FOOD FOR THOUGHT: THE GOOD LIFE

Ecclesiastes 3:9-13, 5:18-20; Song of Songs 2:8-14, 4:9-16
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Introduction to Song of Songs reading:
Song of Songs or Song of Solomon is the fifth book of wisdom literature in the Jewish canon. It is unlike the other books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. It barely made it into the canon. Rabbi Akiba near the end of the first century won the argument when he said, "No Jew ever questioned the sanctity of the Song of Songs; for all the world is not worth the day when the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Davis, p.65).

It has fascinated commentators since its reception into the Jewish and Christian canons being among the earliest and most commented on books of the Bible. The medieval church produced over a hundred commentaries on the book. Bernard of Clairvaux preached 86 sermons and never got past chapter 3. Preachers today tend to avoid it except for a couple verses from chapter 8 which seem appropriate for a wedding homily.

Most of its interpreters have treated the book as an allegory about the relationship between God and God's people, but neither God nor God's people are mentioned in the text. There is nothing in it of religion. It reads as a secular lyric of erotic poetry. It sounds unlike anything else we read in the Bible, and yet so much of the language echoes other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. In this first reading, the woman describes the scene in which her beloved woos her.

Read Song of Songs 2:8-14

In this next reading, the man describes the impact that his beloved has had on him and the desire that he feels for her. Notice her response in verse 16 which encourages him to continue his pursuit. Is it possible that God feels like this about us?

Read Song of Songs 4:9-16

Despite Rabbi Akiva's high regard for the book and the church's fascination with it, it receives very little treatment in churches today. I know of only one colleague who has preached from it extensively on Sunday morning. Most people are only familiar with two verses from chapter eight sometimes read at weddings that speak of the great value of love without using any of the passionate imagery that dominates the rest of the book. When I suggested that we study it a few years ago in our Wednesday study, it received a strong veto. And yet, I can't help but think that the church could have saved itself a great deal of trouble if it had paid more attention to it during certain controversies in its history. Though I don't intend to talk explicitly about the plethora of food imagery in the book, I'd like to offer up a few morsels, some food for thought, and I'd like to begin with Phyllis Trible.

She opens her essay on this book with these words: “Love is bone of bone and flesh of flesh. Thus I hear the Song of Songs. It speaks from lover to lover with whispers of intimacy, shouts of ecstasy, and silences of consummation. At the same time, its unnamed voices reach out to include the world in their symphony of eroticism. This movement between the private and the public invites all companions to enter a garden of delight” (p. 144).

Trible reads this book as a description of God’s intention for human relationships. God intends for us human companionship that is intimate, lives that know ecstasy and fulfillment. Disobedience disrupted the intimacy that existed between Adam and Eve. Instead of bone of bone and flesh of flesh, an inequality is introduced into the relationship. We are told in Genesis 3 that Eve’s passion shall be for her husband, but his passion, his efforts will be expended on producing food from the soil. Songs restores the mutuality. Chapter seven verse 10 makes it official. “I am my beloved’s and his desire shall be for me.”

In short, as Ellen Davis affrms, “The Song affirms the incomparable joy of faithful sexual relationship” (p.82). Unfortunately, the church has too often sent conflicting messages about sex, sometimes affirming the dominance of the man over the woman, insisting that sex was only for procreation. Guilty of exploiting women sexually, some of its clergy have modelled an abusive form of sex. In a culture that exploits sex, the church needs to be more thoughtful in its messaging.

Instead of rejecting erotic language completely, the church needs to speak more responsibly and contextualize it. “We need an interpretation of the Song,” writes Davis, “that takes full account of the remarkable scriptural resonance, which cannot be separated from the erotic language” (p. 69). She’s talking about the fact that the language of Songs reflects the language of the rest of scripture. You cannot read the Psalms without glimpsing God’s strong desire for us and the Psalmist’s passion to be one with God. You cannot read the prophets without sensing the ecstatic, joyful hope of a restored covenant between God and the people. “You shall be my people, and I shall be your God,” says the prophet. The Hebrew sense of “created in the image of God” carries a strong physical resemblance. Jesus speaks of abiding in his disciples as they abide in him. Something to think about. Food for thought.

Though Songs doesn’t mention God it isn’t a huge leap to see the book as an allegory about the relationship between God and God’s people. “The beauty of these poems is part of their theological meaning…. It portrays the love between the Lord and his people as desire,” (p. 12) writes Robert Jenson in his commentary. Given the many ways in which we’ve messed up human relationships, we’re a little more comfortable with this reading. No one would argue with Davis when she writes, “longing for intimacy with God is a necessary desire for a healthy soul… our souls were made to delight simply in God’s being” (pp.82-83).

Unfortunately, for much of Christian history, we have divorced the body from the soul, and pursued an enlightened soul at the expense of a restored body. The separation of body from soul has led to a “spirituality that is hostile to the body” (Moltmann, p.112). But

as Jurgen Moltmann reminds us, “there is no trace in the anthropology of the Old Testament of a higher appreciation of the soul, thanks to its relationship to God, and a depreciation of the body” (113).

When it comes to the details of the Song, most interpreters don’t agree, but there does seem to be a consensus that the allegorical reading of these poems pertaining to God and God’s people cannot be separated from the erotic story taking place between two human lovers. Contemporary thinkers reject the division between soul and body. As Moltmann says, “The soul of the human being manifests itself in the animate body, not in a bodiless inner dimension” (p. 114). So when Hebrews reminds us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, according to Moltmann, “this means that God dwells, not in a separated apex of the soul, but in the whole of the bodiliness that is open to the senses and to society. Physical life is sanctified and affirmed” (p.113).

He’s not commenting on Song of Songs, but his conclusion summarizes its lesson well: “We will seek union with the Spirit of God through the sensory perceptions of the world. We will not only retreat into ourselves in order to seek God; we will also go out from ourselves, in order to experience the presence of God with all our senses in the outside world” (p. 117).

It’s not hard to go from there to Davis’ observation that “the Song… evokes a healed relationship between humanity and the natural world” (p.83). For all that the lovers say about each other, you would be hard-pressed to sketch a drawing of either one. The descriptions are mostly metaphors taken from the natural world. It doesn’t matter to the poet what they look like, only that their love flows naturally from creation. Something to think about as we reconsider our relationship to the earth and how we treat it.

Song of Songs offers us lots of food for thought as we think about our relationship to those whom we love, as we think about our relationship to God, and as we think about our relationship to the earth. It urges us to passionate and purposeful living. It reminds us that ecstasy or joy belongs to the good life, and though I haven’t talked about this, it doesn’t leave out the suffering that sometimes accompanies hopeful living.

The imagery offered up by the poetry is not unlike the poetry of Emily Dickinson who uses images found in nature to encourage us to live lives of wonder. Timothy Jones summarizes his thoughts about her poetry in the most recent Christian Century. These words seem to reflect things we might also learn from the poet of Songs”

“Might we, with the help of the poet’s high art, make an internal shift – from cooler, utilitarian language to more wonder-laden vocabulary? Tending to things that grow helps us tend to our words and images, too. We learn not just to speak about the goodness of biodiversity but also to let ourselves be moved by a kind of bioluminosity… Might not environmentalism gain deeper roots here, in all that comes from a God of inexhaustible creativity? We can make a piece of tillable land a holy ground on which we tread with wider eyes. Or turn toward the waters and skies with a more beatified sense of nature’s expansive mysteries.”

What Dickinson does with the natural world, Songs does with human love. Both poets provide us with a vision for what our lives could be if only we were more attentive. The question offered by Jones might be suggested by our poet as well. *"What does it mean to live an everyday life surrounded by realities both cosmic and earthy?"* (p.51).

As the teacher writes in Ecclesiastes: "This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot." We too often focus on the shortness of life in this verse and overlook the goodness that God intends to belong to our days. Just a little food for thought. Amen.

Resources:

Davis, Ellen F. *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc: Lanham MD. 2001.

Jenson, Robert W. *Song of Songs: Interpretation, A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2005.

Jones, Timothy. "Emily Dickinson, botanist" *Christian Century*, September 2024, Vol. 141, No. 9. Pp. 48-51.

Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril*. Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY. 2019

Trible, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia. 1978.