

# GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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## An Introduction To The Song Of Solomon

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The Song of Solomon is a book that is seldom preached on. This is understandable because of the many challenges posed to most preachers. The book is part of God's word, and it has to be preached some time in the ministry of any preacher. We may have to wait till we are more confident before preaching it, but we cannot wait forever. Since it is part of God's word, it will do us spiritual good to hear it expounded. Although seldom preached, it has nevertheless uplifted and enraptured many godly people in times past who studied it. Here, we shall provide an introduction to the book, followed by a discussion of the interpretation of the book.

### I. The book

#### *The author*

Who wrote this book? The first verse of the book tells us that it is "the song of songs, which is Solomon's." In the Bible, there is only one Solomon, who was the king of Israel for forty years. You might not realise it, but the name always applies to this particular person every time it is found in the Bible. He was the son of David, who built up the kingdom of Israel. Solomon extended the borders of Israel and under his reign the kingdom reached the height of its glory. After Solomon, the kingdom split into two and never recovered its former glory. In the book, many places are mentioned - including Lebanon, Carmel, Mount Gilead, Hermon, and Tirzah - all of which were in the territory of the one nation during the rule of Solomon. It was during his reign that horses from elsewhere were sold to Egypt, and chariots were introduced into Israel from Egypt. We are not surprised, therefore, to read in chapter 1, verse 9, "I have compared you, my love, to my filly (or horses) among Pharaoh's chariots."

#### *Date of writing*

In the original texts, there are a large number of foreign words: Egyptian, Syrian, and Arabic. This shows that Solomon had established widespread contact with the surrounding nations. We know that Solomon had trade ties with Egypt in the south, and Tyre in the north. The timber and workmen for the building of the temple in Jerusalem came from Tyre. The Queen of Sheba came from afar to visit Solomon. Ships were sent to distant lands in trade. The scholars tell us that the book was most likely written in 965 BC, which was the time when Solomon began building the temple.

#### *The style*

What can we say about the style of the book? It is actually a love poem, written in parts, that was intended to be sung. The different parts were probably sung to different tunes. The tunes are not indicated, nor preserved. We therefore take it that the Holy Spirit intended the book to be part of Scripture, to teach us doctrine. We know that the book of Psalms was originally compiled to be sung, and many of the tunes are mentioned. For example, we have "The Lilies," "Jeduthun," and "Death of the Son," which are names of the tunes but the tunes are not recorded for us. God's intention is that we are to study the Psalms as part of Scripture, although they were originally songs.

We know from 1 Kings 4:32 that Solomon, in his lifetime, wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. Not all his proverbs are included in the book of Proverbs, and not all his songs are included in the book of Psalms. Only Psalm 72 and Psalm 127 are attributed to Solomon, while most of the psalms were by King David. Some of the psalms were by men like Asaph and the sons of Korah, while a number of them are unattributed. Solomon probably contributed to many of these unattributed psalms.

Solomon realised that much of what he wrote was not intended by God to be part of His word and therefore did not include them. He was a man submitted to God. His book, The Song of Songs, however, was intended to be part of Scripture, as was his other books, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. We see that Solomon was a man well capable of writing “the song of songs.”

### ***The purpose***

This book is structured as a drama that unfolds in different parts. The story revolves around two characters, namely Solomon himself and the Shulamite woman. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Solomon caught a glimpse of the future glory of God’s kingdom in which the Messiah would come to save His people. The Song portrays the relationship of love between the Lord and His people

## **II. The interpretation**

### ***Three views***

Let us now say something about the interpretation of this book. There are three main views concerning the book. First, there is the literal view which treats the book as a poetic description of Solomon’s real courtship and marriage with his first wife. Second, there is the typological view which accepts the historical reality of the contents but claims that the book ultimately portrays Christ’s love for His church. The third is the allegorical view which considers the book as a spiritual allegory, the contents of which are made up and have no historical basis, and is intended to teach deeper spiritual truths. It depicts God’s love for Israel and, by extension, Christ’s love for the church.

The allegorical view has been held by the Jews even before the time of Christ. Those below thirty years of age were not permitted to study the book for fear that they might not have the spiritual maturity to grasp its message and would be stumbled instead by carnal imaginations arising from its contents. The book was read during the Feast of the Passover, to commemorate the redemption of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses. To the Jews, the book portrays the special relationship between God and His chosen people, Israel. Many Christian commentators and preachers hold to the allegorical view as well. The well-known Old Testament scholar, E. J. Young, favoured the typological view but admitted that the dominant view among Christians is the allegorical one. The well-known commentators, Matthew Poole and Matthew Henry, both held to the allegorical view. The well-known Particular Baptist preacher, John Gill, also held to the allegorical view, and so did C. H. Spurgeon - “the prince of preachers.” Hudson Taylor, the well-known missionary to China, also held to the allegorical view. Dr. Peter Masters, of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, has recently produced a very helpful book on the Song of Solomon which also upholds the allegorical view.

### ***The allegorical view***

We must now give the reasons why we adopt the allegorical view, and reject the literal and the typological views. The first reason is that the title of the book, as given in the first verse, shows that it is the best of all songs. It is called “the song of songs” just as we have the expressions, “the King of kings,” and “the Lord of lords,” in the Bible. Solomon composed many songs, and this is regarded as the best. Furthermore, this song is included as part of Scripture. We would expect this book to contain lofty, spiritual, contents that are glorifying to God and edifying to men. If this book is based on the real marriage of Solomon to his first wife, as claimed in the literal and typological views, we would face with the difficulty of accepting a betrayed marriage as a model. We are told in 1 Kings 11:3-4, “And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as *was* the heart of his father David.” Surely, we cannot accept a failed marriage as the basis of “the best of all songs” in the Bible.

The second reason why we reject the contents as historical is the absurd and inappropriate use of words to describe people. In Chapter 4, verses 1-4, for example, we have the beauty of the bride described in the most amazing way: “Your hair *is* like a flock of goats, going down Mount Gilead;” “Your teeth *are* like a flock of shorn *sheep* which have come up from the washing;” “Your neck *is* like the tower of David, built for an armoury.” Which lady would like to be described like that? Another example is found in Chapter 7, verses 2-4: “Your navel *is* a rounded goblet.... Your waist *is* a heap of wheat set about with lilies;” “Your neck *is* like an ivory tower, your eyes *like* the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim.” Imagine a beautiful lady being described as having a waist like

a heap of wheat, and her eyes like pools, or fish ponds! These words would not be absurd if they are used allegorically, in which the objects used in the comparison symbolize some spiritual values. Then, look at Chapter 2, verse 1, “I *am* the rose of Sharon, *and* the lily of the valleys.” These are the words of the groom, represented by Solomon. If Solomon were to be literally saying these words of himself, it would be nothing but self-praise. Can the word of God be encouraging us to praise ourselves? However, if the groom is seen as symbolizing the Lord Jesus Christ, these words are wholly appropriate to be used by Him. The Lord is beautiful and perfect in His character, and He reveals Himself to us as such so that we may trust in Him as our Saviour.

Thirdly, there is a glaring absence of any description of a wedding feast or of ceremony. The bride is brought to the banqueting house in Chapter 2, verse 4, but that is about the sustenance of the bride by the groom, and not about a wedding banquet. Even the description of Solomon coming in a procession in Chapter 3:6ff, apparently to see the bride, stops short of describing a wedding ceremony. It says in Chapter 3, verse 11, “Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day of gladness of his heart.” The word translated as “wedding” is better rendered as “espousal.” The passage is actually describing the betrothal of the couple which, according to Jewish custom, is more binding than the engagement that we have today. The couple became husband and wife legally, but were not allowed to live together until their actual wedding day. The Jewish betrothal is used in Scripture to portray the relationship between Christ and the church. The church is betrothed to Christ, who has gone to heaven to prepare a place for His people. He would one day return to take the bride to be with Himself. There would then be the “marriage supper of the Lamb,” mentioned in Revelation 19:9.

That leads us to the fourth reason why we regard the book as an allegory concerning the relationship between Christ and His church. The Bible is full of teaching that God is the husband, and His people the bride. We see this in Isaiah 54:5, “For your Maker *is* your husband, the LORD of hosts *is* His name; and your Redeemer *is* the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth.” The same can be seen in Isaiah 65:5 and Hosea 2:16, 19-20. In the New Testament, Christ is portrayed as the groom and the church His bride. We see that in the parables of the Lord, such as in Matthew 9:15 and John 3:29. We see that also in the epistles, such as in 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:23, and Revelation 19:7, 21:2 and 22:17. This is a fact that is well-known to us. In the last passage for example, i.e. in Revelation 22:17, it says, ‘And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.’

The fifth reason why we look upon the Song of Solomon as an allegory is that the Bible itself is full of allegories, and this book in the Bible is not unique in this respect. Remember that an allegory is a made-up story which is not historically true. The story is deliberately made up to act as a vehicle for conveying deeper spiritual truths. An example of allegory is found in Judges 9; where verses 7 to 9 say,

Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out. And he said to them: “Listen to me, you men of Shechem, that God may listen to you! The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us!’ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Should I cease giving my oil, with which they honour God and men, and go to sway over trees?’”

From this we see what an allegory is like. Trees don’t talk, and trees don’t rule. This is a story that is made up. Some versions of the Bible wrongly give this passage the heading, “The parable of the trees,” when it is actually an allegory. A parable is a story based on real-life events, the purpose of which is to convey one main truth. The Lord used many parables in His teaching. When we interpret a parable, we must be careful not to read too much into the details of the story but focus only on the main point of the story. We note, however, that there are some parables which are mixed with allegorical elements. For example, in the Parable of the Sower, there are allegorical elements in which the seeds sown are used to symbolize the word of God, and the birds to the air that take away the seeds represent the devil who prevents the word from taking root in the heart of the hearers. These are allegorical elements, and must be recognised as such, but the whole story is a parable and we must not

lose sight of the main point of the story, namely that we must take heed how we hear the word of God. In a pure parable, the main point of the story must be noted.

We come back to discuss the allegories of the Bible. In Romans 11, the apostle Paul describes the relationship of physical Israel with the church, which is spiritual Israel. He says that the natural olive branches are trimmed off, and the wild olive branches are grafted in. That is an allegory. Another is found in Revelation 12. The woman, which represents the church, is about to give birth to the male Child. The fiery red dragon attempts to swallow up the Child but God takes Him away. The dragon becomes furious and turns his fury on the woman, and then on the other children of the woman. We know that the male Child is the Lord Jesus Christ, for He alone rules all the nations with a rod of iron. We are told of His power over the devil in the subsequent verses. We see, then, that allegories abound in the Bible and we should not think it a strange thing that the Song of Solomon is an allegory.

We consider the sixth reason why this book is regarded as an allegory: Solomon was obviously conscious that he was writing under divine inspiration, with himself as a type of Christ. This point must be grasped. In terms of raw talent, Solomon was well capable of writing this song. We have no doubt about that. We have seen that he had written 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. The question we want to ask is, Was he conscious that he was writing under inspiration things concerning the future Messiah? We answer in the affirmative because of many indications to this effect. First, we note that Solomon's name is mentioned seven times in this book, a number which in biblical prophecy symbolizes God's perfection. Is this just a coincidence, or is there a significance in the number seven?

Second, we note that in Genesis 49:10, when Jacob was near death, he uttered the prophecy concerning Judah, "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes." This was a prophecy concerning the power of rule resting in Judah until a mysterious Person, or event, called "Shiloh" comes. Solomon was from the tribe of Judah, and he would have known of this prophecy. The word "Shiloh" means "Peace," and the name of Solomon in the Hebrew language is "Shelomoh," while his bride in this story is "Shulamith," both of which are derived from the word "Shiloh." The word "Shelomoth" is masculine, and its feminine form is "Shulamith." It seems that Solomon was conscious that he was a type of the coming Saviour - a Ruler who is a King of Peace. Over two hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah was to refer to the coming Saviour as the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

Third, we are told this about Solomon in 2 Samuel 12:24-25, "Then David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in to her and lay with her. So she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. Now the LORD loved him, and He sent *word* by the hand of Nathan the prophet: So he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD." The name "Jedidiah" actually means "Beloved of the LORD." You would remember that when the Lord Jesus Christ was on earth, the voice from heaven came, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." David spoke of the coming of the Saviour who would rule over all His enemies, in Psalm 110:1. The Jews have always understood that a son of David would be the Saviour. The Lord Jesus Christ applied the prophecy of Psalm 110:1 to Himself, in Matthew 22:41-45, for He was a descendant of David. Solomon would have known of his other name, "Jedidiah," and the unusual circumstances of his birth. He would have known that God had chosen him to be a type of the coming Saviour.

Fourth, when Solomon asked for wisdom from God, it was in order that he may judge God's "great people" (1 Kings 2:9). When the temple was dedicated, he prayed that God would hear the supplication of His people Israel whenever they called to Him. We read in 1 Kings 8:53, "For You separated them from among all the peoples of the earth *to be* Your inheritance, as You spoke to your servant Moses, when You brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD." God responded by saying, in 1 Kings 9:3, "I have consecrated this house which you have built to put My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually." We know that the land of Israel foreshadowed the kingdom of Christ, the nation of Israel foreshadowed the church, and the temple foreshadowed Christ's body which would be laid down as the perfect sacrifice to redeem the church, His spiritual body. The church, will be gathered in perfection as the heavenly temple on the last day. Solomon was conscious that Israel was God's covenant people, a people that foreshadowed the covenant people of God in the New Testament age. He was conscious of being appointed as king in a

nation specially chosen by God.

When you consider all these together, you cannot but conclude that Solomon was conscious of the fact that he was being inspired by the Holy Spirit to write Scripture, which foretells the coming of the Messiah and a new age. He was consciously writing this book of Song as an allegory to convey lofty spiritual truths pertaining to the future. The prophets of the Old Testament, like Jeremiah and Daniel, knew that they were writing God's word (Jer. 36:27-28, 32; Dan. 12:4). The apostles in the New Testament knew that they were writing God's word (2 Pet. 3:15-16). We should not be surprised that Solomon knew he was writing God's word.

### ***The value of this book***

We have covered the reasons why this book must be regarded as a spiritual allegory. I must confess that for a long while in the ministry I was not prepared to preach from the book for three main reasons. Firstly, I was troubled by the unusual language used. If we take the book literally, we end up with a lot of problems, as we have discussed earlier. The literal approach certainly posed a problem to me.

Secondly, I was reluctant to treat the book as allegory because allegorising has been a big problem with preachers. Some of those who like allegorising tend to read too much into any Bible passage, to the extent of being ridiculous. I was much inclined to adopt the typological approach, although that has its accompanying problems. What swung me to the allegorical view was the realization that treating the book as allegory is different from applying the allegorical method of interpretation to the book. I hope you see the difference between the two matters. The Roman Catholics favour a method of interpreting the Bible called the allegorical method, in which each passage of Scripture is seen as having three or four meanings - the literal meaning, the moral meaning, the spiritual meaning, and the mystical meaning. In their view, the task of the preacher is to determine the three or four levels of meaning from any passage of Scripture. We do not believe there are three or four meanings to any passage of Scripture. We believe that every passage of Scripture contains one spiritual meaning which God intends us to know. The task of the preacher is to understand the passage by applying the correct rules of interpretation so that the intended meaning becomes clear and then apply that meaning to our various circumstances and needs. The many *applications* must not be confused with the one *meaning* of that passage. To determine the one correct meaning of the passage, the normal historical-grammatical-theological approach of interpretation must be used. We would study the historical background; we would study the words, grammar, tenses and sentence construction; we would take the text in context and compare it with other Scriptures. You see now that treating the Song of Solomon as allegory is different from interpreting it by what is called the allegorical method of interpretation.

Thirdly, my initial difficulty with the allegorical approach was that while accepting Solomon's ability to write such a love poem, I had not seen the truth that Solomon was conscious of being inspired by the Holy Spirit to write such an allegory. Writing a spiritual allegory requires the writer to consciously use it as a vehicle to convey deeper spiritual truths. Was Solomon consciously writing deeper spiritual truths? As we have already seen, Solomon was well aware that he was an instrument of God in writing the book. Just as the prophets and apostles were conscious that they were writing Scriptures, Solomon was conscious that he was writing Scriptures. He not only wrote this book, but also the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and composed a number of the Psalms.

Once you are sure that this book must be treated as a spiritual allegory, it will yield bountiful benefits. We will see "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" in the book. We will be raised to great heights of ecstasy as the beauty of the Saviour and His love for His church are unveiled. We will be searched to the depths of our being concerning our fickleness, our ingratitude, and our inconsistencies. We will be melted with gratitude as we realize the great condescension of our Saviour towards undeserving sinners in coming to save them, to transform them, and to give them a new status before God. This book will stir up your love for the Lord. It will restore cold-hearted and backslidden Christians. It will give a new sense of direction and perspective to your lives.

Prophecies of Christ abound, with rich views of the bride's destiny. Our hearts will be lifted up to look forward to that great day when our Saviour will return for His precious bride. You will come to

realize that nothing in all creation matters more than to belong to God and His Son. You will want to worship the Lord, and sing praise to Him for all eternity. The book ends with the words, "Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices." This echoes the words found at the end of the book of Revelation, "He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

May the Lord bless this book to our souls!

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