

A NEW 'SONG'

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Recovering ancient Israel's spirituality of sex

Students new to biblical studies are unfailingly astonished when they first encounter the Song of Songs. Fawn-like naked breasts, a woman's black hair cascading like a flock of goats, pure white teeth like ewes and a lover's hand under his beloved's head in an enchanted garden—these are just a few of the sensuous images described by the author in vivid detail. All this has proven too hot for most readers over the centuries. To cool things down, interpreters have advanced allegorical renderings that cast the song as a metaphor for the love between God and Israel, and later God and the church. These interpretations are beautiful and profound, but as one of my Old Testament professors joked, "If it's an allegory about the love between God and Israel or the church, it's a little kinky!"

In recent years scholars have moved toward recovering the interpretation of the text as wisdom literature, intended to teach young Hebrew women propriety in love and sex. This wisdom-love poem carries a challenging but affirming message for young people today as they attempt to navigate the confusing currents of romance in a culture of casual sex.

Our ancient Israelite ancestors in faith had great respect for the powerful energy of romantic love and sexuality. The poet writes: "Love is as strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame of Yah(weh)" (Song 8:6); "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it" (8:7); "Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?" (6:10). Consequently, many books of the Hebrew Scriptures are replete with rules, taboos and veritable fences around sex. They understood that erotic energies need insulators and transformers to cut down the dangerously high voltage.

We who live in the post-sexual-revolution era tend to view those biblical proscriptions as restrictive, superstitious and repressive. Perhaps to some extent they were. But if given the chance, the sages of Israel might respond to our "enlightened" attitudes toward sex by pointing out that our culture's acceptance and tacit approval of random hook ups (no-strings-attached sex, often under the influence of alcohol or drugs), "friends with benefits" and pornography is laughably naïve. The ancients understood that the arrows of Eros were arrows of fire and lightning—elements not to be treated lightly. Within our own church, the sexual abuse crisis has made painfully clear the damage that can be caused by the misuse of sexuality. And consider the countless times that the cavalier use of erotic energies is implicated in divorce, disease, sexual assault and other forms of violence. What then can the wisdom of the Song of Songs teach about this divine fire driving each of us?

Sex as Sacrament

The fact that a text like the Song of Songs was composed, was included in the canon of Scripture and has long been considered wisdom literature demonstrates that ancient Israel affirmed the beauty and power of sex and saw the energy of the romantic relationship as a profoundly spiritual one. We must ask ourselves then—does Christian sex education recognise this reality and provide

our people with the perspective to see their romantic longings through the lens of the soul? Perhaps; but more often than not the spiritual dimension of sexuality is not named or explored.

Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I., a widely respected lecturer and spiritual writer, contends that churches never attained a very healthy spirituality of sexuality. Father Rolheiser suggests that we moderns have reduced sexuality to genitality, detaching it from the heart, family, fertility, community and church. The Scriptures, however, make it clear that these passionate longings come directly from God, who commands humankind to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gn 1:28). In the theology of Genesis, sexual energy is a part of God’s garden of delight. The Song of Songs, which employs abundant garden imagery, reaffirms that reality and celebrates sex. A major task of churches in the 21st century will be to rediscover and reintegrate sexual energies as part of our spirituality, to reimagine a context that understands sex as a sacrament and to mentor people of all life stages in the art of soulful romance. Fortunately, we need not reinvent the wheel in this work; the Song of Songs provides a theological, biblical starting point accessible across generations.

To Those Who Wait

The Song of Songs implicitly recognises what Carl Jung said about energy in general—it is not friendly. Everyone who has ever fallen in love understands the possessive control that romantic fires assert. The lovers of the Song speak to the intoxicating feelings of longing and infatuation that are part and parcel of new love, a longing that dominates them day and night. Chapter Three, for example, relates a dream sequence in which the young woman is searching for her beloved: “Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer” (3:1). And the young man, intoxicated by his lover’s beauty, says in longing, “Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth” (7:8–9). The lovers’ desire for each other is overwhelming, but the text also speaks to how they carry this tension with difficulty but integrity until the time is right.

The Song recognizes that the ways of love cannot be forced, cannot be acted upon prematurely, cannot be short-circuited. Three times in the book, a plea is repeated by the female lover to her friends, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and does of the field, do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Just as a premature warming and opening of a cocoon will reveal a butterfly not yet developed and ready for flight, erotic, romantic longing consummated too soon can destroy blossoming love. The Song vividly—and in alluring detail—describes the ecstasy of physical union in love, but also counsels patience; for if lovers move too quickly, if they do not carry erotic tension chastely, they will miss out on a beautiful, soulful experience.

Beyond ‘Dumpster Love’

Finally, the Song can serve the needs of our era as it did the ancients—as initiatory wisdom to those new to the ways of love and the pulse of sexual energies. Sharing the insights of previous generations with those coming of age today might help young people to recognize and avoid what a former student of mine called “Dumpster love.” Reflecting on the soul-destroying impact of pornography and the hook-up culture—two challenging and frightening realities that teenagers and young adults must face—this 17-year-old young man said, “Rather than wait for the deeply spiritual bonds made by marital sex, we cognizantly accept a lesser pleasure, like food from a dumpster, to tide us over. Our hunger drives us to desperation, rather than action.”

Absent any awareness of or guidance about the deeply spiritual and emotional dimensions of their sexual appetites, many have reduced what is God's greatest gift of communion between two human beings to a mere bodily function that has to be satisfied. Such spiritual degradation should come as no surprise in a culture and a church that has no process for initiating our young men and women into the proper use of the erotic impulses that hit them at the onset of puberty.

Throughout history, native and aboriginal cultures have taught their young people to situate sexual energy properly within themselves and have sacralized this moment as a part of intensive, demanding initiation rites. Young men especially are taught, sometimes through a public and painful circumcision ritual, that their sexual apparatus is not merely a new plaything. Granted, no one is suggesting we return to that particular model, but our current way of dealing with this coming-of-age issue amounts to holding our breath and hoping for the best. This has left us with devastating results. The Song of Songs provides us with a precedent for recovering this key initiatory moment in a young person's maturation.

Our ancestors in faith provide us with a vehicle that delivers this ancient wisdom—the sage, the wise person who speaks with the authority of experience.

- We will need mentors and teachers who have done their own soul work, who are emotionally whole, who have grown into a mature sexuality and who reverence and respect the power of sex.
- We will need to create sacred spaces and sacred times where candid questions can be asked and informed answers can be given.
- And we will need to move beyond the unfounded fear that if we talk with young people about sex, they will be more apt to do it.

If the coming-of-age young person does not get thoughtful, soul-centric and accurate information about sexuality and romance from trusted adults, he or she will look for answers elsewhere.

The Canadian naturalist and writer Trevor Herriot, in his book *The Road Is How*, shares this insight about the Song of Songs:

The Song proposes that we all become lovers and invites us to revisit in our own souls that anthropological moment of deciding how we will look upon our bodies and the earth. These cannot be objects to be used for selfish pleasure and gain—not if we are lovers. To love life, love another, love a place, is to know that the flesh of the body and the flesh of the earth are one; and that this unity is good and holy, testifying to a truth uttered in our very language of the body.

As we seek a more healthy, mature integration of sexuality into our lives, as we seek to recover our understanding of our sexuality as divine fire, as we seek to befriend and bless our erotic drives, we can look to the Song of Songs as our wisdom and guide, ancient but timeless.

The Story of 'Songs'

Although credited to King Solomon, who reigned in the mid-10th century B.C., scholars suggest that the Song of Songs was written in the period following the Babylonian exile (587 B.C.). While compiled between the fourth and second centuries B.C., many of the poems in the book might be

centuries older. The Song of Songs is an example of a larger genre popular in the ancient near East—love poetry. Also known as the canticle, the song is perhaps the most celebrated and commented-upon book in scripture. St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote seven sermons on the first verse alone, “let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” The poems and dialogues between the lovers capture the passion and ecstasy of romantic love through nature imagery. It is said that Rabbi Akiva, a first-century A.D. Israelite scholar, once observed, “The entire universe is unworthy of the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel.”

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