



## On the Song of Songs: A Beautiful and Enriching Love

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If we were to go into any newsagent's shop and look at some of the magazines on display, and not just the magazines on the top shelves, we would find headlines to attract potential readers. Recent covers of mainstream women's magazines offer readers a 'Winter sextrology guide – when you'll split, commit or meet Mr. New', 'Real-life man magnets reveal their secrets', 'Feast your eyes on this year's hottest men', 'Decode his sex style,' 'Drive him wild – seduction master class – have ANY man at your mercy', and, more adventurously, 'Enhance the four phases of arousal and prepare for hot action!' Readers are also offered a book on special offer: 'Steam It Up Sex Moves'.

The sexualisation of our society can be seen in ever-changing attitudes to sexuality, sexual habits and the increase in the consumption of pornography. Sexual messages are communicated in television programmes, films, music videos, fashion, and on the Internet. Films and images that might have been classified as pornography a few years ago, are no longer thought to be so and can be seen on mainstream television, in daily newspapers and weekly magazines. Advertising agencies and the companies they work for also encourage us, overtly or subliminally, to make sexual connections, suggesting that we will be more physically and sexually attractive to the opposite sex or the same sex, depending on orientation, if we purchase their products.

Ariel Levy, writer and contributing editor of *New York Magazine*, widely regarded as feminism's newest and most provocative voice, suggests that in our super-sexualised culture, stick-thin minor celebrities, lap dancers, porn stars and surgically enhanced women are the new role models for women, particularly young women, and that,

if your only form of sexual expression is inauthentic to you, is something that you have copied from strippers and porn stars – people who are, after all, paid to depict

pleasure – then your chance of finding true intimacy, connection, even love is grossly diminished ... genuine passion and love seems to be going the way of the dodo.<sup>1</sup>

For men, the situation is not so different. So-called ‘lad’s mags’ boast magazine covers adorned with soft porn images of girls and minor celebrities with headlines like, ‘How to bathe your new baby’ or ‘Win the chance to pole-dance with Pamela’, and with free gifts offered of beer and Durex, these magazines promote the ‘rough magic’ of being a bloke. The Scottish writer and contributing editor of *London Review of Books* and *Granta* magazine writes,

Since good-looking naked men started appearing on the covers of magazines aimed at men, the incidence of bulimia among British males has risen by 100%. ... as if to confirm what the experts always said about the pressure exerted by images of the perfect on the imperfect ... the threat of the male gaze has been making many women and gay men ill for years, but men’s magazines show that the threat has now become general enough to be counted a cultural worry. All men now experience other men’s looks, and that is one of the anxieties these magazines sometimes exploit and sometimes suppress.<sup>2</sup>

Like women, it appears as though men are also being over-sexualised and harassed into becoming more physically appealing and sexual in ways that are neither healthy nor esteem-building.

All of this, of course, has a knock-on effect on our children. Many magazines for teenage girls are now full of sexual content and the Internet has meant a radical change in children’s and young people’s social and cultural environment. Whereas the Internet can be a wonderful learning and research tool for young people in terms of their school and college work and can also be good fun if used under

parental supervision, access to the Internet has made it much easier for paedophiles and other sex criminals to find, make contact with and groom children to sexually abuse or exploit. Our children have become extremely vulnerable and are being sexualised at a much earlier age than previously.

The lectionary reading for the day is from the second chapter of the Song of Songs. This song, of extraordinary eroticism, is the only surviving example of ancient Hebrew love poetry. In it, girl yearns for boy, girl finds boy, loses and finds him again, apparently more than once, girl and boy fall deeply in love with each other, become frustrated by the guardians of convention, boy and girl probably consummate the relationship, and this tale is told in between praise songs of the beauty of the other and their love and desire for one another. They celebrate the admiration of each other's bodies and the beauty of physical love.

What distinguishes this book from other books of the Bible is not the fact that it takes human sexuality seriously – there are other places where that happens – but that the love between man and woman is celebrated exuberantly and non-judgementally, for there is nothing moralistic about it – one has to look elsewhere in the scriptures for that. It is not a book about marriage ethics either. Marriage is mentioned, but there are no references to the traditional contractual obligations that would have been part and parcel of marriage when these poems were written probably sometime in the third century BC.

However, the inclusion of the book in the Bible has brought with it what could be called the blush factor, because of the perceived intensity of the eroticism of the words. Many theologians and other commentators have been more comfortable, interpreting the work as an allegory. Quite apart from the overtly sexual content, this approach solved the problem as to why God is not mentioned in the book, from start to finish.

The allegorical interpretation views the book as describing the love between God and the Church and/or between God and the soul of the

believer, a view expressed by Christian theologians such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Jerome. Alternative opinion to this view found only isolated expression. The Christian thinker, Theodore of Mopsuestia who, in the fourth century, read the Song of Solomon literally and declared it an erotic love poem, was officially condemned at the Council of Constantinople (553) with his view being rejected as heretical. Theodore's opinion was not revived until the sixteenth century when the Calvinists Sébastien Castalion and Johannes Clericus made use of it. Other theologians and thinkers through the ages, Bernard of Clairvaux being amongst the most prominent, have interpreted the book as variously depicting the union between God and Israel or between Christ and the Church, or the mystical union of the individual soul with Christ.

The reluctance to regard the book as an erotic love poem may have had its roots in centuries of Church teaching that sex could only be justified in terms of procreation. It certainly was not something to be enjoyed as an end in itself. It was considered sinful to take pleasure in it – such desire, it was thought, muddied the spiritual waters and prevented people from living a truly godly life. Richard Holloway writes,

The early Christian interpretation of the Adam and Eve myth associated sex with sin, because it was through their original disobedience that sin had entered the world. The eternal innocence of the original couple had been succeeded by sexual desire and guilt; and their immortality had been replaced by death because, according to St Paul, 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 6:23). ... It built into early Christian consciousness an association between sex, guilt and death that led to the heroically ascetic utopianism of some of the early Christian Fathers. It was imagined that, if virginity became universal, death itself might be defeated and the curse of Adam overturned. Women, by the pains of childbirth would continue the race and at the same time partially purge the guilt of their sexuality, which was the cause of all our woe in the first place. This was

the beginning of a complicated nexus that rendered sex itself intrinsically sinful, women as the lure to that sin, and their subjection the consequence.<sup>3</sup>

De-sexing the book by understanding it as an allegory was the way that the Church got around the problem – and the blush factor. Much ink was spilt writing about it and much suffering and shame was caused by expounding a teaching which said that there was something inferior or bad about human sexual love or that the body was evil or an obstacle to the spiritual. However, as a counterpoint, theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Walter Brueggemann and Rowan Williams among them, have preferred to understand the text, not as an allegory, but as the story, in poetic form, of two people who love each other – plain and simple.

The Song of Songs could be thought of as a subversive book, not least because it is the only book in the Bible whose main speaker is a woman, speaking in her own voice. Bold, assertive and confident, the predominance of feminine voices and viewpoints is not what we might expect. Such dominance would not have been readily affirmed by many in the Christian Church. Armed with and impelled by love, the woman defies social authority and the prejudices of people and fashion. She is strong, the man is sensitive. In addition, the book is the only place in scripture where a woman describes her sexuality for herself and where it is not condemned.

The poetic imagery is extraordinarily rich – the beauty of the human body and the wonder of love are spoken of in terms of flowers, fruit, animals, jewels, spices, scent, water, wine, a garden, the countryside, the moon, the sun, and so on. The woman says,

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,  
so is my beloved among young men.  
To sit in his shadow is my delight,  
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.  
He has taken me into the wine-garden and given me loving  
glances.

Sustain me with raisins, revive me with apples;  
 for I am faint with love.  
 His left arm pillows my head, his right arm is round me.<sup>4</sup>

And in chapter 5,

My beloved is fair and desirable,  
 a paragon among ten thousand.  
 His head is gold, finest gold,  
 His hair is ... black as the raven.  
 His eyes are like doves beside pools of water ...  
 His cheeks are like beds of spices, terraces full of perfumes;  
 his lips are lilies, they drop liquid myrrh.  
 His eyes are golden rods set with topaz,  
 his belly a plaque of ivory adorned with sapphires.  
 His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of finest gold;  
 his aspect is like Lebanon, noble as cedars.  
 His mouth is sweetness itself, wholly desirable.  
 Such is my beloved, such is my darling ...<sup>5</sup>

Her lover, is equally expressive,

How beautiful you are, my dearest, how beautiful!  
 Your eyes are doves behind your veil, ...  
 Your lips are like a scarlet thread,  
 and your mouth is lovely;  
 your parted lips behind your veil are like a pomegranate cut  
 open. ...  
 You are beautiful, my dearest, beautiful without a flaw.<sup>6</sup>

And in chapters 7 and 8,

The curves of your thighs are like ornaments devised by a  
 skilled craftsman  
 Your navel is a rounded goblet that will never lack spiced  
 wine.

Your belly is a heap of wheat encircled by lilies.  
 Your two breasts are like two fawns, twin fawns of a gazelle.  
 Your neck is like a tower of ivory.  
 Your eyes are the pools in Heshbon ...  
 Your nose is like towering Lebanon ...  
 You are stately as a palm tree,  
 and your breasts are like clusters of fruit ...  
 Your mouth like fragrant wine flowing smoothly to meet my  
 caresses,  
 gliding over my lips and teeth ...  
 Wear me as a seal over your heart, as a seal upon your arm;  
 for love is strong as death, passion cruel as the grave;  
 it blazes up like a blazing fire, fiercer than any flame.  
 Many waters cannot quench love, no flood can sweep it  
 away;<sup>7</sup>

Such beautiful, sensuous language, the love expressed, encircled and interwoven with the spirituality of God's creation,

... It is here that love gathers ... vital for a human life.  
 For love alone can awaken what is divine within ... a  
 rhythm of grace and gracefulness ... when love awakens  
 in your life, it is like a rebirth, a new beginning.<sup>8</sup>

So how, if at all, can the words of this book speak to us today? Is it a treatise on free love, for these biblical songs do not moralise or sermonise? Some of us may feel a bit uncomfortable or confused with this possibility and important moral conflicts might arise for us, because of a belief that such an interpretation of the Song of Songs runs counter to some of our own deepest values. Yet, the power of the poetry can perhaps resonate with us in this day and age precisely because of the way it presents experiences which all human beings can recognise and in which all human beings can find delight and experience joy. More importantly, for an age which has in many ways become cynical about sex and love, these two people capture 'the springtime and summertime of the soul'<sup>9</sup> and the freshness of new

and consensual love. We are presented with the desires of a man and woman who enjoy the bond of mutual sharing and what we experience is their tenderness, joy, sensual intimacy, reciprocal longing, mutual esteem and wholesomeness. Restraints are clearly present – the woman acknowledges degrees of propriety and the words remind us that love and sexual expression are not something trivial or cheap or a commodity which can be bought and sold in the marketplace. The love of which the book speaks is to be celebrated but respected.

J. Philip Newell writes that,

We will not be able to address the perversity of our generation's fascination with sex by denying the essential goodness of our sexuality, but rather by declaring that it is deeply sacred, an essential part of who we are, and therefore reflecting the goodness of God's image in us ... to acknowledge the goodness of our physicalness and to understand that the sensual has a place in spirituality and can express God's love and creativity.<sup>10</sup>

And this is perhaps the point of reading the Song of Songs as it is, without muddling it up with riddles and allegorical interpretations. The text speaks of sacred sexuality, renewing our delight at the way people ought to be with all their beauty and fragility, refreshing our awareness of the wonder of human love and the richness of human experience and delight at the presence of the other. In love for the other, we share something of the love we have of God and for God.

In all relationships of this kind, might we need to reflect, particularly in this culture of ours, that we might always be on holy ground and that when that is forgotten, all sorts of misuse and abuse can take place? for,

... with whom should we be intimate? And, how does the goodness of the sensual relate to commitment in relationship, or to the demands of community life



and society's well being? Yes, let us passionately and uninhibitedly taste the goodness and delightfulness of creation, but let us also be alert to the laws that protect sustainability and wholeness in our relationships.<sup>11</sup>

In all our diverse expressions of love and physical love, it is how we use it, how we abuse it, how we misuse it, that is important. All sexuality, grounded in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ, doesn't invite open license to do anything, yet neither can it be confined within narrow prohibition. The context of real people's real lives leads us to a place where we are not always sure about what God forbids. Rowan Williams, affirming the grace of the body and the sacred space of erotic love, in a remarkable speech delivered before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, suggests that we are called to embody the creative ethic of God,

to desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire: my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body ... we are pleased because we are pleasing ... the moral question ... ought to be one of how much we want our sexual activity to communicate, how much we want it to display a breadth of human possibility and a sense of the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of other subjects.<sup>12</sup>

There is nothing second best, let alone sordid, about physical love rightly ordered. Human love and divine love mirror one another – and without that intensity of love, we are the less as people. What God celebrates in physical, sexual love is the deepest, selfless, uninhibited sharing of all we have with another – mind, body, spirit – in a faithful and enduring relationship that reflects the unconditional love and dependable fidelity of our utterly faithful God.

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(This paper is based upon a sermon preached in St Giles' Cathedral on 3 September 2006.)

- <sup>1</sup> Ariel Levy, *The Guardian*, June 21 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew O'Hagan, *London Review of Books*, June 3 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Holloway, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999), 58.
- <sup>4</sup> 2:3–6 (*Revised English Bible*).
- <sup>5</sup> 5:10–16.
- <sup>6</sup> 4:1a–7.
- <sup>7</sup> 7:1b–9; 8:6–7a.
- <sup>8</sup> John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* (London: Bantam Books, 1999), 26.
- <sup>9</sup> O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, 206.
- <sup>10</sup> J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1997), 102.
- <sup>11</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace*, 10<sup>th</sup> Michael Harding Memorial Address (Oxford: Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, 1989), 4–5.
- <sup>12</sup> Williams, *The Body's Grace*, 4–5.