

Singing of sex: Rereading the Song of Songs

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

Some exegetes and preachers have tried to persuade us that the Song of Songs is an elaborate allegory about the love of God for Israel or of Christ for the church. Yes, the book may have something to teach us about the divine-human relationship, but it is also, and without doubt, a song of erotic love. It is sensual, playful, beautiful and filled with longing. It is an expression of joy in the pleasures of the flesh, and it revels in the beauties of the human body. The Song mostly speaks in a woman's voice—a woman who expresses forthrightly her erotic longings.

In speaking so joyously of sexuality and in adopting a woman's voice, the Song of Songs offers a remarkable and welcome minority report within the scriptures. Renita Weems points this out in her *New Interpreter's Bible* commentary:

Female sexuality [in the Bible] poses problems for men and, according to our male narrators, for God. Unrestricted contact with women threatens boundaries and portends turmoil. Repeatedly fathers warn sons against falling into the sexual snares of loose women; and in both canonical and noncanonical literature one finds male narrators openly declaring their contempt for women.

The Song of Songs provides a different voice and another perspective. Its poetry is so sensual that we can almost taste the figs and almonds and smell the fragrant oils. Its beauty is so palpable that we are prompted to weep for the ways we have misused our sexuality or missed its gift.

The Song of Songs not only contests a sexually repressive or Victorian sensibility. It also opposes the inclination toward casual sex or instant gratification that characterizes our sex-saturated society. While the Song insists that we are embodied beings and that the human body is beautiful, it also asserts that we are more than our bodies.

Recently I heard someone refer to “the McDonaldization of sex.” What was meant by that term, I think, is that sex, like so much else, has come to be seen as accessible,

convenient and immediate. Why wait? “You deserve a break today!” McDonald’s tells us. “Just do it!” says Nike.

The Song of Songs, by contrast, is charged with longing. The lover seeks her beloved but does not find him. When he appears it is through a lattice or behind a fence, and their moments together are stolen.

In one respect, this feature of the Song simply reflects the society from which it emerged—a society in which relations between unmarried men and women were strictly supervised, and opportunities to be alone with a lover were few.

But the language of longing and losing, of seeking and finding, expresses something more than a different cultural context. It suggests that human beings contain depths, and that love is less about knowing another’s body than about learning to know another’s heart. Such learning takes time and effort, and it is inevitably accompanied by frustration as well as satisfaction, sorrow as often as joy.

Several years ago the directorial team of Merchant and Ivory turned some of Jane Austen’s novels into movies. Somewhat like the Song of Songs, these films portray love and relationships in ways that have begun to seem odd in our culture. The stories include much longing and losing, seeking and finding, and are filled with small gestures that are often indirect and are sometimes missed or misinterpreted by the lovers. This is because the characters are coming to know one another’s hearts slowly and carefully before they came to know one another’s bodies.

The success of these films suggests that they touched a nerve in our culture and tapped a hunger—a hunger for the acknowledgment that human beings are mysterious, that we are creatures who are not all exposed surfaces, but have hidden depths, and that coming to know these depths takes time and effort.

In scripture, sexual intimacy is characteristically described as “knowing” another. Thus, Abraham came to “know” Sarah. Joseph found Mary to be great with child though he had “known her not.” The term may simply be a polite euphemism, but it also suggests what we most long for and need: to know another truly and deeply and to be known by another in the same way. This is the higher reward that comes with the higher burden of older patterns of courtship and marriage.

What a difference it would make if the Song of Songs were among the books on sex that parents gave their adolescents to read. It is a book that our mother the church has given us, and that God, who loves us like a wise father, has given us. We should

read it.