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2012

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Recommended Citation

Luter, A. Boyd, "Love in a Fallen World: Further Toward a Theology of the Song of Songs" (2012). *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 382.

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***Love in a Fallen World:
Further Toward a Theology of the Song of Songs***¹

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Attempting to write on the theology of the Song of Solomon is a somewhat exasperating² experience. Initially, it is necessary to wade through the long history³ of fanciful allegorical and blushing⁴ typological approaches to the theological significance of the Song. However, even among scholars who champion a “literal” understanding of the Song and its unity—whatever that means to each individual interpreter,⁵ there is no deeper consensus about what kind of “literal” work it is,⁶ and even less agreement about its theological content and value than might be expected, though, fortunately, enough to build upon as theological bedrock.

¹ This article was originally presented as a paper at the 2011 National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, in San Francisco, California, on November 16, 2011.

² Duane Garrett (in Garrett and P.R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations* WBC [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004], 3) admits up front that writing a commentary on the Song of Songs is “somewhat embarrassing,” to which I readily agree, as prepare my own commentary on the Song for the Evangelical Exegetical Commentary series (gen. ed. H.W. House; Logos Bible Software).

³ Among recent evangelical commentaries, though of widely varying lengths, the surveys of the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs by Tremper Longman III (*Song of Songs* NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 20-47), Duane Garrett (*Songs of Songs*, 59-97), Richard Hess (*Song of Songs* BCOTWP [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 22-29) and Daniel Estes (in D.C. Fredericks and D.J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs* AOTC [Downers Grove: IVP, 2010], 275-286) all offer distinctive helpful perspective and insights. In addition, the article by J.P. Tanner, “The History of the Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997) 23-46, is a valuable contribution. None, however, approaches the encyclopedic discussion of M.H. Pope, *The Song of Songs* AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), though, 35 years after its release, it is dated.

⁴ The most obvious reason for the typological approach has always been that the tradition, or individual interpreter, effectively “blushed,” not willing to accept the obvious: that the primary significance of the Song of Songs has to do with the romantic and sexual aspects of life. Paul J. Griffiths, *Song of Songs* Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011) is the most recent example of this ancient approach.

⁵ In spite of an increasing number of arguments for the literary unity of the Song, Longman understands the Song to be made up of a “superscription” (1:1) and 23 short love poems (see his headings under ‘Text and Commentary’ on p. viii). However, he treats the theology of the book in a unified manner, much like dealing with the theology of Psalms or Proverbs as unified, though both books were written by multiple authors over a long period of time.

⁶ For example, among recent evangelical commentators, Estes and Hess view the Song as “love poetry,” while Garrett goes so far as to suggest an extremely sophisticated musical understanding, arranged from a literary perspective as a grand chiasm (see Garrett, 32). Beyond that common perspective, (e.g.) Estes and J.S. Deere (“Song of Songs,” in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* eds. J.F. Walvoord and R.B. Zuck [Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1985], 1009) champion a two-character understanding, while a three-character view is held by Hess and I. Provan (*Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* NIVAC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 245-46, where Provan refers to the two-character view as the “mainstream” understanding since early in church history [245]).

Two approaches in which significant strides have been made in regard to the theological understanding of the Song of Songs are: 1) the stand-alone theology of the book; and 2) the theology of the Song as part of the overall canon of Scripture. This paper is not a current status report or analysis of the theology of the Song, though the first two sections of this paper will initially focus on where there is a loose consensus in regard to those two approaches. Instead, the main thrust of this presentation is to suggest several fresh ideas for further theological reflection using both of these approaches. The next section will turn to a previously untapped⁷ source/approach, which will be seen to yield further fresh insight in regard to the theological content of the Song: *systematic* theology. The rationale for employing systematic categories will be presented at that point. The concluding section of the paper will review and summarize its findings.

The Song's Theology on Its Own Terms

Approached in a standard literary manner, the Song of Songs is quickly seen to be about the romantic “love” of a man and a woman.⁸ This understanding may *initially* seem virtually non-theological (or at least a-theological), given that there is no other biblical book with this type of didactic orientation.⁹ However, *upon further reflection*, that is exactly the point theologically: the Song of Songs uniquely describes that side of male-female relations.

Barry Webb captures well the “feel” of the Song of Songs:

Its subject is love, but it is neither a philosophical treatise about love, nor a sex manual. It is a rhapsody of love, an outpouring of the feelings of people who are in love and who are experiencing it in the flesh, with all its attendant pains and pleasures. There is an intimacy about the book which is both delightful and embarrassing.... This is a book for those who want to know, or perhaps remember, what it is like to be in love and to make love.¹⁰

Many interpreters can agree, at least in general, with Webb’s characterization of the book.¹¹ However, when questions such as the marital state of the characters, or whether

⁷ As far as I have found in my research to this point.

⁸ Though those holding the three-character view (see note 5 above) insist that there is a rivalry between the king and the shepherd, the young woman’s “true love.”

⁹ For example, P.R. House (*Old Testament Theology* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1998]) states, “Read in isolation, Song of Solomon is artistically and thematically lovely but not particularly theologically enriching” (469).

¹⁰ B.G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther* New Studies in Biblical Theology (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 18.

¹¹ If the reader wishes to consider some of the very helpful recent discussions of the “love theology” of the Song, see, e.g., Longman, 58-67; Garrett, 100-07; Estes, 293-99; and, quite succinctly, Webb, 31-32.

premarital sex is in view,¹² how erotic the figurative wording is¹³ or how far things actually go sexually in the text,¹⁴ arise, significant differences again show themselves. Is there a way to move past these scholarly “opinions,” which, when viewed objectively, often are based as much on assumptions brought to the text than textual evidence?

Yes, it is possible to proceed further, if it is remembered that meaning is not just reflected in words, phrases and sentences. Literary structure shapes the wider movement of meaning and that is the case at least as much with a poetic book like the Song of Songs.

Over the last several decades, there have been repeated attempts, some of which have been better-received and others not so well-received, to determine a book-encompassing inverted parallel structure of the Song of Songs.¹⁵ Before proceeding further, though, it is significant for the ensuing discussion to note the observation of Duane Garrett in regard to a point of agreement of virtually all of these varied chiasmic structures: *the dramatic climax of the entire book is 4:16-5:1 (i.e., the physical consummation of the relationship between the man and woman)*.¹⁶ To back this conclusion, Garrett points out that, by his count, “... [T]here are four hundred lines of poetry in the Song, and 4:16 begins at line 200.”¹⁷ In other words, by Garrett’s calculation, 4:16-5:1 is not only the dramatic, but also the actual, textual “center” of the Song.

Of the major proposals, the grand chiasm I find most convincing is that of David Dorsey, reproduced here in overview, with slight adaptation:¹⁸

¹² At the least, I agree with Hess: “The Song is not a manifesto for free love...” (35). Several passages located before the wedding/wedding night (4:1-5:1), with 2:17 and 3:4 being prime—but not exhaustive—examples, do not require being interpreted as consummated love-making. The varied explanations of Garrett (*Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 163, 174), Hess (99-100, 105-07) and Estes (332-33, 337-39) all present highly plausible exegetical alternatives to full-bore lovemaking in Song 2:17 and 3:4. A recently-published study making a fresh positive case on one important aspect of the issue is B.P. Gault, “A ‘Do Not Disturb’ Sign? Reexamining the Adjuration Refrains in the Song of Songs,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (2011) 93-104.

¹³ It is not an overstatement to observe that the impetus for the most erotic interpretations of many of the poetic figures of speech in the Song comes from highly erotic love poetry of the surrounding Ancient Near Eastern context, about which there is still no consensus concerning the degree of its impact on the Hebrew literature of the period.

¹⁴ Certainly, Song 4:16-5:1 and 7:10 picture being “right at the doorway,” so to speak, of coitus, though described with poetic beauty. Hess is on target in saying: “Although anticipated and sometimes almost achieved, it is not possible to find a clear and certain description of coitus having taken place” (35).

¹⁵ Among the notable efforts at setting forth the Song of Songs as a grand chiasm are: J.C. Exum, “A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1973) 47-79; Exum, *Song of Songs OTL* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); W.H. Shea, “The Chiasmic Structure of the Song of Songs,” *ZAW* 92 (1980) 378-96; E.C. Webster, “Pattern in the Song of Songs,” *JSOT* 22 (1982) 73-93; D.A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs NAC* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 376; Garrett, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 30-35; D. Dorsey, “Literary Structuring in the Song of Songs,” *JSOT* 46 (1990) 81-96; and Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 199-213.

¹⁶ Garrett, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 199-213. The diagram from which this chiasmic structure is adapted is on page 212. A significant, but more popularly-written, adaptation of Dorsey’s structure is found in S. Craig Glickman, *Solomon’s Song of Love* (Monroe: Howard, 2004), which Glickman explains in some depth in ‘Appendix C’ (pp. 231-41). Glickman’s chiasmic understanding is also more recently reflected in his notes on the “Song of Songs” in the *Holman*

- a (1:1-2:7) Opening words of mutual love and desire
- b (2:8-17) Young man's invitation to join him in the countryside
- c (3:1-5) Young woman's nighttime search for the young man (I)
- d (3:6-5:1) *Their wedding day and night*¹⁹
- c' (5:2-7:11 [7:10 ET]) Young woman's nighttime search for the young man (II)
- b' (7:12 [7:11 ET]-8:4) Young woman's invitation to join her in the countryside
- a' (8:5-14) Closing words of mutual love and desire

If Dorsey's intricately-reasoned sense of the breaking points between each section of this structure is correct, it is immediately noticed that Song 4:16-5:1 occurs at the very end of the central section of the chiasm, which describes the wedding day and night (3:6-5:1). It should also be admitted here that the same point is fairly apparent from simply reading the Song, completely apart from the additional interpretive insight provided by any chiasmic structure. However, it is spotlighted even more by virtue of the inverted parallel focus on the center (i.e., *abcdc'b'a'*) of Dorsey's layout.

What difference theologically does observing that the wedding day and night is the central focus of the book's inverted parallel structure make? Much, as Paul House aptly observes in regard to Song 3:6-5:1: "... [D]esire will be united with sexual intimacy, but only a public profession of commitment seals the union with [Solomon's] intended."²⁰

The point here is that the central theological focus of the Song of Songs is not just love, especially of a sexual nature. Instead, it is love and desire *headed toward marriage* (1:2-3:5), *love and desire making a very public commitment and having a very private consummation* (3:6-5:1), and love and desire *working through the "growing pains" of a married relationship, including "baggage" brought into the marriage and tensions which develop within the marital bond* (5:2-8:14).

Thus, it is more precisely accurate to refer to the theology of the Song of Songs as setting forth a *marriage-related* love. And, the Song does so while honestly depicting the full bloom of youthful infatuation (chs. 1-2), against the backdrop of the selfishness (5:2-4) and disappointment (5:5-8) of "real life," life worked out against the eventual unavoidable prospect of death (8:6)—in other words, *love in a fallen world*.

One more example will suffice of how the Song on its own terms offers a richer theology than has been previously understood. Song 6:8-9 is an example of a seemingly unnoticed²¹

Christian Standard Bible Study Bible, gen. eds. E.A. Blum and J.R. Howard (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), esp. 1106-07.

¹⁹ Italics mine.

²⁰ House, *Theology*, 466.

²¹ A source which skirts along the edges of the parallelism I lay out here, but does not "connect the dots" is J.P. Tanner, "The Message of the Song of Songs," *BSac* 154 (1997) 151-52. Dorsey (*Literary Structure*, 208), by contrast, sees his entire c' section (Song 5:2-7:11 [7:10 ET]) as inverted parallel, with 6:4-9 being the *center* of the

smaller inverted parallel structure teeming with theological implications, only two of which I will sketch here:

- a (6:8a) There are 60 queens and 80 concubines
- b (6:8b) ... Young women without number
- c (6:9a) “*Unique*²² (Heb. *achat*; lit. “one”) is she, my dove, my perfect one”
- d (6:9b) “*Unique* (same as above) is she to her mother”
- c’ (6:9c) “*Flawless* to the one who gave her birth”
- b’ (6:9d) Daughters see her and bless her
- a’ (6:9e) Queens and concubines... sing her praises²³

The inverted parallelism here becomes even clearer when it is realized that “young women” and “daughters” are talking about the same group in the Song of Songs (compare “*daughters* of Jerusalem” in 1:5 with “*young women* of Jerusalem” in 2:7, 3:5, etc, with all passages obviously referring to the same grouping).²⁴

At the midpoint of this chiasm is the double assertion by Solomon that his wife is “unique”: 1) to *him*; and 2) to *her mother*. The first assertion makes good sense: Solomon is saying that the Shulammitte (who is about to be named in 6:13; see the discussion of this observation below) stands out as far and away the best of the royal wives (i.e., “queens” and “concubines”), as well as any of the other future potential royal wives (i.e., “young women”/“daughters”).

However, there may be more going on here than first meets the eye. As odd as it seems initially, this statement of how Shulamith stands out (i.e., stands *alone*) in Solomon’s mind in comparison to the rest of the women of the royal court may actually be a muted declaration of the superiority of monogamy.

Though surrounded by a host of the most gorgeous women imaginable,²⁵ Solomon has found the “*one*” for him. In that regard, is it merely coincidental that the name “Shulammitte”—first disclosed only four verses later (i.e., in 6:13)—may be quite plausibly understood as the “lexical counterpart”²⁶ of Solomon (i.e., Solomon’s exact female counterpart/soulmate)? Though following in the partially political polygamous ways of his father (e.g., 2 Sam 5:13;

chiasm. Thus, while our analyses are not in complete agreement, his understanding does serve as further argument for the importance of 6:8-9 in the wider context.

²² “Unique” is the rendering chosen by respected modern Bible versions utilizing all three major philosophies of translation: NASB (formal equivalence), NIV (dynamic equivalence) and HCSB (optimal equivalence), though the literal rendering of the Hebrew is “one.”

²³ I am presenting a paper at the 2012 ETS Southwest Regional Meeting entitled “She’s ‘the One’: Reflections on the Chiasmic Structure of Song of Songs 6:8-9.”

²⁴ See the more in-depth discussion of Tanner, “The Message of the Song of Songs,” 150-52.

²⁵ For the purpose of the general point being made here, it makes little difference whether the wording in Song 6:8-9 is taken literally, as rounded numbers or figuratively or, if literally, when in Solomon’s reign it might have occurred.

²⁶ D.J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 428.

11:27; 1 Chron 3:1-9 [note esp. 3:2]), but going tragically further over the 40 years of his reign (1 Kgs 3:1; 11:1-4), in Song 6:8-9, Solomon may be reflecting that he understands the superiority of monogamy over his actual worldly, *flagrantly* disobedient (see Deut 18:17) lifestyle.

If this seems overly ironic, it should be remembered that Jesus railed at length at the problem of hypocritical behavior on the part of Jewish leaders (Matt 23:2-32). According to Paul, Peter certainly knew and believed dramatically better than his inconsistent action in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14). And, most pointedly, Solomon's father, "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22), grievously sinned sexually, then desperately covered it up by having Solomon's mother's first husband killed (2 Sam 11).

Paul House agrees in regard to this irony regarding Solomon:

It must be said that these chapters on love, passion, commitment and permanence are not made with the purpose of arguing that Solomon exemplified these principles.... In a strange way Song of Songs may therefore be an even more important work than if he had been a model husband. The canon offers Solomon at his best in this case while also balancing this portrayal with the accounts in 1 Kings.²⁷

Moving to Solomon's second declaration, though, it must be asked, "Why is Shulamith's mother brought into play, and especially *here*? That does not make immediate sense at all. Also, why would wording like "the one who gave her birth" follow the simple term "mother?"²⁸ Neither of those questions can be answered from the Song of Songs (i.e., by itself). Thus, I will delay further discussion until the next section of the paper.

The Song's Theology in Canonical Context

The most obvious close affinity with the Song of Songs is in another of the Wisdom Books. As Walter Kaiser says, "If Solomon is the author of this work (and so the text as we have lays claim in 1:1; 8:12) then the entrée to this work can be made through another piece by the same author: Proverbs 5:15-23."²⁹ And, it is also likely that Ecclesiastes 9:9 should be considered another significant Wisdom parallel to the Song.³⁰

²⁷ House, *Theology*, 469.

²⁸ The latter question becomes even more intriguing when it is recalled that, in Song 3:4, located in the parallel section of Dorsey's chiasmic structure (i.e., c [3:1-5]; c' [5:2-7:11/7:10 ET]), "mother" is followed by "the one who conceived me" (HCSB). In addition, both ideas—her conception and birth—are brought together in again referring to her mother in 8:5. I address that data, as well as additional relevant evidence, in "She's 'the One.'"

²⁹ W.C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 145. D. Estes (*Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 293-94, 298), a specialist in Wisdom Literature, makes the same strong linkage.

³⁰ R.B. Zuck, in Zuck and E.H. Merrill, eds., *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 253.

However, House is also correct in stating

No Old Testament text approximates the Genesis situation as closely as do the lovers' statements in Song of Solomon. Their love recaptures Genesis 2:25 as much as is possible in a sinful world characterized by mixed motives and outright deception.³¹

In regard to the echoes of Genesis in the Song of Songs, Kaiser goes so far to assert: "The book... was intended as a commentary on Genesis 2:24...."³² However, both House and Kaiser appear to be focusing too narrowly on the parallels between the Song of Solomon and the early part of Genesis. In his magnum opus, *The Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*,³³ Richard Davidson argues at great length that the Song of Songs not only echoes Genesis 1-3, but also represents a sort of return to Eden.³⁴

I am not as convinced as Davidson of a virtually *complete* "return to paradise" (i.e., the Garden³⁵/"reverse the curse") in the Song of Songs.³⁶ While the principles Davidson catalogs from Genesis 1-3 reappear to one degree or another in the Song, the presence of the fallen world "outside the garden," so to speak, would mean that sin is being taken into "the garden" by the lovers.

However, I do wholeheartedly concur with his central biblical thesis—and he is certainly not alone on this count³⁷: that there is a strong intertextual relationship between the Song and Genesis 1-3. One additional plausible example of that relationship serves to make that point.

³¹ House, *Theology*, 465.

³² Kaiser, 146.

³³ (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007).

³⁴ There are four major sections in the structure of Davidson's massive volume. The first discusses sexuality in Gen 1-3, the second lays out sexual material elsewhere in the OT, except for sexuality in the Song of Songs, which is the third section (which presents the Song as fulfilling the principles of Gen 1-3 and virtually "reversing the curse" of Gen 3). The fourth section of *The Flame of Yahweh* is an "Afterword" on sexuality in the NT.

³⁵ Without question, the "garden" motif in the Song of Songs is very important (e.g., see the older, but still quite helpful, subject study of G.L. Carr, *The Song of Solomon* Tyndale OT Commentaries [Downers Grove: IVP, 1984], 55-60. A careful, but as yet unpublished, study on this subject is Brian P. Gault, "The Garden of Love in Song of Songs: Universal Archetype or Theological Allusion?")

³⁶ Though Song 7:11 (7:10 ET ["... [H]is *desire* is for me"]) is clearly an echo of Gen 3:16 ("Your *desire* will be for your husband..."; [both HCSB, italics mine])—given that these are two of the three uses of the Hebrew term in the entire OT, there is insufficient space in short study like this to lay out and weigh the various possible understandings and their theological significance.

³⁷ For example, Zuck (253) says "creation theology" is an important point of contact between the Song of Songs and Wisdom Literature. In his discussion of the theology of the Song, Estes (*Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 294, 298-99) discusses aspects of Gen 1, 2 and 3. Longman (63-66) limits his interactive discussion in his commentary to Gen 2-3, though he broadens it to Gen 1-3 elsewhere ("Song of Songs: Theology of," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* gen. ed. W.A. Van Gemeren [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997] 4:1237-38). On the other hand, Garrett (*Songs of Songs/Lamentations*, 99) asserts that the linking the Song of Songs with Gen 1-3 is overplayed and "... provides no clear guidance for interpreting the Song or appropriating the Song theologically." Very oddly, Garrett then superimposes his thesis that the Song of Songs provides a model for "The Transformation of the Soul" (107-21).

To return to Song 6:8-9 once more, the contrast between “the one” and the women (i.e., queens/concubines/young women) “without number”³⁸ may have affinities to another part of Genesis 1-3. If Genesis 2:24-25 is almost certainly antecedent theology for the Song of Songs, what about the immediately preceding verses: Genesis 2:18-23? Is it stretching things to hear an echo of Adam going through the process of moving from his aloneness (2:18) to being introduced to his exact counterpart (2:21-23), against the backdrop of the differentiation that came from naming all the animals (2:19-20), in Solomon proclaiming Shulamith³⁹—whom he may have given the name of his exact counterpart (6:13) for the purpose of the Song—as “the one” (6:9) against the backdrop of women “without number” (6:8)? If nothing else, in both cases, Adam and Solomon had to go through a process to come to the point of insight and appreciation for the counterparts the Lord provided.

Davidson and others are certainly correct in hearing Genesis 1-3 echoed in the Song of Songs.⁴⁰ But, I would go even a little further than that in charting the canonical frontier of the Song: I suggest that there may also be allusion in the Song of Songs to *Genesis 4*.

How did I come to that conclusion? The previously-mentioned reference to Shulamith’s birth in Song 6:9, paralleled by the earlier mention of her conception in 3:4, as well as the backdrop of polygamy noted in 6:8-9, all echo major themes in Genesis 4.

In a treatment of this sort, there is not enough space to adequately discuss whether the birth of the Shulammitite mentioned in the Song (6:9; 8:5) is being linked to the “seed” or “bear[ing] children” angles in Genesis 3:15, 16 (and Gen 1:28), though it is worthy of careful consideration.⁴¹ However, given the fact that the flow of the wider narrative of Genesis 4 is structured by the repetition of “conceived” and “gave birth” (see 4:1, 17, 25), it is not far-fetched that, in the Song of Songs, Solomon had in mind Genesis 4 as much as he fairly clearly did Genesis 1-3. Also, it should be remembered that the plague of polygamy seen throughout the Hebrew Bible begins with Lamech, the descendant of Cain (Gen 4:19, 23).

How does bringing Genesis 4 into the mix help with understanding the theology of the Song of Songs as part and parcel of a canonical theology? I have entitled this paper “Love in a Fallen World.” The beginning of the outworking of that tragically fallen world is Genesis 4, hard on the heels of the fall of mankind and the curses in chapter 3. Thus, the possibility of reflection on Genesis 4 in the Song is not much of a theological extension at all.

³⁸ Garrett (*Song of Songs & Lamentations*, 229) insightfully writes, “In the fashion of Wisdom Literature, the man is proclaiming that however many other women of whatever status there may be, his beloved is still by far the best.”

³⁹ See the helpful, and comprehensive (though compact), discussion of the possible interpretations of her name by E.F. Huwiler, “Shulammitite,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* gen. ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 5: 1227. At the end, Huwiler admits, “... [T]he form may well be related to *slm*, and influenced by the name of Solomon.”

⁴⁰ Overall, it is probably fair to say that most (though hardly all) interpreters of the Song of Songs now see some allusion to the earliest chapters of Gen in the Song. The current state of the question seems no longer to be “whether,” but “how much.”

⁴¹ I will consider those exegetical possibilities very carefully in “She’s ‘the One’.”

But, that is not all that needs to be said about the relationship between the Song of Solomon and Genesis 1-4. Another important piece of the puzzle will be brought into play in the next section.

The Song's Theology in Systematic Terms

What ideas related to standard systematic theology categories are found in the Song of Songs? By process of elimination, starting from the beginning of most theological systems, there is nothing about God, other than “the flame of Yahweh,” if, in fact, that is the proper translation in 8:6.⁴² There is no Bibliology beyond the intertextual relationship between the Song and Genesis 1-4, Proverbs 5 and Ecclesiastes 9 mentioned earlier (and passages like Eph 5 and Rev 19, 21 in the New Testament). There is no Pneumatology, Angelology or Soteriology in the Song. There is no Christology or Ecclesiology (unless the interpreter embraces a typological understanding of the book) or Eschatology, at least not beyond the references to “death” and “Sheol” in 8:6.

With all of these typical systematic categories considered, the only ones left are: (*Theological*) *Anthropology* and *Hamartiology* (i.e., mankind and sin). But, does that make sense?

Upon further reflection, it makes *excellent* sense! What else is the Song of Songs about other than *humanity*: man and woman (i.e., mankind as male and female, as the Lord created His “image”/“likeness,”⁴³ to be, according to Gen 1:27). As emphasized earlier in this article, their love in the Song is worked out against the dark reality of fallen mankind (i.e., sin). Here again is the basis of my title: “Sin in a Fallen World.”

At this point, I will mention but two further possible insights of the realization that, from a systematic standpoint, the Song of Songs is theologically dominated by Anthropology and Hamartiology. I will not argue their legitimacy, just bring them up for consideration in the wider ongoing dialogue about the Song of Songs.

First, because Shulamith and Solomon both see each other as so rare in their extraordinarily beautiful qualities (e.g., Song 5:10 [Shulamith describing Solomon]; 6:9 [him describing her]), it appears that they are presented as the ideal man and woman. If that is the case, then the names “Solomon” and “Shulamith,” both apparently from the Hebrew *slm* root, may echo the obvious similar sounds of the Hebrew *ish* (“man”) and *ishhah* (“woman”) in Genesis 1:22, 23.⁴⁴

⁴² Song of Songs 8:6 is one of the most important parts of the entire book, no matter how it is understood by the interpreter. However, it is not within the purview of this paper to explore the issues there.

⁴³ See the excellent discussion of E.H. Merrill, “Image of God,” in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* eds. T.D. Alexander and D.W. Baker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 441-45.

⁴⁴ I.e., paronomasia (see the helpful compact discussion of A.P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988], 127).

Second, in researching and writing an entry on the “Image of God” several years ago for the *Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics*,⁴⁵ I concluded that, in the context of the initial biblical use of the terminology in Genesis 1:26-27, the *imago Dei* is comprised of three aspects, all of which are found in the surrounding verses⁴⁶: a) *creativity*; b) *relationality*; and c) *rulership*. The reasoning as to how I came to those three elements is simple:

- a) The major revelation of God in Genesis 1 is that He is the ultimate *creator*. God and man share the quality of “creativity,” though God created *ex nihilo* and all human creativity is derivative. Yet, it is still creativity, whether in the creating of additional human life⁴⁷ (“be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth” [Gen 1:28, HCSB]) or the development of human culture (e.g., 4:17-22).
- b) That God is *relational* (i.e., not alone/solitary) is clear from the use of the plural pronouns “Us” and “Our” in Genesis 1:26. That mankind was created as relational is seen in the wording “[God] created them male and female” (1:27, HCSB).
- c) In Genesis 1, God is the unrivaled sovereign ruler over all He has created, yet He chooses to delegate (at least some of) that *rulership* to mankind: “... [F]ill the earth, and subdue it” (1:28, HCSB).⁴⁸

In considering how those three aspects of the image of God are present in the Song of Songs:

- a) The only wording related to *creating* life in the Song of Songs has to do with the conception (3:4) and birth (6:9) of Shulamith (see also 8:5). If nothing else, though, the incredible poetic imagery of the Song must be considered highly *creative* from an aesthetic perspective. In that same vein, Solomon was a remarkably prolific composer, authoring “1,005 songs” (1 Kgs 4:32, HCSB) and this is “Solomon’s Finest Song”⁴⁹ (Song 1:1, HCSB), a creative *tour de force* by any artistic standard.
- b) The *relationality* of the male and female main characters of the Song of Songs is so beautiful that Davidson is convinced it reflects a sort of “return to Eden.” While Davidson somewhat overstates the case, there is enough similarity to have prompted many to think of the original Garden (Gen 2-3) when reading the extensive “garden” imagery in the Song (notably, 4:12-5:1a; 6:2, 11; 7:11-12; 8:13).
- c) Though more subtle, the extensive references to the flora and fauna—Solomon was an acknowledged expert in both realms (1 Kgs 4:33)—at the least infers *rulership* (or the closely related ‘stewardship’) angle. It is not out of line here to suggest that may be one

⁴⁵ Gen. eds. E. Hindson and E. Caner (Eugene: Harvest House, 2008), 247-49.

⁴⁶ My way of approaching this point was that, to the extent mankind is either like, or the representative of, God, the *imago Dei* must reflect things that are true of both God and mankind in Gen 1—the only scriptural “context” that existed at that point. If that point is not respected methodologically, whatever reasoning is employed in regard to the meaning of the divine “image”/“likeness” in mankind is ultimately *eisegesis*, not *exegesis*.

⁴⁷ A point emphasized by Merrill, “Image of God,” 443.

⁴⁸ This three-part explanation is adapted from my “God, Image of” entry (Luter, *Popular Encyclopedia*, 248).

⁴⁹ Though mildly paraphrased, this is nonetheless a completely legitimate rendering of the Hebrew of Song 1:1.

reason why Solomon, a child of the palace and the city, made such extensive figurative reference to the beauty and wonder of plant life and the animal kingdom throughout the Song of Songs.

Logically and methodologically, it is not required for exact terminology (i.e., the “image/likeness” of God) to be present for a theological concept to be in play. As seen above, the clear presence in the Song of Songs of all three components that comprise the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1 is sufficient to prove the point.⁵⁰

Thus, the profit from employing systematic categories in studying the theology of the Song of Songs is significant: 1) Solomon and Shulamith are set forth as perfect counterparts, just as the first man and woman were in Genesis 1:22-23; and 2) all three identifiable elements of the *imago Dei* laid out in Genesis 1:26-27 and context are present in the Song, inferring that what is seen in the outworking of “Solomon’s finest song” is nothing less than a beautiful poetic depiction of the image/likeness of God, as close to the way mankind can be this side of Genesis 3, in a fallen world.

Conclusion: Marriage-Related Love in a Fallen World of God’s Image-Bearers

To summarize, in the initial section of the paper, having to do with the ‘stand-alone’ theology of the Song, two important—if not entirely new—points were underscored:

- The theology expressed in the Song is not just generally about love, romance and sex, as goes the unfortunate stereotype, but its chiasmic literary macrostructure clarifies that its focus is, instead, *marriage-related love which is worked out in a fallen world*.
- The inverted structure of Song 6:8-9 infers that not only is Shulamith viewed as “unique” comparatively, but that the book may actually be making a case for the superiority of monogamy (i.e., [the] “one” wife).

In the second section of the paper, in the dovetailing of the theology of the Song with earlier canonical theology, two fresh ideas were set forth for consideration:

- The finding of perfect counterparts and the naming of them is paralleled in Song 6:8-9, 13 and Genesis 2:20-23.

⁵⁰ I wrote a doctoral dissertation (A.B Luter, Jr., “A New Testament Theology of Discipling,” Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985) and two books (Boyd Luter and Kathy McReynolds, *Disciplined Living* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996] and Luter and McReynolds, *Women as Christ’s Disciples* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997/Fern, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003; Second Ed.]) utilizing this same logic as far as the Great Commission in Matt 28:19-20 is concerned: it is not necessary for the command “make disciples” or even the noun “disciple(s)” to be present for the Great Commission to be in play. The reason is that the Greek structure in Matthew 28:19-20 has one imperative—“make disciples”—and three sequential participles: 1) “go[ing],” with the gospel; 2) “baptizing”; and 3) “teaching.” When any of those three aspects (i.e., evangelism, baptism or teaching) is in view, the Commission is being carried out, even if not in total.

- There appears to be a paralleling of the “conception” and “giving birth” wording in the Song (e.g., 3:4; 6:9; 8:5), as well as the polygamous background (6:8-9), with textual emphases found in Genesis 4.

In the final section of the paper, the realization that data contributing to the systematic theology category of Anthropology (and less so, but still significantly, Hamartiology) is most prominent in the Song led to two final theses:

- Solomon and Shulamith, likely being the male and female versions of the same name, may echo “man” (Heb. *ish*) and “woman” (Heb. *ishhah*) in Genesis 2 as being perhaps as close to the ideal humans as there has been since the fall, at least in the poetic depiction of the Song of Songs.
- The Song contains all three aspects of the concept of the “image of God” introduced in Genesis 1:26-27, reflecting that the *imago Dei* is still very much present after the fall of mankind (Gen 3), especially in the joyful, developing love of a relationship-become-committed-marriage, the way the Lord created it to be (Gen 2:24-25), even in a fallen world.

To conclude, much excellent work has been done mining the theology of the Song of Songs, especially in the last several decades. The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that the theological “mother lode” of the Song is anything but “tapped out!” However, since the research laid out in this presentation did not require blasting deep new shafts to expedite getting at the theological ore, any “nuggets” set forth here that prove insightful in broadening the theological horizons of the Song were effectively lying on the surface,⁵¹ simply waiting for a fresh observer to notice them. In the time ahead, may many more careful students further engage the study of this magnificent book, including its rich theology!⁵² There is much more profit yet to be gained from its teaching and application (2 Tim 3:16-17).

⁵¹ I.e., no allegorical, typological, ‘deeper structure’ perspective or imported framework were employed in this consideration of the theology of the Songs of Songs, only standard exegetical method, literary structure and antecedent theology/intertextuality.

⁵² At the time of the writing of this article, I had not been able to interact with C.G. Bartholomew and R.P. O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011).