

Song Sung Blue?

BY LAURA SINGLETON

The best comeback to the stereotype of the sexually repressed born-again Christian (the only way they know to deal with a naked body is to cover it up!) can be found right in the pages of the Bible: the Song of Songs. It's certainly erotic, but hardly the script for a "blue movie."

When Attorney General John Ashcroft, the most publicly-identified Christian in the U.S. Cabinet, last February ordered a backdrop of draperies to conceal a monumentally-bare-bosomed Art Deco statue during official occasions in the Great Hall of the Justice Department, surely I was only one of many evangelicals who winced at the report. Though one spokesperson suggested the reason was the metallic statue's reflective background in photographic lighting, the consensus interpretation in the news media and on late-night talk shows invited guffaws over the presumably prudish sentiments behind Ashcroft's gesture. Soon he will be putting pantaloons on piano legs, right? There go those unhealthy, sexually repressed born-again Christians—the only way they know to deal with a naked body is to cover it up!

The best comeback to this derisive stereotype is found right in the pages of the Bible between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. The Song of Songs, also called Song of Solomon, with its frankly sensual and erotic imagery, offers enough titillation to make even *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw blush. Its provocative content was implicitly acknowledged by rabbinical teachers, who only allowed students over the age of thirty to read it. "That it is in Scripture at all is an elegant testimony to the Hebrew refusal to chop life into things sacred and things secular," notes Richard Foster.¹ Jews and Christians alike would claim, however, that it's far from pornographic, which prompts the question of how we tell the difference. Merely citing divine inspiration (an argument simplified along the lines of: "The Holy

Spirit don't write no porn!") is more a dodge than a rationale, as it excuses us from exploring the issue further. It also misses an opportunity to discover principles that can be applied more broadly in considering the nature of secular artwork and writings.

Another dodge, quite popular throughout the history of Judeo-Christian thought but a dodge nonetheless, is to view the book solely as an allegory of the love of God for His people Israel, or of Christ for the Church. So entrenched is this viewpoint that parents smile dotingly as their preschoolers warble in Sunday School, "I'm my beloved's and he is mine—his banner over me is love." In the original context, these praises hardly seem ordained for the mouths of babes! While Jesus of course does love the little children, leaving Song of Songs with this assessment misses the point that even an allegory must be convincing in its first meaning if it is to be helpful. Only because we can identify with the prodigal or the elder son, for example, does that parable of Christ's convict us, and likewise, only if the passion between Solomon and the Shulammitte is believable can it adequately mirror the passion of Christ for the Church. So it may be viewed as an allegory, yes, but not at the expense of dealing with its erotic material at face value.

One potential argument to separate Song of Songs from pornography is that it's not pictorial. Too often we reduce our definition of porn to Internet photo spreads, pulp magazines, or adult videos. In this case, however, even our sexually-liberated pop culture has seen the truth. On an episode of the sitcom *Friends*, Joey finds a dog-eared novel tucked under the mattress of his roommate Rachel's bed. Its plotline, he quickly discovers, involves a lusty maid, an overheated blacksmith, and other participants of a similar stripe. Joey, generally not the sharpest arrow in the quiver, in this case knows something when he sees it. "You've got porn!" he exclaims, first with astonishment and then with glee as he confronts a chagrined Rachel, who tries frantically but unsuccessfully to re-characterize the genre of her "literature." Indeed, for my gender, steamy romance novels or magazine serials, with a veneer of character development between explicitly-detailed sexual romps, are by far the favored form of pornographic consumption. Being a written expression of sensuality by no means excludes the Song of Songs from that category.

A final reason I find inadequate for dismissing this work from the pornographic category is its use of figurative and euphemistic language rather than explicit anatomical terms. First of all, time and translation have distanced us from knowing exactly how "graphic" the words may have seemed to contemporary Hebrew eyes. To today's reader, though, however delicate the expression seems, the implication is clear when the lover declares, "You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches" (7:7-8). If

anything, the mystery hidden in the metaphor makes the message more sensual and arousing than had he simply proclaimed, “I want to grab your breasts!” It definitely invokes the imagination. But since the path into sexual imagination is not necessarily a safe one, why is the Song of Songs not pornographic? Perhaps we should take a close look at the book’s content and how it differs from popular pornography in order to develop biblical standards for evaluating erotic material.

In the first place, a virtue of the Song of Songs is that it glorifies the normal rather than the extreme. As a pastor friend of mine once highlighted, praising teeth “like a flock of shorn ewes...all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved” (4:2) rejoices in the rather prosaic quality of fortunate dental hygiene! Though herbal scents and cosmetics were certainly not unknown in ancient times, the “nectar” or “liquid myrrh” of the lips (4:11, 5:13) or the “mixed wine” of the navel (7:2) seem more closely linked to natural breath and body aromas than the latest mouthwash or perfume. This stands in direct contrast to typical pornographic material, which tends to rely on digitally-enhanced images of surgically-enhanced bodies that dampen appreciation for the real thing. C. S. Lewis has his fictional demon, Screwtape, suggest that this is all part of a diabolical strategy: “We [demons] are more and more directing the desires of men to something which does not exist—making the role of the eye in sexuality more and more important and at the same time making its demands more and more impossible. What follows you can easily forecast!”² For women, this finds its analogue in the romance novels depicting unceasing passion and exotic adventures which may be not merely an escape, but become a cause for dissatisfaction in the everyday. In either case, the outcome undermines healthy marital relationships.

Another distinguishing feature is the book’s multi-dimensional portrayal of the admirable qualities in both male and female lovers. Not just visual beauty is extolled, but voice, smell, taste, and, most strikingly, virtue. I contrast this with a comment from a friend of

mine who once worked on the website of a popular men’s magazine. Part of his job was creating photo captions, and he noted the challenge of coming up with “creative ways of saying, ‘This girl is sexy!’” When the observations are limited to the visual, and these attributes have been systematically reduced (or, more likely, augmented!) to a cookie-cutter definition of physical perfection, even the most gifted writer is stumped.

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At the same time, I suspect this man, who recently became engaged, would have no problem filling pages with the ways his fiancée enchants him. Real love finds an infinite variety of things to enjoy in its object, and these go beyond the aspects that sag or broaden with time.

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of Miriam or Deborah in their songs, the Shulammitte maiden gets more airtime than any other woman in Scripture! Her voice is a powerful one, of such similar character to Solomon's that commentators sometimes differ in their division of phrases between the speakers. "My vineyard, my very own, is for myself," she says in 8:12, and whether she is speaking about her chastity

or her property, her authority to command it is clear. Contrast this to the passive faces in most pornographic photos, supporting a viewer's self-arousal while eliminating the inconvenient necessity of dealing with a lover's emotions. Then consider that behind at least some of those faces are stories like the one told by Linda Boreman, the star of "Deep Throat," better known by her stage name, Linda Lovelace. Boreman, who was essentially broke when she died after an auto accident last spring,³ claimed she had been coerced and manipulated into participating in the pornographic films that made her famous. Witnesses disputed Boreman's stories of intimidation at gunpoint, but whether the guns were real, threatened, or just images woven from deep-seated shame and regret, clearly the experience was anything but empowering for her.

Finally, and most importantly, the Song of Songs differs from pornography because it portrays sexual expression linked to commitment and consequences. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave," (8:6) says the Shulammitte. The bond being described shares with death and the grave an essential quality of permanence. Again, this contrasts starkly with perspectives such as that of the prophetess of sexual liberation, Helen Gurley Brown, whose philosophy still greets us on each cover of *Cosmopolitan*, the magazine she edited for more than 30 years. A woman's role, it's clear from the stories featured there, is to figure out the best sexual techniques

to keep her man captivated. Revealingly, in a 1997 interview, Brown commented on her own marriage, "I've kept him faithful all these years."⁴ Ms. Brown, who personally dismisses any moral arguments for monogamy, places responsibility on the woman to stimulate her husband's continued interest, so the wife of a philanderer somehow deserves what she gets. How ironic that a message purporting to offer women "power" instead robs them of the right to expect fidelity!

In the end, the Song of Songs, even with its frankly erotic poetry, distinguishes itself from pornography with its emphasis on the value of persons, both male and female. It also points to ideals of restraint and premarital chastity, highlighting the genuine struggle between desire and virtue, and it emphasizes the serious nature of the sexual bond, presumed to seal the marriage covenant. Whether or not the lovers are historical persons, they have a convincing and particularized reality which transcends the shallowness of images invented for our selfish gratification.

NOTES

1 Richard Foster, *Money, Sex & Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 95. Foster's helpful discussion of Song of Songs in this work offered important insights to my own analysis.

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Edition, 1996), 77.

3 "Linda Lovelace died with no money; father scraping up money for funeral," Scripps Howard News Service, April 25, 2002.

4 Helen Gurley Brown, interview by Becky Garrison, *The Women's Quarterly*, Fall 1997, available online at www.iwf.org/pubs/twq/fa97g.shtml.



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