation, and Commentary* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 37 (emphasis original).

[10] E.g., Mitchell, 451–508; Garrett, 352–66; Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs,* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 20–47; Richard S. Hess, *The Song of Songs,* BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 22–29.

asserts that the divine-human relationship is the *primary* or *real* meaning of the Song—to the diminution or negation of the human-to-human relationship.[11] Like the variety of hermeneutical approaches to the Song, the weaknesses of an allegorical hermeneutic are also addressed elsewhere and need not be rehearsed here. Though the Bible frequently employs the marriage metaphor to image the divine-human relationship (as we will see), metaphorical illustration does not warrant allegorical interpretation.

Finally, there is the issue of genre. Garrett notes the uniqueness of the Song not only within the poetic corpus but within the Hebrew Bible, as the only work devoted in its entirety to the celebration of marital love.[12] He also observes the affinities of the book to the wisdom corpus. Its use of sexual language is not, after all, unknown in other wisdom books (Prov 5:15–19; Eccl 9:9), though sometimes in a negative context (Prov 7, 9). Its ascription to Solomon is a strong indication that it belongs to the wisdom genre, and the specific designation of "songs" as a dimension and demonstration of the artistry of Solomon's wisdom should not be overlooked (1 Kgs 4:30–34). "Most important," notes Garrett, the book comports with "the function and purpose of wisdom literature," which "is meant to teach the reader how to live in the world." If other wisdom literature—like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes—extends those fields to include "politics, personal morality, economics, social behavior," then "certainly courtship, sensual love, and marriage cannot be excluded since these areas are among the most basic universals of human experience."[13] Again, even Proverbs and Ecclesiastes incorporate specific counsel along these same lines. "Sexuality and love are fundamental to the human experience; and it is altogether fitting that the Bible . . . should have something to say in this area."[14]

At the same time, one of Garrett's assumptions in assigning it to the wisdom genre is, in my view, short-sighted: "The covenant between Yahweh and Israel is not in view as it is in the books of the Law and the Prophets."[15] Though the Song expresses no explicit covenantal dimension on the surface, I will argue that it is *implicitly* and *deeply* theological and covenantal, precisely because the marital relationship (which is celebrated in the Song) is an inherently covenantal institution of divine origin with profound theological ramifications. God himself repeatedly employs a husband-wife metaphor analogically. Because God originated marriage as a covenantal relationship that he knew he would later invoke as a primary metaphor for the relationship between himself and his people, the Song's canonical

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[11] The historical ubiquity of the allegorical approach explains how lines from the Song found their way into Christian hymnody and devotional literature. Unfortunately, besides suffering from the weakness of the allegorical approach, many lines either misunderstand or ignore the original speaker and the line's function in the original Song. For example, "Jesus, Rose of Sharon" is drawn from Song 2:1; but the passage is clearly a reference of the Shulamite to herself (cf. 2:2), making the sentiment incompatible as a reference to Christ. Likewise, "He's the lily of the valley" (also from Song 2:1) is a self-reference to the Shulamite, not to her beloved. The origin of the line "He's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul" is a little uncertain (1:8? 5:9? 6:1?). Other lines reflect a more accurate application of the Song's language. Samuel Rutherford's lines, "O, I am my Beloved's and my Beloved's mine" (2:16; 6:3) and "He brings a poor vile sinner into His house of wine" (2:4), are consistent with the Song's speakers and imagery. For a more detailed (generally sympathetic) survey of the Song's influence on hymnody, see Mitchell, 532–43.

[12] Garrett, 366–67.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 366.

[15] Ibid.

function goes beyond merely teaching a theology of marital love, important as that is. Canonically, there is more of a theological-covenantal orientation than meets the ear.

A Dialogical Analysis of the Song

In drama, as in historical narrative, dialogue is hermeneutically central and determinative.[16] In the Song, dialogue is not just central—it is everything. After the title in 1:1, the Song is entirely dialogue with no narration. Any valid interpretation, then, must give close attention to who says what to whom.

Actors

Views on the number and nature of the actors in the Song vary. For the purposes of this article's canonical-theological proposal, however, it makes no significant difference whether Solomon is one of the two main characters in the Song or whether he is a third party composing the Song about the relationship between two others. What matters is the relationship between the two main actors in the Song.[17] In addition, from the standpoint of the theological import of the Song—grounded as it is in the theological import with which God has canonically infused the marriage relationship that the Song celebrates—it is irrelevant whether the characters are viewed as literal or imaginary, historical or parabolic, biographical or idealized. The quality of the marital relationship that it depicts is the core of the Song's theological import.

Her

The Song's female voice is referred to as a shepherdess (1:8) and identified as a "Shulamite" only in 6:13 (twice).[18] She is usually called (my) companion, darling, lover (רַעְיָתִי; 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4). Other terms of endearment include my bride (4:8, 11), my sister (5:2), or my sister-bride (אֲחֹתִי כַלָּה; 4:9, 10, 12; 5:1), and love (אַהֲבָה; 7:6). For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to her throughout this article as the Shulamite.

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[16] Whether viewed as a continuous plotline or a collection of poems between lovers, the Song displays a series of dramatic interchanges between the protagonists, not unlike the Book of Job but with no intervening narration.

[17] Nonetheless, in the interest of full disclosure, in my view Walter Kaiser correctly identifies "three main characters in the book, not just two: Solomon, the Shulamite maiden whom Solomon is trying to win as another prize in his growing harem, and the boyfriend whom the maiden really wishes to marry instead of marrying King Solomon." Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 145. For others who hold that Solomon is not the Beloved in the poem, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 301–2; Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2010), 270–71; Longman, 16.

[18] Debate persists over what this term signifies. Was she an inhabitant of Shulam (unknown location), or of Shunem (2 Kgs 4:8) as a unique variant of Shunammite (2 Kgs 4:12, 25, 36; cf. Abishag the Shunammite, 1 Kgs 1:3, 15; 2:17, 21, 22)? Or is her title a feminine form of Solomon, "the Solomoness" (Solomon = *Shlomo*; Shulamite = *Shulamiyt*), or does it derive from *shalom*? For a discussion of these and other possibilities, see Mitchell, 127–36.

Him

The Song's central male character is identified as a "shepherd" (1:7). The Shulamite's favorite pet-name for him (over thirty times) is (*my*) *beloved* (דּוֹד or the possessive דּוֹדִי).[19] It is important to note that *the terms of endearment are exclusive to each of the lovers.* She never calls him anything but *beloved*, and he never uses this term with reference to her. Remembering this exegetical fact will prevent a multitude of interpretational and applicational sins.[20] Moreover, the beloved speaks always and only to the Shulamite; the Shulamite speaks both to her beloved as well as to others, but always about her beloved. I will refer to him throughout the rest of this article as the beloved.[21]

Chorus

A group or groups of plural speakers (who are clearly neither the Shulamite nor the beloved) occasionally react to or interact with statements from the Shulamite or the beloved. Their precise identity is unclear. Most are presumed to be a group of "daughters (of Jerusalem)" since the Shulamite sometimes addresses such a group.[22]

Dialogue

Translations vary somewhat in identifying and assigning dialogue, but those differences relate more to the "supporting cast" than the protagonists. Speakers are consistently identifiable by virtue of the number and gender of the Hebrew pronouns. Generally, it is particularly clear when He or She is speaking.[23]

The important dialogical question in the Song is not only *what* is said, but *who* says it. Who speaks the most? Who gets the most "press"? In a love song written by a man in a largely patriarchal society,

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[19] Interestingly, this address of endearment surfaces in another song: "Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of *my Beloved* regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill" (Isa 5:1; unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the NKJV.] The song is sung to Yahweh, the owner of the vineyard (5:7). Many interpreters think the singer is Isaiah; if so, he would be speaking as a model Israelite in his holy affection for Israel's exalted God. Cf. John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 152–53; he also observes that the same word *vineyard* in Isaiah's song "has sexual overtones in Canticles."

[20] James Hamilton's reference to the woman as "the beloved" misses the Song's consistent use of this term exclusively as the woman's term of endearment for the man. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 307–8.

[21] As indicated earlier, whether or not Solomon is the beloved in the Song and, as such, the main male actor (Him) is irrelevant for the purpose of this article's proposal. For the sake of thoroughness, nonetheless, it is worth noting that Solomon is mentioned by name a few times (1:1; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12). Within the Song itself, the referent of "Solomon" or "the king" is debated. Some clearly refer to King Solomon comparatively (8:11–12). Others could be culturally conditioned references to the beloved as her "Solomon" or her "king," so to speak (3:7, 9, 11). Some evidence suggests that brides and grooms in Near Eastern marriage culture referred to each other as "king/prince" and "queen/princess." Bell, 270; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 92.

[22] **Bold** indicates instances of this group's dialogue; the other references indicate the group being addressed or referred to (1:**4**, 5, **11**; 2:2, 7; 3:5, 10, 11; 5:8, **9**, 16; 6:**1**, 9; 8:4; 8:**8–9**). Based on the statement in 1:6, 8:8–9 is often attributed to the Shulamite's brothers.

[23] Bell, 271.

who would you expect to be the dominant speaker? Likewise, in a song widely regarded (even without an allegorical hermeneutic, as we will see below) to be in some way reflective of God's love for his people, who would you expect to hear the most?

To begin with, who gets the first word? She does (1:2). Who gets the last word? She does (8:14; again, the term *beloved* always refers to him, and he never uses it of her). That alone is suggestive, but the bigger question is, who speaks the most throughout the Song? She does. And the ratio is not insignificant. The Shulamite sings to and about her beloved twice as often,[24] and virtually twice as much content as he speaks about her.[25] Moreover, he always sings to (and about) her; she sings sometimes to him and sometimes to others, but always about him—his qualities, her desire for him, and what he means to her.

Table 1. Song of Songs: Dialogue Distribution

Speaker	Hebrew
Total Words	1,246[26]
Chorus	148 (12%)
Him	379 (30%)
Her	719 (58%)

Why is that? This is no tongue-in-cheek commentary on the loquacious proclivities of the feminine personality, hardly giving her beloved a chance to get a word in edgewise. In any literary creation, dialogue does not happen by accident. More than anyone or anything else, the Song rivets our attention on the Shulamite bride and her devotion and passion for her beloved. That is both purposeful and meaningful.

This is not a novel observation. Others have noted the rhetorical dominance of the female voice in the Song.[27] Köstenberger and Goswell write, "The Song of Songs is largely a woman's song, for the

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[24] Garrett's outline of the Song assigns seventeen "speaks" to the woman, and only eight "speaks" to the man. Garrett, 381, 383.

[25] Again, Hamilton's depiction of the Song is askew because of this. Referencing Song 7:10 ("I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me"), he writes, "The use of this term 'desire' in Genesis 3:16" indicated that "Yahweh cursed the woman with 'desire' for her husband, which meant that she would inappropriately seek to take the initiative in the relationship. The Song sings the righting of reversed desire. The one who desires is the man, and it is he who takes proper initiative in the relationship." Hamilton, 308. Whatever one makes of Genesis 3:16 (including the tantalizing detail that its Hebrew word for "desire" occurs elsewhere only in Genesis 4:7 and Song 7:10), the dialogical realities of the Song do not emphasize the man's initiative in this relationship. In fact, Gledhill enumerates thirteen passages that express "the woman's initiatives" versus only six passages that express "the man's initiatives." Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs,* BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 251–52.

[26] Including 1:1, the total is 1,250 words; but the opening verse is introductory and not part of the Song. The Shulamite's word count includes two passages in which she is quoting the beloved (2:10–15; 5:2); in one of them, she recounts what he says to her in her dream. In both cases, they are his words only secondarily; she is the one saying them, and that, too, is significant.

[27] "Where the Torah and Prophets' texts portrayed the male, whether human or divine, as the dominant and proactive partner, Song of Songs presents a female character who dominates speech and takes most of the sexual initiatives—at least in terms of words. The male is either quoted (e.g. 2:10–14), or speaks rarely (e.g. 1: 9–11, 15; 2:2; 4:1–15; 5:1; 6:4–10;

female lover is the first and last to speak, as well as the most frequent speaker, and sometimes her male beloved speaks only indirectly, through her speech."[28] The question is, why does Solomon (and more importantly, the Holy Spirit) create this uneven distribution of speech in the Song? What is the significance of this literary emphasis? And what impact might it have on our understanding of what the book is doing canonically?

The Theology of the Song: A Survey of Views

The theology of a book revolves around the larger transcendent truth(s) it intends to communicate. Expressions of the Song's theology are varied, though certain themes recur. Garrett raises the question of whether the Song "preaches Christ." Granted, the Song is not allegorical.

> It is Christocentric, however, in the same sense that practical teachings of Proverbs and Deuteronomy are Christocentric. Christ is both Lord over the created order and giver of life. God originally pronounced the creation of man and woman good and decreed that their union should be the most profound of human relationships, and Christ brings this aspect of mortal life to a realization of the creation ideal. . . . It is in the sphere of a new covenant relationship with God in Christ, with transformed attitudes, Spirit-driven enablement, and the awareness of sins forgiven that husband and wife can find the union of openness and fullness of blessing God intended.[29]

Garrett's observations are valid but his view of the Song's theological ramifications seems too narrow, especially in view of the vast scriptural reservoir of the marriage metaphor. What the Bible teaches about the marriage relationship should inform our understanding when God employs that metaphor throughout Scripture to describe the divine-human relationship.

Eugene Merrill writes that the Song's purpose is "to glorify romantic love and to celebrate the purity of sexual intimacy within the bonds of married life." [30] "Its bold, graphic imagery of lovemaking between the Shulamite maiden and her beloved came to be understood in Jewish exegesis as a parable depicting the Lord's love for Israel and, in Christian hermeneutics, a picture of Christ's love for the

etc.)." David M. Carr, "Passion for God: A Center in Biblical Theology," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 23 (2001): 20. Carr, however, sees the relationship depicted in the Song, "featuring as it does a prominent female voice and a different vision of male-female relationships" as "probably grounded in some kind of alternative women's discourse within ancient Israel." Similarly, Gledhill writes, "The initiatives of the girl in seeking romantic encounter and stimulating desire are far more numerous in the Song than those of the boy. This subtle [?] disproportion may be a deliberate attempt by the author gently to challenge the pronounced patriarchalism of OT Hebrew society." T. D. Gledhill, "The Song of Songs," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 216. Such explanations exemplify a horizontally preoccupied tunnel vision regarding the Song's canonical role and significance.

[28] Köstenberger and Goswell, 299.

[29] Garrett, 380.

[30] Eugene Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 639.

church."[31] Accenting the divine side of this relationship, however, overlooks the Song's distinctly lopsided dialogical emphasis on the Shulamite's love for the beloved, not the other way around.

Merrill sums up the Song's theological significance: "Theologically, the message is that what God has created is intrinsically good and beautiful and that man and woman, in their love and admiration of one another, are fulfilling the creation mandate that imparts to the two of them together the authority to have dominion over all things and to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen. 1:28)."[32] But the Song says nothing about procreation[33] or dominion. The Song focuses on the delights of the relationship itself, and especially through the Shulamite's eyes. Merrill describes the Song as a theological paradigm for a higher relationship—"that of the Lord for his creation and, in particular, for mankind created in his image"—that furnishes a glimpse "into God's indescribable and inexhaustible love for all beings in all places and at all times."[34] This emphasis is so broad and generalized, however, that it risks subverting the Song's point and hortatory power. Merrill's portrayal not only reverses the Song's emphasis on the Shulamite's love for her beloved but also flattens the specificity of the Song's theology into a generic message about God's love for humanity. The Song does not depict mere compassion or love in general. It is laser-focused on a particular species of *relational* love—the supremely *exclusive* relationship of romantic love in the context of marriage. To be sure, God does love creation and mankind in general; but that is not the category of love that the Song of Songs spotlights and praises.

David Moore and Daniel Akin argue that although allegorizing tendencies have gone too far at times,

> marital relations are to be an earthly picture of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). In the Song of Songs we are given an idealistic portrayal, replete with imagery fit for the garden of Eden (e.g., Song 4:12–5:1), of the relationship between the king and his bride. While maintaining that the song is about human love, human love does not exhaust the greatest Song humanity has ever encountered. Indeed, the Bible sings the beauty of the love of God.[35]

Once again, the emphasis on God's love for man, however admirable and biblical, misses the Song's distinctive and repeated focus on *her* love for *him*—and by way of application, on man's love for God, not the other way around.

Dennis Kinlaw notes (*contra* Merrill) that marital love is more than a means to the end of procreation: "The prospect of children is not necessary to justify sexual love in marriage. Significantly, the Song of Solomon makes no reference to procreation. . . . The Song is a song in praise of love for

[31] Merrill, 639.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Song 3:4 and 8:5 technically refer to procreation with reference to the birth of the Shulamite and the beloved themselves (respectively), but not with reference to the relationship between the Shulamite and beloved.

[34] Ibid., 639–40.

[35] David G. Moore and Daniel L. Akin, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs,* HOTC (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003), 138–39.

love's sake and for love's sake alone."[36] But he also goes further than Garrett in recognizing a larger theological undercurrent.

> Song of Songs is more than a declaration that human sexual love in itself is good. Historically, Judaism and Christianity have agreed. Have they been wrong so long? Their argument was allegorical. Their intuition may have been correct even if their exegetical method left something to be desired. This writer concurs with their position and believes there is biblical support for that intuition. That support rests in the analogical nature of the relationship between biblical election and human marriage.
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> The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship God has to His people is almost universal in Scripture. From the time God chose Israel to be His own in the Sinai Desert, the covenant was pictured in terms of a marriage. Idolatry was equated with adultery (Ex. 34:10–17). Yahweh is a jealous God. Monogamous marriage is the norm for depicting the covenantal relationship throughout Scripture, climaxing in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. God has chosen a bride.[37]

Kinlaw is on the right track. It is not that God initiated a relationship with Israel and then cast about trying to think of a good analogy to describe the nature of that relationship. Human marriage exists (in part) to mirror the divine-human relationship, not vice versa. But correlating the Song to the divine-human relationship needs to reflect accurately the literary emphasis of the Song. God has chosen a bride; but that point views the Song through the wrong end of the binoculars. That is not the side of the relationship that the Song accents. The Song is not about the man choosing the woman, nor does it forestage his love for her. By a two-to-one ratio, the Song sings her love for him.[38]

Longman, too, recognizes that the Song's emphasis on marital love "does not exhaust the theological meaning of the Song."

> When read in the context of the canon as a whole, the book forcefully communicates the intensely intimate relationship that Israel enjoys with God. In many Old Testament Scriptures, marriage is an underlying metaphor for Israel's relationship with God. . . . In spite of the predominantly negative use of the image, we must not lose sight of the fact that Israel was the bride of God, and so as the Song celebrates the intimacy between human lovers, we learn about our relationship with God. So we come full circle, reaching similar conclusions to the early allegorical approaches to the Song. The difference, though, is obvious. We do not deny the primary and natural reading of the book, which highlights human love, and we do not arbitrarily posit the analogy between the Song's

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[36] Dennis Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:1207. Is it truly love for love's sake, however? Or is it love for the loved one's sake?

[37] Ibid., 1208.

[38] Indeed, she "not only speaks more often but also initiates the relationship and pursues it." Longman, *Song of Songs*, 15.

> lovers and God and Israel. Rather we read it in the light of the pervasive marriage metaphor of the Old Testament.[39]

Because the NT also adopts the marriage metaphor, he adds, "Christians should read the Song in the light of Ephesians and rejoice in the intimate relationship that they enjoy with Jesus Christ."[40] Longman enunciates the same view in his later commentary on the Song but fills out the picture considerably. After explaining the errors of the allegorical view and defending the Song as a celebratory depiction of human marital love, he nevertheless argues for a theological reading of the book as well.

> Read within the context of the canon, the Song has a clear and obvious relevance to the divine-human relationship. After all, throughout the Bible God's relationship to humankind is likened to a marriage. . . . The allegorical approach was not wrong in insisting that we read the Song as relevant to our relationship to God. . . . More than any other human relationship marriage reflects the divine-human relationship. . . . The allegorical approach erred in two ways, however. First allegorists suppressed the human love dimension of the Song, and, second, they pressed the details in arbitrary ways in order to elicit specific theological meaning from the text.[41]

In other words, in dismissing an allegorical view of the Song, *das Kind nicht mit dem Bade ausschütten*; we need to dump the allegorical bathwater without ditching the theological baby. One can discard an allegorical reading without rejecting the Song's analogical-theological relevance, just as one need not superimpose an allegorical hermeneutic over a literal and applicational reading of Ephesians 5:22–33 to recognize the analogical-theological mystery that Paul underscores in 5:29–30 and 32.[42] Longman moves the discussion of the Song decisively in the right direction. Still, a dimension of that divine-human relationship—borne out by the textual data of the Song and the canonical data of the rest of the OT—is missing from the discussion. Can we be any more specific about the ramifications of the Song for Israel's marital-covenant relationship to God (or ours to Christ)?

I will argue that a canonical-theological[43] perspective that "navigate[es] between nonhistorical and nontheological readings of the text"[44] preserves the Song's theological relevance, which is distorted by

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[39] Tremper Longman III, "Song of Solomon, Theology of," in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible,* ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 743.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Longman, *Song of Songs,* 67, 70.

[42] For a helpful discussion of the identification of the mystery in 5:32, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 775–81.

[43] The characteristics of canonical theology in the context of OT studies include (1) "focus[ing] on the final canonical form"; (2) "interpreting texts in light of their broader Old Testament contexts"; (3) "reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture"; and (4) viewing the Old Testament as not merely historically descriptive but "prescriptive." Though the approach was championed largely by Brevard Childs (devoted as he was to historical-critical views of the text), it is possible to adapt a canonical-theological approach without such baggage. See Brittany Kim and Charlie Trimm, *Understanding Old Testament Theology: Mapping the Terrain of Recent Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 91–101, 104–9.

[44] Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 464.

an allegorical reading and lost by a purely horizontal interpretation. The goal of a canonical-theological approach "is to focus on the function" of the book's "canonical position and on its historical role as part of Israelite . . . literature."[45]

But not all canonical-theological readings emphasize the same conclusions or points of contact. House's "canonical synthesis" underscores the Song's affirmation of the institution of marriage (à la Genesis 1–2 and the records of the patriarchs), the permanence of marriage, and the heterosexual nature of marriage as God has designed and intended it.[46] House, however, comes closer to the mark of the Song's *distinctive* function and role when he observes that "the love depicted here puts the adulterous love Israel shows for Yahweh . . . to shame." But, like so many others, he parallels "God's love for Israel and the love reflected in Song of Solomon"[47] in generic terms that seem to overlook the fact that the Song highlights one specific side of that marital love in particular: the woman's.

Themes of the Song

What are the core ideas communicated by the dialogue and actions of the protagonists? Garrett states the Song's horizontal message as succinctly as anyone: "The message is that the mutual pleasures of love" within the marriage relationship "are good and possible even in a fallen world. The song is a testimony to the grace of God and a rejection of *both* asceticism and debauchery."[48]

Moore and Akin express the message of the Song in similar terms[49] but explore the implications of this message a bit further. They argue that the Song's ideal of marital love is characterized by the first two qualities listed below. To those, however, I will add four more significant and equally suggestive characteristics. All of these characteristics of the relationship illustrated in the Song become relevant for the canonical-theological proposal developed below.

Mutuality: Reciprocal Satisfaction

The Song describes a reciprocity of relationship between the woman and the man; each is fully satisfied in the other. Dorsey further corroborates this idea. As one of the Song's central themes, "the reciprocity, or mutuality, of the lovers' love" is "conveyed by the matching of reciprocal expressions of love. . . . These structuring techniques underscore the point that the two lovers are equally in love."[50] This mutual satisfaction is accomplished not merely by each seeking to satisfy oneself in the other, but by each so surrendering to the other that self-satisfaction becomes a byproduct of spousal satisfaction.

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[45] House, 463. I have generalized House's specific statement about the Song to underscore the broader value of the canonical-theological approach.

[46] Ibid., 466–69.

[47] Ibid., 465.

[48] Garrett, 380.

[49] Moore and Akin, 140.

[50] David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 213. The Song, he adds, portrays a "mutuality of romantic love that is virtually unparalleled in ancient Near Eastern literature," displaying "a surprisingly high view of woman and a remarkable vision of the ideal of equality and delightful reciprocity in the marriage relationship."

Exclusivity: Undivided Affection

One reason for the potency of this reciprocal delight is the total exclusivity of the relationship. The intensity of this love (more on this below) is increased and explained by the fact that there is no wish for anyone else and no room for a competing affection. Their love occurs within the freely embraced covenantal confines of an exclusive marriage relationship.

> There is no hint of any illicit sexual activity. . . . In the scenes of greatest intimacy (4:9–12), the girl is called (literally) "my sister-bride," which puts the couple in the marriage bed. . . . The intimacies and the delights of love are experienced within the bond of a secure relationship . . . . There must be no intruders; so in biblical terms, adultery is a most serious offense, the breaking of a bonded relationship.[51]

Kaiser proposes Proverbs 5:15–21 as the "entrée" to the Song, where Solomon extols the sanctity and satisfaction of the sexual relationship within the singularity of marriage; indeed, Song 4:12, 15 echoes the same metaphors as the proverb, where the beloved describes his bride as a spring, a fountain, and a well of flowing water.[52]

Purity: Virtuous Passion

This characteristic grows naturally out of the previous one, and yet it is distinct enough to warrant separate emphasis. Because the Song expresses this passion within the context of marriage, the delight described is innocent and appropriate and, therefore, candid and unashamed (cf. Gen 2:25). The Song "presents the purity and wonder of true love" and "teaches the beauty and holiness of the marriage-love relationship that God has ordained for humanity."

Intensity: Consuming Ardor

The Song sustains a high level of passion, each for the other; the mutual expression of that ardor is what the entire Song is about. It is "a highly romantic book.[53] The point is so obvious from the imagery and language of the book that it might be thought hardly worth mentioning, but it is often ignored. Note that the lovers speak to and of each other frequently and in great detail. They relish their pleasure in each other not only with physical action"—which, it should be noted, is actually minimized in the Song—"but with carefully composed words."[54]

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[51] Gledhill, "The Song of Songs," 217. Mitchell, too, takes pains to emphasize that sexuality outside the bounds of the covenantal relationship of marriage is a perversion of the divine gift itself and all that it signifies. Mitchell, 279–81.

[52] Kaiser, 145.

[53] Bell emphasizes this point as well, to counterbalance the overemphasis of some interpreters: "This book is really about romance, not primarily about sexuality" (274).

[54] Garrett, 379.

In other words, the Song highlights a love that is, above all, passionately *expressed*. Moreover—and this is crucial to emphasize—*the locus of this passion*, this desire and delight that is expressed by each for the other, *is not in an act or event*. That leads to the next characteristic.

Relationality: Person-Centered Delight

This consuming passion *is focused not on an act, but on the person.* This is as significant for the theological role played by the marriage metaphor in Scripture as it is for the nature of an authentic marriage relationship itself. Sexual union, consistently reserved in Scripture exclusively for the marriage relationship, becomes itself a physical metaphor for the unique relational (comm)union of two *persons* into a unitive intimacy.

> [T]he union of the spouses' bodies has a more-than-bodily significance; the body emblematizes the person, and the joining of bodies emblematizes the joining of the persons. It is a symbol that participates in, and duplicates the pattern of, the very thing that it symbolizes; one-flesh unity is the body's language for one-life unity.[55]

That abstract fact is visibly illustrated by a unique physiological reality. Consider the implications of one expression easily overlooked, though twice spoken: *his left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me* (2:6; 8:3). That language conveys not merely a close encounter, but a *face-to-face* encounter. The divine design of human biology is illustrative of the relationality built into human sexuality. For every other species, copulation is a purely functional, instinctual act that conveys—even on the level of its physical mechanics (anterior-to-posterior)—no concept of intimacy, unity, or (comm)union. By contrast, the physiological design of the characteristic human union (anterior-to-anterior, face-to-face) is unique to humans, and physically expressive of the nature of the marital relationship as a holistic communion between two persons. Given the illustrative function of this full-orbed relational union within the context of divine revelation, the exclusivity and consuming nature of this preoccupation with another *person* is theologically significant.

Divinity: Love as a Divine Gift

Mitchell captures this principle most succinctly: "The love that is celebrated by the married couple through their sexual intimacy is kindled by God himself."[56] That married love is a creation and gift of God (a fact affirmed elsewhere in Scripture; Gen 1:26–28; Heb 13:4) is underscored in the Song's dramatic climax in 8:6—its "theological highlight."[57]

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[55] J. Budziszewski, "The Natural Laws of Sex," *Touchstone,* July/August 2005, https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=18-06-022-f. Budziszewski's article is the most forthright and insightful treatment I know on how God has (and has not) designed human sexual intimacy to work.

[56] Mitchell, 281. Mitchell complains that the theological import of the statement is missed by many English translations. The ESV and NASB are among the few that reflect the divine reference.

[57] Mitchell, 6. The translation of 8:6 that follows in the text is Mitchell's.

> For love is as strong as death,
> and ardor is as fierce as Sheol.
> Its flames are flames of fire,
> the flame of Yah.[58]

The Song's assertion that such love is ultimately a divine gift sanctifies the mutuality, exclusivity, purity, intensity, and relationality of married love.[59] It is a gift of the God who is love (1 John 4:8, 16) to those he created as man and woman in his own image.

A Canonical-Theological Proposal

A common canonical perspective views the Song as a commentary on Genesis 2:24–25, "a manual on the blessing and reward of intimate married love."[60] Other approaches similarly fixate on the Song as a depiction of the ideal marriage—almost Eden revisited amid a fallen world.[61] "The Song's principal reference," therefore, "is not to Christ and the Church or to Jehovah and Israel but to the husband/wife relationship."[62] As such, "the Song is wisdom's reflection on the joyful and mysterious nature of love between a man and a woman within the institution of marriage."[63] Even on this view, however, many also concede a theological dimension inherent in the biblical use of the marriage metaphor.

> From the creation story in Genesis 1–2 to the marriage of the Lamb in Revelation 21, human sexuality is presented as a specific gift from God to his creation, and serves as a suitable metaphor

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[58] Mitchell describes the final expression in 8:6 (שַׁלְהֶבֶתְיָה) as "the single most significant phrase in the Song," which "tragically most expositions downplay and mistranslate" (1188). See Mitchell's detailed defense of this reading (1185–92). Despite Mitchell's lament over the majority report, the list of those who share his view and translation is not inconsiderable. A sampling of others who argue for this reading include Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation, and Commentary* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 74; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 190–92; D. Phillip Roberts, *Let Me See Your Form: Seeking Poetic Structure in the Song of Songs*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), 327; Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 144; Hess, 237, 240. Regardless of one's view of 8:6, that the flame of marital love is a sacred gift from God is consistent with other revelation in any case (Gen 2:24–25; Prov 5:15–19; Eccl 9:9; Heb 13:4).

[59] Others have identified some of these same characteristics outlined above. E.g., Longman, *Song of Songs*, 70: "From the Song we learn about the emotional intensity, intimacy, and exclusivity of our relationship with the God of the universe." Ernest C. Lucas also calls attention to certain characteristics about the nature of the relationship described in the Song, including its "equality," "mutuality," loyalty, "exclusivity," and its "'responsible' attitude to love." *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 197–98.

[60] Kaiser, 146. Cf. this same view of the Song as commentary in Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion & Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible,* NSBT (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 207; R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 265; G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), 37; Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther,* NSBT (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 30–31.

[61] Hamilton, 307–8.

[62] Van Kleeck, 49.

[63] Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 575.

> to illustrate the relationship between God and his people. The Old Testament is as replete with references to Israel as the wife of the Lord as the New Testament is with references to the church as the bride of Christ.[64]

In short, the Spirit of Christ who superintended the writing of the Song (1 Pet 1:11) intended it to be more than merely a commentary on human marital love. Even most theological readings of the Song, however, give almost no attention to the specific ramifications of how the relationship is depicted in the Song—not only the corollaries of its positive expressions, but also the corollaries of its foil-like negative implications.

Stephen Dempster comes tantalizingly close to the specific emphasis I am proposing when he remarks, "When reading this text, the reader hears Jeremiah's oracle, Ezekiel 16, and Hosea 1–3." But then the arrow strays from what I suggest is the Song's canonical-theological bullseye. He continues:

> There is the reminder of the passionate and fiery love that Yahweh had for his people before the crisis [the captivity]. An exiled Israel hears the ending of the song perhaps as a melody to a different drum from when the original audience heard these words:
>
> > Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned (Song 8:6-7).
>
> Such a text inspires hope for Israel, since it suggests that God will not abandon his beloved.[65]

To be sure, God's love for Israel is incontestable and unending. But if we apply the Song's language consistently, we are not the "beloved"; God is. And if we take the Shulamite's dialogical dominance in the Song as purposeful and significant, then the Song's analogical relevance emphasizes not so much a reassurance of *God's* love, but a call to God's people to emulate the *Shulamite's* love.

The Song is a poetic expression of love within the marriage relationship, which functions as the primary analogy for a spiritual reality unfolded throughout Scripture—an analogy that God himself has chosen as the primary metaphor for depicting the nature of the relationship between himself and his people.[66] Since God has designated the marriage relationship as that primary analogy, the Song necessarily and inherently conveys far-reaching biblical-theological ramifications in its broader canonical context. That is why it is significant, for example, that *the Song especially highlights not the male side of the relationship* (analogous to God's love), *but the female side* (analogous to the love of

[64] Carr, 37. Actually, however, the OT is *far more* replete with references to that relationship than the NT.

[65] Dempster, 207–8.

[66] It should go without saying that this analogy does not extend to the sexual dimension of the marital relationship; unfortunately, however, that caveat needs to be spelled out in view of recent writings that seek to apply the sexual dimension of marriage to the divine-human relationship, and even to draw explicit parallels between sex and spirituality. Even when God uses the marriage metaphor, he always speaks of his relationship to his people in covenantal and relational terms, never in sexual terms. The closest the metaphor comes to sexual innuendo is when it describes the human *breach* of that relationship in terms of adultery and prostitution. As will be seen below, Ezekiel 16 and 23 are quite graphic in illustrating negatively the nature of Israel's adulterous abandonment of Yahweh.

God's people for him). Insofar as marriage furnishes a pervasive divine illustration of the relationship between God and his people, Song of Songs furnishes a divine illustration—a model—of the ideal posture of the human side of the divine-human relationship. The Song's prevailing positive motif of marital love expressed by the Shulamite for her beloved stands in glaring contrast to the OT's prevalent negative motif of Israel's habitual spiritual adultery and prostitution.[67]

Amid a canonical revelation awash in repeated and (often) explicit references to Israel's spiritual adultery against her divine Husband, the Song depicts the antithesis to that covenantal adultery. As such, *the emphasis depicted in the Song is not so much Yahweh's love for Israel, but what Israel's love for Yahweh should look and sound like*. However intentional or not on Solomon's part, on the canonical level the Song functions as a live commentary on the adulterous defection of Israel from her covenant obligation to love Yahweh entirely and exclusively (Deut 6:4–5). The Shulamite's verbal domination of the Song's dialogue is an unshushable vocal testimony to the kind of passionate adoration and exclusive devotion Israel should have for her Husband (Isa 54:5). The Shulamite was—throughout Israel's history—a timeless witness to what Israel should have been in her relationship to Yahweh, but was not. And insofar as the NT continues the use of that marriage metaphor, the Shulamite remains an enduring model for God's people today.

The Song includes no explicit identification of such an illustrative use of its female protagonist; it stands on its own as a vivid depiction of the marital ideal. Nevertheless, God's pervasive employment of the spiritual/covenantal marriage/adultery motif throughout the OT to describe the nature of his people's defection from him—to which the Song depicts such a magnificent exception—strongly suggests an implicit illustrative intention.

This is not allegory through the back door. The Song really is first and foremost about human marital romance. But God, not man, created marriage. And God, not theologians, decided to make the marriage/adultery motif the primary metaphor under which he describes and discusses the nature of the covenantal relationship between himself and his people. The remainder of this article will focus on briefly tracing the biblical theological use of that metaphor throughout the canon.

A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Marriage/Adultery Metaphor

The marriage/adultery metaphor surfaces in almost every corpus of the biblical canon. If the Shulamite's example of single-hearted devotion and passion is both an indictment of and model for God's people, the best way to demonstrate this canonical function is by conducting a biblical theological survey of God's frequent use of a theme that is the Song's diametrical opposite: covenantal defection as spiritual adultery.[68]

[67] The view proposed in this article does not necessitate that the Shulamite be flawless in all her interactions with the beloved. Even if some passages in the Song may be interpreted as a failure on the Shulamite's part, the standard she represents need not be perfection but, rather, an unshakably exclusive devotion that always compels her to return to her beloved even in spite of sin and failure.

[68] One invaluable work for filling out such a survey is Raymond C. Ortlund, *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, NSBT (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003). He begins by treating marriage in Genesis 2 as the necessary backdrop to the study of spiritual adultery. This context is essential for understanding and interpreting the enormity of spiritual adultery when it begins to surface later in the redemptive story. The rest of the work is a detailed,

Old Testament

Pentateuch

The metaphor is rooted in the garden of Genesis 2 with the divine institution of the one-flesh union between one man and one woman. The exclusivity of monogamy is built into the created order by God from its very genesis. If the ultimate goal was purely procreation, there are far more efficient ways of filling the earth than monogamy. But in the plan of God, from the commencement of creation human marriage exists for more than merely procreation; it is also designed to mirror the divine-human relationship, setting the stage for God to employ marriage as a metaphor to describe the nature of his relationship to his people.

Exodus 19:3–6 identifies the unique relationship that God covenants with Israel "above all the nations of the earth," and to which she accedes. Exodus 20:2–6 is the first enunciation of the concept of *divine jealousy* toward his people.[69] Exodus 34:14–16 reiterates God's jealousy even more forcefully and contains the first sexual metaphor for spiritual infidelity. God describes the worship of any other god as "playing the harlot" and "whoring after other gods" (i.e., prostituting themselves). We can become so accustomed to this metaphor, sanitized by its biblical usage, that it fails to shock us that God would choose such a repugnant metaphor to describe how he views the spiritual unfaithfulness of his people.

Leviticus 17:7 and 20:4–6 restate the harlotry motif in connection with the pursuit of other gods. In Numbers 15:39 God commands the Israelites to attach a tassel to their robe as a visual reminder, "that you may not follow the harlotry of your own heart and your own eyes." The verb *follow* is the same term used repeatedly (13x) to describe those who *searched* or *scouted* or *spied out* the land. In other words, the tassels were a visual warning against *exploring* the harlotry that lurked within them. The verse casts the net much wider (and deeper) than merely external, physical idolatry.[70] Nevertheless, the Pentateuch closes with the sad forewarning that "this people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land . . . and will forsake me and break my covenant which I have made with them" (Deut 31:16). The Historical Books chronicle that national descent.[71]

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systematic, biblical-theological treatment of passages that develop the theme of spiritual adultery. Ortlund does not, however, draw any connection between this theme and the canonical-theological function of the Song of Songs that I am proposing. I believe these two themes function in counterpoint as contrasting images of God's people.

[69] We think of (and often experience) jealousy in terms of suspicion, distrust, and paranoia. But in certain contexts, jealousy is an entirely appropriate emotion. How we express it can sometimes be sinful; but the expectation of loyalty and devotion from someone with whom we have a covenant or family relationship is a righteous expectation.

[70] "Verse 39 does not specify idol worship as the harlotry in view. Nothing in the passage requires so narrow a referent. This ambiguity has the positive exegetical function of broadening the field of reference to all the wayward desires of the heart and the lust of the eyes. The language concerns Israel's 'playing the harlot' after their own hearts and eyes, implying without limitation the various temptations which may be imagined, perceived, and caressed through the senses. . . . The net force of the declaration is that all the sinful preferences of the autonomous self, running contrary to the law of God, are a kind of whoredom" or prostitution. Ortlund, 40.

[71] Solomonic authorship would place the Song early in the nation's canonical history, lending weight to the canonical-theological function proposed in this article, whether or not the later sacred historians and prophets were conscious of the contrastive function of the Shulamite. At the same time, however, even a late date for the Song would not undermine its

Historical Books

After God miraculously preserved them through the wilderness and established them in the land, as if on cue, Israel ignored her godly leadership and played the prostitute not only with other gods (Judg 2:17; 8:33) but even with Gideon's ephod (Judg 8:27). The Chronicler underscores the irony that they prostituted themselves with the gods of the very people "whom God had destroyed before them" (1 Chr 5:25). Nor was this true only of the largely apostate northern kingdom; the southern kingdom followed in their steps as well (2 Chr 21:13).[72]

Prophets

Israel's infidelity to their covenant relationship with Yahweh is particularly pronounced in the Prophets.[73] The development of this metaphor takes a new twist through God's instruction to Hosea to take a wife of promiscuous tendencies, "for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the Lord" (Hos 1:2). God is making it very personal—as if *your* wife entered into multiple adulterous affairs and prostituted herself freely while still living under your roof, enjoying your protection and provision. God then issues the first prophetic call to the people to abandon their harlotries before he shames them publicly (Hos 2:1–13). The passage takes an unanticipated, undeserved, impossibly merciful and affectionate eschatological turn when God promises to woo the nation back to himself in language at least conceptually reminiscent of the Song (Hos 2:14–20).

In Isaiah 1, Jerusalem "the faithful city has become a harlot" (1:21). Judah's "spiritual whoredom is seen to translate into social meltdown, for the offences decried in vv. 21-23"—murder, rebellion, robbery, bribery, exploitation of the vulnerable—"are not religious but moral and social in nature" and the symptoms of a "deeply personal defection from Yahweh."[74] And yet, like Hosea, Isaiah includes a glorious future reversal by way of an extended eschatological marriage metaphor (Isa 54:4–10).

Through Jeremiah God again uses the metaphor of Judah's harlotry to describe her wanton abandonment of him: "on every high hill and under every green tree you lay down, playing the harlot" (Jer 2:1–5, 20–24). The language of love in the Song is sensually rich yet beautiful in the purity of its passion, because it is expressed within a legitimate marital relationship. Here, the language is sexually explicit but vulgar and repulsive; God portrays his people as a camel or donkey in heat, desperately searching to mate. So pathetic was Judah's frenzied quest for any replacement for Yahweh that "she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees" (Jer 3:1–9).

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canonical-theological function. Either way, prospectively or retrospectively, the adoring Shulamite functions as a foil to adulterous Israel.

[72] Though it does not warrant a separate section, the spiritual adultery motif also finds its way, however briefly, into poetic literature as well (Ps 106:39).

[73] The degree to which the prophets (or historians) may have been aware of the Shulamite foil in the canonical-literary background is irrelevant to the Holy Spirit's superintending design. It is unlikely that the biblical authors saw any significance in the omission of Melchizedek's genealogy from Genesis 14 until the writer of Hebrews discloses its Christological implications (Heb 7:3).

[74] Ortlund, 79.

A witness against Israel's adulterous desertion of her covenantal Husband, the Shulamite all the while modeled the pure passion of a wife delighted in and devoted exclusively to her husband. By virtue of God's persistent use of marriage as his preferred metaphor for his covenant relationship with Israel, she exemplified the delight and devotion that Israel should have had for Yahweh alone. If you want to see what Israel should look like with respect to her God, look at her.

It is important to remember that these prophetic diatribes did not originate from the puritanical opinions of a few antiquated old fogies. In each case, they are quoting Yahweh's words and viewpoint. And through no prophet does God speak more bluntly than Ezekiel. Ezekiel features two chapters of embarrassingly explicit imagery to describe Judah's marital infidelity.

Ezekiel 16 is the longest literary unit in Ezekiel. The language in Song of Songs, though often sexual, is poetically discrete; the language in Ezekiel 16 is shockingly graphic. "No one presses the margins of literary propriety as severely as Ezekiel."[75] Again, however, if we take inspiration seriously, Ezekiel is merely the human mouthpiece. His testimony is that what he writes is "the word of the Lord that came to me" (16:1). These are not the independent word choices of a crass and crotchety old prophet; they are the words "breathed out" by God as he speaks to and through the prophet. The interpreter faces a dilemma, then: trying to convey the force of divine language without unduly offending public sensibilities. The fact is, it is offensive because God jolly well means it to be offensive. The description of God's people here is the ultimate antithesis to the picture we have in the Song of Songs. Judah has become not merely an adulteress, nor even a harlot; she has become, in the common parlance of God's choosing, a nymphomaniacal slut.

In 16:1–14 God's love for Jerusalem is personified and allegorized.[76] The oracle is specifically addressed to Jerusalem (16:2–3) as a theodicy justifying the utter decimation of that city.[77] He reminds Jerusalem of the pagan background from which he redeemed her when she was unattractive, unpromising, and utterly helpless (16:4–5). Nevertheless, God shed his kindness and compassion on her (16:6–7) and graciously beautified her (16:8–14; cf. 2 Chr 6:5–6; 9:1). But then something very ugly starts to happen. Imagine the pure and lovely heroine of your favorite romantic story—whether Cinderella or Snow White, Dickens's Amy Dorrit or Gaskill's Molly Gibson, or (to make it as personal as God takes it) your own fiancée or wife—turning to adultery, choosing to become a prostitute. It is a revolting, offensive thought that such stories should end that way. That is the point, and that is exactly how God reacts.

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[75] Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 466. Whereas previous oracles "softened potentially offensive ideas with euphemisms (e.g., 7:17)," in chapter 16 "Yahweh throws caution to the wind" and describes Judah's adulterous defection in the earthiest of language. After identifying some of the oracle's most explicit vocabulary, Block adds that "the semipornographic style is a deliberate rhetorical device designed to produce a strong emotional response." Block, 467.

[76] "This prophetic oracle is a parable about a despised orphan who became the wife of a king, then gave away all his gifts to become a harlot"—a story of "grace and ingratitude, of God's love spurned." Lamar Eugene Cooper Sr., *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 167–68.

[77] "Jerusalem's total destruction could be justified only as a response to some enormous evil. The purpose of this oracle is to describe that sin in the most graphic terms so all who witness it will recognize the justice of God. . . . Radical evil requires a radical response." Block, 466, 470.

God describes Jerusalem's arrogant conceit and her ungrateful betrayal in committing spiritual prostitution (16:15ff.). The language grows exceedingly graphic—more so in Hebrew than in most translations—as God describes Jerusalem's incurable infatuation with the surrounding culture under the metaphor of a wife-turned-prostitute. The verb זנה (prostitute oneself, be a harlot) occurs twenty-one times in Ezekiel 16; and the references to high places (16), images (17), pagan offerings (18–19), and pagan worship (20–21) indicate the character and locales of this behavior. Though the books of Kings do not characterize the nation's idolatry in this way, it is the fullest documentation of what this spiritual adultery and fornication looked like.[78] They multiplied their idolatrous adulteries at every intersection and eagerly made themselves available to anyone and everyone other than Yahweh (25)—the Egyptians (26), the Assyrians (28), the Babylonians (29). God is not describing literal forays into sexual immorality (although that may well be a side-effect of much of the idolatry). He is using married immorality as a metaphor to describe how he views their defection from him and his covenantal claim on their exclusive affection and allegiance. But they left him and joined themselves to these idolatrous cultures with an obsessive desperation that disgusts even the nations that they want to be like. Yahweh describes his reaction to this betrayal not only in terms of an offended God but in the language of a wronged and grief-stricken husband:

> I was crushed [lit., broken, shattered] by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot after their idols; they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations. And they shall know that I am the LORD; I have not said in vain that I would bring this calamity upon them. (Ezekiel 6:9–10)[79]

Again, off in the canonical distance stands the Shulamite bride in the Song of Songs, faithfully modeling the pure passion that God's people should have had for him, their Husband, alone. But it gets even worse. Yahweh describes Jerusalem's behavior in terms of a dysfunctional and insatiable lust to be like—and be liked by—the surrounding nations (16:30ff). God bluntly observes, in effect, that a prostitute at least does it for money, but Judah is so desperate to be like them that they are willing to pay for the privilege of becoming their whore. The sin God is addressing is not ultimately sexual—though there are moral effects in the behavior of his people. The sin God is addressing is deeply spiritual, cultural, religious, and relational.

How does this kind of frenetic, obsessive, idolatrous, adulterous behavior start? It did not begin with random Israelites who one day happened to see a gold idol and think, "Wow, that's so beautiful it must be god! I think I'll adopt that as my god and worship it." That's not how idolatry works. Idolatry is religious but never merely religious; it is social and cultural. Israel's idolatry was often not a total abandonment of Yahweh and a wholesale substitution of some other religious culture. Often it

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[78] See, e.g., 2 Kings 16:1–4, 10–18; 21:1–15. One can trace the trajectory of this behavior throughout the books: 1 Kings 3:2–3; 11:7–8, 13; 14:23–24; 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35; 16:4; 17:9–19; 18:4, 22; 21:3; 23:5, 8, 9, 13.

[79] For a discussion of whether such a passage is adequately explained under the rubric of anthropomorphism, see my article "Greater Is He Than Man Can Know: Divine Repentance and an Inquiry into Anthropomorphism & Anthropopathism, Impassibility and Affectability," *JBTW* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 73–93.

was either idolatry bootlegged in and cross-dressed as the worship of the true God (Exod 32) or idolatry unabashedly adopted alongside their continued worship of Yahweh (Jer 7:9–10; Ezek 23:38–39)—up to their high places for an idolatrous fling, then back down to Yahweh's temple as though it was all perfectly natural. The prophets all describe God's disgust with their worship and sacrifices to him for that very reason. Fawning affection for the surrounding culture cannot coexist with a genuine, Shulamite adoration for God and God's culture, for the same reason that John expresses: the two are diametrical opposites and mutually exclusive (1 John 2:15).[80] *Idolatry—spiritual adultery—always begins with an admiration, affection, and infatuation with the ways and values of a neighboring culture.* Idolatry is not a merely religious or ideological phenomenon; idolatry and culture go hand-in-hand. Idolatry is not ultimately *about* the *idol*; it is about the accompanying *culture*, *values*, and *lifestyle*. If you want confirmation of that, read Ezekiel 23.

In Ezekiel 23 God delves into another account of Israel's marital infidelity. She is not merely an adulteress, nor even a harlot; she has become something even worse. The chapter describes both Israel and Judah as obsessed nymphomaniacs. The verb עגב (to have sensual desire, to pursue erotically) occurs eight times in the OT, and seven of them are in Ezekiel 23. God tells another parable—an allegory, in fact—about two women. By the end, God's metaphorical language becomes what we might almost call obscene (23:20)—but that is because the actual behavior he is describing is, to him, obscene. Again, we must remember that God is not directly describing the physical sexual immorality of all the Israelites with their pagan neighbors; God is describing their idolatrous obsession with the surrounding pagan culture via obscenely metaphorical sexual language. Why? *Because Israel's religious idolatry was a form of marital betrayal and infidelity of the worst imaginable kind*. It was an infatuation with the up-and-coming surrounding pagan culture.

> But she increased her harlotry; she looked at men portrayed on the wall, images of Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion, girded with belts around their waists, flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like captains, in the manner of the Babylonians of Chaldea, the land of their nativity. As soon as her eyes saw them, she lusted for them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. Then the Babylonians came to her, into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their immorality; so she was defiled by them, and alienated herself from them. She revealed her harlotry and displayed her nakedness. Then I alienated Myself from her, as I had alienated Myself from her sister. (Ezek 23:14–18)

Their adulterous fascination was fixated not on the gods, but on the people: their dress, their pomp, their style, their impressive appearance, their pride and security. Judah's breathless response to what they saw was, in essence, "That's what I want! That's what I want to look like! That's who I want to be like!" In short, Judah idolized them. What form did this idolization take? Religious idolatry? This was

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[80] Paul underscores the same contradiction—intriguingly, with specific reference to the Corinthian temptation to idolatrous syncretism: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons." He follows this with a clear echo from the OT: "Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?" (1 Cor 10:21–22).

certainly part of it (cf. 23:36–39). Literal immorality with the Assyrians and Babylonians? Probably. Political alliance? Perhaps.[81] But unlike Ezekiel 16, the focus here is not on the religious dimension (idolatry proper) but on the cultural dimension: the people, the clothing, the status, and the culture of the surrounding nations. That desire to be like the nations around them is the OT expression of its NT counterpart: worldliness.

Worldliness is nothing more complex than world-likeness, and *world-likeness* is simply the opposite of *Godlikeness*, the antithesis of holiness—the concept of being set apart uniquely and exclusively for God, as a wife is to her husband. Worldliness is not an idea invented by paranoid puritanical fundamentalists. It is not even a new concept first introduced in the NT; it was going on all through the OT. Indeed, it began in Genesis 3:15.[82] Worldliness is simply identifying with the unbelieving world—preferring their company, emulating their culture, adopting their values over God's, or mixing it with God's and calling it "Christian" under the rubric of liberty. What the NT identifies as "the world" is not a neutral zone but a war zone, a kingdom of subjects governed and influenced by a spirit who is in declared and hostile opposition to God. Worldliness, like idolatry itself, is not an external sin, though it has external symptoms. Worldliness is a profoundly internal, spiritual, religious, and relational issue. The OT describes it as wanting to be like "the nations." The NT calls it conformity to "the world." In both Testaments, God calls it not just idolatry but adultery and prostitution. That is because religion and culture are inseparable; religion always expresses itself in the culture, and the culture that is embraced always works its way into one's religion. All of life and culture is religious, because all of reality is theological, because all of humanity has been created in the image of God and is either pursuing God or rejecting and rebelling against him.

Even from this vantage point, looking back at the Song of Songs through a wide-angle canonical lens, the Shulamite remains as the single, sterling example that Israel never emulated in her relationship to Yahweh her Husband.

> "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am lovesick!"
>
> "What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?"
>
> "He is altogether lovely. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" (Song 5:8, 9, 16).

[81] Summarizing this passage, Cooper observes that "Judah's political prostitution was presented in explicit sexual terminology." Cooper, 228. But when did Judah rush into a political or military alliance with Babylon, and was then repulsed, as the passage describes? Jehoiakim became subservient to Babylon for three years, but then rebelled against them (2 Kgs 24:1). It seems nearer the mark to say that Judah's *cultural* prostitution is in view and presented in explicit sexual terminology.

[82] Genesis 3:15 guarantees the perpetual presence and temptation of worldliness and the unavoidable endemic enmity between God's people (the seed of the woman) and the world (the seed of the serpent)—an enmity that is not merely natural or incidental, but divinely ordained ("I will put enmity between"). For a thorough exploration of the trans-canonical significance of Genesis 3:15, see Jonathan M. Cheek, "Genesis 3:15 as the Root of a Biblical Theology of the Church and the World: The Commencement, Continuation, and Culmination of the Enmity between the Seeds" (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2019).

In the context of the predominant metaphor God has chosen throughout the canon to portray his relationship to his people, the adoring Shulamite depicts the ideal wife and, as such, the consummate foil to adulterous Israel. It is no wonder that God delights in, and that the best of songs celebrates, the kind of pure passion and devoted admiration of such a woman for her husband—because Yahweh never got it from the nation he favored and chose out of all others. One day he will.[83] And as the NT indicates, he still looks for it from his people today.

New Testament

The marriage/adultery metaphor does not die with the OT but resurfaces in the NT. Familiarity may not always breed contempt, but it can certainly kill curiosity. We may become so acclimated to NT language that we never pause to marvel over it.

Gospels

On at least three different occasions Jesus referred to the religious leaders of his day as an "adulterous generation" (Matt 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38). Why *adulterous?*[84] This was not a swipe at the personal morality of some in his audience; it was a concise and picturesque commentary on the spiritual character of these Jews as a whole, echoing the language of the prophets.[85] The OT background of that language that we have already surveyed corroborates this conclusion. And yet, if there is one sin of which these Jewish leaders were not guilty, it is pagan idolatry in the classic religious sense—which only underscores my earlier argument that spiritual adultery involves much more than merely bowing down to false gods.[86] One wonders whether the word *adulterous* caught their attention and made them think of any of those OT passages.

Epistles

Paul echoes God's language of jealousy when he writes, "I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin [like a Shulamite bride] to Christ" (2 Cor 11:2). In Paul's most classic use of the marriage metaphor, his instruction to wives and husbands is likened to and grounded in the higher reality between Christ and his church (Eph 5:22–33). Like the Song of Songs, Ephesians 5 is first and foremost about the human marriage

[83] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the eschatological reversal of Israel's adultery, but it is promised even in some of the stiffest condemnations we have surveyed (e.g., Jer 3:11–20; Hos 2:14–23; 3:5).

[84] This is the same root used in Ezekiel 16:32 (LXX), "You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband."

[85] Citing this passage, Ortlund comments, "Jesus responds to his contemporaries with denunciations not unlike those of the Old Testament prophets" (137). Lane likewise notes that this is "an expression colored by the strictures of the prophets against idolatry (cf. Isa. 1:4, 21; Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 2:4)." William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 310.

[86] It is often asserted that the Babylonian captivity cured the Jews of idolatry, but that is not my point here. One has only to read Ezra and Nehemiah with a modicum of attentiveness to see that the exiles were still as susceptible to idolatry and its concomitants as they were prior to the captivity. This was not the case with the NT-era religious leaders. Yet, spiritual adulterers they were nonetheless.

relationship and, secondarily by analogical application (not allegory), about the divine-human relationship.[87]

The NT passage most reminiscent of the OT marriage/adultery motif is James 4:4–5.

> Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

The connections implied in the OT are made explicit here: adultery equals friendship with the world, which in turn arouses divine hostility. Instead of reserving their love and devotion for Christ, these had, by prioritizing their own pleasure (ἡδονή, 4:1, 3) and lust (ἐπιθυμέω, 4:2) and by their affection (φιλία, 4:4) for a world at enmity with God, put themselves on the side of God's enemies. Also, verse 5 again links jealousy to the marriage metaphor; it is the same OT concept of God's righteous claims on the singular devotion of his people. All reality—from angels to humans—is divided into two sides: those who are God's and those who are in rebellion against him. In the OT it was Israel and "the nations"; in the NT it is the church and "the world." To dote on and flirt with the world, let alone to pant and pursue and lust after the world—desiring to be like and to be liked by the surrounding culture—is to commit spiritual adultery. Spiritual adultery is no better than physical adultery just because it is *only* spiritual. It is not just *spiritual* adultery; it is spiritual *adultery*.[88]

Revelation

The marriage metaphor that pervades both the Old and New Testaments appropriately comes to final fruition in Revelation—the consummate book of consummation. The positive eschatological marriage imagery in Revelation 19 and 21 is brightened by its intentional contrast to the preceding negative imagery of Revelation 17–18, where the angel shows to John "the judgment of the great harlot" (17:1).[89]

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[87] "Paul is the one who lifts the hermeneutical capstone into place by revealing what our intuitions may have suspected all along, *viz.* that marriage from the beginning was meant to be a tiny social platform on which the love of Christ for his church and the church's responsiveness to him could be put on visible display. Human marriage is finally divulged to be emblematic of Christ and the church in covenant, destined to live together not as 'one-flesh' for a lifetime in this world but as 'one spirit' for eternity in a new heavens and a new earth." Ortlund, 172.

[88] For some penetrating practical applications of spiritual adultery, see Ortlund, 174–76. Also, for readers who may wonder why 1 John 2:15–16 is not included, the primary focus of this NT survey is not worldliness but the marriage/adultery metaphor.

[89] This description is "indicative of her spiritual harlotry and representative of an ecclesiastical or religious facet that is a counterfeit of the real. In prophetic language, prostitution, fornication, or adultery is equivalent to idolatry or religious apostasy (Is. 23:15-17; Jer. 2:30-31; 13:17; Ezek. 16:17-19; Hos. 2:5; Nah. 3:4). . . . With this background it is beyond dispute that this woman . . . is the epitome of spiritual fornication or idolatry. She leads the world in the pursuit of false religion whether it be paganism or perverted revealed religion. She is the symbol for a system that reaches back to the tower of Babel and extends into the future when it will peak under the regime of the beast. . . . So this woman represents all false religion of all time, including those who apostatize from the revealed religion of Christianity." Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 282–83.

Of all the images God might have chosen to depict the character of this eschatological atrocity, why a whore? Why is a prostitute the divine persona of choice to epitomize this final expression of human mutiny against God? If the ultimate issue at stake in history is a *kingdom* issue between God and Satan,[90] why is Babylon not depicted more simply as, say, a *rebel?* The essence of "prostitution" (literal or metaphorical) is the selling on the public market of what is intended to be private and sacred and devoted to one—whether it is one's body or one's soul and worship. Prostitution is taking what God has given for one use only and merchandising it publicly for profit.[91] This whore prostitutes her soul and worship—which rightfully belong exclusively to God—to the Beast and to the dragon, apparently in exchange for a considerable degree of power, since she is the one *riding* the Beast and therefore in control (for the time being). She is also described as drunk with the blood of saints, implying that part of the services she has sold is an effective role in helping the Beast hunt down and destroy the saints (who would not worship the Beast or his image). Like all prostitutes, she is a tool and a slave.

Against this backdrop of the divine destruction of all prostitutional defection from the Creator, Revelation 19 (vv. 6–9) and 21 (vv. 2, 9–11) complete the biblical-theological marriage metaphor with the marriage celebration of the Lamb (Christ) and his wife ("the saints").[92] "The Bible, like the Song of Songs, ends with a bride calling to the one who loves her to come (Rev. 22:17, 20; Song 8:14)."[93]

Conclusion

It is neither accidental nor insignificant that folded into the creation motif that begins and ends the Bible is the marriage motif. It is a metaphor chosen and reiterated throughout by God himself, and it bookends his self-revelation. Within that canonical context, the Song of Songs eternally enshrines the Shulamite's feelings and expressions of loving marital devotion first and foremost on the literal and horizontal (human-human) level and secondarily—not in spite of but precisely *because* of the literal level—on the analogical and vertical (divine-human) level. Neither she nor the Song functions on an allegorical level. In the broader canonical-theological context, however, she becomes a theological, analogical metaphor for God's people, under both the Old and New Covenants. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that in the rest of the canon, God himself repeatedly employs a husband-wife metaphor analogically.

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[90] Kingdom vocabulary dominates the Apocalypse. The βασιλ- word family shows up 39x; θρόνος occurs 47x; ἐξουσία appears 21x.

[91] Someone who sells her labor, skill, time, or knowledge for legitimate purposes is not a prostitute. That is why the metaphorical definition of "prostitution" is the selling of one's time and services to an unworthy cause.

[92] "According to Jesus, there will be no sex or marriage in heaven as we know them now, but neither will there be any singleness, for both will have been replaced by a greater reality, the final union between Christ and his people, in which all of the redeemed will be included (Rev. 19:6–10)." Webb, 34.

[93] Ibid. "So," Webb adds, "from a New Testament perspective, the love depicted in the Song is not only a taste of what was given in creation, but a sign of what will be consummated in the new creation—a sign of the gospel. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31–32)." Marriage, notes Ortlund, "is a divine creation, intended to reveal the ultimate romance guiding all of time and eternity" (173).

The problem consistently spotlighted by this theological metaphor is the disaffection and unfaithfulness of Israel as the adulterous wife of Yahweh. In contrast, this Song memorializes a consummate picture of the pure and passionate longing of the Shulamite for her beloved. Even though the Song is primarily about marital love—or rather, *because* it is primarily about marital love—it *necessarily* has theological and Christological relevance, because God himself has made the marital relationship his paradigm of choice to picture the relationship between him and his people.

Just as the Book of Ruth is the counterweight of covenantal family-loyalty in the context of the rampant disloyalty that characterized the era of the Judges,[94] the Song of Songs is the counterweight of covenantal marital-loyalty in the larger canonical context of Israel's lack of love and loyalty in her covenant relationship to Yahweh. The Song is the richest image of what should be the posture of Yahweh's people toward him.[95] The canonical-theological observation espoused here should not confuse illustration with interpretation. Just as the marriage relationship is addressed quite literally in the NT yet the marriage metaphor is applied illustratively on the spiritual level, the same may be done here with the Song in its OT context without doing any violence to the text or compromising the dignity of the divine-human relationship.[96]

On a personal level, the Shulamite's opposite is Gomer (Hosea 1, 3). Just as Gomer represents the adulterous unfaithfulness of Israel to Yahweh, the Shulamite's passionate love and loyalty to her husband (her beloved) is the ideal and ultimate foil to Israel's adulterous infidelity to her Husband (her Beloved, Isa 5:1). The Shulamite is the standard of passionate fidelity with the power to shame the nation for its unconscionable infidelity. And because God employs the marriage metaphor trans-testamentally, she remains for all of God's people the standard of passionate admiration and exclusive fidelity both to one's spouse and to one's God. What does that look like?

> To love God truly is not simply to keep his commandments, but to thirst for him as a deer thirsts for flowing streams (Ps. 42:1), and to long for him as a bride longs for her groom. For that is how we ourselves are loved by God . . . . When what should be the fruits and accompaniments of love [i.e., obedience] are mistaken for love itself, the heart sooner or later goes out of religion, however committed to orthodoxy and good works it may be [like the Ephesian church which forsook its

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[94] Ruth 1:1 is important for locating the story not only chronologically but theologically. Throughout the era of the Judges Israel forsook (עזב) the Lord (e.g., 2:12, 13; 10:10, 13, 16). That they failed to be loyal to Yahweh is apparent not only from the storyline but also from the conspicuous absence of the word חֶסֶד, which occurs only twice in Judges (and one of those notes the *absence* of loyalty, 8:35). By contrast, loyalty is a conspicuously present and controlling motif in the Book of Ruth, both in word (1:8; 2:20; 3:10) and action (1:14, 16–17; 2:11; 4:14, 15).

[95] Garrett issues an important and appropriate caveat: "Sexual language should not be brought into the vocabulary of worship and devotion via allegorism or any other means" (357). Likewise, Gledhill concedes that "there is some biblical justification for a moderate typological approach. But the danger of this hermeneutic is that of thinking that the relationship between the believer and God is highly emotional or even erotic." "The Song of Songs," 215.

[96] "We could justifiably treat the Song of Songs as an extension of the marriage metaphor that occurs in many places in the Bible." Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., "Marriage," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 539.

> first love, Rev. 2:4], and it becomes a burden rather than a joy. The Song of Songs is there to stop love going out of our relationships, with God and with one another.[97]

When we fail to measure up to the Shulamite's example, or even like Judah and Jerusalem wander wantonly into sin, chastity can be recovered. The NT introduces us to another woman well-known for her prostitution (Luke 7:36–50). She was no Shulamite. But when she came to Jesus, and poured out on him her repentance, and gratitude, and devotion—he received her, forgave her, and comforted her. He does that for all who return to him like that.

[97] Webb, 35.