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# Song of Songs and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Song of Songs and Work

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### Introduction to Song of Songs

The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is love poetry. Yet it is also a profound depiction of the meaning, value and beauty of work. The Song sings of lovers who court, then marry, and then work together in an ideal picture of life, family and work. We will explore themes of hardship, beauty, diligence, pleasure, passion, family and joy as they are depicted in the wide variety of work seen in the Song of Songs.

In the ancient world all poetry was sung, and the Song is, in fact, the lyrics to a song collection. It was performed by singers consisting of a male lead, a female lead and a chorus. Song of Songs should probably be thought of as a concert piece created for an aristocratic audience in Solomon's court. It has strong analogies to the love music of ancient Egypt, which was also meant for such audiences and which was composed in the centuries just prior to the age of Solomon.<sup>[1]</sup> The lyrics of Egyptian poetry, although in many ways very similar to Song of Songs, are rather light-hearted and often focus on the ecstasy and afflictions of young lovers. The lyrics of Song of Songs, however, are not flippant or casual but profound and theological, and they provoke serious thought, including thought about work.

There are numerous interpretations of Song of Songs<sup>[2]</sup>, but we will approach it as a collection of songs that center on the love of a man and a woman. This is the plain sense of the text. It is the most fruitful way to explore meanings that actually arise from the text instead of being imposed upon it. The love poetry celebrates the beauty of a wedding and the joy of love between man and woman.

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### Hardship and the Beauty of Work (Song of Songs 1:1-8)

The Song begins with the woman speaking of her love for her man and, in the course of this, she speaks of how her skin has been darkened because her brothers made her work the family vineyard (Song 1:6). Work arises only six verses into this song about love. In the ancient world, people tended to look down on dark skin not for racial reasons but for economic reasons: dark skin meant that you were in the peasant class and had to work in the sun. Fair skin meant that you were in the aristocracy, and

therefore pale skin (not a tan!) was especially prized as a mark of beauty in women. But here, the woman's hard work has not really diminished her beauty (Song 1:5; "Dark am I, yet lovely," NIV<sup>[3]</sup>). Furthermore, her job has prepared her for the future, when she will tend her own vineyard (Song 8:12). A woman who works with her hands may not be an aristocrat, but she is beautiful and worthy of praise.

The loveliness of work, and working people, is often obscured by competing notions of beauty. The Greek world, whose influence is still deeply present in contemporary culture, regarded work as the enemy of beauty. But the biblical perspective is that work has an intrinsic beauty. Solomon builds himself a palanquin (a seat carried on poles) and the Song extols the beauty of the workmanship. It is literally a labor of love (Song 3:10). He puts its beauty to use in the service of love — transporting his beloved to their wedding (Song 3:11) — yet the work was already beautiful in its own right. Work is not only a means to an end — transportation, harvest or paycheck — but a source of aesthetic creativity. And believers are encouraged to see and praise the beauty in others' — including spouses' — work.

## DILIGENCE (SONG OF SONGS 1:7-8)

The woman seeks her beloved, whom she regards as the finest of men. Her friends tell her that the obvious place to find him is at his work, where he is tending the sheep. Yet his work is arranged in a way that makes interaction with his beloved possible. There is no notion that work time belongs to the employer, while time off belongs to the family. Perhaps the reality of modern work makes family interaction at work impossible in many cases. Truckers shouldn't text their families while driving, and lawyers shouldn't receive a visit from their spouses during closing arguments. But perhaps it is not entirely a bad thing that the separation of work and family that arose with the factory system in the 19th century is beginning to fade in many industries.

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## When Work is a Pleasure (Song of Songs 1:9-2:17)

In 1:9-2:7, the man and woman sing of their devotion to each other. He speaks of how beautiful she is, and she proclaims how happy she is in love. Then, in Song 2:8-17, they sing of the glories of the arrival of springtime, and he invites her to come away with him. This is in the context of the agricultural economy of ancient Israel, and a trip into the countryside in springtime is not just a picnic. It involves work. Specifically, pruning has to be done to ensure a good harvest (Song 2:12-13; "the time of singing" can also be translated "the time of pruning," as in the NASB). In addition, Song 2:15 says that foxes, animals that love to eat young grapes, have to be kept from the vineyards lest they spoil the harvest. But the man and woman have light hearts. They turn this task into a game, chasing away the "little foxes." Their work is so amenable to games of love that it leads to the double entendre, "our vineyards are in blossom." This glorious picture of agricultural life in springtime hearkens back to the Garden of Eden, where tending the plants was meant to be a pleasure. Genesis 3:17-19 tells us that, because of

sin, such labor has become drudgery. But this is not the original or proper meaning of work. This episode in the Song is a glimpse of how God desires life to be for us, almost as if sin had never happened. It is as if Isaiah 65:21 were already fulfilled: “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” The kingdom of God brings not the elimination of work, but the restoration of joy and delightful relationships in work. See Theology of Work Project article, [Revelation and Work](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org) for more on work in the ultimate kingdom of God.

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## Passion, Family and Work (Song of Songs 3:1-8:5)

In a series of songs, the text describes the marriage of the man and woman and their coming together. The woman yearns for the man (Song 3:1-5) and then she comes to him on a lovely palanquin (Song 3:6-11).<sup>[4]</sup> The man, wearing a crown, receives her (Song 3:11). In an Israelite wedding, a bride arrived in a sedan surrounded by attendants (Song 3:7) and she was received by her groom, who wore a crown. Song 3:11 confirms that this text celebrates “the day of his wedding.”<sup>[5]</sup>

The man then sings of his love for his bride (Song 4:1-15) and their wedding night is described in vivid images and metaphors (Song 4:16-5:8). The woman then sings of her love for her beloved (Song 5:9-6:3) and another song on the woman’s beauty follows (Song 6:4-9). The couple then sings of their love for each other (Song 6:10-8:4). The text is frankly sexual, and Christian preachers and writers have tended to avoid the Song or to allegorize it out of concern that it is too racy for polite religious society.

But the sex in the text is intentional. A song about the passion between two lovers on their wedding day would be missing something if it failed to mention sex! And the sex is intimately connected to both the household and the work in the Song. Upon their marriage, the lovers create a household, the primary unit of economic activity in the ancient world. Without sex, it could not be populated with workers (i.e. children). Moreover, passion (including sex) between spouses is a glue holding the household together through the prosperity, adversity, joy and stress that characterize a family’s life and work. Today, many couples report dissatisfaction with the amount of time they have for sex and lovemaking. A major culprit is that one or both partners are too busy working.<sup>[6]</sup> The Song makes it clear that you should not let work push aside time for intimacy and sex with your spouse.

Throughout these verses, we see imagery drawn from landscape of Israel and its agriculture and shepherding. The woman’s body is a “garden” (Song 5:1). The man’s “cheeks are like beds of spices” (Song 5:13). Enjoying his bride, he is like a man gathering lilies in a garden (Song 6:2). She is awesome like Jerusalem (Song 6:4). Her “hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead” (Song 6:5). Her teeth are like a flock of ewes (Song 6:6). Her stature is like that of a palm tree (Song 7:7).

They desire to go to the “vineyards” (Song 7:12). She rouses her beloved “under the apple tree” (Song 8:5). The joy of their love is intimately connected to the world of their work. They express their happiness with images drawn from what they see in their gardens and flocks.

### New Year, New Brew

True Vine is a micro brewing company in Tyler, Texas that prioritizes faith, family, and community. Read more about their dreams and work [here](#).

This suggests that family and work belong together. In the Song, the whole of life is integrated. Before the industrial revolution, most people worked with family members in the households where they lived. This is still true in much of the world. The Song paints an idyllic view of this arrangement. The reality of household-based labor has been marred by poverty, grinding toil, humiliation, bonded service and slavery, and abusive relationships. Yet the Song expresses our desire — and God’s design — that our work be woven into the tapestry of our relationships, beginning with family.

In developed economies, most paid work occurs outside the household. The Song of Songs does not offer specific means for integrating work with family and other relationships in today’s societies. It should not be taken as a call for us all to move to farms and chase away the little foxes! But it does suggest that modern workplaces should not ignore their workers’ family lives and needs. Many workplaces provide day care for workers’ children, career development that respects parenting needs, time away for family care needs, and — in countries with private health care — medical insurance for workers’ families. Yet these considerations are not available in all workplaces, and some have been cut by employers. Most modern workplaces fall far short of the model of family care we see in the Song. The recent trend towards shifting work from offices to homes may or may not improve matters, depending on how costs, revenues, support services and risks are distributed.

The Song could be an invitation to creativity as the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace takes shape. Families might start businesses in which family members can work together. Companies might employ spouses together or help one spouse to find work when relocating the other. Recent decades have seen much innovation and research in this area, both in secular and Christian — especially Catholic — circles.<sup>[7]</sup>

[What is the difference between work and a job? \(Click to listen\)](#)

The Song should also increase our appreciation of unpaid work. In pre-industrial households, there is little distinction between paid and unpaid work, since work occurs in an integrated unit. In industrial and post-industrial societies, much — but by no means all — of the work occurs outside the household, earning wages to support the household. The unpaid work that remains to be done within the household often gets less respect than the paid work done outside. Money, rather than overall contribution to the household, becomes the measure of work's worth, and sometimes even of individuals' worth. Yet households could not function without the often unpaid work of maintaining the household, raising children, caring for aged and incapacitated family members, and sustaining social and community relationships. The Song depicts the value of work in terms of its overall benefit to the household, not its monetary contribution.

The Song may pose a challenge to many churches and those who guide Christians, for it is uncommon for Christians to receive much help in arranging their work lives. Not enough churches are able to equip their members for making godly, wise, realistic choices about work in relationship to family and community. Undoubtedly, church leaders will rarely have the on-the-ground knowledge needed to help members land jobs or create workplaces that move towards the ideal depicted in the Song. If I want to know how to better integrate my work as a nurse, for example, with my family relationships, I probably need to talk more with other nurses than with my pastor. But perhaps churches could do more to help their members recognize God's design for work and relationships, express their hopes and struggles, and join with similar workers to develop viable options.

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## Joy (Song of Songs 8:6-14)

Love is sacred and a thing to be protected. It cannot be bought (Song 8:7). The woman compares her love life with her husband to her tending of a vineyard (Song 8:12), asserting that although Solomon may have a great many vineyards to be tended by his workers (Song 8:11), her joy is in taking care of her own family. Happiness does not consist in wealth or in having others to do your work for you; it consists in working for the benefit of those you love. Love therefore does not consist only of expressing emotions, but also in doing acts of love.

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## Conclusion to Song of Songs

The Song of Songs gives us an ideal picture of love and family, life and work. Joy in the shared work of the household is a central feature — almost as though sin had never happened. In the Song, work has a beauty that is integrated into a wholesome and joyful life. The Song shows us an ideal for which we should strive. Labor should be an act of love. Marriage and household relationships should support — and be supported by — work. Work is an essential element of married life, yet it must always serve —

and never crowd out — the most fundamental element of all: love.

## Key Verses and Themes in Song of Songs

<p><b>Song 1:6</b> Do not stare at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have not kept!</p>	<p>Work can be used for control and can humiliate, but it also makes a person stronger.</p>
<p><b>Song 1:8</b> If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow the tracks of the flock and pasture your kids by the shepherds' tents.</p>	<p>A person of worth will normally be found to be at his work.</p>
<p><b>Song 2:12</b> The time of singing [pruning] has come...</p>	<p>Work was meant by God to be a time of celebration.</p>
<p><b>Song 2:15</b> Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards...</p>	<p>For those whose hearts are light, even work can be a game.</p>
<p><b>Song 6:2</b> My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies.</p>	<p>The use of agricultural imagery to describe marriage shows that the worlds of work and of family are integrated in a healthy marriage.</p>

<p><b>Song 8:7</b> If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.</p>	<p>Love, and the labor that one puts into one's family, provide the joy that wealth and leisure cannot.</p>
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## ENDNOTES

- [1] M. V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
- [2] Other possible approaches are discussed in Duane A. Garrett and Paul A. House, *Word Biblical Commentary: Song of Songs and Lamentations*, Vol. 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004) 59-81. None of these are specifically applied to work, however.
- [3] The NRSV translation, "I am black and beautiful," may give the erroneous impression that her dark complexion is due to ethnicity rather than exposure to the sun.
- [4] "Who is this?" (3:6) — translated misleadingly as "What is that?" in the NRSV — is feminine in Hebrew, indicating that it refers to the woman.
- [5] Garrett, *Word Biblical Commentary: Song of Songs*, 175-184.
- [6] International Planned Parenthood Federation, "FPAHK Survey on Marriage and Sex."
- [7] The following are recommended for further exploration:  
 Robert D. Austin and Lee Devin, "Knowledge Work, Craft Work and Calling" in Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri, eds., *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).  
 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens Encyclical Letter* (Homebush, N.S.W, Australia: St. Paul Publications, 1981).  
 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis Encyclical Letter* (Homebush, N.S.W, Australia: St. Paul



Publications, 1987).

Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus Encyclical Letter* (Boston: St. Paul Books, 1991).

Wilder Robles, "Liberation Theology, Christian Base Communities, and Solidarity Movements: A Historical Reflection," in Richard L. Harris and Jorge Nef, eds., *Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean*, new ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

Shirley J. Roels, "Christian Manufacturers at the Crossroads," in Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri, eds., *Global Neighbors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

Thomas W. Walker, "Who is My Neighbor? An Invitation to See the World With Different Eyes," in Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri, eds., *Global Neighbors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).