

The Shulammitte Woman

HER CHARACTER: Hers is the only female voice that speaks directly and extensively to us in Scripture. Ruth's, Esther's, Hannah's, and Mary's voices, for instance, are all mediated through narration. The Shulammitte woman boldly declares her longing and desire to be united to her lover in marriage.

HER SORROW: To have been separated from her beloved at times.

HER JOY: To enjoy so passionate a love.

KEY SCRIPTURE: Song of Songs 1–8

Monday

HER STORY

*S*he was young, beautiful, and desirable. He was handsome, strong, and agile, a shepherd or a king who lavished strange praise upon his beloved: He compared the Shulammitte woman's hair to a flock of goats running down a mountain slope, her nose to the tower of Lebanon, and her teeth ("each with its twin"!) to sheep that have just bathed. We smile at such images. But we are fascinated by this beautifully written collection of love songs. And though we know it is not merely some ancient Valentine's Day card, we are not quite certain what to make of it.

Unlike any other book in the Bible, the Song of Songs is full of erotic imagery. The Shulammitte woman was as passionate as her lover, initiating contact with him, openly declaring her feelings. She

yearned for kisses from his mouth, so in love that even his name smelled sweet to her. She wandered the city at night (or dreamt of wandering it) searching for him. She wished she could pass him off as her brother so that she could kiss him publicly without creating a scandal. Each declaration from her elicited a passionate response from her lover, who sang of her,

Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.
I said, "I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit."
May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine,
the fragrance of your breath like apples,
and your mouth like the best wine.

—Song of Songs 7:7–9

Despite the ancient imagery, we get the message.

The story of the Shulammitte woman and her lover isn't properly a story, one with a clear narrative line, but a poetic expression of love in all its emotional ups and downs. The songs capture the desire, the anguish, the tension, and the ecstasy of love. But speakers and scenes shift so quickly that it can be difficult to understand. No wonder there have been so many different interpretations of the Song of Songs, more than any other book of the Hebrew Scriptures.

What makes this portion of Scripture even more enigmatic is that it never once mentions God. But if God has nothing to do with these love songs, how did this material ever make it into the canon of Scripture in the first place?

The Jews believed the book was not primarily about individual lovers but about God's love for his people Israel. Christians initially read it as a parable of Christ's love for the church and later as a parable of his love for the individual soul. Modern commentators tend to view it more literally, as an expression of the sacredness of married life, the fullest expression of love between a man and a woman. They praise its inclusion in the Bible because it celebrates marital love and the sexual expression of that love. Anyone inclined to believe the Bible teaches a negative view of sex should read this book of Scripture before drawing such a conclusion.

But who wrote these eloquent love songs? Some say various poets, while others say they were written by Solomon in praise of one of his many wives. Yet others have suggested they were written by a woman. Whatever the case, most admit that the poetry of the Song of Songs can be understood in more than one way. The story of the Shulammitte, mysterious as it is, touches our longing to love and be loved.

ROMANTIC LOVE

The erotic poetry of Song of Songs is not merely an expression of sexual desire but of the romantic love between a young man and a young woman. The love between the lover and the beloved is not merely one of physical pleasure and intimacy but one of a depth of feeling and commitment. True love doesn't fade with the changes brought about by time but is stronger even than death. Neither the waters of time nor the rivers of disappointment or tragedy can wash it away (Song of Songs 8:6–7).

Most marriages in biblical times were arranged. When children were very young, their parents formed alliances to provide wives and husbands for their children. Many of these marriages took place when the participants were young, so young that the rabbis eventually established the minimum age for marriage at twelve for girls and thirteen for boys. Mere children even then, romantic and committed love developed over the years of marriage.

Although not all marriages were love matches in the beginning, many arranged marriages were eventually characterized by love. Isaac loved the wife his father's servant had gotten for him (Genesis 24:67). Elkanah loved Hannah, a wife he probably received by arrangement with her family (1 Samuel 1:8). A beautiful example of the sacrificial love of a husband for his wife is given in Exodus 21:2–5, where a husband willingly goes into servitude for life rather than leave the wife he loves.

A man could, however, choose his own bride, even against the desires or arrangements of his parents. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel because he loved her (Genesis 29:18) and got her sister, Leah, also as part of the bargain. Samson begged his father to get a young Philistine woman for him, certain she was the right one for him (Judges 14:3).

The Old Testament seems to assume that husbands will love their wives, whether chosen by or for them. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes tells husbands to be sure to “enjoy life with your wife, whom you

love” (Ecclesiastes 9:9), as though a husband’s love for his wife is a given. The New Testament, however, urges husbands to love their wives. Four separate and clear times (Ephesians 5:25, 28, 33; Colossians 3:19) Paul mentions that husbands should love their wives, once even comparing that love to the love Christ has for his church.

If you have been so fortunate in your own marriage to experience a love even half as passionate as the one described in the Song of Songs, read it in light of your story, thanking God for his blessing. But even if you haven’t, you can be glad that married love and its sexual expression was God’s idea to begin with. You can also read the Song of Songs as a dialogue between God and your own soul. God’s love, after all, is more passionate than any human love you could ever experience. He is the true Lover of your soul, ready to sing with you the greatest and most beautiful song of all.



HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Song of Songs 4:9–5:1.

1. What picture of married love do you get from this passage?
2. When you think about your own marriage or singleness in light of this passage, what thoughts and feelings arise in you?
3. Imagine God having such passion for you. How do you respond?

Read Song of Songs 8:6–7.

4. How do these verses express the commitment between the lover and the beloved? What does it take to sustain such a commitment?
5. Throughout history, intimate love relationships have been shamefully distorted and profaned. Song of Songs gives God’s vision of what love relationships were meant to be. What can you do to pursue such a relationship with your husband or with God?

God doesn't promise the Song of Songs kind of erotic, intimate, earthly love to everyone. He blesses many marriages with it, but it is not something everyone enjoys. However, he does promise to love his people with the same depth of love described here. That includes you. You are his treasured one, his beloved, and he delights in you just as these lovers delight in each other.

Promises in Scripture

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

—DEUTERONOMY 7:6

*Praise be to the LORD,
for he showed his wonderful love to me.*

—PSALM 31:21

*For the LORD takes delight in his people;
he crowns the humble with salvation.*

—PSALM 149:4

I have loved you with an everlasting love.

—JEREMIAH 31:3

*The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.*

—ZEPHANIAH 3:17

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

*Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot wash it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.*

—SONG OF SONGS 8:6–8

- REFLECT ON: Songs of Songs 1:2–4; 2:10–13; 8:6–8.
- PRAISE GOD: That nothing can separate us from his love.
- OFFER THANKS: That Christ's passion has rendered us beautiful in the eyes of God.
- CONFESS: Any failure to believe God truly is the Lover of your soul.
- ASK GOD: To help you enter into this dialogue of love with him.

Lift Your Heart

*T*he Shulammitte woman was so captivated by her lover that his name was like perfume that made everything in her world smell good. In biblical times, names actually revealed the person. Knowing someone's name was equivalent to knowing that person's essence. This week, light a fragrant candle as you take time to reflect on one or more of God's names. Look up relevant Scripture passages and ask God to reveal himself more deeply to you.

Creator of Heaven and Earth (Genesis 14:19)
My Song (Exodus 15:2)
Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)
Good Shepherd (John 10:14)
Counselor (John 14:26)
Father of Compassion (2 Corinthians 1:3)
Savior (1 Timothy 4:10)
Light (1 John 1:5)

Lord, I have placed you as a seal over my heart. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate me from your love.