

Preaching the Song of Songs: How Should Pastors Handle, “Bellies,” “Navels,” and “Breasts,” from Their Sunday Morning Pulpit?: A Test Case in Literal Hermeneutics **AND** Literal Application by Mark McGinniss, October 2012.

Introduction

Today I stand before some of the greatest practitioners of literal hermeneutics which is a hallmark of traditional dispensationalism. Because of this unique vantage point and to introduce my topic, I would like to propose a multiple-choice test. There is only one question. It has six possible choices.¹

Which of these choices would be a legitimate **and** literal application of these various verses from the Song of Songs to a contemporary audience in your church?

A. Preaching on 7:8: “But let us for the time being understand ‘palm tree’ to mean the cross, an interpretation that both makes plain sense to the unprejudiced mind and points to a hidden profundity of unfathomable Wisdom.”

B. Preaching on 8:6-7: “This strong, enduring love is presented in a context that includes marriage, but it is broader still.... For the Christian, Jesus is our Model of love.... The One who loves all and gave himself for us sets the bar for love in our relationships.”

C. Preaching on 7:10: “‘I am my beloved’s and his desire is toward me.’ Every doubt and fear is gone. She has found her satisfaction in him and he finds his in her. What a wonderful picture of communion between the Christian and his Savior.”

D. Preaching on 7:9: “In the morning the ‘sleepers’ will awake to see the blossoms that signal new life in the spring, even as divine love (8:6)—manifest most fully in the spring time resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter, celebrated with flowers that adorn the chancel—brings new and eternal life.”

E. Preaching on 4:12-5:1: “In biblical context, a garden can also suggest Eden. We are not living there now. The fall has damaged sexuality.... Yet love and sex are still gifts from the Creator, and a good marriage is like sneaking back into paradise. Similarly, in the overall story of the Bible, the gospel restores believers to a superb garden, a new Eden with ‘no more curse’ (Rev 22:3).”

F. Preaching 7:1-4: “Sexual intimacy can and should continue to increase throughout marriage. In contrast to what contemporary culture supposes,

¹ Each choice is from reputable scholar and is documented.

² Richard A. Norris Jr, ed. *The Church’s Bible: The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 263.

³ Jerry Gladson, *The Strangest Books in the Bible: Preaching from the Song of Solomon, Ruth,*

sexual intimacy is not just the special prerogative of the young, but should bring increasing delight over time. As a couple comes to know one another better, they learn to enjoy each other more.”

Before we review your choices, how did you decide which was an appropriate application? How did you decide which were incorrect? I would suggest that your answer is partially contingent on your understanding of dispensational preaching. I would also like to suggest that only one of the above applications is congruent with dispensational preaching. Let’s review.

Choice A is incorrect because it derives from a non-literal hermeneutic and produces a non-literal application. While John of Ford (12th century) may have been a believer, he was not a believer in nor a practitioner of a literal hermeneutic or a literal application of the biblical text. His allegorical hermeneutic drove his allegorical application.²

Choice B: While Jesus is always a safe bet for the correct answer in Sunday School, this choice is unfortunately incorrect. Jerry Gladson chose a literal hermeneutic to understand the SoS but his application (even though it included Jesus) broadened way past the intent of Solomon when he penned those words of chapter eight.³ Since Jesus is not mentioned as a model of love in the Song, it is difficult at best to see this as an accurate and literal application.

Choice C: It is difficult to criticize a fellow dispensationalist and one who began his preaching career at age 13, but this selection is also incorrect. While the beloved Brethren pastor, H. A. Ironside, stated that he was looking at the Song “from a dispensational standpoint,”⁴ he fell into the applicational trap of “typifying”⁵ its message and disregarded any literal application of this love poetry.

Choice D: Christopher Mitchell unapologetically understands not just the Song but all OT revelation through a Christological lens. “All of the OT revelations of God’s gracious love point toward and are fulfilled by Christ. Therefore a Christological hermeneutic is appropriate for the interpretation of all the OT

² Richard A. Norris Jr, ed. *The Church’s Bible: The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 263.

³ Jerry Gladson, *The Strangest Books in the Bible: Preaching from the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (USA: Xlibris Corporation), 40.

⁴ H. A. Ironside, *Song of Solomon Revised Edition* (Neptune: NJ, Loizeax, 1999), 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

Scriptures as well as the NT.”⁶ While there is much to appreciate in Mitchell’s 1300 page tome, his present day allegorical reading is at odds with a literal hermeneutics and subsequent literal application. This makes this choice an incorrect one as well.

Choice E: Grenville Kent is one of the few (if not the only one) who when he penned a book on preaching the OT actually offered a message outline on the Song! Choice E were his reflections based on his message, “I Dig Your Garden.”⁷ While I appreciate Kent’s cute title and his bravery on preaching this ancient love poem and his desire “not to strain the text”, his reflections burden the literal application considerably when he writes: “It is better, in my opinion, to let the Song be what it is—a human love poem—and then make broad comparisons with the human relationship with God.”⁸ This “broadening” which sounds spiritual actually stretches a legitimate, literal application of this section of Scripture past its breaking point. Thus, this choice too must be rejected by those who hold to the model of dispensational preaching.

Choice F: In fairness I need to declare that I had to limit Daniel Estes’ notes on 7:1-4 (because of space and not to give away the correct answer by making it the longest and most obvious selection in a multiple choice test).⁹ But Estes added nothing more to his literal explanation of these verses. He did not enhance his application with a “broadening” of its application to include the NT, or with an inclusion of Jesus, or with an appeal to a supposed deeper meaning of her “navel,” or with a “clearer” vision of a very sensual, dancing, possibly naked Shulammitte through a Christological lens. He began with a literal hermeneutic and ended with a literal application—nothing more and certainly nothing less.

Naturally my evaluation of these choices is based on my understanding of dispensational preaching. While it is not the purpose of my paper to develop a definition of dispensational preaching, I would at least suggest that dispensational preaching is more than simply a sermon that centers on a pre-trib and a pre-mill eschatology. I would offer a working definition of dispensational preaching as a proclamation that surfaces the intended (single) meaning of the human author through a literal, historical, grammatical understanding of a passage **AND** that same meaning surfaced in the text is applied to the contemporary audience.

⁶ Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 5. The answer choice is from page 1093—94.

⁷ Grenville J. R. Kent, “Preaching the Song of Solomon,” in *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 139.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹ Daniel J. Estes, “The Song of Songs,” in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 398.

That our dispensational preaching keeps in sight both aspects of this working definition is a must. As our multiple choice test showed earlier there are preachers and scholars who read and study the Song literally but who do not believe that a literal application exhausts all other meanings (i.e. non-literal) of the text.

If application drifts from the single meaning of the biblical author, then the application no longer matches our working definition of dispensational preaching. And if we are no longer preaching dispensationally, I wonder if we are preaching the text literally. Plus, there is no guarantee that a literal reading or even a literal interpretation will produce a literal application. There are at least two models of preaching the Song that proclaim that they follow a literal hermeneutic but are guilty of much more than literal application of the text.

Modern Day Models of Preaching and Applying the SoS¹⁰

While many pastors shy away from preaching the Song,¹¹ those who do attempt to expound it generally fall into one of four models of interpretation and application of this biblical love poetry.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, I cannot contain my discussion of preaching of the Song within the traditional dispensational camp. The reason is at least three-fold: it is difficult to discover who identifies themselves as traditional dispensationalists; dispensational preaching has usually been defined as simply preaching a pre-trib, pre-mill eschatology; and very few pastors (of any hermeneutical persuasion) actually tackle the SoS from their Sunday morning pulpits.

To demonstrate my point I have broadened my “preaching” category to include commentators, since preachers use these sources as study tools in their exegesis and tend to follow (and quote) their favorite scholars.

¹¹ Estes observes, “At the same time that the scholarly literature on the Song has multiplied, the book has been virtually ignored in the preaching and teaching of the church” (Estes, “The Song of Songs,” 267). Richard Hess, who himself wrote a commentary on the Song for Baker in 2005, observed in a interview in *The Washington Post*, that he “has never heard a sermon on it” (Adelle M. Banks, “Falling in Love with the Erotic Song of Solomon: Tiny Book in Hebrew Bible Seldom Addressed from the Pulpit,” *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/10/AR2006021001870.html> (accessed July 5, 2012). In the same article Michael Dudit, editor of *Preaching* magazine, states that he doesn’t recall ever receiving a sermon on the Song in twenty years.

While we would debate the degree (and accuracy) of exposition in their preaching, there are some notable exceptions: See Mark Driscoll’s 2008, 10-part sermon series on the Song of Solomon entitled: “The Peasant Princess” <http://marshill.com/media/the-peasant-princess/sermons>. Tommy Nelson has a book based on his popular conferences on the Song of Solomon: *The Book of Romance: What Solomon Says About Love, Sex And Intimacy* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998). David Jeremiah has published a new book which I believe is based on a sermon series he did at his church in San Diego: *What the Bible Says about Love, Marriage & Sex: The Song of Solomon* (San Diego: Turning Point, 2010).

1. *Non-Literal Hermeneutic & Non-Literal Application*

This model is normally associated with the likes of Bernard of Clairvaux¹² who practiced an allegorical interpretation and application that was the standard interpretative practice of the ancient and medieval church. Although many have jettisoned this model, it still has its adherents today. In his expository commentary on the Song, John Phillips writes, “Those who dislike typology and symbolism will never feel at home with the Song of Solomon. In this book we find some of ‘the deep things of God.’”¹³ Expounding on 7:4b-5 Phillips writes, “Here again we must go beyond Solomon and his flatteries to the spiritual lessons that underlie his words, lessons that become plain only when we look away from the Shulamite to the church.”¹⁴ Origen would be proud.¹⁵

2. *Literal Hermeneutic & Non-Literal Application*

In helping pastors preach this problematic book, John Richardson seemingly rejects the allegorical interpretation as a basis for preaching. He writes, “The Allegorists were wrong only, and yet crucially, in that they tried to avoid the erotic offense of the Song.”¹⁶ This statement tips his hand to his preaching model. While he recognizes the need to understand the Song as a song and understand its use of metaphor and the lack of cultic references, his application is inconsistent with his literal reading of the text. He writes to preachers, “If our analysis is correct, then in our preaching we should rather take up and extend this theme as pointing to the Covenant relationship with God and his people, for whilst the Song of Songs is certainly a celebration and endorsement of human eroticism it is surely also in some

¹² Bernard (c. 1090-1153) wrote 86 sermons on the Song to his brother monks at Clairvaux in northeastern France. His last three sermons were an exposition on SoS 3:1. Samuel J. Eales, trans and ed. *Song of Solomon by Bernard of Clairvaux* (1895; repr., Minneapolis: Klock Klock, 1984).

¹³ John Phillips, *Exploring the Love Song of Solomon: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 9. Also see Stephanie Paulsell who teaches the practice of ministry at Harvard Divinity, “If we are to recover the Song of Songs as a text of devotion in our day, it will be by taking Origen’s words to heart.” “Faith Matter,” *Christian Century* (September 22, 2009): 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁵ Origen would also be proud of Robert Jenson, who in his commentary designed for teaching and preaching warns, “The commentary to follow will be prudent—insofar as this is possible with the Song—and assume only the less radical dissent from current opinion; that is, we will suppose that the canonical Songs solicits allegory.... Of the intent of whoever definitely made the Scripture of the Song, we can be more certain: they intended the Song to be about Israel and the Lord.” “Song of Songs,” in *Interpretation* (Louisville, John Know Press, 2005), 10—11.

¹⁶ John P. Richardson, “Preaching from the Song of Songs. Allegory Revisited,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21 (July 1997): 257.

sense a sacralization of it.”¹⁷ Richardson’s wish to help pastors preach this is commendable. However, it is difficult to follow his exegetical gymnastics. How does his literal observation lead to such a non-literal application? This approach is of little use to one who wants to preach dispensationally.

More recently in the *Journal for Preachers*, Martin Copenhaver expounds, “Even after such thorough allegorization, one cannot escape the impression that the author of the Song of Solomon actually was doing what he appeared to be doing—namely, celebrating human love with poetry, reveling in romance and sexuality.”¹⁸ While Copenhaver did not expound any particular text of the Song, taking him at his word his observation places him in the literal interpretation camp. However, as he concludes by applying the Song, he writes, “When we love one person that way, that one special person, we catch a glimpse—just a glimpse but a glimpse—of how God feels about each and every one. And that, I think, is the biggest reason why the Song of Solomon, this passionate ode to romantic love, made it into our Bibles.”¹⁹ To make the application that this Song is a “glimpse” of God’s love for people, is to glimpse an application that has no connection with a literal reading of this poem.

From his message on the Song, James Harnish explains, “But there is behind that obvious interpretation, the spiritual truth that we dare to believe that our sexuality is a human, physical expression of the spiritual relationship which God intends to have with His people.... Wouldn’t you like to sing about your relationship with God with this poet, ‘He brought me to his banquet hall and raised the banner of love over me?’”²⁰ My short answer is no. To “sing” Harnish’s application is to “literally” sing off key.

3. *Literal Hermeneutic & Literal Application & Something More*

Arguably this model may be the most prevalent for modern day pastors and scholars who seek to both understand and apply this love literature to a

¹⁷ Ibid. The theme Richardson is building from is the covenant. “The reference to Jerusalem reminds us that it is *the* land which is in view—the land which God promised to Abraham, which is one pole of the Covenant promise and which is both a fulfillment and foretaste of the eschatological hope. This is the cultic and theological centre of the Song of Songs” (256).

¹⁸ Martin B. Copenhaver, “Reveling in Romance,” *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2011): 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39.

²⁰ James A. Harnish, “Human Sexuality: The Sensual Christian (Song of Solomon)” *Preaching.com*, <http://www.preaching.com/sermons/11567227/> (accessed June 18, 2012). In the same vein, David Rigg concludes his sermon on Song 6:11-7:9 by stating, “It is not enough for Christians to just say ‘no’ to sin. We first must say ‘no’ to the environment which prompts and encourages it! In order to avoid sin, you must avoid the enticement to sin. The Shulamite apparently learned how and when to say ‘no’ to the enticement of sin.” “Song of Solomon #15,” *SermonCentral.com*, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/song-of-solomon-15-david-rigg-sermon-on-promises-of-god-114221.asp> (accessed June 28, 2012).

contemporary culture. Here, interpreters practice a literal hermeneutic but the literal reading does not exhaust other possible meanings or applications of the text. Listen to Richard Hess speaking of 4:1-5:1: These verses “bring together an epicurean delight that exults in the senses and pleasure of the physical world. More than any text in the Bible, these verses reject the suppression of physical pleasures as though in themselves somehow evil or unworthy of God.”²¹ This is both a literal interpretation **AND** literal application of these verses especially in light of 5:1e-f. However, he continues, “The erotic pleasures of sexual love are not capitulations to sin. They instead are the most excellent sign in this world pointing to the joys that God has in store for those who love him (1 Cor. 2:9).” Tangent to this application he adds, “As a couple’s desire grows with their love, so the believer’s desire for God enflames the divine love that knows no consummation in this world, but becomes only better and better.”²² Even if one could argue that sex points to a believer’s reward in heaven (you can’t) or that a believer’s love for God grows in relationship to his desire for his spouse (not necessarily), there is nothing in the lines of the Song that could possibly make these literal applications of this biblical text.

Graeme Goldsworthy in his chapter, “Preaching from the Wisdom Literature,” offers this observation to preachers, “One thing is clear: the perspective of the book on human love is realistic. It extols the mystery and pleasures of love freely expressed and yet without a hint of salaciousness.” He then offers a concluding admonition for preaching any wisdom text: “The Christian preacher has great flexibility in dealing with a series of text from any one book, provided the treatment of the text is true to their significance in the frame work of the whole book.”²³ To grant the benefit of the doubt to Goldsworthy, that sounds like a literal hermeneutic and application. But he adds something more in the following sentence: “The ultimate concern of the preacher should be to preach the meaning of the text in relation to the goal of all biblical revelation, the person and work of Christ.” While I believe Jesus is omnipresent, he is not in the Song and thus should not be in a literal application that seeks to reflect a literal exposition of the single meaning of this biblical wisdom text.

Rightly rejecting the allegorical view, popular pastor, David Jeremiah writes, “The presence of symbolism doesn’t override literal meaning.” But then he seems to contradict his position by continuing: “In other words, we *can* read the book as a symbolic poem about Christ, but we should primarily read it at face value: as a song of love—romantic and emotional and sexual—between husband and wife.”²⁴ This

²¹ Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 158.

²² *Ibid.*, 250. This application concerns his theological implications for 8:5—14.

²³ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 194.

²⁴ David Jeremiah, *Love, Marriage & Sex*, 14.

dynamic is illustrated in his observation 4:16 & 5:1. Speaking of the physical intimacy the couple is enjoying in these verses he writes, “This is a perfect image, a kind of momentary paradise at the center of the book and at the center of marriage. It even hints symbolically of eternity in which Christ and His bride have finally been united in the ultimate paradise.”²⁵ Jeremiah provides a clear example of a literal reading with a literal application **AND** something more than the original author intended.²⁶

4. *Literal Hermeneutic & Literal Application & Nothing Else*

In this model the preacher or commentators follow an exegetical method that follows a grammatical, historical, literal hermeneutic **AND** expounds an exposition and application of the text that is faithful to the meaning of the original author without any other appeal. In *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament*, Elizabeth Achtemeier writes after hearing an allegorical sermon on the Song (2:8-13), “Most profitably, however, the text should be interpreted for what it is—a young man in

²⁵ Ibid., 163.

²⁶ Also see Douglas Sean O’Donnell’s article which was written to provide directions to “those of us who preach, to navigate through the often dark (but ah so beautiful!) waters of Solomon’s Song. “The Earth is Crammed with Heaven: Four Guideposts to Reading and Teaching the Song of Songs,” *Themelios* 37 no. 1 (April 2012) http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the_earth_is_crammed_with_heaven_four_guideposts_to_reading_and_teach/ (accessed June 28, 2012). As a senior pastor, O’Donnell concludes, “This Song is God’s provision to sustain loving marriages and renew loveless ones. It is his provision for increased intimacy that reflects the intimacy of Christ’s love for the church, an intimacy that makes the world turn its head to view marriage and say, ‘So, that’s the gospel. What must I do to be made wise unto salvation?’” While Ephesians 5:32 reflects such intimacy, there is no such indicators of the gospel reflection in the Song.

In an article designed for those who preach the Song based on the Lectionary, Nancy deClaisé-Walford, offers three understandings of the Song: “As a simple erotic love song built on the model of other erotic love songs from the ancient Near East? A love song that celebrates the sexual love of one human for another? YES. As an allegory for the love of God for humanity? As the love of God for Israel? AS the love of Jesus for the Church? YES. As a glimpse of Eden redeemed? A place where the created good is celebrated? YES, by all means, YES.” “An Introduction to the Song of Songs,” *Review and Expositor* 105 (Summer 2008): 389. For a similar application see Eugene Peterson, *The Message: Wisdom Books* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1996), 376.

Although he rejects an allegorical reading and recognizes the abundance of sermonic material, Robert Longacre, remarks, “Even as we reject the allegorical interpretation of this book..., we recognize in the book the presence of a powerful *symbol*.” For Longacre this symbol, “affirms that human love as God intended it finds its fulfillment in eternity where people no longer marry or are given in marriage.” “An Ancient Love Poem: the Book of Canticles,” *In A Mosaic of Languages and Cultures: Studies Celebrating the Career of Karl J. Franklin*, ed. Kenneth A. McElhanon and Gerard P. Reesink (SIL e-Books 19: 2010) <http://www.sil.org/silepubs/abstract.asp?id=52526> (accessed June 28, 2012), 200.

spring, calling out his fair beloved to accompany him to the hills.”²⁷ While I may not agree with every application Achtemeier draws from the text, she does so without any spiritualization or typology or non-existent intertextuality.

Although they only provide three paragraphs on the Song, in their “Preaching Psalms and Wisdom Literature,” Terry Carter, et al., rightly recognize that the “Song of Songs speak openly and joyfully of human sexuality.”²⁸ They reject an allegorical interpretation and suggest that the book demonstrates how a wise person loves their spouse. While I would argue with Carter that this is the “interpretative key” for this wisdom book, it is, however, a literal interpretation of the book with an accompanying literal application: nothing more and nothing less.

While not sharing how he would preach the text, G. Lloyd Carr’s commentary is a straightforward literal interpretation of the Song. He does however, offer what direction he would and would not take in application when he writes, “The Song is presented simply as an account of the relationship between the lover and his beloved. Nor is there any indication in the New Testament that the Song has a Christological interpretation or application.”²⁹

In Craig Glickman’s popular exposition there is no appeal to allegory, spiritualization or to the gospel. Glickman simply reads the Song in its plain sense and suggests, the following application: “The lovers of the Song helps us see not just what our partners should *be* like, but what our relationship should *feel* like: The role of emotion, longing, and sexual attraction; the foundation of friendship, respect, and commitment; the experience of intimacy, certainty, and forgiveness.”³⁰

²⁷ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching the Hard Texts of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 117.

²⁸ Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God’s Word: A Hands on Approach to Preparing, developing and Delivering the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 277.

²⁹ G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1984), 31. Also see Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (Nashville, Westminster John Knox, 2005). And Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). It should be noted that Kaiser has only one page on preaching the Song and without warrant finds the “hermeneutical clue” for this poem in Proverbs 5:15-23 (94). However, he does advocate preaching this song literally.

I would have liked to include Dan Estes’ commentary, “The Song of Songs,” in this section as well since he writes, “The contents of the book indicate it is intended to celebrate human love within the parameters of God’s design” (302). However, when he expounds on bellies, navels and breasts in his explanation of 7:1-10 he somehow moves from the intimacy of the couple to Paul knowing Christ in Phil. 3:10! This is disappointing in an otherwise very good and very literal commentary (398).

³⁰ Craig Glickman, *Solomon’s Song of Love* (West Monroe, LA: Howard, 2004), 14.

Handling Bellies, Navels and Breasts from the Sunday Morning Pulpit

While I disagree with Rabbi Saadia who suggests that the interpretation of the Song “resembles locks to which the keys have been lost,” I would offer that to preach this Song the expositor needs to possess certain “keys”³¹ to help them unlock an exposition that practices a literal hermeneutic which should lead to a literal application. While these “keys” do not guarantee such an application, they may provide the most likely access to a literal utilization of this Song for a contemporary audience.³²

Key #1: Classify the Genre as Wisdom Lit

It is clear from 1:1 that this “poem” is actually a song. As such, we can understand it without its music as a lyrical love poem. But this lyrical love poem is also can be classified as wisdom literature. Child’s notes, “The Song of Songs was to be heard along with other portions of Israel’s scripture as a guide to wisdom.”³³ This genre designation is important as it sets the direction to understand how the pastor can approach this book. As wisdom literature it offers no imperatives or appeals to the Law, but instead paints a picture of how wise people should function in this sometimes-dangerous area of passion and desire. As this book is preached as wisdom lit it should replicate in wise married hearers the desire to be like this couple. On the other hand wise singles who hear its message understand the need to wait until one is married to share in its intimacies although their bodies may be saying otherwise.

Key #2: Understand that “Bellies Means Bellies and Breasts Means Breasts.”

What do pastors do when they encounter navels, bellies and breasts in the biblical text on a Sunday morning? We take a deep breath and explain these

³¹ These “keys” do not negate the importance of other necessary steps in exegesis such as translating this poetic text. I would suggest that these are additional. Other articles that offers various “guides” to help pastors use Solomon’s Song, see Douglas Sean O’Donnell, “The Earth is Crammed with Heaven: Four Guideposts to Reading and Teaching the Song of Songs.” Also, Greg W. Parsons, “Guidelines for Understanding and Utilizing the Song of Songs,” *Bib Sac* 156 (Oct 1999): 419-22.

³² Although it is outside the scope of this paper, I would suggest that there are at least three reasons why the SoS is not preached literally:

1. It is easier to “type, allegorize, or find Jesus” in the Song than to struggle with its interpretation and preaching the likes of chapter seven literally.
2. Expectations are such that if we are “truly” Christian every message will end in Jesus or at least the message will have some connection with him.
3. Many are following the crowd of contemporary preaching that is “Christ-centered or gospel-centered.” A preacher is not “hip,” “cool,” or horrors, not “cutting edge” if he is not preaching like “everyone” else.

³³ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 578.

intimate words within the literal, grammatical, historical context in which they are found. To suggest an allegorical or typological meaning for various body parts that are potentially uncomfortable to mention from the pulpit is to open the possibilities that these words mean everything and thus mean nothing at all.

Key #3: Appreciate the Poetic Use of Metaphors and Similes

Arguably no other book in either canon contains the amount of imagery that the Song includes. To communicate his message the poet employs numerous metaphors and similes throughout his poem. But it is this plethora of figurative language that seemingly conceals the book's meaning for a contemporary audience. To explain how "your two breasts are like fawns, twins of gazelles" (4:5) proves frustrating (and sometimes embarrassing) to most pastors and even scholars.

Besides the sheer amount of metaphors and similes, is the issue that these literary devices are historically and culturally conditioned. That "your hair is like a flock of goats" (4:1) and "your nose is like the tower of Lebanon" (7:4) hardly communicate desirability in our Western culture! Although these similes may not express our standard of feminine beauty, it is clear that the poet utilized these culturally conditioned figures of speech for that purpose. So, although we may not be able to explain (or appreciate) completely the beauty of a female nose compared to a tower, we do understand the rhetorical function of the simile.

The Song is a garden orchard filled with literary devices and a wise pastor needs to be brave enough to walk his people through such greenery and stop and appreciate their use. Although a pastor may not be able to detail every aspect of the comparison within a particular simile or metaphor, he should be able to recognize the function of each literary device within its context.³⁴

Key #4: Acknowledge Solomon's Role

Having to explain the presence of Solomon, a man with seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, in a book that extols a monogamous relationship causes even the most hearty of pastors to tackle Chronicles 1-8 instead! Solomon is indeed this song's most controversial character. But what kind of character? Is he the author, the male lover, the amour in a three-way love affair, or something else?

Solomon does pose some significant interpretative questions; however, none of the proposed solutions negate a literal reading and application of the Song. I would suggest that 1) Solomon is the author of this Song who wrote better than he

³⁴ For instance explaining the metaphor "your eyes are doves" is elusive—in which way are her "eyes doves"? By color? By their fluttering like a dove's wings? We are uncertain. However, it can be noted that within the context this metaphor is intended to show the complete desirability of the woman.

lived and 2) he is not the male lover nor does he have a voice in the Song (he is only spoken to in 8:12. There he is the foil for the couple who enjoy each other exclusively while the king has his hordes of women i.e. Baal-hamon—“master of many”).³⁵

Key #5: Identify the Main Voices

Since the Song is not a narrative nor is its main characters historical,³⁶ there is a need to identify the “voices” of the Song and not its characters. In this poem we do not really see the characters in action—because the Song is a fiction and not actually happening—we simply hear their voices. But we hear these speeches in such detail that we have their actions painted on our mental stage.

There are four voices in the SoS. The female lover has the dominant voice. She speaks the majority of the time, which is consistent with other ANE love literature. The second voice is the male lover. The third voice is a collective unit known as the Daughter of Jerusalem. They function to allow the reader to hear the inward thoughts of the woman when her beloved is absent. Their conversation is always with the woman. The fourth and final voice in the Song is the unidentified speaker of the admonition of 5:1: “Eat, friends; Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers.” I would suggest that this anonymous voice is the poet’s and as such he speaks for God.³⁷ And in speaking for God he declares that sexual passion and intimacy within a heterosexual marriage are to be enjoyed with his blessings. This is a message that literally needs to be preached today.

Key #6: Recognize the “Absence” of God

The Song along with Esther enjoys the intriguing status of being the only two books in the Bible that do not mention God. While God’s providence is visible all over Esther, there is no overt evidence of God in the Song. This divine absence leads some scholars to suggest that there is not much theology in these verses, which in turn leads pastors away from preaching it!³⁸

³⁵ For a fuller treatment of Solomon’s role see my article: “What Is He Doing in that Book?” Solomon’s Role in the Song of Songs,” *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* (Fall 2008).

³⁶ Longman writes, “The man and the woman of the Song are not historical personages but rather poetic types, and as such the poet invites the readers to identify with them. In this way, the work encourages intimate passionate love” (Song of Songs, 62).

³⁷ For a detailed argument for this position consult: Mark McGinniss, *Contributions of Selected Rhetorical Devices to a Biblical Theology of the Song of Songs*, (Oregon: Wiph & Stock, 2011), 139—223.

³⁸ Paul House, “Song of Solomon is artistically and thematically lovely but not particularly theologically enriching.” *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 469.

However, God's overt absence is not an oversight but a necessity. Richard Davidson writing concerning the lack of references to God remarks, "It is understandable that in a time of pagan fertility cults, when the very air was charged with the divination of sex, the divine presence/voice would have to be muted in the context of sexuality."³⁹ It is not that this book lacks a theology proper due to the "absence of God," it is simply proper theology to "exclude" God so that the concept of "sex" is not embodied with the sacred.

Key #7: Suggest an Overall Structure

The structure of the Song is a vexing question. While current scholarship is moving away from the general plot arrangement of Courtship, Marriage, Post Honeymoon, there is no scholarly consensus on how this poem moves from 1:2 to 8:14. This inability to understand its structure and movement hinders pastors from wanting to preach these love lyrics. It is difficult to expound a book when one does not have a handle on the book as a whole.

I would suggest that the Song moves through seven cycles that repeat four themes: separation, desire, obstacle and union.

| | First Cycle | Second Cycle | Third Cycle | Fourth Cycle | Fifth Cycle | Sixth Cycle | Seventh Cycle |
|--------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| | 1:2-2:7 | 2:8-17 | 3:1-5 | 3:6-5:1 | 5:2-7:11 | 7:11-8:4 | 8:5-14 |
| Thematic elements | | | | | | | |
| Separation | 1:2 | 2:8-9 | 3:1 | 3:6-11 | 5:2-6:1 | 8:3 | 8:13-14 |
| Desire | 1:2-4 | 2:10-14 | 3:2-3 | 4:1-7 | 5:4-16 | 7:11-12 | 8:6-7 |
| Obstacle | 1:5-6 | 2:15 | 3:1-3 | 4:8 | 5:3-6 | 8:1 | 8:8-12 |
| Union | 1:7-2:3a | 2:15 | 3:4 | 4:9-5:1d | 6:2-7:9 | 7:11-8:2 | 8:5-7 |
| Transition | 2:3b-7 | 2:16-17 | 3:5 | 5:1e-f | 7:10 | 8:4 | |
| | | | | | | | |

As one looks at the whole book something fairly interesting about one aspect of the structure of the Song becomes evident. The four themes stay in the same general order throughout the first five cycles. There is a slight switch in the sixth. However, in the last cycle the themes of union and separation are completely

³⁹ Richard Davidson, *The Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 622.

reversed. This reversal plays to the main theme of the book. It is a book that has no ending: there is a constant desire to be together.

Key #8: Develop a Purpose Statement

To preach the Song literally the pastor must understand the author's purpose for this book to his original audience. I would suggest that the Song of Songs is a love song about a couple who revel in their strong desire for each other. Through the use of intimate dialogue this couple shares their yearning to be together when separated and passionately enjoy each other when they are in each other's presence. While the garden motif reminds the reader of the Garden of Eden, this garden is post-fall and there are obstacles the couple must overcome to be together. Through the use of highly charged sexual imagery that is clothed in Hebrew poetry this fictitious couple invites every married couple who is wise to enjoy their own celebration of love. However, at the same time the Song recognizes the intensity of sexual desire and cautions wise single people not to arouse or awaken this emotion until the proper time, that is marriage.

There is a great need in our churches for married couples and single individuals to have access to this divine wisdom in the area of physical intimacy. But where will believers of any age get this wisdom if pastors are not preaching it or are not preaching **and** applying it literally?

Key #9: Ascertain the Song's Relationship w/ NT

There is none!

Many point to Ephesians 5:32 and its context as a link with the Song because of its theme of marriage and one flesh. However, as we have seen, the purpose of the SoS is not to extol marriage,⁴⁰ or even the concept of becoming one flesh. The main purpose of the SoS is to demonstrate the dynamic of desire: the interplay of absence and presence.

If there was an intended intertextual link with the Song, Paul could have easily quoted it. But instead he cited Genesis 2:24 thus creating a stronger intertextual thread between this chapter and Ephesians 5. No clear linkage exists between Ephesians 5:32 and the SoS.

Key #10: Exercise the Courage to Preach the Whole Counsel of God

This book is the only book in our entire Bible that has somehow been stamped with a PG-13 or even R rating and thus has not seen the light of many Sunday morning pulpits. Yet, I have read the SoS in a number of translations and I have not found one that directs preachers not to preach this book on Sunday

⁴⁰ Although, the couple is married in the entire Song.

mornings because of its erotic vocabulary. But that is the case and many times even at the direction of scholars!⁴¹ Duane Garrett cautions, “A final question is whether the Song should be preached (as in sermons) or taught (as in Bible studies). Probably the pastor will find it more appropriate to teach the Song in a Sunday night or week night series instead of preaching it on Sunday morning.”⁴² It is somehow permissible to share this salacious song alone with married or engaged couples but it is considered unsavory to unpack its metaphors or preach chapter 7 during a Sunday morning service.⁴³ This is a self-imposed restriction and not a biblical one. Pastors need to starch their backbones (and with advance warning) preach the whole counsel of God even the Song of Solomon on Sunday mornings! To do less is for God’s people to miss an opportunity to hear God’s word on a topic that is literally talked about everywhere but the church.

Conclusion

So how are ministers of God’s word to handle a text that sings the beauty of bellies, navels and breasts? Literally! They are called to preach it—on a Sunday morning—as God intended—with a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic that yields a literal application that is true to the meaning as stated by the author and one that is communicated in a manner that edifies and exhorts its hearers to wise living. Anything less (or more) would not be true dispensational preaching.

⁴¹ For example Jerry Gladson cautions: “The Preacher would be well advised to proceed with caution in such an approach, however, perhaps utilizing this text and topics for a special occasion rather than the regular worship service” (*The Strangest Books in the Bible*, 36). David Hubbard observes, “Preaching on the Song in most congregational settings is difficult. The language is so frank and the theme so specialized that the message would probably not minister effectively to the entire church.” *The Communicator’s Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 260. In recognizing the need to share the message of the book Greg Parsons suggest using the Song in couple classes, college or high school classes, counseling, a wedding sermon or with one’s own spouse—but not on a Sunday morning. “Guidelines for Understanding and Utilizing the Song of Songs,” 419-22. While I agree with the caution and understand the difficulty the Song presents in preaching, I cannot believe that God put a book in the Bible that he would not want preached to all especially in light of its message to single people. I do not read of the same angst among scholars in preaching the book of Proverbs (especially chapter 5)!

⁴² Duane A. Garrett, “Preaching Wisdom,” in *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle: Preaching the Old Testament Faithfully*, ed. George L. Klein (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 121—22.

⁴³ See John MacArthur, “The Rape of Solomon’s Song, Parts 1-4,” (April 2009) media.sermonaudio.com/mediapdf/417091244255.pdf (accessed April 20, 2009). In this Internet post MacArthur is vehemently reacting to Mark Driscoll’s literal preaching of the Song in Edinburg, Scotland.

Speaking of the Song’s figurative language MacArthur states, “It speaks in secret terms about that which should be kept secret” (Part 2, Wednesday, April 15, 2009). Following his line of reasoning, no biblical metaphors should be unpacked or explained for the congregation.