

Hearing and Proclaiming Her Voice: The Not-So-Secret Longing of Female Sexual Desire in the Song

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Abstract: Evangelicalism as a whole (in which dispensationalism is a part) does not have a stellar history as it relates to its treatment of women or their issues. One area that has been woefully neglected in the church is the area of female sexuality. The church has generally been monotone in her voice to her female members along the lines of “no, no, no,” “sex is dirty, dirty, dirty,” or “sex is simply for your husband.” This voice is unfortunate and even unbiblical since there is an entire book in the Bible that bears directly on female sexuality. The voice of the Song of Songs is neither mute nor monotone on this critical subject. However, this poem is rarely heard (or taught accurately). This song needs to be embraced and celebrated for its divine teaching to married and single women on their own sexual desire.

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Wrong Voices and Deafening Silence

Evangelicalism as a whole (of which dispensationalism is a part) cannot boast a stellar history as it relates to its

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treatment of women or their issues.³ One area that has been woefully mishandled in the church at large is the area of female sexuality. The church's voice has generally been either silent or monotone to her female members along the lines of "no, no, no," "sex is dirty, dirty, dirty," or "sex is simply for your husband."⁴ Although some have attempted to correct these incomplete or unbiblical "voices," they are competing with countless opinions that at times (unfortunately) are noisier and more compelling.

Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus record these well-intentioned (but woefully wrong) voices of moms to their daughters:

"Only 'those kinds' of girls enjoy sex."

"Sex is a man's thing. You just have to endure it."

"Wait until you've have been married twenty years, it gets old."

³ The denial or suppression of female sexuality is not a church only issue. Western culture may have a more checkered history than the church in this regard. Baumeister and Twenge observe, "The suppression of female sexuality can be regarded as one of the most remarkable psychological interventions in Western cultural history. According to Sherfey's (1966) respected statement of this view, the sex drive of the human female is naturally and innately stronger than that of the male, and it once posed a powerfully destabilizing threat to the possibility of social order. For civilized society to develop, it was allegedly necessary or at least helpful for female sexuality to be stifled. Countless women have grown up and lived their lives with far less sexual pleasure than they would have enjoyed in the absence of this large-scale suppression. Socializing influences such as parents, schools, peer groups, and legal forces have cooperated to alienate women from their own sexual desires and transform their (supposedly and relatively) sexually voracious appetites into a subdued remnant" ("Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality," *Review of General Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2002): 166, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/26cf/592c500860d43ceab39d21816654e53e9c6c.pdf>).

⁴ This essay is dealing with female sexuality from a Western perspective. It is not interacting with the international church in areas where female sexuality is actually physically attacked as in the practice of female circumcision.

Interestingly, while the male gender may have heard the same voices, they do not generally suffer in the same way expressing their sexuality within marriage.

“After two years of marriage, the excitement vanishes. You’ll see.”
 “Give him his sex so you can have his children.”⁵

A female believer wrote to Kevin Leman: “I grew up in a really conservative, religious home. I was never told in so many words, but the message came across loud and clear: *Sex is dirty. And you’re dirty if you ever think about it.*”⁶ Gary and Barbara Rosberg share Jasmine’s struggle: “My mom and grandmother pounded into my head that sex was dirty. How do I take all that training from the women in my life and still become the sexy woman I know my husband wants? As soon as I get in the mood, those messages bounce around in my head and I get turned off before I get started.”⁷

Dannah Gresh and Juli Slattery write of one Christian who shared, “Growing up, I was one of those ‘good Christian girls’ who took the message of purity seriously. I had trained my mind and my heart to say no to sexual things through my teens and early twenties. When I got married, the wedding ring on my finger didn’t suddenly erase all the ‘no’ messages.”⁸ Another female believer wonders, “How can I get rid of old tapes in my head from my childhood about how defiled sex is? They make me feel inhibited every time I have sex. I feel like a prostitute.”⁹

Judy, too, grew up in a religiously conservative home. Before she was to be married at twenty-one, her mom pulled her aside for the sex talk (for the first time). Kim Eckert continues Judy’s story, “Her mom described sex as something a wife did for her husband to keep him satisfied. Never did the mom mention the

⁵ Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus, *Intimate Issues: Conversations Woman to Woman* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook P, 1999), 5.

⁶ Kevin Leman, *Turn Up the Heat: A Couple’s Guide to Sexual Intimacy* (Grand Rapids: Revell), 22.

⁷ Gary Rosberg and Barbara Rosberg, *The 5 Sex Needs of Men and Women* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2006), 99-100.

⁸ Dannah Gresh and Juli Slattery, *Pulling Back the Shades: Erotica, Intimacy, and the Longings of a Woman’s Heart* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 103-4.

⁹ Archibald D. Hart, Catherine Hart Weber, and Debra L. Taylor, *Secrets of Eve* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 11.

possibility that there could be sexual pleasure for the wife.”¹⁰ Unfortunately Judy is not a lone case as Eckert reports, “I have counseled many women who have experienced a deep sense of disappointment and guilt about their inability to enjoy sex as a gift in marriage. Even though they know that sex within marriage is not a sin; it still feels like a sin.”¹¹ One Christian wife responded to a study of the sexual attitudes of Christian women and shared, “More than anything else I want to abandon myself to my husband when we make love. He is kind and gentle, and very patient with me. But something inside me tells me I am doing bad things ... after two years of marriage I still feel like I am sinning.”¹²

Juli Slattery tells the story of Holly. In a group of moms discussing how to

infuse excitement into the marriage after childbirth, ... one of the women suggested going to the underwear store and mixing in some ‘sexy undies’ with the standard ‘granny panties.’ Holly was embarrassed and disgusted that her Christian friends would suggest wearing lacy underwear and thongs. Although she couldn’t voice a logical or biblical reason why she was offended, she simply couldn’t accept that God would be okay with this.¹³

Dillow and Pintus share the story of one woman who confided,

It’s as if I live in a two-story house. The top floor is my spirituality and the bottom floor my sexuality. In between the two floors is a brick barrier separating my spiritual self from my sexual self. Because I want to be godly, I can’t allow myself to be too earthly—and sex is definitely earthly. I allow myself to experience

¹⁰ Kim Gaines Eckert, *Things Your Mother Never Told You: A Women’s Guide to Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² Hart, Weber, and Taylor, *Secrets of Eve*, 12.

¹³ Juli Slattery, *No More Headaches: Enjoying Sex & Intimacy in Marriage* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2009), 50.

pleasure—but only so much. If I get really carried away, it would be ‘too fleshly.’¹⁴

My wife, Joy and I counseled one young wife and her sexually frustrated husband (with two kids) who truly believed that God never meant women to enjoy sex. As “Jean” sat on the couch across from us, she vehemently challenged us to show her that he did!

Just a few years ago we were asked to conduct a single pre-marital session on “sex” for a young Christian pastor and his soon-to-be bride. The reason for only one session was because her pastor was too uncomfortable and embarrassed to share with them openly, honestly, and biblically about physical intimacy within marriage.

While the reasons, motivations, and historical influences can be debated concerning such individual stories, the reality is that many of our sisters in the Lord have not heard God’s *full* voice concerning female sexuality. What is surprising is that with the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the plethora of sexual information (both good and awful) a few mouse clicks away in 2020, one wonders why Christian women are struggling so in this area. One reason is that these women (generally) have been taught that the Bible should be followed in all areas of life. And many endeavor to obey the biblical text. However, in the area of sexuality, outside the “Thou shalt not” passages and 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, the church has been monotone in her prohibitions. One sister observes,

The church is behind the times in many respects. Certainly, it has not helped to educate its adherents to a healthy and biblically acceptable form of sexuality. The church needs to counter hundreds of years of ‘shame-based’ theology connected with sexuality. I want my daughters to have a healthier view of sexuality than I grew up with.¹⁵

¹⁴ Dillow and Pintus, *Intimate Issues*, 15.

¹⁵ Hart, Weber, and Taylor, *Secrets of Eve*, 9.

Although not true of every church or family, this sister recognizes that while the church has nailed the negatives, it has in many cases avoided the teaching of the positives. Ellison and Brown submit,

If the Christian response to sex has long been fear and suspicion, and if the prevailing watchwords are control and restraint, then contemporary Christians must look long and hard to find theological affirmation of erotic pleasure and even longer and harder to find theological interest in *women's* sexual pleasure.¹⁶

For women, the church's silence is deafening; and other voices are all too eager to fill this void. As Carolyn Mahaney observes, "If you watch TV, go to the movies, or read magazines today, you can get the impression that the only people having sex (or good 'sex') are the ones who aren't married. If married sex is even portrayed in popular media, it seems bland or routine. Our culture demeans marital sex and instead celebrates immoral sex."¹⁷ Following the siren song of culture creates its own set of poor consequences for the women of the church.

However, above this cacophony from culture rises a clarion voice from Scripture—an entire book about sexuality from the female perspective. It is my contention that the church needs to hear this voice and "sing" without embarrassment, shame, or blush the Song of Songs.¹⁸ I also assert that this mostly ignored but divinely inspired poem from God's own lips needs to be the foremost voice women hear on the beauty and wonder of their sexuality.

Speaking for women, Mahaney rightly observes,

¹⁶ Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, eds., "Introduction to Part 4," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 241.

¹⁷ Carolyn Mahaney, "Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God: What Every Christian Wife Needs to Know" in *Sex and Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 202.

¹⁸ Or allegory or spiritualizing.

It is important that we acquire a biblical perspective of sex. God intends for us to experience tremendous joy and satisfaction in our sexual relationship with our husbands. And what greater proof do we need than the fact that God included the Song of Solomon in Holy Scripture—an entire book of the Bible devoted to love, romance, and sexuality in marriage. ... This little book portrays a physical relationship between husband and wife that is filled with uninhibited passion and exhilarating delight. This is God’s heart and aim for our sexual experience.¹⁹

Hearing the Song in its Proper Key

To hear the divinely inspired Song rightly, women (and others who want to teach it) must recognize how it teaches. Unlike the NT epistles or OT Law, there are no commands or imperatives for the reader to follow. Instead, as wisdom literature it instructs by holding up at the same time both a model and a mirror. As a model the Song implicitly instructs readers that this is the type of wise, intimate relationship God desires them to enjoy. The model does not share the “normal” quantity of sexual experiences, various sexual positions, or best sexual techniques for a happy Christian marriage.²⁰ Instead it models in broad-brush strokes the God-desired quality of marriage intimacy. It silently asks this question of its readers, “Don’t you want this type of intimacy in your marriage?” As a mirror, the Song implicitly requests readers to evaluate whether or not their marriage reflects the desire of this couple in their own relationship. It silently asks the question of its readers, “Do I have this quality of desire and physical intimacy between my spouse and me in our marriage?” Estes rightly notes, “Instead of merely reporting the experience of the characters, the book, as poetry, endeavors to re-create their experience in the reader.”²¹ As such the Song does not command

¹⁹ Mahaney, “Sex, Romance,” 202.

²⁰ The Song is not as some have claimed a Hebrew or even Christian Kamasutra. Patrick Hunt writes, “The *Song of Songs* is more appropriate to bedside table than coffee table.... It could even be called the Hebrew *Kamasutra*” (*Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis* [New York: Peter Lang, 2008], iv).

²¹ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 401.

obedience; it inspires every wise couple to desire and maintain a relationship that mirrors and models these lovers.

Solomon wrote his best song (Song of Sol 1:1) celebrating passion and desire between a heterosexual man and woman within the confines of God-ordained marriage. This poem does not narrate the ups and downs of the courtship-marriage-post honeymoon stages of an historical couple. It is an artistic creation that places the two main literary characters into a lush and nearly perfect environment. In this garden setting the two lovers reveal themselves through their conversation. This sometimes erotically charged dialogue paints on the reader's imagination the pleasure of fulfilled desire and the palpable ache of absence. For this couple, longing is satisfied only in the presence of the other. When absent from each other, they yearn for one another, and their desire drives them over every obstacle to be one. The movement of the book from her first voiced longing for his kisses to her final wish for his return is achieved by this cyclical progression of absence to presence.²² For this couple presence produces shalom; absence is always to be struggled against. No good comes from absence except a desire to be present with the other.²³

²² Appendix 1 is my outline of the flow of the Song.

²³ What the Song is not: (1) The Song is not about God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the church. This allegorical interpretation was a common view held by the church fathers because of their uncomfortableness with the subject matter and their philosophical foundations. They spiritualized or allegorized the Song. For example, the female lover's breast actually represented a deeper or more spiritual meaning. Since women have two breasts, some commentators said that one breast was the NT and the other was the OT in which the church received her nourishment. Jewish scholars would equate the two breasts with Moses and Aaron who "nourished" the nation of Israel. (2) The Song is not a narrative that traces the love between Solomon and the country lass named the Shulammitte. One cannot outline the Song based on their courtship, marriage, and happily-ever-after. The text simply will not sustain such a reading. For examples see the obvious sexual references in 1:2; 1:4; 2:3-6; 2:14; 3:4, which are before the supposed wedding in the later part of chapter 3. (3) Some have surmised that it is a narrative of two male lovers, one being Solomon and the other a rustic shepherd, who vie for the affection of the pretty Shulammitte whose heart

The Song of Songs is an ancient love song about a couple who revel in their strong physical desire for each other. Through the use of intimate dialogue this couple shares their desire to be joined when separated and passionately enjoy each other when they are together. For this couple sex/physical oneness is a natural consequence of desire and defeating obstacles to be together. While the garden motif reminds the reader of the Garden of Eden, this garden is post-fall and has a number of obstacles the couple must overcome to be one. Through the use of highly charged sexual imagery clothed in Hebrew poetry, this fictitious couple invites every couple who is wise to enjoy their own celebration of love within the confines of their marriage.

The Song moves and has its being through the interaction of four main characters or more specifically four voices: the female lover (who speaks the majority of time—approximately 65%), the male beloved, and a chorus of women known as the daughters of Jerusalem.²⁴ This female chorus functions to let the reader know the inward thoughts of the female lover when the male lover is absent from her. They also act as the near audience for the reader as the female lover shares her exhortation with the daughters, which applies to them.²⁵ The fourth voice speaks but one full poetic line and it is the narrator's voice who speaks for God (5:1). No other voices are heard in the Song.

really belongs to the lowly shepherd and not the fabulously wealthy king. Again, the text will not support such a reading.

²⁴ Interestingly, and not seen in our English translations, the second person pronouns that are used of the “daughters of Jerusalem” are masculine plural in the BHS. This is not a textual issue but a rhetorical device of Solomon to allow both men and women readers to be represented by the “daughters” in the Song and subject to the exhortations of the female lover. See Song of Solomon 2:7; 3:5; 8:4.

²⁵ Solomon, although the author of the Song, has no voice in his composition. Solomon is directly spoken to only once (8:12). In this instance he acts as the foil for the couple who enjoy only each other while the king has his hordes (“vineyards”) of women (Baal-hamon, i.e., “master of many,” 8:11). Solomon wrote better than he lived. He knew that one mutually exclusive love is better than a harem full of lovely and willing ladies who were bought with wealth (8:7c, d).

God's Voice on Female Sexuality

One woman muses, "What is right? What is wrong? Can I both be godly and sensuous? I wish I knew how I should think about sex and how You, God, think about sex."²⁶

Although OT theologian Paul House gets some points right on the Song, he is certainly not helpful when he concludes, "Song of Solomon is artistically and thematically lovely but not particularly theologically enriching."²⁷ His observation misses badly the opportunity to answer from God's own perspective what God thinks about sex and how divine wisdom should inform women how they should think and act concerning all things sexual. This poem is filled with divinely inspired theology that voices distinctly the proper and good expression of female sexuality.

While we cannot bare all the theology concerning female sexuality based on our present time constraints, allow me to uncover five divine realities that demonstrate that the Song is the foremost voice women need to hear concerning their own sexuality, that the Song is the foremost voice that the church needs to proclaim (on Sunday mornings) concerning female sexuality for all her members, and that the Song as God's voice provides divine permission for her married female members to celebrate fully his gift of female sexuality in their own marriages.

#1. Women Have Divine Permission To Celebrate Physical Intimacy Within Marriage²⁸

In the unique opening lines of the Song, the female lover pines:²⁹

²⁶ Dillow and Pintus, *Intimate Issues*, 3.

²⁷ Paul House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 469.

²⁸ Although there is no need to state the obvious boundary markers to these truths to the present audience, to avoid any misunderstandings or applications, all of these theological truths are required by God to be enjoyed within the confines of a heterosexual marriage.

²⁹ No other book of the Bible begins with a female point of view or voice.

May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
 For your love is better than wine (1:2).³⁰

Not satisfied she hungers a chapter later:

Sustain me with raisin cakes,
 Refresh me with apples,
 Because I am lovesick.
Let his left hand be under my head
 And his right hand embrace me (2:5-6).

These few poetic lines provide clear evidence of our female protagonist's yearning for multiple kisses, erotic caresses, and prolonged lovemaking. Her craving for intimacies is palpable and undeniable. Only the most talented allegorists could cover up what these divine texts so clearly expose—the woman wants sex! While these sample texts are theologically informative, what should not be missed are the subsequent lines. In the following verses 1:3 and 2:7 her erotic desires are not met with divine lightning bolts! There is no divine prohibition, divine sarcasm, or divine censure for this woman's cravings for physical intimacy in any part of the Song. Only a caution is proffered in the adjuration refrains.³¹ This thrice-repeated warning challenges the unmarried daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken such "love" (i.e., desires) until the proper time (i.e., marriage). However, for the woman of the Song, there is no similar restraint. She need not abandon or even curtail her fleshly longings since she is already married.³²

While these verses certainly show God's approval of female sexual desire, it is in 5:1 where his divine affirmation is unmistakable. The section that ends with 5:1 actually began in 3:6 with their separation. Once the couple is together (4:1), the

³⁰ All translations are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

³¹ Cf. 2:7; 3:5; 8:4.

³² The Song begins *in medias res*. The couple is already married. Although a minority of scholars sees the couple as unmarried (and it is true there is no mention of their marriage in the poem), not being married would contradict the Torah which would have excluded its inclusion in the canon.

male lover begins an elaborate *wasf* that recounts her exquisite physical beauty (4:1-7).³³ His praise of her body transitions to an invitation for his female lover to overcome unknown and possible dangerous obstacles that separate them (4:8-9). Male desire continues in the next verses and becomes more bodily specific but stays clothed in flora metaphors (4:11-15). His invitation and yearning is answered with her own enticement:

Female lover

Awake, O north *wind*,
And come, *wind of* the south;
Make my garden breathe out *fragrance*,
Let its spices be wafted abroad.
May my beloved come into his garden
And eat its choice fruits! (4:16)

While dressed in spicy Hebrew images, it is clear that her offer is for lovemaking. The man enthusiastically accepts her invitation with the same metaphorical language that morphs her garden into his garden:

Male lover

I have come into my garden, my sister, *my* bride;
I have gathered my myrrh along with my balsam.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk. (5:1a-d)

Longman remarks, “He enters the garden and enjoys all of its delights. ... The double objects of each of the final three cola indicate the totality of his experience. ... He has possessed her completely, a fitting image of sexual intercourse.”³⁴ However, in the midst of such “intimate feasting,” an unidentified voice addresses the couple:

³³ *Wasf* is an Arabic term for a physical description.

³⁴ Tremper Longman, III, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 159.

Eat, friends;
 Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers (5:1e,f).

While there is discussion among scholars as to the identity of the unknown voice, a legitimate contender is the narrator. Although Amit is writing on Hebrew narrative, she summarizes well the position of the narrator and her words are applicable to this poem: “Both God and the narrator must be trustworthy and hence are the benchmark of trustworthiness for all other personae. Whatever accords with the narrator’s statements of God’s must be beyond doubt.”³⁵ In this case the narrator’s imperatives to continue the “feasting” of each other is actually the voice of God.³⁶ Dillow observes, “The poet seems to say this is the voice of God Himself. Only the Lord could pronounce such an affirmation. He, of course, was the most intimate observer of all.”³⁷ Since the anonymous voice is God’s, the poet is using this short imperative rhetorically to cast his divine favor over the most intimate of human activities between a man and a woman. The point should not be missed that the commands are to both lovers: female and male. The woman is to be “drunk” with their lovemaking just as much as the man. Exum is certainly correct as she observes, “‘Eat,’ ‘drink,’ and ‘be drunk,’ plural forms addressed to both lovers, leave no doubt that eating and drinking in the garden is mutual sexual indulgence and satisfaction.”³⁸

³⁵ Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 95.

³⁶ While it is outside the scope of this paper to pursue, a legitimate question is the absence of the voice of God. “Why not let God speak for himself in the Song of Sol, instead of ‘hiding’ his voice behind the unnamed narrator?” It may be that since Israel’s neighbors were so heavily engaged in various fertility cults that Solomon may have felt the need to keep a respectable distance between God and the act of sex. As Phipps writes, “In Hebrew culture sex had been demythologized; it was considered a proper sphere for man but not for deity.” See William E. Phipps, “The Plight of the Song of Songs,” *JAAR* 42, no 1 (March 1974): 83.

³⁷ Joseph C. Dillow, *Solomon on Sex* (Nashville: Nelson, 1977), 86.

³⁸ J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 183.

Arguably this is the clearest divine voice in all of Scripture proclaiming God's approval, nay his encouragement, for both married females and males to celebrate to the fullest sexual intimacy within marriage. This is the voice sisters in the Lord need to hear (and believe). But if the Song is not rightly proclaimed, how will they hear God's wisdom and how will those unbiblical messages bouncing around their gray matter be countered without God's voice?

#2. Women Have Divine Permission To Initiate Sexual Experiences Within Marriage

One area where married women struggle is in the area of initiation of sexual experiences with their husbands. Writing on the top five sexual needs of men and women, the Rosbergs comment, "Of all the sex needs, initiation seems to be the most difficult for many wives to practice."³⁹ While the reasons for lack of initiation certainly vary among women, it is not an issue for the female lover in the Song.

I am my beloved's,
And his desire is for me.
Come, my beloved, let us go out into the country,
Let us spend the night in the villages.
Let us rise early *and go* to the vineyards;
Let us see whether the vine has budded
And its blossoms have opened,
And whether the pomegranates have bloomed.
There I will give you my love. (7:10-12)

Although her invitation is attired in Hebrew metaphor and figurative language, it does not take a degree in Hebrew to undress her meaning. She is initiating a sexual romp! While the "budding," "opening" and "blooming" may be sexual innuendoes (or flimsy excuses for lovemaking in the vineyard), it is clear that she is enticing him through sensually charged agricultural imagery for a time of lovemaking, and if to be understood literally, outside! Diane Bergant explains, "The word for love is

³⁹ Rosberg and Rosberg, *5 Sex Needs*, 136.

plural in form and, as has been the case with its other appearances (1:2, 4:10), is better translated ‘lovemaking.’⁴⁰ Hess writes, “The picture is also a metaphor of her body and its fecundity for love. In this verse the drama and journey again lead to the same destination, the place of lovemaking.”⁴¹ Longman concurs: The last line “clarifies her intention to explore the vineyard. She will give her love to him; the vineyard again is a place of lovemaking.”⁴²

The metaphors are not so dense that the reader cannot see that the female is the one expressing sexual desire, planning and initiating the amorous tryst. To understand the theology here one needs to remember how the Song of Solomon teaches. As a model it asks the question: “Don’t you want this type of intimacy in your marriage?” And as a mirror it asks, “Do I have this quality of desire and physical intimacy between my spouse and me in our marriage?” In other words it encourages women to ask themselves, “Do I understand that God allows me as a woman to initiate a sensual scenario with my husband?” While many of our married sisters do not live in such an agricultural setting to follow the Shulammite’s example line by line (and in some places lovemaking outdoors is illegal—if caught), the verses affirm that women do have God-given approval to be the architect in lovemaking. The modern wise female lover has the divinely approved model to follow in the Shulammite.

#3. Women Have Divine Permission To Celebrate Sexual Creativity Within Marriage

Another area where many women feel prohibition is expressing sexual creativity within marriage. Here is a sampling of real questions I have received from women:

“Is role-playing wrong? Does the Bible say anything about it?”

⁴⁰ Dianne Bergant, *The Song of Songs* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical P, 2001), 91.

⁴¹ Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 226.

⁴² Longman, *Song of Songs*, 201.

“I don’t want anyone to faint so I wanted to text this question. Oral sex, is it wrong, biblical?”

“How can you decide to try new positions?”

“Is it permissible to use toys/devices?”

“A pastor bought his wife some lingerie and wants her to dress like a prostitute in the bedroom. Is this ok in God’s eyes? And dance like a stripper for him? What do you think?”

These queries reveal the fact that Christian women wrestle with knowing what is sexually right or wrong in the bedroom ... or any other room in the house. And even if some may be erotically adventurous inside or outside the bedroom, there is the morning after. One woman muses, “I blushed when I remember what we had done last night. What would my mother think—what would my pastor think—what did I think?”⁴³ This is an example of one looking for the divine voice in this vital area.

The female lover in the Song has no such reservations or doubts. Finishing the section, she began above, not only is there a promise of female initiation of lovemaking, but on her proverbial suggestive menu is a promise of something “old and new” in verse 13.

Female lover

Come, my beloved, let us go out into the country,
Let us spend the night in the villages.
Let us rise early *and go* to the vineyards;
Let us see whether the vine has budded
And its blossoms have opened,
And whether the pomegranates have bloomed.
There I will give you my love.

The mandrakes have given forth fragrance;
And over our doors are all choice *fruits*,
Both new and old,
Which I have saved up for you, my beloved (7:11-13).

⁴³ Dillow and Pintus, *Intimate Issues*, 210.

Verse 13 (14 Hebrew) is somewhat puzzling. What are these “choice *fruits*” that are both “new and old” which the female lover has “saved” for her male lover? In keeping with the double entendre of the previous verses of “budding,” “opening” and “blooming,” it is safe to assume that there is a sexual connotation associated with this verse. If one consults HALOT and translates כָּל-מִגְדִּים as “all delicacies” instead of “choice *fruits*” and recognize that the female lover is the one who has “stored up” “both new and old” “delicacies” for her beloved, it does not take much ingenuity to see her creative use of language as a euphemism for both fresh and “old” favorite sexual activities for them to both to enjoy.⁴⁴ Cheryl Exum suggests, “The fruits the woman offers are choice fruits of her garden (4:13, 16). ‘New as well as old’ includes the whole spectrum of delights, known to lovers who appreciate how new familiar can be.”⁴⁵ Dianne Bergant sees “new and old” as a merism and writes, “The merism includes the poles and whatever is between them. The woman has already promised to make love (7:13). Here she declares that she has laid up the pleasures of lovemaking for her beloved (*dodi*).”⁴⁶ Hess comments, “The expression ‘new and old’ used of fruit may function as a metaphor for experiences of carnal love that the two have shared. The female promises new delicacies as well as those already favored by her lover.”⁴⁷

We are uncertain as to the male lover’s response to her creative and not-so-subtle carnal declaration. But sanctified imagination would guess he said yes. However, it is not his response that is important, but her voice, her longing, her desire, her erotic inventiveness that is centered and celebrated in these verses. Her longing meets no divine condemnation, no reprimand, no rebuke. Although the Shulammitte’s voice is undoubtedly both the model and mirror for females to hear, how will they hear if the church is not proclaiming this theology? Female sexual creativity is to be celebrated within marriage and this truth proclaimed in church.

⁴⁴ HALOT, 543

⁴⁵ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 242.

⁴⁶ Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 92.

⁴⁷ Hess, *Song of Songs*, 227.

#4. Women Have Divine Permission To Celebrate Female Sexual Passion Within Marriage

Leman shares a letter he received from a female Sunday school teacher: “Here’s my secret: I really, really love sex. And I’m a woman. (If the other Sunday school teachers could hear me now, I’d be the talk of the church for a year.)”⁴⁸ This observation begs the question. What are the reasons that a woman who says she loves sex with her husband becomes church news for a year? Isn’t this supposed to be the norm? One of the reasons it would be “news” is because women have heard multiple voices announce throughout history (their own personal history and their gender’s) that they should not like sex; sex is not for them, or sex is only for procreation. And if they ever discover that they (heaven forbid) actually enjoy sex, they certainly shouldn’t acknowledge it! To be a proper Christian woman (they have been told) they must squelch their female sexual passion.

While many have heard these erroneous voices, it was not the voice that governs the female lover of the Song.

Listen to a sampling of her voice:

May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine, (1:2)

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
So is my beloved among the young men.
In his shade I took great delight and sat down,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He has brought me to *his* banquet hall,
And his banner over me is love.
Sustain me with raisin cakes,
Refresh me with apples,
Because I am lovesick.
Let his left hand be under my head
And his right hand embrace me. (2:3-6)

My beloved extended his hand through the opening,

⁴⁸ Leman, *Turn Up the Heat*, 232.

And my feelings (*inward parts*)⁴⁹ were aroused for him. (5:4)

His mouth is *full of* sweetness.
And he is wholly desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem. (5:16).

I would lead you *and* bring you
Into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me;
I would give you spiced wine to drink from the juice of my
pomegranates.
Let his left hand be under my head
And his right hand embrace me, (8:2-3)

Unless one follows Origen or Bernard of Clairvaux, the female voice is unequivocal as it concerns female sexual passion and pleasure. While biology itself teaches that females are designed for sexual pleasure,⁵⁰ here unembarrassed theology needs neither comment nor commentary to demonstrate God's approval of female sexual passion within marriage. The biblical text is clear; the divine voice is clear; her voice is clear. The only voice missing is the church's voice. The voice of the Song provides a strong theological anchor that allows a woman to have her sexual celebration approved by God and not simply by feelings or the headlines of *Redbook* or *Cosmopolitan*.

#5. Women Have Divine Permission To Celebrate Nakedness Within Marriage

Lauren F. Winner observes, "We Christians get embarrassed about our bodies. We are not always sure that God likes them very much. We are not sure whether bodies are good or bad."⁵¹ It is interesting that God designed physical intimacy to be embodied in well, bodies! Without real, corporeal bodies, there

⁴⁹ HALOT's second definition for מַעֲדָה, "that part of the body through which people come into existence," 609.

⁵⁰ The only function of the female clitoris is to provide sexual pleasure.

⁵¹ Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos P, 2005), 33.

is no sexual intimacy to be received or given and certainly none to be celebrated.

The first book of the Bible displays for readers that God is not ashamed of bodies, even nude ones. This makes perfect theological sense since God created man and woman bodily (Gen 2:7; 2:21-22) and both without a stitch of clothing (Gen 2:25). While clothing has become a theological necessity after the fall for mankind, in the Song nakedness is unashamedly evident and celebrated between the husband and wife.

The fifth movement of the Song is by far the most erotic stanza of biblical poetry in the canon. The reason for its erotic nature is the detailed *wasf* of the female lover (7:1-9a). What makes this *wasf* so different than the one of chapter 4 is that here the female lover is nude and possibly dancing. That she is completely uncovered is clearly visible by the body parts that he describes in metaphorical detail:

“curves of your hips...” (7:1)
 “your navel is like a round goblet...” (7:2)
 “your belly is a heap of wheat...” (7:2)
 “your two breasts are like two fawns...” (7:3)
 “Your stature is like a palm tree,
 And your breasts are *like its* clusters. (7:7)
 I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree,
 I will take hold of its fruit stalks.
 Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine ... (7:8).

These physical feminine qualities can only be described in such literary vividness if she is naked. Otherwise these various “parts” would be hidden beneath her garments. While this *wasf* has been the “whipping boy” for feminist scholars against the “male gaze,” they do not represent the Shulammite’s opinion of his visual contemplation of her body. In response to his thoroughly approving gaze she declares,

I am my beloved’s,
 And his desire is for me (7:10).

Bergant views his gaze and her response to his gaze as “mutual love, not an unequal relationship. It is interesting to note that whenever this formula is appears, it is found in the mouth of the woman. She is clearly desirous of mutual possession.”⁵² Exum writes, “Whereas Genesis connects the woman’s desire to her domination by the man, the Song says desire is mutual.”⁵³ It is clear from her four-word response,

אָנִי לְדוֹדִי
וְעָלִי תְשׁוּקָתְךָ:

that the female lover does not shy away from her lover’s gaze. Although some may argue that the female lover’s lack of garments is strictly for his enjoyment, it is readily heard in her response that she is not ashamed of her bare physique but embraces and luxuriates in her bodily sensuality with her lover.

While there is ongoing cultural and scholarly discussion concerning how sexually stimulated the modern female gender is by sight, clearly the female lover likes what she sees when she turns her feminine gaze on her nude lover (5:10-16). In this lone female *washf* in the Song it is clearly evident by the male body parts described that he is naked under her visual scrutiny. While his head, locks, eyes, cheeks, lips, and hands would be noticeable if he were clothed, it is her description of his “abdomen” and legs which give physical evidence of his full-frontal nudity.

Female lover

His abdomen is carved ivory
Inlaid with sapphires.

His legs are pillars of alabaster
Set on pedestals of pure gold. (5:14-15)

If he were clothed, neither of these male body parts would be visible to her naked eye. Bergant observes,

⁵² Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 90.

⁵³ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 241.

Moving further down his body, the woman marvels at the man's belly. The Hebrew word used [בִּטְנֵי] usually denotes inner organs, bowels, even womb. The woman would not extol the man's belly unless it was naked, clearly a provocative thought. Although the precious gems probably refer to overlaid decoration, there might also be veiled allusion to the man's genitals. The generous use of double entendre throughout the poem leaves this reference open to such interpretation.⁵⁴

Uncovering these metaphors, Longman proposes,

When one thinks of ivory, one thinks of a tusk of ivory, an object that could easily have erotic connotations. The decoration with lapis, a precious stone blue in color, simply would highlight the object's preciousness. In such an erotic poem, the line at the least is suggestive of, if not explicitly referring to, the man's member.⁵⁵

Exum concurs, "There is something sexually suggestive in all these images of hardness—not simply that one or more of these images might be a veiled reference to the man's penis."⁵⁶

While her lover's nudity is clothed under these salacious Hebrew metaphors, her lavish appreciation for his entire body cannot be missed. At the end of her *wasf* she asserts of her naked lover:

His mouth is *full of* sweetness.
And he is wholly desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem. (5:16).

As it was in the Garden before the fall, this pair is naked and not ashamed to celebrate it with each other. This female is the model and mirror for all wise women to evaluate their practice and attitude concerning nakedness. The Song (i.e., God) declares

⁵⁴ Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 72.

⁵⁵ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 173.

⁵⁶ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 207.

that bodies are good and that naked bodies are to be enjoyed within marriage.

Conclusion

To Judy, Holly, Jean, Jasmine, and Other “Good Girls”

There is an orchestra of voices that the women who stories introduced this paper can listen to as it concerns their sexuality. However, the Song of Songs has shown that God has not left his daughters without a clarion voice for them to follow in all things sexual. God desires that his daughters understand and follow his voice alone as it concerns their sexuality. Although it is certainly not easy to switch off contrary voices, a wise wife will follow the divine voice above all others (Prov 1:5). Women who follow this divine voice inside and outside the bedroom have divine permission to acknowledge and celebrate their sexuality within the confines of their individual heterosexual marriages.⁵⁷

To Those Who Teach the Song

While much more can be affirmed from the theology of the Song concerning female sexuality, enough theology has been laid bare to allow the women of the church to hear the true and only voice that should guide their sexuality—God’s. As dispensationalists who understand God’s word correctly, it is our responsibility to proclaim God’s voice distinctly without stammer, stutter, or blush concerning female sexuality. At least half of the congregation is waiting to see if the church has anything more to say about female sexual pleasure than the negatives.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ In this paper I am not arguing for eliminating the “no” voice to pre-marital sex or sexual immorality. I am arguing for a balanced biblical voice to be heard.

⁵⁸ However, hearing this theology in the male voice has its own issues. As one female 30-something shared, “Without even reading your paper, my first reaction is ugh ... another man telling me how to view my sexuality.” Although such sentiments do not absolve us of our teaching responsibilities, it should sensitize us to how we communicate such theology (cf. Titus 2:3-4).

Appendix 1

*How the Song Moves*⁵⁹

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

⁵⁹ Notice how the Song of Solomon begins with the theme of separation (1:2) and ends with separation (8:13-14). This cyclical pattern demonstrates that this truly is a song that God desires “not to end” in a marriage relationship.