

ONE OF THE interesting questions surrounding the interpretation of the Song of Songs is if and when the lovers consummate their relationship. Bound up with this question is how literally to take some of the erotic imagery that is used, and, even when such overtones are detected, to determine whether these are realised (that is, acted out by the two leading characters), or whether they are merely descriptions of fantasies and desire.

While that is a bigger question than can be tackled here, there is a very helpful clue in the terminology that the lovers use to refer to one another. They use a number of different words, the favourite of which is *dod*, variously translated as 'beloved' or 'lover' (perhaps 'darling' [or 'honey' in the US] might be a modern equivalent). The word comes from the same root word as the name David ('beloved'). Another term, more strange to the Western ear, is 'sister,' used by the man to speak to the Shulamite. It doesn't mean that she is his sister (thought she might be in the spiritual parable-counterpart); rather it is an indication of the level of intimacy they feel, that to him she really is an essential 'part of the family.'

The term for focus in this piece, however, is the term 'bride' ('spouse' in the AV). If the lovers do indeed consummate their relationship during the course of the Song we might well ask whether or not they are married—for if they are not, then there is a problem in terms of overall Scriptural harmony, unless passages that appear to refer to intercourse are taken as anticipation rather than reality. The use of the term 'bride' is very significant in this respect; it is clearly the very opposite of what a casual relationship might be in the world today, the sort of relationship sometimes signified by the modern use of the word 'lover.' The term 'bride' necessitates marriage, so if it is used in the Song (which it is), then there must be marriage involved, at least at some point.

The real interest is the *distribution* of the term 'bride' within the book. For it is not used throughout the poems. On the contrary, its use is confined to a very particular part of the book, the only part, in fact, where it appears: 4:8,9,10,11,12; 5:1.

Here, then, the lovers *are* married (or imagine themselves to be), and we note that this occurs, pretty strikingly, in the very centre of the book.

If marriage is the climax of a successful courtship then it would make sense that it would be placed at a particularly significant juncture in the book: perhaps at the start, perhaps at the end (the book building to a grand finale), or perhaps in the middle as the centrepiece. By contrast, it would be less likely that we would find the marriage scene, say, six-sevenths of the way through. Indeed, we don't; it is right there, in pride of place, at the middle.

Interesting, too, that the most obvious case of allusion to sexual union is found *precisely* at this point in the book, where the term 'bride' appears and the lovers are married: "I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse . . ." (5:1). So does this mean that elsewhere in the book the lovers are married? What about in chapters 5–8 in particular—are the poems chronologically ordered so that, once the marriage occurs, the lovers are wedded from this point on?

All Bible study is a work in progress, of course, but I would suggest not; they are only married in that central poem. The reason for this is the absence of the term 'bride' elsewhere in the book, and the fact that the man is away for significant periods both before and after that central moment. The longing expressed elsewhere in the poem is to be contrasted with the consummation that takes place at the centre, and this longing elsewhere in the book is there because they *want* to be united and one, but cannot yet be so (by my implication, because they are not yet married). When we think about how this works out as an allegory about Christ and the church, it fits perfectly. It is indeed Christ, the man, who has gone away, and we long for the time when he will return and we may be one with him.

This suggestion, if correct, implies that the Song is not a chronologically ordered piece with an unfolding narrative 'plot' such that something in chapter 2 *necessarily* occurs after chapter 1. Instead it is a collection of poems without a formal 'plot' but containing repeated themes and motifs. But these repeated themes and poems are arranged around a central poem in which the lovers are at last united in every sense, never more to be parted. And in that union there is supreme joy, truly a Song of Songs!

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