

Song of Songs

1. Name – In the King James Version, this book is entitled “Song of Solomon,” but both modern translations and Jewish and Christian have typically referred to it as “Song of Songs” from the phrase in the opening verse. The phrase can be taken as a superlative – “the best of songs.”
2. Author and date – Much debate surrounds the author, and this has an impact on the interpretation of the book. Traditionally, the phrase “song of songs of Solomon” has been taken to indicate that Solomon wrote it. However, the Hebrew phrase translated “of Solomon” can be understood to mean “of/to/for/about Solomon,” implying either that Solomon wrote it, that it was dedicated to him, or that he is a primary character in the action. While it is noted that Solomon composed many songs (1 Kings 4:32-34), there is nothing that attributes these songs to Solomon other than the ambiguous opening phrase. Traditionalists typically identify the main characters as Solomon and the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kings 3:1). Ironically, she was apparently not his first wife, since Rehoboam was born to Naamah and was already one year old when Solomon began to reign (1 Ki. 11:41-42; 14:21). Because this relationship, as well as the 700 wives and 300 concubines to come, were hardly exemplary, many find Solomonic authorship to be extremely implausible. In fact, some see the song as a satire of Solomon’s reign and treatment of women that casts Solomon as the “villain.”
3. Approaches to interpretation
 - a. *Allegorical/typological.* This approach views the primary meaning as symbolic of the relationship between God and his people or Christ and the church. The typological approach allows for a literal or historical basis for the song, while the allegorical approach does not. This approach has been the predominant approach to the book both in Jewish and earlier Christian tradition. However, it has been largely discredited. First, an allegorical approach seems to have arisen out of a discomfort with such clearly erotic language in the Scriptures. However, God is the good author of marriage and sexual relations; there is nothing unspiritual about celebrating and delighting in it. Second, very similar love poems have been discovered in Mesopotamia and Egypt, suggesting that readers would have understood the Song in the same literal way. Finally, the allegorical method leads to absurd interpretations when seeking to press the details of the Song into an allegory. For example, Cyril of Alexandria understood “My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh, resting between my breasts,” to be a reference to Christ appearing between the Old and New Testaments.
 - b. *Dramatic.* The current preference in interpreting the Song is to read it as a drama, with two or three characters (depending on whether the shepherd and the king are the same person) and a female chorus provided by the daughters of Jerusalem. Modern translations often assume this view by dividing the text with headers suggesting a drama. However, there is no example of drama anywhere else in Scripture or in the literature of the ancient Near East. The characters are difficult to identify (are there two or three?). It is difficult to discern any clear progress and resolution.
 - c. *Historical.* Some understand the Song to be a poetic account, either of the relationship of Solomon and his beloved; or of two lovers, with Solomon seeking unsuccessfully to woo the Shulammitte maiden away from her true love, a simple country boy. This is closely related to the dramatic approach but asserts that the story is actual history.
 - d. *Didactic.* This approach may or may not assert a historical basis but focuses on the general lessons to be learned from pure love celebrated sexually and faithfully. The Song may simply be a collection of loosely related love poems without any intended overall plot or resolution.
4. Message – The Song extols the goodness, beauty and blessing from God of the wonder of sexual love when expressed within marriage. Marriage between the lovers is never clearly asserted but is assumed from its context within the canon. While not an allegory, the Song provides a clear picture of marriage that the Scriptures use as a metaphor for the relationship of God and his people (Eph. 5:22-33). Thus, it instructs us concerning the intimate, pursuing love between Christ and the church.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.
A Survey of the Old Testament, Hill and Walton, Zondervan, 2000.