

Interpreting the Bible 9 – Interpreting Poetry & Proverbs

1. Interpreting Poetry (The Song of Solomon)

“According to the most common interpretation, the Song of Solomon is a collection of love poems between a man and a woman, celebrating the sexual relationship God intended for marriage. God established marriage, including the physical union of a husband and wife (Gen. 2:18–25), and Israelite wisdom literature treasures this aspect of marriage as the appropriate expression of human sexuality (Prov. 5:15–20). The Song of Solomon has also been understood as an illustration of the mutual love of Christ and his church.” (from the Introduction to the Song of Solomon in the English Standard Version Bible.)

Should Song of Solomon be interpreted as person-to-person love or as an allegory of God’s love for Israel or Christ’s love for the church?

Allegorical interpretations of this book tend to be strained. Denying the human and historical setting of this Song creates more discomfort with the subject matter than insight into the nature of Scripture. The idealistic and allegorical language that lovers use might lead one to assume the freedom to allegorize the entire experience, but the lovers themselves would strongly object. The practice of allegorizing the book comes from outside theological and philosophical frameworks, not the content of the book itself.

One form of interpretation similar to allegorizing takes a “typological” approach. It begins by admitting the historical validity of the story. But it also insists that the idealized language of the lovers can ultimately only accurately describe the kind of love that Christ has demonstrated toward His church.

A more satisfying way to approach Solomon’s Song takes the story at face value, interprets it in a normal historical sense, and understands the idealized use of poetic language to depict reality. This interpretation affirms Solomon’s account of three phases in his relationship with the Shulamite: his early days of courtship, the early days of his marriage, and the maturing of the royal couple through the good and bad days of married life.

The book serves as God’s demonstration of His intentions for the romance and loveliness of marriage, the most precious of human relations and “the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7).¹

Christ in Song of Solomon

The words of Solomon intimately paint a picture of marriage. Yet, Song of Solomon illustrates the spiritual relationship between God and Israel, His chosen nation, and even the relationship God desires with individuals. Solomon attempts to express the love of the beloved for his bride. This mystery can only be fully revealed in the intimate relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32).²

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Quick Reference Guide to the Bible*, Student ed. (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2001), 103–104.

² *Ibid.*, 102.

2. Interpreting Proverbs

A proverb is wise advice in concise statements. All cultures have proverbs, but biblical proverbs are divinely inspired and communicate how to live in a way that pleases God.

The key to understanding proverbs is that whatever they communicate is *generally* true, but not *absolutely* true. The only way we can take any particular proverb as an absolute promise is if it is taught more explicitly elsewhere in the Bible.

Examples:

- * Proverbs 10:4
- * Proverbs 3:9-10
- * Proverbs 22:6
- * Proverbs 22:15
- * Proverbs 26:4-5

Yet, *some* proverbs have *no* exceptions and are absolutely true all the time. Examples:

- * Proverbs 11:4
- * Proverbs 11:7
- * Proverbs 6:16-19

The key in discerning which are generally true and which are absolutely true is whether or not the particular teaching is found and confirmed elsewhere in Scripture.