

The Rape of Solomon's Song, Part 2

Scripture: Song of Solomon 4:12–16

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(By John MacArthur)

It's frankly hard to think of a more appalling misuse of Scripture than turning the Song of Solomon into soft porn. When people can no longer read that portion of Scripture without pornographic imagery entering their minds, the beauty of the book has been corrupted, its description of righteous love perverted, and its role in sanctifying and elevating the marriage relationship deflected. That *preachers* would do this in public worship services is unconscionable.

Song of Solomon is deliberately veiled in poetic euphemisms that are beautiful by any measure. Some of the imagery is fairly obvious, some highly debatable. In many places the meaning is indistinct enough to permit a great deal of hermeneutical imagination, and wisdom would seem to teach that here—*especially* here—it is best for the preacher not to be a lot more explicit than the Holy Spirit was.

And let's face it: overall, the Song is about as *far* from explicit as the writer can get.

Moreover, since the symbolism is obviously about passion, romance, love, desire, and tenderness, its ambiguity serves a deliberate purpose: it speaks in secret terms about that which should be kept secret. The language is clearly designed to communicate intimate affection privately through veiled, confidential, almost clandestine terms.

This is a vital point: The style of communication between these two lovers beautifully conceals all but the most essential meaning of their love songs in a way that guards the deeply personal (and divinely intended) privacy of the marriage bed.

Song of Solomon is incredibly beautiful precisely because it is so carefully veiled. It is a perfect description of the wonderful, tender, intimate discovery that God designed to take place between a young man and his bride in a place of secrecy. We are not told in vivid terms what all the metaphors mean, because the beauty of marital passion is in the eye of the beholder—where it should stay.

Tom Gledhill wisely sums up this point in his IVP commentary on Song of Solomon (pp. 29-31):

To unpack metaphors and unwrap euphemisms [in Song of Solomon] may mean that our thoughts spiral out of control, and we end up by committing adultery in our imaginations. So if the interpretation of Scripture proves to be a stumbling block, and a cause of offence to some who believe, what then? . . . Once a particular line of interpretation has been suggested, it is difficult to avoid seeing explicit sexual allusions everywhere, until the whole work becomes saturated in references to genitalia, intercourse and explicit sex.

. . . The New Testament answer is very clear and straightforward. Jesus said, 'If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out . . . It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.' In other words, we are not to walk into temptation open eyed when we know our particular areas of weakness .

. . . The language we use to describe various parts of the human anatomy (what the Apostle Paul describes as our 'unpresentable parts') is a matter for delicate sensitivity When [inappropriately explicit] words are used in verbal discourse, a profound disorientation takes place in the hearer, which has a tendency to block off to a large degree any further capacity for rational discussion. They act, so to speak, as verbal hand grenades. Their use is a terrorist activity, causing wanton destruction.

Tremper Longman III says this about preachers and commentators who interpret the Song's poetic imagery in overtly explicit ways: "[Their] free association with the images of the Song is so prevalent that we learn far more about the interpreters than we do about the text" (NICOT, p. 14).

Consider, for instance, the following passage from Song of Solomon 4:12-16. Here Solomon depicts his bride with a complex metaphor employing flowery symbols, and she responds by echoing the imagery:

A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
A rock garden locked, a spring sealed up.
Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
With choice fruits, henna with nard plants,
Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
With all the trees of frankincense,
Myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices.
You are a garden spring,
A well of fresh water,
And streams flowing from Lebanon."
Awake, O north wind,
And come, wind of the south;
Make my garden breathe out fragrance,
Let its spices be wafted abroad.
May my beloved come into his garden
And eat its choice fruits!"

Solomon thus describes his bride as a locked, gated garden. To him, she is a pleasant place full of charming fragrances and soothing substances. The word-picture he paints is beautiful on every level. The details ("choice fruits, henna with nard plants, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon . . . trees of frankincense, myrrh," etc.) may or may not have specific meanings that would have been known to the bride.

All a careful interpreter can say with certainty is that Solomon finds his bride pleasurable to all his sensory perceptions. He therefore likens her to the most pleasant and beautiful imagery he can think of—ointments and fragrances and visual delights—all concentrated together in one well-cultivated spot. A garden. The garden is "locked," which, again, underscores the intimate privacy of pure marital love. Nothing requires the exegete to take it any further than that. Scripture itself *doesn't* go

further than that.

"It's frank but not crass," Mark Driscoll told a Sunday congregation in Scotland just less than 18 months ago. But then he continued by paraphrasing Solomon in a way that was totally crass and not even remotely close to what the Holy Spirit intended. (A CD copy of that shocking message, entitled *Sex: A Study of the Good Bits of Song of Solomon* was recently sent to me by some deeply offended and concerned Christians in the UK. It is primarily the reason I'm doing this series.)

In Driscoll's mind, it's not the bride herself who is a garden, but a specific part of her anatomy. As he re-imagines the passage, it is not a poem about the delightful privacy the marriage partners enjoy; it's a sneaky way of openly exposing that intimacy for all to see.

In essence, he treats Song of Solomon like the old urban legend about the lyrics to "Louie, Louie." Only those with the secret knowledge can really understand it; and therefore its true meaning *must* be something dirty.

That approach caters to prurient ears. It is hard to see it as anything other than sheer exhibitionism. Worst of all, it turns the whole purpose of Song of Solomon on its head.

Tremper Longman was right: eisegesis like that reveals nothing about the book but everything about the interpreter.

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