

MATTHIAS BIBLE GUIDES

Song of Solomon

*Kamina
Wüst*

Old Testament Series Editor
Kamina Wüst

“Do not stir up or awaken love in the wrong circumstances, and be utterly committed to the right kind of love, because God’s love is protective and his jealousy is fierce.”

Matthias Bible Guides exist to help Bible teachers of all levels engage with the word of God and prepare themselves to teach the Bible to others. This series is for the **Bible study leader** who wants to equip himself or herself to prepare and lead studies that are faithful to the Scriptures and to answer questions with confidence. It’s for the busy **preacher** who’s faced with the wonderful but daunting task of writing a new sermon series. And it’s for **any interested Christian** who wants a reliable companion as they read through a book of the Bible, alone or with others.

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Series Editors

Old Testament: Kamina Wüst

New Testament: Geoff Robson

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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Song of Solomon
Matthias Bible Guides
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About Matthias Bible Guides

Matthias Bible Guides exist to help Bible teachers of all levels engage with the word of God and prepare themselves to teach the Bible to others. This series is for the Bible study leader who wants to equip himself or herself to prepare and lead studies that are faithful to the Scriptures, and to answer questions with confidence. It's for the busy preacher who's faced with the wonderful but daunting task of writing a new sermon series. And it's for any interested Christian who wants a reliable companion as they read through a book of the Bible, alone or with others.

A Matthias Bible Guide is not a commentary. It's a good place to start *before* you read any commentaries. Like many commentaries, each guide gives some big-picture information on the book's authorship, date, genre, purpose and theological themes. From there, its aim is to equip you to understand the book for yourself and apply it to your pastoral context.

To create a series that's informed by serious scholarship yet accessible to all, the guides are written by authors who are both academically accomplished and pastorally experienced. All our contributors have academic qualifications in their area of the

Bible, and we've worked with them to distil their expertise into an easily digestible resource. The guides include tools such as suggested breakdowns for sermon and study series, plus recommended reading lists both at entry level and from more advanced academic sources. There are also free daily reading plans available online to accompany most guides, making the guides well suited to personal devotional use.

The guides assume a degree of biblical literacy while aiming to be accessible to Christians with and without formal theological training. That's why, for example, they include Greek and Hebrew words but make sure to translate them, and they use academic terminology while including a glossary of these terms in case any are unfamiliar. The guides are designed to be stimulating to those who already have a Bible college education, while opening up a new world of scholarly thinking to those who don't have such training.

While the guides reflect the theological convictions and, to some extent, the personal interpretations of the authors, they aim to *teach you* how to read the book instead of simply *telling you* what it says. The series operates within an unashamedly evangelical framework where the Bible is treated as the inspired, infallible and inerrant word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct. Within this framework, we aim to uphold what is certain from the text while stimulating your thinking around any areas of ambiguity, confident that the Spirit is working as you wrestle with God's word. In all this, our aim is to assist you not so much to master the Bible as to be *mastered by* the Bible.

As with all material published by Matthias Media, the aim of these guides is to help make and grow disciples of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Every Matthias Bible Guide is rich with

Christian application and ideas for illuminating the gospel in a way that's faithfully grounded in the unique qualities of each book.

Kamina Wüst and Geoff Robson
Series Editors

In this volume, Dr Kamina Wüst shares the fruit of many years spent studying and teaching the Song in a range of academic and pastoral settings. While acknowledging the many and varied interpretations of the book and showing an appropriate humility about the Song's ambiguities, Dr Wüst combines rigour and skill in listening to Scripture with the conviction that God had his purpose in inspiring the Song—and that, with careful reading, this purpose can be understood today. Her deep understanding of Hebrew poetry—both the challenges inherent in studying this genre, and the blessings that come from allowing the text to do its work on us and in us—is evident throughout. Many readers will be left with a sense of relief at having been helped to understand a previously confounding part of Scripture. All readers will be left with a profound joy and thankfulness to their heavenly Father for the beauty and fullness of his revelation to us.

Geoff Robson
Editor

Getting started with the Song of Solomon

What makes the Song of Solomon unique among books of the Bible?¹

It's not the only book composed of finely wrought, complex poetry—around one third of the Old Testament is poetry, and much of it is tricky to translate or interpret.

It's not even the only book that doesn't mention God—neither does the book of Esther, so the Song isn't completely unique in that respect.

There's the fact that it's the only text in the Bible to contain extended, positive descriptions of two people making love—that's pretty interesting!

1 The Song is known either as the Song of *Songs* or the Song of *Solomon*. A literal translation of its title (1:1) is "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's". This guide uses the title 'Song of Solomon' because the ESV (the translation used in the guide) uses this title. Furthermore, the interaction between the Song and the figure of Solomon in the Bible is central to my interpretation, so calling it the Song of *Solomon* is a reminder that its relationship to Solomon is key. Either title is legitimate, and it's fine to use whichever is preferred.

But the most intriguing thing about the Song of Solomon is that after more than two millennia of debate and analysis, there is no significant agreement on its interpretation. Even among Christians who share the same basic principles when it comes to reading the Bible, there are significant deviations of opinion on the meaning of the Song. The Song is so unusual, and so unexpected in its context, that it has historically been found quite difficult to handle. Interpretations have often been guided by the readers' preconceptions rather than by the quirky, sometimes confronting details of the text itself.

A popular perception about the Song of Solomon is that it's predominantly a celebration of marriage between a man and a woman—and, by implication, that it might have little to say to anybody who doesn't find themselves in this life situation. This guide will reveal that the Song has much to say to everybody. Yes, the Song shows that a relationship between a man and a woman can be a wonderful thing, but its message is much bigger than that. Even if a person doesn't immediately see themselves represented in the Song, Jesus has a message for them from this book. And Jesus has an invitation for *everybody* to live in his kingdom.

Anybody who's going to tackle teaching the Song of Solomon should hold two principles while reading it. Firstly, keep an open mind—a *really* open mind. You might have some long-ingrained beliefs about the Song that don't match up with the details of the text. Do your best to read with fresh eyes and be prepared to let God surprise you. Secondly, don't rely too heavily on one person's interpretation. Be aware that there are different interpretations out there, presented by reliable, Bible-believing scholars who make credible cases for their opinions. Be ready to weigh different interpretations against the text and decide which view makes the most sense.

With all this in mind, this guide has several aims:

- to lay out the basics of the Song, including what can be known for sure about its author, date of composition, genre, characters, setting and so on, to prepare you for reading it
- to make some big-picture connections to the theology and history of the rest of the Old Testament
- to give a snapshot of the major debates in scholarship so that you can understand the different views and where they're coming from
- to talk about Christian applications for the Song, while avoiding the folly of jumping to make connections to Jesus that aren't suggested in the text
- to lay out some sample teaching outlines, which you can use or adapt for your own Bible talks or studies
- to point you to the most useful further reading so that you don't have to wade through the daunting array of scholarship on the Song.

Since there is so much that's debated about the Song, this guide will also take care to highlight where details are unknown or where there is not enough evidence to make a strong case for a particular view. You'll be encouraged to investigate for yourself, be aware of different options, and admit comfortably (to yourself, and to others as you teach) when it's not possible to know something for sure. Although the Song of Solomon can be hard to understand, we can read with the confidence that God has breathed out this part of Scripture, like all Scripture, for our good, and that he is always revealing truth to us through the work of the Holy Spirit as we delve into his word.

This book is a simple, sensible and balanced guide to the Song of Solomon for anybody who's interested in understanding

it better, whether you have an academic background or not. It will transform your perspective on the Song and build your confidence in handling it and other tricky texts in the Old Testament.

Enjoy!

The central message of the Song of Solomon

The Song's message is summed up in two sets of verses: 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4; and 8:6-7. Taken together, these verses say something like:

Do not stir up or awaken love in the wrong circumstances,
and be utterly committed to the right kind of love,
because God's love is protective and his jealousy is fierce.

The way the message of the Song works is related to its literary structure. The Song is a love poem framed by a dialogue between the main character (the woman) and a secondary character (the group known as the "daughters of Jerusalem"). That is, the woman is telling the poem to the daughters of Jerusalem, who are listening and sometimes responding. In the 'universe' of this book of the Bible, the daughters of Jerusalem are the direct audience of the Song.

Three times the woman pauses the action of the poem to tell the daughters of Jerusalem something with special urgency.

She says:

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the does of the field,²
that you not stir up or awaken love
until it pleases. (2:7, 3:5, 8:4)

It isn't immediately clear why the woman adjures (urges) the daughters so urgently, or why they should be cautious about stirring up love. The answers emerge as the Song builds up the positive picture of the central relationship and alludes to the cautionary tale of King Solomon.

Song 8:6–7, which is universally recognized as the poetic climax and key teaching of the Song, adds the final pieces to the instruction:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the LORD.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
he would be utterly despised.

The little word 'for' in the third line is key here, as it indicates that the description of love that follows it is the reason for the instruction that comes before. The listener is being urged to set

2 This line is omitted from 8:4.

their lover as a seal upon their heart and arm *because* of what love is like.

So now we have the whole instruction:

**Do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases, AND
Set [your lover] as a seal upon your heart, a seal upon
your arm, BECAUSE
Love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave.**

As we explore the Song, we'll discover some key points that help make sense of all this:

- While the Song is definitely about human love first, 8:6–7 uses language that is closely associated with God's love elsewhere in the Old Testament, revealing that it's ultimately God's love that provides the reason for the warning about human love.
- The “daughters of Jerusalem” are likely a stand-in for the people of Israel as a whole.
- While the woman and her beloved embody the ideal example of love, King Solomon is also mentioned as a negative example—the type of love the Song's audience should avoid.

In its original context, the Song of Solomon cautions the people of Israel to be cautious and committed in matters of love in light of the legacy of Solomon. In a contemporary context, the basic warning is the same. But now, we not only know the cautionary tale of Israel's covenant-violating kings; we also have the whole picture of God's love and judgement as displayed in King Jesus' death and resurrection.