

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשִׁלְמָה

The Song of Songs

3-Day
Devotional
Guide



**PILLAR
SEMINARY**
for CONTEXTUAL LEADERSHIP

Day 1

Solomon's Tragic Tale



If we hope to grow from our study of God's word, we need to be willing to change our perspectives, even deeply held ones, on the meaning of texts in the pursuit of the truth. This is often the case with the Song of Songs. Though the Song has often been viewed as providing a pattern or model of a loving intimate relationship, the evidence of the biblical narrative surrounding Solomon, in addition to Solomon's description within the Song itself, make this reading difficult.

The biblical narrative describing the rise and fall of King Solomon is tragic. It's clear that the author of 1 Kings views Solomon in a negative light when placed alongside the Lord's expectations for Israel's kings as described in Deuteronomy 17. For example, despite the biblical law's proscription against amassing large amounts of horses, resources, and wives, Solomon does all three.

	Torah	Solomon
Horses	Deuteronomy 17:16	1 Kings 10:26
Wives	Deuteronomy 17:17	1 Kings 11:13
Riches		1 Kings 10:14

Even with this negative depiction in the biblical narrative, somehow the church has historically read the song associated with Solomon as providing an exemplar of love, either between God and humans, or between a husband (Solomon) and his wife.

Day 1

Solomon's Tragic Tale

The difficulty might arise from the assumption that the Song was authored by or dedicated to Solomon, and is therefore laudatory. Solomon's relationship to the Song is unclear, however, in light of the Hebrew text of verse 1, which states

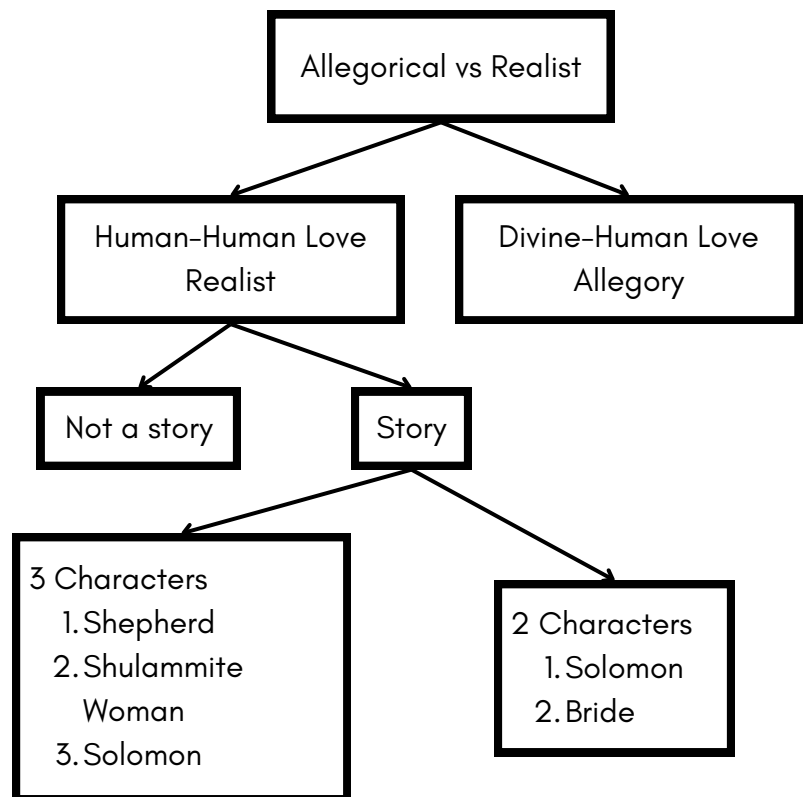
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A song of songs, which is _____ Solomon.

The preposition *lamed*, of which "Solomon" is the object in this verse, can be translated into English as "belonging to," "for," or "about" Solomon. Since Solomon receives heavy criticism in our interpretation of the Song, it's unlikely that Solomon wrote it, or it was written "for" him. Therefore, the Song is about Solomon.

Throughout the history of the church, readers assumed that the Song should be interpreted as an allegory of divine-human love--that it provides an example of God's love for his people, the Church. Given the New Testament analogy of marriage as a love relationship modeling Christ's love for the church, implications for a relationship of marital love were drawn from the text.

As we'll see in the following days of our study, the three-character interpretation, with Solomon serving as the antagonist of the story, is most consistent with the overall biblical perspective on Solomon, in addition to the text of the Song itself.



Day 1

Solomon's Tragic Tale

Guided Prayer

Father, please help me to seek the truth of the Song by faithfully reading, interpreting, and applying it to my life in the coming days.

1

Read


Deuteronomy 17


1 Kings 1-11


Song of Songs 1

2

Reflect


 What has been your experience with the Song? Have you read it or studied it church? Which approach did you take?

 Why do you think the divine-human approach has dominated interpretations of the Song for much of church history? What does this say about the way sex is viewed and discussed in the Church?

 How do you think viewing Solomon as a negative character in the story will impact your reading of the Song?

3

Respond

 As people of the text, we must follow the evidence of the text wherever it leads. Does this approach to the Song challenge your understanding of love, marriage, and intimate relationships?

Notes

Day 2

A Song of Love



In this study, we are referring to the Song as a “Song of Love and Protest.” As we’ve seen, the Song should not be viewed as an allegory of divine-human love, but rather a poetic story of three individuals: a shepherd, a Shulammitte woman, and Solomon, who receives criticism for his abuse of power over the vulnerable. In this section, we’ll focus on the Song’s message of God’s love and concern for the vulnerable—in particular the Shulammitte woman.

God’s concern for the vulnerable is not unique to the Song—it’s a theme that can be seen throughout the Hebrew Bible, especially in Torah, the Lord’s instructions to his people. The Lord speaks into the culture of the ancient world and elevates his people’s concern for vulnerable populations by legislating a special concern for other humans as fellow image-bearers. The Lord moves redemptively to dignify his image on earth despite the chaos brought about by human sin. Some of those that receive special attention in Israel’s laws are landless people/immigrants, the poor, and women.

	Example
Immigrants	Deuteronomy 10:14-19
Poor	Exodus 21:1-6
Women	Deuteronomy 21:10-14

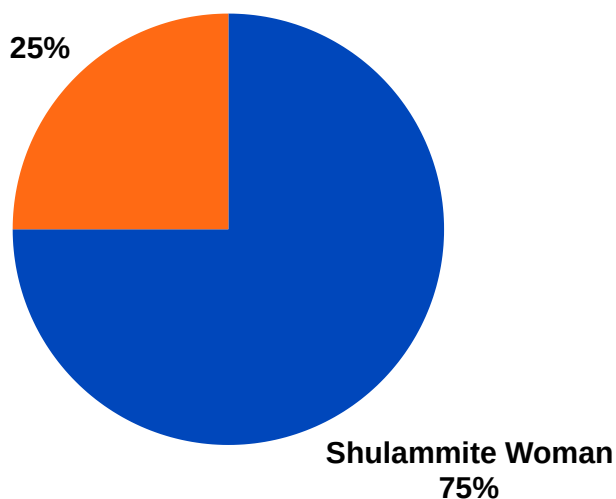
We therefore see the Song as continuing and advancing the Lord’s consistent love and care for vulnerable people, in this case, the Shulammitte woman, who has likely been forced to join Solomon’s harem despite her strong love for another—the shepherd (e.g., Song 1:7).

Day 2

A Song of Love

It goes without saying that in the ancient world, women were a vulnerable population. Women's rights, especially choices regarding whom they married, were vastly limited in comparison to what we see in the West today. It's likely, due to the evidence of the text in Song 8:8-12, that the Shulammitte woman who serves as poet in this Song has been forced to marry Solomon by her brothers, against her wishes.

The "song of protest," which we'll explore in tomorrow's study, gives air to the grievances of the Shulammitte woman who would rather be with her beloved shepherd than the king her brothers have forced her to marry. In this critique, God shows his love for the Shulammitte woman, and by extension, vulnerable populations everywhere.



"...the Old Testament world... is often a dark place, in which male power wreaks havoc on the female world."
--Iain Provan

Impressively, 75% of the Song is written from the perspective of the Shulammitte woman who has been taken against her will into Solomon's vast harem. In no other passage or book do we see such space given to a female voice.

As you read through the Song, consider the significance of the Lord choosing to speak to his ancient people through the voice of the Shulammitte woman, despite her lower societal status, and how incredibly dignifying this is.

Day 2

A Song of Love

Guided Prayer

Father, please help me to see the vulnerable people of the world as you see them--people in need of your care and my protection.


1


Read


- Genesis 1-3**
- Deuteronomy 10**
- Song of Songs 2-4**

2

Reflect


As you read through the Song, take note of how much space is given to the Shulammitte woman's perspective.  What does this tell you about God's concern for the voice of women in general?

The refrain that the daughters of Jerusalem not "stir up or awaken love before it pleases" (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4) has  often been taken to refer to a prohibition against pre-marital sex in Christian culture. How do you read this refrain today?

Does the argument that God is concerned for and loves  the vulnerable of society challenge your ideas or assumptions about God's character?

3

Respond

What vulnerable populations should you seek to serve in your community?  Are there any services in your church or non-profit organizations that God may be calling you to work with?

Notes

Day 3

A Song of Protest



As we continue with our study of the Song of Songs, we turn to the theme of protest embedded within the three-person interpretation of the Song. We've seen that this Song gives voice to the vulnerable Shulammitte woman in her critique of Solomon. While 1 Kings 10-11 provide summary assessments of Solomon's tragic tale on the macro-level, the Song zooms into one particular example of a person and relationship disrupted by Solomon's abuse of power. The Song carries with it a prophetic voice that echoes the Lord's judgement against those who abuse the authority they've been given. The Song of Protest demonstrates how much the Lord hates the abuse of power.

As we've previously seen, Deuteronomy 17 provided Israel with the criteria for successful kingship. It's clear, however, that from the time of Solomon forward, Israel's kings generally did not abide by these expectations. Failure of leadership led to a general failure to abide by Torah's ethics throughout the nation, as seen in the prophets. The critiques of Solomon in the Song are therefore consistent with the concerns toward the vulnerable seen throughout the prophets.

	Example
Oppressed	Isaiah 1:17
Foreigner	Jeremiah 22:3
Poor	Amos 5:11-12

Rather than protecting a vulnerable woman, as would be Solomon's charge as Israel's king, he takes advantage of his position to fill his harem with wives and concubines, evidently, at times, against their will.

Day 3

A Song of Protest

In the case of the Shulammitte woman, Solomon and the woman's brothers conspired together to rip her away from the relationship she truly desired with the Shepherd. This criticism, when read within the three-person story we've discussed, is directed squarely at Solomon's abuse of power.

"The Bible repeatedly reminds readers that God will hear those who are least powerful in society and who are the victims of abuse of power by others."

--Carol Smith

There are several clear instances of such a critique, such as the contrast of beautiful, outside, and possibly edenic imagery used in conjunction with the Shulammitte's love for the shepherd (1:4, 7, 8, 14, 17), with the images used in relation to Solomon's bed chamber, which is inside (1:4, 12). The Shulammitte does not want to be with Solomon. Though these critiques are leveled against Solomon in particular, it's reasonable to take them as expressing God's overall distaste for and indictment against the abuse of power in general--especially against those in vulnerable populations.

Of course, there are times when we ourselves are vulnerable and need protection. During these times we have God's assurance that he hears us and has not forgotten our plight. Yet, we must also ask ourselves where we might abuse our own privilege. We must allow the text of the Song to place a mirror before us and critique our own abuse of power in our families and communities.

Outside ↔ *Inside*

Personal ↔ *Impersonal*

Day 3

A Song of Protest

Guided Prayer

Father, please help me to see where I possess power and privilege that should be used to care for those who are vulnerable and oppressed.

1

Read

- Amos 2; 5
- Song of Songs 5-8

2

Reflect

As you read through the passages in the Song today, take note of all potential critiques of Solomon. How does the idea that the Song is a protest against Solomon's abuse of power update the way you think about God's hatred of the abuse of power?



Which character do you most identify with in the story of the Song? Do you find yourself more in the place of the vulnerable woman, or the king who has abused his God-given authority? Why?



3

Respond

Create a list of all the spheres in which you possess influence (e.g., employment, home, community, church). In the next week, seek to improve and more faithfully exercise your authority to look out for the vulnerable in at least one of these spheres.



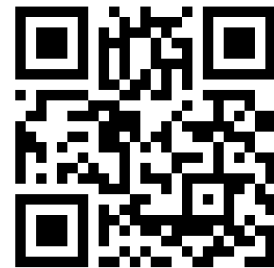
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