

Solomon and Sinatra: The Song of Songs and Romance in the Church
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Part 7

Turning to an allegory from the American Songbook, I have two selections:

“Ghost Riders in the Sky”

"Ghost Riders in the Sky" is an allegorical song written in 1948 by the prolific [Stan Jones](#). Members of the [Western Writers of America](#) chose it as the top western song of all time! Those of us from Ellensburg love this song. The song tells the allegorical folk tale of a lone cowboy who has a vision of “red-eyed, steel-hooved” cattle thundering across the sky, being chased by the spirits of Hell-bound cowboys. One cowboy warns our loner, like Dives in Luke 16:27, that “if he does not change his ways today,” he will be doomed to join them, forever "trying to catch the [Devil's](#) herd across these endless skies". The song lyrics also have a faint echo of Deuteronomy 33:26, “There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty.” I Kings 8:47, “if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried”; “Psalm 68:33, “to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens; behold, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.” and Psalm 7:12, “If he does not turn, [God] will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready.” Mr. Jones also wrote the music for the popular John Wayne western films *The Horse Soldiers*, *The Searchers*, *Rio Grande* and the television series *Cheyenne*, starring the Christian actor, Clint Walker. The 1949 version of “Ghost Riders” by active churchman and very popular baritone, [Vaughn Monroe](#) and His Band first appeared on the [Billboard](#) charts, lasting 22 weeks and reaching #1. *Billboard* ranked the song as the #1 song in America for 1949.

“An old cowpoke went riding out one dark and windy day
Upon a ridge he rested as he went
along his way
When all at once a mighty herd of red-eyed cows he saw
A'plowin' through the
ragged skies and up a cloudy draw
Yi-pi-yi-ay, Yi-pi-yi-o
Ghost herd in the sky
Their brands
were still on fire and their hooves were made of steel
Their horns wuz black and shiny and
their hot breaths he could feel
A bolt of fear went through him as they thundered through the
sky
For he saw the riders comin' hard and he heard their mournful cry
Yi-pi-yi-ay, Yi-pi-yi-o
Ghost riders in the sky
Their faces gaunt, their eyes were blurred, their shirts all soaked with
sweat
They're ridin' hard to catch that herd but they ain't caught them yet
They've got to ride
forever in that range up in the sky
On horses snortin' flame an' fire, as they ride on, hear them
cry
Yi-pi-yi-ay, Yi-pi-yi-o
Ghost riders in the sky
As the riders loped on by him, he heard
one call his name
"If you want to save your soul from hell a' ridin' on our range.
Then
cowboy change your ways today or with us you will ride a-tryin' to catch the Devil's herd
across these endless skies."
Yi-pi-yi-ay, Yi-pi-yi-o
Ghost riders in the sky
Ghost riders in the
sky.”

("Ghost Riders in the Sky" performed by Vaughn Monroe)(2:55) https://www.amazon.com/Ghost-Riders-In-The-Sky/dp/B003VCY7OO/ref=sr_1_1?s=dmusic&ie=UTF8&qid=1474672367&sr=1-1&keywords=ghost+riders+in+the+sky+vaughn+monroe

You might recognize Mr. Monroe's unique voice as the voice of "Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow," a song popular in Bruce Willis' movies as well as many other number one hits in the 40s and 50s (eg, "There, I've Said it Again," "Ballerina"). Can you image the most popular song in America in 2016 telling us to turn or burn?

"This Ole House"

One of the most famous allegorical songs in the American Songbook was written in 1951 by evangelical composer/actor, Stuart Hamblin called, "This Ole House." The song evolved into an analogy for the Christian life as one gets older (cf, Ecclesiastes 12), looking forward to the physical resurrection into heaven ("getting ready to meet the saints"). But the song began as a folk tale when Hamblin and fellow cowboy actor John Wayne were on a hunting trip in the Sierra Mountains of California and stumbled upon a ramshackle cabin with a dead man and a live dog in it. A young Roman Catholic, Rosemary Clooney, recorded the song with Buddy Cole's orchestra in 1954 and it became a *Billboard* #1 hit – the most popular song in America. This song is like a song selection from the Old Testament Church songbook which used common objects to illustrate the gospel. For instance, in **Isaiah 5(1)**, the great prophet used "The Song of the Vineyard" to preach the good news. "I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard; my loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside." Isaiah assumes the role of a musician in order to reach the heart and conscience of some of the chosen people, who by now had become impervious to the power of his preaching. Mr. Hamblin wanted to do the same thing with his song and he uses the metaphor of a crumbling house to do his preaching. Clooney hit recording features basso profundo singer Thurl Ravenscroft who was the voice of Tony the Tiger ("They're Great") in Kellogg's Frosted Flake commercials and sang "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch" in the movie *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Mr. Ravenscroft is buried in the Chrystal Cathedral memorial gardens in Anaheim.

"This ole house once knew my children This ole house once knew my wife This ole house was home and comfort As we fought the storms of life This ole house once rang with laughter This ole house heard many shouts Now she trembles in the darkness When the lightnin' walks about Ain't a-gonna need this house no longer Ain't a-gonna need this house no more Ain't got time to fix the shingles Ain't got time to fix the floor Ain't got time to oil the hinges Nor to mend no window pane Ain't gonna need this house no longer I'm a-gettin' ready to meet the saints This ole house is a-gettin' shaky This ole house is a-gettin' old This ole house lets in the rain This ole house lets in the cold On my knees I'm gettin' chilly But I feel no fear or pain 'Cause I see an angel peekin' Through a broken window pane Ain't a-gonna need this house no longer Ain't a-gonna need this house no more Ain't got time to fix the shingles Ain't got time to fix the floor Ain't got time to oil the hinges Nor to mend no window pane Ain't gonna need this house no longer I'm a-gettin' ready to meet the saints Now this ole house is afraid of thunder This ole house is afraid of storms This ole house just groans and trembles When the night wind flings its arms This ole house is a-gettin' feeble This ole house is a-needin' paint Just like me it's tuckered out But I'm a-gettin' ready to meet the saints Ain't a-gonna need this house no longer Ain't a-gonna need this house no more Ain't got time to fix the shingles Ain't got time to fix the floor Ain't got time to oil the hinges Nor to mend no window pane Ain't gonna need this house

no longer I'm a-gettin' ready to meet the saints know I'm gonna leave Else he'd wake up by the fire place And he'd sit down, howl and grieve But my huntin' days are over Ain't gonna hunt the coon no more Gabriel done brought in my chariot When the wind blew down the door Ain't a-gonna need this house no longer Ain't a-gonna need this house no more Ain't got time to fix the shingles Ain't got time to fix the floor Ain't got time to oil the hinges Nor to mend no window pane Ain't gonna need this house no longer I'm a-gettin' ready to meet the saints.”

(“This Ole House” performed by Rosemary Clooney)(2:23) https://www.amazon.com/This-Ole-House/dp/B013THGLDA/ref=sr_1_7?s=dmusic&ie=UTF8&qid=1474672589&sr=1-7&keywords=this+ole+house+rosemary+clooney

“The House I Live In”

The song, “The House I Live In,” originally appeared on Broadway in the musical revue, *Let Freedom Sing*, in war year 1942 and was written by [Earl Robinson](#). The lyrics were written in 1943 by [Abel Meeropol](#). The song was the title song of a 1946 ten-minute [short film](#) of the same name starring [Frank Sinatra](#). Made to oppose [anti-Semitism](#) at the end of [World War II](#), the film received an [Honorary Academy Award](#) and a special [Golden Globe](#) award in 1946. In 2007, this film was selected for preservation in the United States [National Film Registry](#) by the [Library of Congress](#) as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant”. In the film, Mr. Sinatra, playing himself, takes a break from a recording session and steps outside to smoke a cigarette. He sees a bunch of boys chasing a Jewish boy and intervenes and he breaks out into song. The allegory of the song is that the “house” is “America.” The main of the lyric is that we are all Americans and that one American's blood is as good as another's and that all our religions are to be respected equally. The song became a national hit. Mr. Robinson and Mr. Meeropol were later accused of being members of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, Mr. Sinatra continued to include the song in his repertory for decades. In fact, he performed the song at the [Nixon](#) White House, the inaugural ceremonies of [Ronald Reagan](#), and the centenary of the [Statue of Liberty](#).

“What is America to me A name, a map, or a flag I see A certain word, democracy What is America to me. The house I live in A plot of Earth, a street The grocer and the butcher And the people that I meet. The children in the playground The faces that I see All races and religions That's America to me. The place I work in The worker by my side The little town the city Where my people lived and died. The howdy and the handshake The air a feeling free And the right to speak your mind out That's America to me. The things I see about me The big things and the small The little corner newsstand Or the house a mile tall. The wedding and the churchyard The laughter and the tears The dream that's been a growing For a hundred and fifty years. The town I live in The street, the house, the room The pavement of the city Or the garden all in bloom. The church the school the clubhouse The million lights I see But especially the people That's America to me.”

“Strange Fruit”

"Strange Fruit" was originated as an allegorical poem written by American Jewish writer, teacher and songwriter Abel Meeropol as a protest against [lynchings](#). In the allegorical poem, Mr. Meeropol expressed his horror at lynchings, inspired by [Lawrence Beitler's](#) photograph of the 1930 [lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith](#) in [Indiana](#). Meeropol published the poem under the title "Bitter Fruit"

in 1937 in *The New York Teacher*, a [union](#) magazine. Meeropol's protest song gained a certain success in and around New York. [Barney Josephson](#), the founder of [Cafe Society](#) in [Greenwich Village](#), New York's first [integrated](#) nightclub, heard the song and introduced it to [Billie Holiday](#). Holiday first performed the song at Cafe Society in 1939. She said that singing it made her fearful of retaliation but, because its imagery reminded her of her father, she continued to sing the piece, making it a regular part of her performances. Because of the power of the song, Josephson drew up some rules: Holiday would close with it; the waiters would stop all service in advance; the room would be in darkness except for a spotlight on Holiday's face; and there would be no encore. During the musical introduction, Holiday stood with her eyes closed, as if she were evoking a prayer. Holiday approached her recording label (Columbia), about the song, but the company feared reaction by record retailers, as well as negative reaction from [CBS](#), which it co-owned. When Holiday's own producer [John Hammond](#), who was the original patron of the young Jewish orchestra leader Benny Goodman, also refused to record it, she turned to [Milt Gabler](#), whose [Commodore](#) label produced alternative jazz. Gabler tells the story that Holiday sang "Strange Fruit" for him *a cappella*, and moved him to tears. Gabler worried the song was too short, so he asked pianist [Sonny White](#) to improvise an introduction. On the recording, Holiday starts singing after an eternal wait of 70 seconds. Holiday recorded the song in 1939 and one in 1944 and it sold a million copies, in time becoming Holiday's biggest-selling record. In 1939, [The New York Post](#) described "Strange Fruit": "If the anger of the exploited ever mounts high enough in the South, it now has its [Marseillaise](#)." 1999, [Time](#) magazine called it the song of the century, and in 2002, the [Library of Congress](#) honored the song as one of 50 recordings chosen that year to add to the [National Recording Registry](#). A side note: Mr. Meeropol adopted one of the sons of Julius and Ethel Roseburg, the convicted and executed communist spies.

“Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.
Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.”

(“Strange Fruit” performed by Billie Holiday) (3:01) https://www.amazon.com/Strange-Fruit/dp/B000VHOQNE/ref=sr_1_1?s=dmusic&ie=UTF8&qid=1474673207&sr=1-1&keywords=strange+fruit+billie+holiday

The literal or natural approach rejects the idea that there is some kind of secret code or “scriptural imaginative” key, as Griffiths claims, to unlock the plain language of the text. The natural approach has us read the words as you would read any other poetry or biblical wisdom literature. At the same time, there is the acknowledgement of ambiguity, mystery and variegated phrases resident in the *Song*. There are two main ways of naturally looking at the text of the *Song of Songs*: a dramatic play or poems of love.

The dramatic interpretation of the *Song* keys off the mention of the name of “Solomon” and thus sees a dramatic love triangle between a young woman (“Shulamite” SS 6:13) who is wooed by King Solomon (SS 3:6-11; 8:11-12), but chooses to remain faithful to her first love, a young shepherd (SS 1:7, “where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep”). The dramatic approach basically interprets the Hebrew as literal erotic play describing the love affair

of a young woman being pursued by two men.

John Milton (1608-1674) wrote, in support of the dramatic approach, “The Scriptures also affords us a Divine pastoral Drama in the *Song of Solomon* consisting of two persons, and a double Chorus, as Origin rightly judges.” (*The Reason of Church Government urg'd against Prelatry*, 1642).

Some prominent Old Testament scholars like Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890) and Samuel R. Driver (1846-1914) subscribed to the dramatic view (“it will be seen that though much of the poetry is lyrical in character, the Song, as a whole, is of the nature of a drama, with dialogue, and action, and character consistently sustained, constituting a rudimentary kind of plot.” *An Introduction of the Literature of the Old Testament*, 1906). Shortly after the American Civil War (1869), Dr. Delitzsch wrote in his introduction to his wonderful commentary on the *Song of Songs*,

“The erotic external side of the poem has an ethical background. We have no ‘love song,’ like Ezekiel mentions in 33:32 having reference to [only] sensual gratification. The Song transforms natural love into holy love. Whatever in the sphere of the divinely ordered marriage relation makes love the happiest, firmest bond uniting two souls together, is presented to us here in living pictures.”

More recently and interestingly, Walter Kaiser (Packer/Soderlund, *The Way of Wisdom*, 2000) and Iain Provan (*NIV Application Commentary on Song of Songs*, 2001), whose commentaries I consult, have proposed this dramatic interpretation.

However, this view has several problems: There are no stage instructions for the reader from the biblical writer(s) to know how to dramatically read the text. So, once again, it is left up to the “scriptural imagination” of the reader to subjectively hermeneutically construct the libretto of the *Song of Songs*. Also, there is no evidence that the Old Testament Church ever wrote dramatic literature. The early Jewish historians Philo (25 BC – 50 AD) and Josephus (37 - 100) make no mention of any Jewish dramatic presentations (cf, Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 1969). Also, in other Ancient Near East Semitic literature, there is little evidence for dramatic writings. Finally, as I’ve mentioned, most commentators reject the idea that “Solomon” was an actual figure in the *Song*. His name appears only 7 times, including the superscription (SS 1:1) and three times in just one poem (SS 3:6-11). So most modern commentators understand “Solomon” to be a poetic figure, a literary device of opulence and manliness, and not a historic personage. In short, the name “Solomon” is used by the young woman poet as she reflects on the wonders of love and marriage with her man, her “Solomon,” her “king for a day,” her “prince charming.” So there are only 2 people involved in this very candid Old Testament Church love affair.

It is now generally understood by the vast majority of contemporary commentators that the *Song of Songs* is poetic literature that emphasizes the goodness and godly joy of sex. As Dan Allender and Tremper Longman write in their 2014 short commentary,

“The Song is bawdy yet discreet, poetic and dense, arousing and erotic, honest and convinced of the primal impulse of love to rise against death.” (*God Loves Sex*)

Contemporary Old Testament scholars who have studied the *Song* through the lens of literary criticism or comparative literature (that is, Ancient Near East love poetry), see an anthology of anywhere from one large love song to over 4 dozen smaller love songs.

But, only in the last 150 years have we understood it to be such a literary masterpiece of love poetry. The 18th century German writer and pastor, Johann G. Herder (1744-1803) described the *Song* as a collection of poems celebrating the joys of human erotic love (“*On the Effect of Poetic Art on the Ethics of Peoples in Ancient and Modern Times*,” 1778). But Herder was more a poet and philosopher and pastor than a trained theologian so his views on the *Song* didn’t get much traction in the theological establishment. A century later, in 1873, a Prussian non-theologian but Christian diplomat to Syria (J.G. Wetzstein), drew specific parallels between the *Song* and Mesopotamian erotic poems and marriage practices that he had witnessed in the Near East. With this kind of observation and the fruits of archeology, the flood gates of comparative literature were opened and multiple studies by the late 20th century have shown numerous similarities between Ancient Near East love poems (e.g., Egyptian, Summarian, Akkadian, etc.) and the *Song of Songs*. In 1985, Michael Fox wrote an influential and universally quoted monograph comparing the *Song* with Egyptian love poems (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*). And with all the scholarly research in biblical culture, language and theology in the last 150 years has come an intellectual boldness and freedom to see the biblical text in a new and fresh way. The result of this research is that today scholarly literature on the *Song* predominately takes the literal perspective of love songs between two young lovers in the Old Testament Church.

But all of this biblical research does not change the awkwardness or embarrassment we Christians still sense when we approach the *Song* in a literal fashion. In fact it heightens it, and so we don’t approach the *Song* very often.

This change in interpretation is really fascinating to me, personally, because when I was at Covenant Seminary, studying Old Testament Hebrew in 1970 with the erudite Elmer Smick, who was a renowned scholar in Hebrew poetry (ie, he wrote a highly regarded commentary on Job for *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 1988), it was received wisdom that the *Song of Solomon* was to be interpreted as an allegorical or typological picture of the relationship between God or Christ and his Church or the individual Christian, or maybe an allegorical dramatic presentation, but not a collection of natural love songs. Most of this revolutionary literal love poem scholarship on the *Song of Songs* has happened in the last 40 years (Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, 1977). Remarkable development.

“If I Had You”

"If I Had You" is another 1928 Tin Pan Alley [song](#) by [Jimmy Campbell](#), [Reg Connelly](#) (“Try a Little Tenderness”) and [Ted Shapiro](#). The ardent lyrics boast that one can do almost anything – change the color of the sky, climb mountains, cross deserts, sail the ocean, become a king, become born again (“start life all anew”) – if the woman he loves will only be his. The romantic love song became a mainstream [jazz standard](#), first in England (the Prince of Wales declared it his favorite fox trot number) and then in America. The 1929 Great Depression created an

emotional environment for female encouragement of her unemployed or under-employed husband to buck up and stay the course and this ballad expressed the husband's need for such support during those early Depression years. Yale University crooner Rudy Vallee (1901-1986) with his Connecticut Yankees orchestra made it a hit in the US in 1929. The song continues to be performed and used in numerous film [soundtracks](#) into the 21st century (eg, [Our Modern Maidens \(1929\)](#), *The Hoodlum Saint* (1946), *You Were Meant for Me* (1948), *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) and *What Women Want* (2000). Here is Mr. Vallee in his 1929 hit recording with Ray McDermott on the piano:

I could show the world how to smile I could be glad all of the while I could change the gray skies to blue If I had you. I could leave the old days behind Leave all my pals, I'd never mind I could start my life anew If I had you. I could climb a snow-capped mountain Sail the mighty ocean wide I could cross the burning desert If I had you by my side. I could be a king, dear, uncrowned Humble or poor, rich or renowned There is nothin' I couldn't do If I had you. I could climb a snow-capped mountain Sail the mighty ocean wide I could cross the burnin' desert If I had you by my side. I could be a king uncrowned Humble or poor, rich or renowned There is nothin' I couldn't do.

(“If I Had You” performed by Rudy Vallee)(3:03)

This latest biblical research has now shown that the *Song* is a book extraordinarily rich with sensory imagery to suggest eroticism:

*By far the most prevalent sensory material is visual: The sense of sight is a recurrent motif where the longing gaze of the lover's body thrills the heart of both partners.

But there is also:

*The sense of the aroma of the lover's body, compared to flowers, fruits, spices, perfumes, even mountains, to enhance the language of love.

*Exodus 30:25, “Make these into a sacred anointing oil, a fragrant blend, the work of a perfumer. It will be a sacred anointing oil;”

*Exodus 30:34-35, “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take fragrant spices – gum resin, onycha and galbanum – and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer.’”

*The sense of taste of the lover's body (wine, pomegranates, walnuts, honey, milk).

*The sense of sound of the lover's movements (voice, breathing, footsteps).

*And of course, the sense of touch of the lover's body (caresses)

*SS 4:5, “breasts like two fawns”

*SS 7:7, “clusters of fruit”

In sum, there is probably nothing more essential to understanding the *Song of Songs* than our readiness to respond to the plain reading of romantic poetry of biblical sensuality. The *Song* contains metaphors, euphemisms and *double entendries* describing various actions relating to sexual arousal. The modern commentator has a couple of options: either he can leave the ambiguities, metaphors and untidiness unresolved and thus leave it up to the reader to sort things

out, exercise their own imagination to come up with some sort of understanding of this beautiful book. Or the commentator can comment explicitly relying on the rest of the Bible, modern biblical scholarship, historical research and biblical reasoning to unravel the metaphors and make some sense out of this magnificent and under-used biblical poetry. The problem with the first option is that the reader may never understand the book. The problem with the second option, the natural and literal commentary, is that the exposition can cause offense and be a stumbling block to brothers and sisters in the Lord. Once the literal line of exposition is begun one can't put the genie back in the bottle and it becomes difficult to avoid seeing explicit sexual allusions throughout the book and the *Song* becomes a work drenched in sexual frankness. The great Church Father, Origen understood this when he wrote,

“I advise everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of the flesh and blood and has not yet ceased to feel the passions of this bodily nature, to refrain from reading the book and the things that will be said about it.” (*Origen: Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, RP Lawson, 1957).