

## Song of Songs 2:8-13

The voice of my beloved!  
Look, he comes,  
leaping upon the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.  
My beloved is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.  
Look, there he stands  
behind our wall,  
gazing in at the windows,  
looking through the lattice.  
My beloved speaks and says to me:  
'Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;  
for now the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtle-dove  
is heard in our land.  
The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.  
Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away.

### We Are Wonderfully Made

Wow! Do you feel a little hot under the collar after reading that one? Maybe if we could imagine a couple Hollywood heartthrobs reading we'd feel the heat a little more. Song of Songs is a compilation of sensual love poems between a man and a woman – probably a young man and a young woman who may not actually be married as a lot of the passages describe the young woman as wandering the city at night looking for her lover and inviting him into her mom's bedroom. This is a book about uninhibited sensual love. This book is not for the faint of heart.

And while we generally think of the Bible as being composed by men one can't help but wonder if some of this book was composed by a woman – perhaps a black woman (“**I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem**”). These poems far outclass any top 40 love songs of my generation, although some of the metaphors are a bit foreign to us – **guys, I would not recommend you tell your wife that her hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead or her nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus**; it might not be well-received. And it's not just hair and nose that the writer or writers describe in this book, which was so explicit that some Jews and Christians debated whether to include Song of Songs into their canon. **It was Rabbi Akiva in the late first or early second century who said, "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the**

**Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5).**

Amen to that, Rabbi! And the whole book is quite consistent with Jewish law; after all, after created woman the first command God gives the couple is to “be fruitful and multiply,” and a commandment that they certainly had no qualms about obeying and a commandment that has been successfully if not *passionately* obeyed over the millennia.

It was likely the influence of **Greek philosophy, which was dualistic and held the body and its desires to be “lower” than the spiritual things**, that caused the early Church to interpret the Song of Songs as an allegory for Christ’s love of the Church and may be the reason why today’s reading is the only passage from this book that is included in the common lectionary used by mainline churches. There is none of this dualistic separation of body and spirit, so common in the writings of Paul, there is none of that in this sacred text. Compare, for example, Paul’s famous passage on love found in 1Corinthians (“Love is patient, love is kind, etc) a favorite ‘love’ passage at Christian weddings, with this passage from Song of Songs:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.	Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
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I ask you, which of these passages better describes the love experienced by a young couple?

I think Rabbi Akiva got it right; this Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies when it comes to scripture. Its focus is on the natural world that is so beautiful to behold and experience, and the physical attraction between two people is as natural as anything. I look around and I see people who have most certainly experienced the longings as well as the ecstasy of sensual love. And of all the things that we as creations of God can be thankful for, sexuality is perhaps the greatest thing. Yes, we can look in awe at the stars in the sky and the crashing of the ocean waves and the radiance of a sunrise or sunset, but when you’re in love all you can see in all of nature is the one in love with. Praise God for that! Rabbi Akiva surely did.

While it’s true that Greek philosophy diminished the importance of the physical body which in turn resulted in Christian teachings that too often avoid talk of human sexuality, it’s also true that society has cheapened the physical act of sex, completely divorcing it from any form of love and turning it into something merely recreational, something to market, and tragically something that leads to the exploitation and the enslavement of others. According to the International Labour Organization there are over 4.5 million people who are victims of forced sexual exploitation. That is just the ‘forced’ exploitation. ‘Voluntary’ sexual exploitation occurs far more frequently as businesses and individuals exploit human lust by making it easy for young attractive people to make lots of money for selling their bodies for public display, or selling sex itself. Because passionate love is such a powerful force it can be so easy to exploit; parents of teenage daughters, you know how important it is to teach self-respect and discretion, to teach them to

distinguish love from lust and a smooth talker from a serious suitor. And you know how important it is to teach your sons that same lesson; sex is not to be experienced as something strictly recreational but rather as the consummation of an endearing love that should accompany it if not precede it. And unfortunately the cheapening of the physical act of sex as well as our society's obsession with physical attractiveness may in part account for the high rate of divorce among adults and the high rate of depression, suicide and drug abuse among youth.

The Song of Songs does not describe sexual exploitation or an abusive relationship between two people (though in one passage the woman states that she is beaten by the sentinels who find her wandering around seeking her lover). The Song of Songs is about the goodness of sensual love between two people, and the point that I make is that this very natural attraction is a gift from God that should be celebrated and for which we should offer thanksgiving. In the heat of passion we can easily forget that God our Creator has provided us with this gift of passion, this gift of sensual love – in the heat of the exchange between the two lovers in Song of Songs God is not even mentioned. But I don't think God is one to complain; he created us to enjoy a certain intimacy, and I don't think he feels slighted for not being the center of our attention in the bedroom. But here and now, dear friends, and in times when we are not caught up in rapture for another person we should offer a huge thanksgiving to God, recognizing in this Season of Creation how wonderfully and beautifully we are made.