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The Song of Songs

A Summons to Care for Creation

At the request of the bride and groom, I once did a wedding sermon on the Song of Songs. Afterward several people joked that it may have been the first time a preacher there had ever uttered the word “breast” in a sermon. “Well,” I replied puckishly, “it’s a good biblical word!” (cf. 1:13; 4:5; 7:3,7-8; 8:1,8,10, NRSV).

The erotic content of the Song of Songs has baffled many Christians. In the past, Christians downplayed its eroticism by interpreting the conversation between the man and the woman as a conversation between God and the people of God, or alternately as a conversation between Christ and the Church.

In the early and medieval church, this line of interpretation was so popular that more treatises were written on the Song than any other Old Testament book. For example, Origen (d. 254) penned a ten-volume commentary, while Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) preached eighty-six sermons on the Song.

Modern interpreters more often read the Song as straightforward love poetry between a woman and a man. If we use this general interpretative lens, what benefit might the church gain by studying this book of the Bible?

I propose one possibility: that by stirring us to delight in our spouse, the Song of Songs also inspires us to care for God’s creation.

The Song accomplishes this primarily through its use of metaphorical language. We may notice three pertinent aspects of such language.

Revealing and Hiding

First, the metaphorical language of the Song hides as much as it reveals.

Consider the line “Your belly is a heap of wheat, / encircled with lilies” (7:2). I’m stumped about how to draw with any kind of anatomical accuracy what such a belly actually looks like. I know how heaps of wheat look since I grew up on a farm, and I’m familiar with lilies of various kinds, but that doesn’t tell me enough to draw, describe, or imagine what her belly looks like.

Take another example. In 5:15, the woman says “His legs are alabaster columns, / set upon bases of gold” (5:15). She likely means to

infer that his legs are sturdy, yet this metaphor gives us no tangible information about their anatomical appearance. Are his legs long or short, hairy or smooth? We don’t know. By its very nature, metaphorical language drops a veil before the bodies of this woman and man, discreetly hiding what these

two persons truly look like. The metaphors are erotic but also keep the book from becoming pornographic.



All Body Types

Second, the open-ended nature of metaphorical language lets us read the unique body of our own beloved into these texts, whether it’s an ectomorph, mesomorph, or endomorph—or using another series of names for body types, whether our spouse is shaped like a ruler, cone, spoon, or hourglass. The Song’s metaphors allow us to imagine all types of bodies as recipients of covenantal love.

continued on reverse

Eídon

A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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Summons to Creation Care (continued)

Mapping Creation

Third, metaphorical language makes connections between two different things—it “maps” one thing onto another thing. In the Song of Songs, the woman and the man most often map God’s creation onto each other’s body. They connect the body of their beloved to the plants, animals, and geography of creation.

Consider these lines where she maps henna blossoms, apple trees, and gazelles onto the body of the man:

“My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms / in the vineyards of En-gedi” (1:14).

“As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, / so is my beloved among young men” (2:3).

“My beloved is like a gazelle / or a young stag” (2:9).

He also maps fauna—doves, fawns, and goats—onto her body:

“O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, / in the covert of the cliff” 2:14).

“Your two breasts are like two fawns” (4:5).

“Your hair is like a flock of goats, / moving down the slopes of Gilead” (6:5).

Note that this mutual mapping also extends to features of Palestinian geography. His body reminds her of the En-gedi, an oasis on the west coast of the Dead Sea; while her hair reminds him of Gilead, a hilly region east of the Jordan River.

By linking each other’s bodies to flora and fauna, oases and mountains, these lovers draw a seamless connection of care among the human, plant, animal, and topographical bodies in God’s creation.

The poetry of the Song invites us to make similar links. This human person with whom I am in covenant is delightful in part because he or she reminds me of a horse (1:9), lilies (2:2, 5:13), a palm tree (7:7), or “the scent of Lebanon” (4:11).

If the body of my beloved calls to mind the glory of flowers and fruit, trees and fields, then I will likely be motivated to care for the creation that my lover so wondrously evokes. If the person I love passionately reminds me of “flowing streams from Leba-

non” (4:15), then I will probably feel some passion for protecting and preserving those streams from Lebanon. If I cherish one, then I will want to cherish the other.

The Song’s poetry imaginatively describes a world where humans, plants, animals, and landscapes live in a new Eden (cf. Genesis 2:4b-25). Experiencing this new Eden with and through our beloved, we discover healing in our broken relationships with creation. Eden is

available now in the delights of covenant love.

Living the Song of Songs

How might we explore the links between our beloved and creation? I offer a few ideas.

1. *Study the Song with the help of a good commentary.* The commentary by Renita Weems in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Volume 5) is especially illuminating. Allow your imagination to roam in the world of the Song.

2. *Write poetry about your own spouse using images from parts of creation that you know.* You may not be familiar with Middle Eastern pomegranates and henna blossoms, but what fruits and flowers do you know? Use those to craft your own love poetry.

3. *After (or before) an encounter of intimacy with your covenanted partner, act to care for creation.* Plant a tree together. Recycle. Use fluorescent and LED bulbs. Write a letter to congressional representatives advocating for the passage of a

particular bill benefitting creation.

If the Song of Songs helps us to care for creation, then in a world where creation is seriously threatened it could become a very important book indeed.

