

THE SONG OF SONGS

A

PROSPECTUS

FOR

THE DOCTORAL THESIS

OF

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Contents of this prospectus:

I. Introduction and note of thanks.

Thanks to TBI and its instructors.

The purpose of the thesis on the Song of Songs.

II. The reason for choosing the Song of Songs.

The difficulties:

The mystery of the book

Applying the principles of exegesis

Bible analysis

Who is speaking? To whom are they speaking?

About what are they speaking? When are they speaking?

Where are they speaking? Why are they speaking?

Interpretation.

Questions that need to be answered.

III. The Subjects that will be addressed by the thesis:

The book's background.

The canonization of the Song of Songs.

The Author of the Song of Songs. Solomon's background, personality, wisdom

The context of the Song of Songs. The culture, history, and people of that time.

This author's translation of the Song of Songs.

A search for gender

Interlinear and smooth translation.

The interpretations of the Song of Songs.

Literal, spiritual, poetical, historical.

The allegorization of the Song of Songs.

Christ and the church; The Lord and Israel

The Lord and Solomon; Christ and the saved; Other allegories

The doctrinal aspects of the Song of Songs.

Reproofs, corrections, and instructions in righteousness

Polygamy; Economy; Husband and wife Relationship

IV. A Rough outline of the Thesis

V. Proposed Bibliography

I. Introduction

I want to thank the faculty of Texas Baptist Institute and Seminary for their dedication and commitment to teaching the truth of God's Word. It is with a grateful heart that I thank them for their patience with preacher students while they help to motivate them to think for themselves. It is that aspect of my Seminary experience, that is learning to think for myself, that I deem most precious to me. I now believe the things that I have been taught because they are true and based upon not what some person has said but upon the Word of God. It is with that frame of mind that I approach the study of the Song of Songs. Though I will read and reference in my thesis over eighty sources of information about the Song of Songs it will be the work of the Holy Spirit of God who will use His sword, which is the Word of God, to guide me to a truthful understanding of this, the greatest of Songs. It is the opinion of this writer that the Song of Songs is the most difficult book of the Bible to understand and interpret.

I was taught by Doctor Ray O. Brooks, President of Texas Baptist Institute and Seminary, some of the fundamental rules to Bible interpretation. He taught me to look for such things as who is speaking, to whom they are speaking, about what are they speaking, and when are they speaking in order to understand the context of what has been said and to gain a proper understanding of the text. Applying these rules proves to be most difficult in the case of the Song of Songs. This thesis will address these problems head on. In the course of determining who is speaking to whom one must carefully and truthfully determine the antecedents of the pronouns and rightly divide the narrative and dialog.

The apostle Paul wrote by the inspiration of God to young Timothy: *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”* (2Timothy 3:16-17) I believe that the first word of this quote, “All”, includes the Song of Songs. It will be the purpose of my thesis to find and declare the profit of this book and in so doing help myself and others gain a proper understanding of the Song of Songs. It is a book which is but a small part of the whole of the “word of truth” which causes one to be **“perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”** I believe that there are contained in the Song of Songs lessons which will help me and others to be better servants for God. Let me close this introduction with another quote and admonition from the apostle Paul. *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* (2Timothy 2:15). Rightly dividing that portion of the word of truth found in the Song of Songs will be the mainstay of this journey.

II. The reasons for choosing the Song of Songs:

The Song of Songs begins just that way. *“The song of songs which is Solomon’s.”* The book begins with the boldest kind of statement. The use of this superlative phrase catches immediately the eye of the reader. It causes one to be compelled irresistibly to read on. One, grasping firmly the opening words, is absolutely driven to read onward and to drink in this which boasts to be the greatest of all songs. A born again child of God, opening the Bible and knowing that it is the word of God and knowing how great God is, will read its pages with awe (Psalms 119: 161) *“...my heart standeth in awe of thy word.”* The child of God drinks in its every word and is spellbound by its greatness. A little more than half way through this, the greatest collection of writings known to man, the reader sees this statement concerning what he or she is about to read **“THE SONG OF SONGS.”** It is the greatest of all songs! The reader has already taken in many great psalms. By the time he arrives at this book God has been praised in such tremendous and glorious ways. Now he is about to read the greatest song of them all. One might expect that the next verse they read would surely say something so profound as *“For God so loved the World that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* Then to the readers shock and surprise they encounter the words *“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth for thy love is better than wine.”* The reader continues on to find graphic descriptions of the human body and of the emotions felt between two young lovers. It describes them, using metaphorical language, being physically intimate. Was not such behavior, according to First Samuel chapter twenty one and verse four, forbidden to David and his men that they might eat the shew bread? Were not the men of Israel prohibited from such conduct, according to Exodus chapter nineteen verse fifteen, so that they might stand before the LORD their God? Did not such behavior cause men and women, according to Leviticus chapter fifteen verse eighteen, to be ceremonially unclean? How can this book possibly be “The Song of Songs” when it contains those things which cause one to be unfit to come before the Lord? Additionally this song seems to condone practices that are considered by modern fundamental Christians as vile such as drinking wine and having a harem and multiple wives. How can a book so full of sin be considered the Song of Songs. Add to these the fact that this book in the King James Version of the Bible does not contain God's name. Even in its original language God's name is only mentioned once and that occurrence is insignificant and unrelated to any kind of praise of Him. How can the Song of Songs be just that, when it does not praise God directly and emphatically. Consider also that one of the main characters makes this statement concerning themselves *“I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley.”* Should not the occurrence of such seemingly arrogant words automatically

disqualify this as “the Song of Songs?” How can this possibly be a greater song than the song of Moses which contained such a marvelous verse as ***“The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him.”*** or the Song of Deborah with its powerful words; ***“I, [even] I, will sing unto the LORD; I will sing [praise] to the LORD God of Israel. LORD, when thou wentest out of Seir.....the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water. The mountains melted from before the LORD, [even] that Sinai from before the LORD God of Israel.”*** Is this song greater than the new song sung by the four and twenty elders who are before God's throne which song included such great words as these: ***“Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.”*** What an intriguing book it is. The answer to this great question: “Why is this the Song of Songs?” must be found.

I have chosen the Song of Songs as the Subject of my thesis for a number of reasons. The first and most important reason concerns the difficulties of applying the rules of Bible interpretation and the principles of proper exegesis. To gain a proper understanding and interpretation of a text one must have a good understanding of the context of that which is written. Context is absolutely vital to interpretation. As you read through the Song of Songs you discover that it is more than a narrative. It is a dialog. The writer does not tell distinctly who is speaking to whom. To make this determination one must consider the gender of the nouns and pronouns in the discourse. This is a help but does not solve the problem in every case. Where gender fails logic must come into play and a little detective work must ensue. It is this difficulty that causes many to write this book off as no more than a pretty poem about love or to allegorize the story in an inappropriate way. Study and right division are, in the case of the Song of Songs, hard work and tedious. A careful application of the rules of logic and argumentation when making the decision of who is speaking to whom is often more than the casual student wants to undertake.

The second reason for choosing the Song of Songs is relative to the many interpretations and applications which have been put forth by various Bible scholars. The most common of the approaches to interpreting this book makes it an allegory. The most common of these puts forth the idea that Solomon's purpose for writing this book was to portray the relationship of Christ to His New Testament Church. This thesis will explore the various reasons for the allegorization of this book and other interpretations like it and any evidence that proves or disproves their validity. The apostle Paul used the story of Hagar and Sarah as an allegory. He did so by the inspiration of God.

Allegory can be a useful teaching tool when carefully applied. When one reads the commentaries of some Bible scholars he gets the distinct impression that the book is nothing more than an allegory of Christ and His Church. However in their writings they give no proof that this was the intention of the author of the Song of Songs.

The third reason for expounding the Song of Songs is to seek answers to the questions which it raises in the minds of modern day readers. There is the question of polygamy. It seems to have been practiced without any public or private condemnation by the general population. It seems to have been so common a practice in Solomon's day that society completely accepted it. It also seems as though God gave it His blessings for it seems to have been practiced without impunity.

There is the question of the young girl in this story who seems quite content and even eager to be the wife of a man who already had one hundred and forty wives and an innumerable amount of virgins waiting to become his wife (*Song of Solomon 6:8*) ***There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number.***

There is the question of term usage and meaning. There are terms which are used as metaphors such as ***"I [am] the rose of Sharon, [and] the lily of the valleys"*** and similes such as ***"my soul made me [like] the chariots of Amminadib."*** These need to be identified for what they are and rightly interpreted.

There is the question of censorship. The book seems to be for mature audiences only. Was and should this book be kept from the eyes of the very young. Is it sufficiently masked in metaphors that it presents no problem to have it in the possession of the youngest of readers in the most puritanic of churches and families?

There is the question which is raised in the Song of Songs itself which asks (*Song of Solomon 6:13*) ***"...What will ye see in the Shulamite?..."***; Should these characters be role models of proper behavior and values? These that seem to praise each other and by each other seem to be distracted from their relationship with God.

There is the question of who are the characters of the story. Some hold to the idea that this is a love triangle. They say that there is a shepherd boy who is the true object of the Shulamite's love. She then must deal with Solomon who has chosen her to be his wife.

One of the unique qualities of the Song of Songs is the depth of its mysteries. It raises questions without number. The answers to at many of these questions and mysteries will be addressed in this thesis.

III. The Subjects of this Thesis

This thesis will address at the least four subject areas. These subject areas are general in nature and each is necessary for the proper exegesis of the text. The first of these is the books author and background. The author will be identified and his history reviewed. This writer believes the author to be Solomon himself. It may be possible that another wrote the book but Solomon would have been the responsible person. An in depth look at those scriptures which give insight to his personality and wisdom will be taken. This will include a look at his life and times. The nation of Israel was somewhat oppressed during the reign of Solomon. They had to put their lives on hold to serve the wishes of a King who heaped unto himself great riches. Even in the Song of Songs he seems to be praised for his wealth and royal treatment. Solomon seems to have been a popular king in his day and his greatest accomplishment by far was the building of the Temple. The Jews took great pride in this temple and in Solomon whose wisdom was a source of national pride.

Though not all of his some three thousand psalms and proverbs were canonized this book was. This thesis will include an evaluation of the canonization of this book and why this book was included in our modern day Bible and not some of the other writings of Solomon. The people, culture, and history of the land of Israel will be examined. Each of these items must be understood in order to have the proper basis for understanding and interpreting the Song of Songs.

The second subject area will be translation of the text into the English language. There is a phrase that is very often true "It loses something in translation." The best way to understand this book is to read it in its original language. I once had an email exchange with a professor at Hebrew University in Israel. I asked him which English translation of the Song of Songs was the best one. He replied to my email that there were no good translations of the Song of Songs. He told me to learn Hebrew and read it in its original language. When a text is moved from one language to another inevitably it loses something. This author's translation of the book will be appended to this doctoral thesis. Various translations will be quoted in the course of this study. Each of these will be chosen for their closeness to portraying the meaning of the original language. The gender of the nouns and pronouns will be recognized and used on some occasions to prove who is speaking to whom. This book contains a considerable amount of dialog without any indication of who is speaking. There are occasions when the one speaking changes even within a verse. Those responsible for dividing this book into chapters and verses did not take this factor into consideration else they might have rethought their divisions. The proper translation of Hebrew into English requires a good understanding of the context of what is being said. The translator must have an understanding of the context in order to make the right grammatical choices such as the tenses of

the verbs. As these various translation problems occur they will be discussed in some detail.

The third subject area is interpretation. There are many different interpretations of the Song of Songs. The most common method of interpretation involves the use of allegory. Allegory is defined by Webster as: “the representation of spiritual, moral, or other abstract meanings through the actions of fictional characters that serve as symbols.” This definition should be slightly modified to represent its meaning more accurately. The word “fictional” should be removed for the apostle Paul used the real life story and real life characters of Hagar and Sarah as an allegory (Galatians 4:24). The use of allegory can certainly be a beneficial tool for instruction. This thesis will cite the Biblical uses and examples of allegory to prove or disprove the validity of applying this method to the Song of Songs. The question as to whether the writer of the Song of Songs intended it to be used only as an allegory or not will be explored in this thesis.

Another interpretation of the Song of Songs involves taking it literally. This method does not exclude that many of the phrases contained in its dialog are metaphorical and simile. This method expects the reader to take the book at its face value. It is a love story and teaches principles of proper courtship and marriage. Though it does not seem to set a good example of fidelity it does express tenderness, compassion, and deep consideration for the feelings and needs of the object of ones love. The lessons learned using this method include both positive and negative examples of the way to have a Godly marriage relationship. With this method of interpretation the reader takes the characters as real and not, as with the allegorical method, only representative of some other person or thing.

The fourth subject area of this thesis will be the doctrinal aspect of the Song of Songs. As quoted and cited above ***“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” (2Timothy 3:16-17)*** If this Song of Songs is scripture then it is profitable for doctrine. The word doctrine means: ***“a particular principle, position, or policy taught or advocated, as of a religion or government.”*** The principles, positions, or policies of God are set forth in scriptures. The lessons taught in the Song of Songs will be set forth and examined in some detail. It is the lessons or the doctrines of a writing which determines the value of it to the one who seeks to live righteously. If the text teaches nothing or if it has little or no spiritual application for the child of God then the book is of little value. Doctor Roy Culley taught me to ask these questions at the close of each text expounded: “What does God want me to do based upon the teachings of this text? What does God want me to be based upon the teachings of this text? What does God want me to know based upon the teachings of this text?” Learning the

doctrines of scripture is not enough. The lessons learned must be applied. It is this subject area that will receive the most attention in this thesis. Proper interpretation precedes proper doctrine as proper doctrine precedes proper learning.

There are many lessons to be learned from the eight chapters of the Song of Songs. What does God teach concerning polygamy? Is polygamy a sin or is it not? What does He teach about the husband and wife relationship? Should women be treated like property? Should husbands be admired by their wives and should a husband admire his wife? What lessons are found in these scriptures concerning love? How does love manifest itself? How will this book reprove the reader? Does this book serve as the sword of the Spirit? Does it convict the wayward? How will it exhort the receptive reader? Does it contain challenges, examples, and goals for which the reader should strive? If the Song of Songs truly is divine scripture then it will prove to be profitable.

It is the desire of this writer to compose a thesis that will be logically and systematically arranged so that it may guide its readers to as thorough an understanding of the Song of Songs as is possible this side of Heaven. Admittedly this is an ambitious goal and is necessary for this is certainly an unusual book. Many have undertaken the task of expounding this book and the lessons it teaches. Most have not adequately defended or substantiated their conclusions. The conclusions, assessments, and statements found in this thesis concerning the text will be well argued, substantiated, conforming to the rules of logic, and full of truth. What follows is a very, very rough outline of the thesis. This outline will be constantly and repeatedly changed as the research, translation, and compilation of resources progresses. It will be a long and laborious journey but one well worth the taking. Should the LORD return before the journey's end then I will learn at the feet of Jesus my LORD why this is the Song of Songs.

IV. A Rough Outline of the Thesis

- I. Forward
- II. Table of contents
- III. Introduction
- IV. A close look at the author of the Song of Songs
- V. A close look at the context of the Song of Songs
 1. The cultural context of the Song of Songs
 2. The customs of the times of the Song of Songs
 3. The relevant history of the times of the Song of Songs
 4. The Law of Moses and the Song of Songs
 5. The geographical context of the Song of Songs
- VI. An overview of the contents of the Song of Songs
 1. An outline of the Song of Songs.
 2. A paraphrase of the Song of Songs.
- VII. Who is speaking to whom? An analysis of the narrative and dialog.
- VIII. Interpretation methods and their application to the Song of Songs.
- IX. Lessons from the Song of Songs.
 1. An exposition of the text
 2. Application of the text
- X. Why is it the Song of Songs?
- XI. Appendix
 1. A collection of pictures and art on the Song of Songs.
 2. This writer's translation of the Song of Songs.
- XII. Bibliography

V. Proposed Bibliography:

The Holy Bible

King James version, Revised Standard Version, Amplified version, New International version, New American Standard Version, and Young's Literal Translations of the Bible, Contemporary English Version, and others.

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