

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND ETHICS OF SEX No. 7, 8/26/07

“The Celebration of Marital Eroticism in Song of Songs” (Part 1)

I was very grateful to Prof. Jack Collins for being willing to give you a lecture on the Song of Songs the first Lord's Day I was away. Dr. Collins is one of the evangelical church's brightest and ablest Old Testament scholars. I have some idea of Prof. Collins' general treatment of the Song but don't know the details. I have already in this series of classes briefly addressed the interpretation of the Song but want to go further, important as this little book is for the Bible's doctrine of marital sex, its celebration of eroticism in the context of marriage and the anticipation of marriage, and the wisdom it teaches young people especially about the management of sexual desire prior to marriage.

Let me, then, begin with a brief review of what I have previously said and what, no doubt, Prof. Collins also taught about the general interpretation of the Song of Songs. [*Note the Hebrew Superlative Form*] I will, no doubt, repeat some of what you heard from Prof. Collins. The reaffirmation and recapitulation will do us good, all the more as unfamiliar as the Song is to most of us. But I want to address a variety of issues in the interpretation of the Song and not knowing precisely what Jack said in any detail, I'll start at the beginning and proceed without reference to his lecture.

Now most of us are familiar with the general debate regarding the interpretation of the Song and its place in the canon of Holy Scripture. There is first the longstanding tradition of an allegorical interpretation of the Song, taking it to be intended as a metaphor for the love of God for his people or Christ for his church. Jewish interpreters of the Song took this view and were followed in it by the patristic commentators. In a straightforward way they argued that only when taken in this way could such a book as this be justified as Holy Scripture. For example and very typically Gregory, known in Christian history as Gregory the Great and often as the first pope, wrote of the Song:

“Kisses are named, and breasts, cheeks, thighs are named in this Book. By these words the sacred discourse is not [made ridiculous]. We learn in the expression of this our own love, the ardor with which we should burn for the love of God.”

Something of this prejudice against the idea that the Song might actually be about the erotic dimension of human romance and love continues today and often in our own circles. Part of this is, of course, simply the conservative instinct, the difficulty we find in believing that the doctors of the church for these two thousand years and more really got the Song wrong. It is to be remembered, however, that the church fathers and the history of believing interpretation of the Song never denied that there was something here as well for husband and wives. Some of them were not allegorists. [Cf. Basil in Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 86-87] If it is an extended metaphor or allegory of Christ's love for his people and his people's love for Christ, the point of comparison is, obviously, that of human romantic eroticism.

But it has to be admitted that sometimes even this admission was grudging or absent altogether. Jerome, for example, in setting up a reading plan for a Christian girl, insisted

that the Song was to be read only after a thorough grounding in the rest of Scripture lest, if tackled too soon, she might jump to the mistaken, damaging conclusion that it is about physical love. [Kelly, *Jerome*, 274]

But as I have mentioned in a previous lecture, there are punishing objections to this understanding – the allegorical or metaphorical – of the Song. The first such problem with this interpretation of the Song is the problem of demonstrating the correctness of any particular conclusion of exegesis. Perhaps we have read some of these interpretations of particular verses or statements or heard them in sermons and have wondered how the preacher or the commentator derived that understanding of the text. How did he know that the text meant what he said it did? Still today, books are being published, or reprinted, by evangelical and even Reformed presses in which the poem is understood in this allegorical or metaphorical way. And such commentaries generate those questions on every page. The Banner of Truth, for example, still publishes the 19th century commentary by George Burrowes, an American Presbyterian, who takes the Song as an account of “the way in which the soul longing for the manifestation of the love of Christ is led along in the gratification of that desire, from one degree to another of pious enjoyment, until attaining the greatest delight possible for the saint in the present world.” [p. 87; cf. John Owen’s exposition in the outline given by Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 78-86]

But at every step along the way of Burrowes’ interpretation there is this fundamental problem of uncertainty in the interpretation of what is, even on Burrowes’ principles, an unidentified and non-self-interpreted allegory. Fact is, no matter how confidently an individual commentator reports his conclusions, taking the Song as an allegory it is very doubtful that anyone really *can* know what anything means. As I mentioned in a previous lecture, *Pilgrim’s Progress* is an allegory, but Bunyan lets his reader know every step of the way both that it is an allegory and what everything means. But there is nothing like that transparency in the Song. So far as the poem itself indicates, it is about the love of a man and woman, a highly erotic and romantic passion of love. But for millennia Christian interpreters have been sure that the *real* meaning lies beneath that surface meaning. But the problem is: how do we know, how can we know this for sure? For example, when Burrowes takes the perfume of 1:12 to be a reference to the “influences of the Holy Spirit,” [231] who is to say whether he is right or wrong? An early church father took the same statement to be a reference to Christ between the Old and New Testaments! There are countless problems of this kind if the Song is taken as an allegory and the fact that interpreters through the ages have not reached agreement about what particular statements mean leaves us uncertain that we would ever know for sure. But that is only the first grave problem with the allegorical interpretation of the Song.

Second, there is this much deeper problem. The love of the Song is not *agape*, it is *eros*. Taking the words of the poem in their ordinary sense and their consistent sense throughout the poem, the love being discussed and celebrated in the poem is not, is very definitely not, *love in spite of*, or *love in defiance of*, but *love because of*. But if Christ’s love for us is being described in this poem, as all allegorical interpreters believe, then,

according to this poem, he loves us because we are so lovely, so attractive, and so wonderful. Read the portions where the lover, the male partner is speaking and you will see it so. Take, for example, 4:1: “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!” Now Burrowes has a solution for that problem. He takes that statement this way:

“The soul, thus conveyed to the bosom of Jesus, is oppressed with a deepening sense of unworthiness, and finds difficulty in believing there can be so glorious a destiny awaiting us; conscious of our corruptions and short comings, we cannot understand how the pure eyes of Jesus can see anything in us attractive. Hence, he takes special pains to enlarge on this point, and assure us how greatly he delights in beholding our ripening graces.” [347]

The problem is that Burrowes is just making that up. There is *nothing* in the text to suggest that that is what the words mean or should be taken to mean. What the lover *actually says* is that his beloved is extraordinarily beautiful; not even simply beautiful *to him*; but beautiful in herself. He is captivated by her. And that is obviously a problem if we are explaining why Christ loves us! He loves us, the whole Bible teaches us, *in defiance of* our lack of beauty, *not* because we are so beautiful. But the mutual attraction of the couple, the delight in one another, the distraction created by the beauty and desirability of the woman that the young man loves is consistently the perspective of the poem. The love of the Song is not *agape*; it is *eros*.

Now, it is worth saying at this point, that the old works on the Song of Songs, including that of Burrowes, are still worth reading. What you have in those works, whether Burrowes’ or Bernard of Clairvaux’s famous eighty-six sermons on the Song, is an account of salvation and the Christian life in terms of the love that binds the Lord to his people, the individual soul’s communion with the Lord, and the believer’s love for Jesus in return. Great men have bent their genius to describing that love and that communion of love in works on the Song and those works remain useful not because they faithfully reproduce the teaching of the Song but because they beautifully convey what the rest of the Bible teaches. The fact that this teaching is being imposed on or imported into the Song from outside does not mean that the teaching itself is not wonderful and beautiful and valuable. This is the reason why, for example, allegorical interpretations of biblical books that we find in the early church fathers are not more idiosyncratic or absurd. The New Testament and the clear teaching of the whole Bible was exercising its control and what was really happening was that truth found elsewhere in the Bible was being imported to other texts. So it is often wonderfully true what the allegorical interpreters of the Song of Songs write, it just isn’t what the Song of Songs itself is talking about.

As I will demonstrate as we go, the text in all the Bible nearest in meaning to the Song is Proverbs 5, but no one treats Proverbs 5 as an allegory about Christ’s love for the church. It is about the love of man and woman in its sexual dimension and, in particular, marital eroticism as God’s appointed protection from the scourge of sexual sin. There is, in other words, a category mistake in the allegorical interpretation of the Song. These interpreters

are taking the book as theology when it is actually wisdom; they are treating it as soteriology when it actually concerns the living of the godly life.

We will say just that much on the question of the allegorical view of the Song of Songs, which way of interpretation, happily, is disappearing in our time. But eliminating allegory does not by itself solve all the problems that must be faced in interpreting the Song. Other problems remain. Two in particular.

1. *There is first the problem of appreciating the genre.* An ancient love poem, written in Hebrew, understandably proves difficult for us to read and understand simply because the genre of ancient love poetry is alien to us. We are all familiar with the humorous examples of the problem posed by the Song of Songs in particular. In 4:1-2, for example, we read, in a depiction of the beloved's beauty that is obviously intended to convey how captivating, how ravishingly beautiful the woman is to her lover,

“Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each one has its twin, not one of them is alone.”

That is not what we would say today to a woman whom we were seeking to impress with our mastery of the language of love! Actually, however, these problems of distance are usually relatively easy to overcome. Most Palestinian goats have long wavy black hair. The movement of a large flock on a distant hillside makes it appear as if the whole hill were alive. And the sheep just shorn are white and lustrous. People of that time and place were familiar with these facts. The fact is, probably nothing is so bound to its time and place as erotic poetry, heavy-laden with metaphor as it always is. Listen, for example, to Lucian, a Greco-Roman writer, many centuries later than the Song, describe the beauty of a woman's teeth:

“When laughing, she showed her teeth; in what way shall I express how white they are, how symmetrical, how perfectly fitted together. They are like a very beautiful necklace of pearls glistening and of the same size, thus ranged in regular order. They received additional beauty from the redness of the lips; for they appeared between them, like the cut ivory in Homer...with a perfect uniformity of all in colour, size, and arrangement.” [Burrowes, 354]

The Greco-Roman world is much closer to our own than that of the ancient Near East and Lucian's description is much easier for us to appreciate, but we still wouldn't describe a woman's teeth the way Lucian did. His description is still too florid for us. The fact is that in different times and places the beauty of a woman's body or the power of sexual attraction is described in different ways and, in their own way, these forms of words are as distinctive as anything we find in the Song. Take, as another example, a much more modern description of the attractiveness of a woman's body – remember, the subject of three highly figurative passages in the Song – this from Edmond Burke, the British statesman.

“Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breast; the smoothness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix or whither it is carried.”

That is a description of the erotic mystery that rivals anything in the Song, even if in a completely different language, expressing the same things in the thought forms of a different time and culture.

Happily many of the remaining problems of interpretation caused by our unfamiliarity with ANE culture and language, if not virtually all of them, have been solved as a result of our growing acquaintance with the culture and the literature of the ancient Near East. As archaeology has provided texts and scholars have learned to read them, we are now able to compare the Song of Songs with other examples of the same genre from the same general period, that is with other ancient Near Eastern love poems. And again and again the Song gives up its treasures easily when once we have the key in our hand.

- a. So, for example, the simile in 1:9, which Burrowes took to be a reference to beauty (for he thinks that the ancients thought that mares were the most beautiful of horses) and tender affection (because people of the ancient Near East loved their horses as we love our pets), is now clear. Egyptian chariots, as everyone would have known in that day, were pulled by stallions – war horses –; the presence of a mare would sexually excite the stallions and keep them distracted from their proper work. There was even a battle tactic of releasing a mare among the chariot horses to divert their attention. The simile, therefore, concerns the sexual attractiveness of the woman, her power to distract him by her sexual charms. It is a very potent figure of speech and explicitly erotic, not even simply romantic, but erotic, sexual.
- b. In 4:12 we have clearly metaphorical references to a garden, a spring, and a fountain. All of these are now well-attested as familiar euphemisms for the woman’s sexual charm, or for sexual activity, or for the genitals themselves. If you remember, we found “spring” and “fountain” in Proverbs 5:12ff. where the reference is unmistakably to sexual love-making. And so with “garden.” In one of the erotic ritual texts of the ANE a goddess invites the king to “plough her.” One of the Egyptian love poems from the period begins: “Distracting is the foliage of my pasture/The mouth of my girl is a lotus bud/her breasts are mandrake apples...” and proceeds to describe her charms in similar figures. Both “lotus” and “mouth” are widely recognized euphemisms for the female genitals. In another Egyptian poem we read: “I am your best girl/ I belong to you like an acre of land/which I have planted/with flowers and every sweet-smelling grass.” Now you have these double entendres all through the Song of Songs. Here, in 4:12, the spring is enclosed; the fountain is sealed, the garden is locked up: all indications of virginity. Sexual consummation has not yet been enjoyed.
- c. Or, take the reference to the female lover as a sister in 4:10. That way of speaking is also found often in the ANE love poems.

- d. Or, take the comparison of love to wine in 1:2. The association between sexual love and the pleasing effects of intoxicating drink is well-attested in the ANE poems. Here is a poem from the group of poems called *The Cairo Love Songs* that date from 1300-1100 B.C., so, quite close to the time of the Song. [No. 23]

I embrace her,
 And her arms open wide,
 I am like a man in Punt, [Punt was a town on the Somali coast, known for
 Its myrrh trees]
 Like someone overwhelmed with drugs,
 I kiss her,
 Her lips open,
 And I am drunk without a beer.

So, while a few problems created by the language and the genre of the poem remain, most of these have been solved and we can understand the meaning of the verses no matter their highly metaphorical and figurative character. In other words, we “get” the expressions of the Song today as perhaps no generation of Bible readers has since the days of the Old Testament itself. As an aside, let me mention again, as I mentioned in a previous lecture, it is important to notice the figurative language of the Song. When understood it is highly erotic and explicitly so, but it would not be recognized as such by children who heard the book read. There is a chasteness to the Bible’s eroticism. It is explicit without being prurient and it is careful of the sensibilities of both children and a public audience. Remember, these books were written to be read out loud and listened to, not first to be read in private as so much of Bible reading today.

2. But, there is another problem that we face, that bears more mightily on our understanding of the poem than we might at first guess. *That is the problem of identifying the poem’s structure.*

You may remember that there were attempts to demonstrate that there are two lovers in the poem and that the poem relates the competition between them for the favor of the beloved and of her preferring the one to the other. There were always terrific problems with that interpretation, not least that no one could agree as to what parts of the poem were to be assigned to which lover. But clearly that is evidence of a structure problem. If you can’t tell where the poem is going or how its parts and pieces are organized, it is much harder to know what it is saying. There are some scholars who have argued that there is no organization and that the Song is just a collection of disparate poems on the theme of erotic love. I think we know now that is not right. But can we go further and build some understanding of the structure of the poem that will help us to understand what it contains, what it is saying?

Jack Collins took the view in his lecture to you that the organization of the poem is linear, proceeding from beginning to end. There is a logic and a narrative structure but it is linear or consecutive. I confess to a significant measure of unease in disagreeing with Jack Collins about anything, but I am persuaded there is an impressive argument to be

made against a linear structure of the poem and for a chiasmic structure, chiasm being, as you may know, an important and common ANE literary device. [Some of the following derived from *Westminster Theological Journal* [vol. 65, No. 1] (2003) 97-111.]

So let me make the case for a chiasmic structure and you can then decide for yourself whether you found Dr. Collins' arguments or mine more convincing. Then we will consider the implications of the poem's structure for its interpretation.

Over the past generation we have been growing more and more familiar with the literary form known as *chiasmus* in which elements are paralleled to each other but in an inverted relationship: AB/BA; or ABC/CBA and the like. Sometimes the inverted elements surround a central, unparallelled unit, a pivot for the work or section as a whole. We find chiasmus as a literary form or structure everywhere in the Old Testament. And, it seems to some, we find it in the structure of the Song of Songs as well. I don't hesitate to admit that some purport to find chiasmus where I can't see it and to be over-subtle in their identification of it in a particular text. So Jack's caution about imposing a literary structure upon a text is deserving of a careful hearing. But, consider this.

- a. If the structure of the Song is chiasmic, we should expect to find the climax (pardon the pun) of the poem in the center, not at the end. The fact that we do find this in the Song is the first and perhaps the most powerful argument for its chiasmic structure. And that is precisely what we find in the Song. The exact center of the poem is 4:16-5:1. In the versification of *BHS* (and it is relatively simple and so uncontroversial to versify Hebrew poetry) *there are 111 lines of poetry before 4:16; there are 111 lines after.* [Omitting the title line.] By the way, in reading the Song it is important to ignore the chapter divisions. They were added a thousand years after Christ and do not reproduce the outline of the poem in any useful way. Read the poem as if there were no chapter divisions, for there were none in the original Song of Songs. But take note of this important fact: the center of the poem is sexual climax. *READ the two verses.* Unmistakably sexual consummation. And, in my view, the only place in the poem where you have that. You have many statements of sexual anticipation, but only here do you have unmistakably sexual consummation. Jack took 8:5-14 as marriage and consummation, but I confess that I simply don't find that persuasive. Read the two texts and see what you yourselves think. Is consummation at 4:15-5:1 or is it found in chapter 8? You have longing and virginity before and after; consummation only here in the middle. In my view this is a crippling objection to the argument for a linear structure to the poem. Sexual consummation occurs in the middle, not the end! That is precisely what makes a chiasmus!
- b. Now, before descending to particulars, let me point out the broad structure as I now see it. You have a certain number of segments before and after a middle pivot and those segments are related to one another chiasmically. And that is true both with regard to micro-elements or smaller sections and macro-elements or larger sections of the poem. Let me illustrate this so you see it in a broad way and that, I hope, will help you to get the sense of the parallelism of smaller units.

1. For example, the central major section of the poem is 3:6-5:1, or if it does not begin as early as 3:6, shortly thereafter. There are four sections before it and four after. The catchword “bride,” occurs only in this middle section. In other words, the young man and the young woman are not regarded as bride and groom or husband and wife before or after this middle section. The wedding and the sexual consummation are found here in the middle section.
 2. Look, for example, at 4:1 where the young woman is wearing a veil. Normally girls and women did not go veiled in Israel. They may have worn head-dresses but not veils, *except on special occasions*. Engagement was one such occasion (as we read in Gen. 24:65 when Rebekah first met her intended, Isaac. She wasn’t wearing a veil but she put one on for the occasion.). The wedding was another (as we read in Gen. 29:23, which seems to be at least a partial explanation as to why Jacob did not realize that he was consummating marriage with Leah and not with Rachel). *So the text indicates that in this section we are viewing the young woman as a bride, a young woman engaged and about to be married and then married.*
 3. You have virginity expressed in 4:12 in the midst of a highly erotic account of sexual desire.
 4. Then, finally, in 4:16 and 5:1 we have sexual consummation. These two verses of the poem are, therefore, the pivot of the chiasmus. What that means is that the structure of the poem itself indicates that this section, culminating in sexual intimacy and fulfillment, is the central interest of the entire poem. The earlier sections – full of longing and anticipation – look forward to it, and the later sections look back to it. The crowning piece of the poem is thus not at the end, but in the middle. *The poem, therefore, is about the erotic attraction, desire, and fulfillment of a young couple who wait until marriage.* This is the blessedness of the romantic and sexual dimension of life in the context of covenantal faithfulness to God.
- c. Now, let me show you, in just a few particulars, how this structure is discerned. Perhaps the easiest way to do this is to show you the chiasmic parallelism that unites the beginning of the poem to its end. In a chiasmus you expect to find parallel units at the very beginning and the very end. And so we do in the Song.
1. Look first at 1:6: “Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun. My mother’s sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected.” The sense in context is rather clear: she is in love but her brothers think that she is too young for love. So they require their sister to tend the vineyards – that is the family’s literal vineyards – hence her dark tan. She is outside working every day. The result of this assignment is that she has no time to tend her own vineyard (that is, her figurative vineyard, her own person, especially as one who loves and is loved).
 2. Now go to 8:8-12. I don’t know if your experience was anything like mine, but this section of the song always mystified me. “We have a young sister and her breasts are not yet grown.” What in the world does that have to do with

anything? Even Jack had to admit that this section of the poem was not fully integrated into the work as a whole. But, if the sister is the same girl of chapter one and her situation in chapter 8 is the same as in chapter 1, this statement makes perfect sense. Now, the first thing that scholars note about the two sections – the one in chapter 1 and this one in chapter 8 – is the comparative vocabulary. You have “vineyard” used in both sections, and, what is more, you have it used literally and figuratively in both. You have “my vineyard” in both sections, that is the figurative use but it is put in the same way in both sections. You have the phrases “which is mine” in both and you have the verb “to tend” in both. The poet is linking up the parallel sections of his poem by this common vocabulary.

3. In 8:8 you have, once again, her brothers talking. The NIV’s editorial heading “Friends” is a guess and a bad guess as it turns out. The use of “sister” in v. 8 certainly suggests “brothers,” not “friends.” By the way, there is no mention of a father in the Song. The implication seems to be that he is dead and that the brothers are fulfilling the leadership role in the family. All of that, of course, may suggest that the Song was originally composed about a specific wedding, about a particular couple and their love and its consummation. Their sister is a minor, she is not sexually mature, and they are wondering what to do with her when a man asks to marry her. Perhaps they know she has already fallen in love. Verse 9 then seems to be their determination to protect her purity. So, once again, we have the brothers in both sections protecting their sister, an obligation brothers had in that time and place. Whether putting her to work in the family vineyards or, more figuratively, building a wall around her, the thought is the same. They are keeping her away from love before she is ready to marry.
4. Now, go back to 1:7-8. Though her brothers are determined to keep her from any romantic entanglement, she desires to see the one she loves. “Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends.” She wants to be with him like his friends are. But a veiled woman in those days who wandered alone would be taken for a loose woman. Then, in v. 8 the friends, those called “the daughters of Jerusalem” in v. 5, tell her where to find her lover and how to go to him and be near him without arousing suspicion or putting her reputation at risk. In other words, she wants to see her lover and she manages to do it. They manage a “date” on the QT!
5. Now, go back to the parallel section in 8:10-12. In v. 10 the girl asserts that she is grown and ready for love and has freedom to tend her own vineyard (in the figurative sense – v. 12). In v. 11 there is the comparison between the rights of the king to administer his own possessions and the rights of this young woman to her own person, to give her love to her lover. And in v. 12, again, the contrast is between the king’s extensive properties and her own person, which remains her right to give to the one she loves. The tenant must pay the king for the use of his vineyard, but she owns her own person so far as love is concerned. And, then, in v. 13, the lover now wants to be with his beloved – just as the beloved wanted to be with her lover in 1:7. He wants to

be with her as her friends are, just as she wanted to be with him as his friends were. In both cases, in 1:8 and 8:14, their wishes for a “date” are fulfilled.

6. Now, there is much more to tell, of course, about the chiasmic parallelism of the elements of the poem. For example, we could talk about the romantic rendezvous described in 1:9-2:7 and its parallel section in 7:1-13. Or notice that the section immediately before the central pivot and immediately after it are both unmistakably dreams. In 3:1 we read: “All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him.” A dream. In 5:2 we read: “I slept but my heart was awake.” A dream. But we haven’t time to explore those parallels in any detail.
7. So, taking all of this together, we learn several things:
 - a. The situation of the couple is the same before the poem’s center –where the emphasis on marriage and sexual consummation is found – and after. It is *not chronological* from start to finish. We have the couple in love and unmarried in the first four sections and the last four; only in the middle one do we find them marrying and consummating their marriage.
 - b. In both sections, we find the young lovers both frustrated that they cannot act on their passion for one another *and* concerned with moral probity. For example, in 8:1 – “If only you were to me like a brother, who was nursed at my mother’s breasts! Then, if I found you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me.” That is, she could kiss her lover, which she longs to do, without moral reproach, because no one would object to a sister kissing her brother and expressing such familial affection. But, she will not kiss her beau before it is time and so she must burn with longings unfulfilled. She is not yet married and so cannot yet enjoy the physical intimacy that belongs to marriage. And, in v. 2 the same. She could bring her lover into her home. In v. 3 she is imagining the scene. But she cannot yet do this because it is not yet time. Her family would rightly object.
 - c. There are different ways to take the statement in 8:4, which also occurs in 2:7 and 3:5. It has been taken to mean “don’t interrupt the sweet dream of love she is enjoying by calling her back to the reality of the present situation” or, as the context suggests is more likely, “don’t start the process of loving exchange until the opportunity and appropriate occasion is present.” [Carr, *TOTC*, 94-95] Once again, the moral cast of the situation is front and center.
 - d. Throughout the poem this seems to be the great issue and it is emphasized by the poem chiasmic structure. Here is one commentator elaborating the point.

“Our imaginations often run far ahead of our physical reactions and they in turn run far ahead of what our actual relationship may be able to bear at that particular moment. When the physical outstrips the fully personal, emotional and psychological integration of the two lovers, the danger signals should start flashing. Adulterous thoughts, thoughts of fornication

are all too easy to entertain in the abstract, divorced from a relationship that is developing healthily at its own pace. It seems that the girl of the Song recognizes that... She wants their love to be consummated, but she is in great tension, because she knows the time is not ripe.... She is basically telling herself to cool it, to wait for the appropriate time. For the Christian, the appropriate time is always within marriage, never outside it." [That re the garden scenes in 1:9-2:7 and 7:1-13; T. Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, 147, cited in Andrew Hwang, *WTJ*, 107-108]

So, no wonder we find marriage and sexual consummation in marriage in the center of the poem and in the crowning position in the chiasmus!

Conclusion:

The Song is a poem about the powerful passionate attraction of love, love in its romantic and erotic dimension, and of the wait required before that love can be consummated, of the necessity of the moral control of erotic attraction, and of the fulfillment of marriage as the righteous fulfillment of these human longings. It is very important to observe that while our sex education nowadays is largely clinical, the Bible's sex education is exclusively moral!