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OF COUGARS & CANDY HEARTS

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Mormons are notoriously good at spreading folklore and faith promoting rumors. One such rumor that you’ve probably heard goes something like this: “Well, I heard that President Hinckley said that you should staple the Song of Solomon shut and never read it!” Or maybe it was Bruce R. McConkie that said it. Or maybe it was Spencer W. Kimball. Whichever General Authority is supposed to have said it, the point is the same: the Song of Solomon is ancient pornography. Just skip it whenever you read the Old Testament and pretend like it doesn’t exist.

But what, I wonder, would members of the Church who speak negatively of the Song of Solomon think if they ever found out that it was actually once quoted in a temple dedicatory prayer. “Remember all thy church, O Lord,” Joseph Smith prayed at the 1836 dedication of the Kirtland temple, “that the kingdom, which thou hast set up without hands, may become a great mountain and fill the whole earth; That thy church may come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with

banners” (D&C 109:72–73). That last bit, few probably realize, is actually straight out of the Song of Solomon. “Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners. . . . Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?” (Song of Solomon 6:4, 10).

Mormon hesitation with the Song of Solomon stems, no doubt, largely from an editorial remark made by Joseph Smith (or one of his scribes) in his “new translation” of the Bible. “The Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings,” the note, written in the hand of Frederick G. Williams, straightforwardly pronounced. (This same note accompanies the modern Mormon edition of the Bible.) While it’s impossible to determine if this negative appraisal of the Song of Solomon came directly from Joseph Smith himself or from one of his associates working with him on his Bible revision, since then the prevailing Mormon feeling for the Song of Solomon has been ambivalence at best. In one extreme instance, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, certainly not known for his timidity

or dissemblance, once blasted the Song of Solomon in no uncertain terms as “biblical trash.” From this early antipathy sprang what is probably safe to say the current attitude of many (if not most) Church members towards the Song of Solomon.

But what do we really know about this (in the minds of some) scandalous book of the Bible? Actually, not a whole lot. There is no indication of the author of the text, and the attribution to Solomon was likely, in the words of biblical scholar James M. Reese, “an editorial superscription that links this poetry to Israel’s famous poet and sage rather than a declaration of authorship.” Furthermore, the date of the composition of the text is undecided. While most scholars would place the date of the text to circa 450–400 BC, others have suggested alternative sixth or third century BC dates. To make matters worse, there’s also little consensus as to what the original purpose of the book was (personal love poetry? a collection of wedding jams? erotic drama? the script to an ancient fertility rite?), to say nothing of how to interpret the book in a theological context (or whether to just ditch it altogether).



Fair as the Moon, Clear as the Sun: MORMONS AND THE SONG OF SOLOMON

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But these ambiguities notwithstanding, one thing is certain about the Song of Solomon: it fits nicely with similar examples of love poetry found in the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel. Parallels from the love poetry of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt can be drawn with the Song of Solomon, and it seems obvious that, whatever else it is, the text clearly has a strong romantic/erotic component to it. Consider, for example, the steamy double entendre found in chapter five. The poet, who has become aroused at the arrival of her lover, hastily undresses and opens the locked door of her chambers. Then, with imagery worthy of an R. Kelly ballade, the lady sings, “My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt” (NRSV Song of Solomon 5:4–6). Needless to say, this is probably not the kind of stuff you’d want seminary students memorizing for scripture mastery.

But not all of the Song of Solomon is so risqué. Other (considerably tamer) passages such as Song of Solomon 6:3 have been used as engravings on wedding bands or recited at wedding ceremonies. In the finale of the popular sitcom *The Office*, for instance, Kevin Malone reads a beloved passage from Song of Solomon at Dwight and Angela’s wedding. “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. . . . The time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. . . . Let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is comely” (RSV Song of Solomon 2:10–12, 14).

Of course, for Christians and Jews who accept the Bible as inspired scripture, the Song of Solomon has served as more than merely beautiful love poetry. Not long after the composition of the text, ancient Jews began commenting on the Song of Solomon as an extended allegory of God’s love for Israel. What’s more, Christian commentators for centuries have interpreted the Song of Solomon

as an allegory of Christ’s love for his church, or even for individual believers. Some may find these allegorical interpretations of the Song of Solomon far-fetched, but it has become a very common approach to the text for many believers.

So how have BYU students taken to the Song of Solomon? Amanda Brown, president of the Students of the Ancient Near East association, primarily appreciates the Song of Solomon for its value as an ancient text. Alluding to the parallels to the Song of Solomon found in other ancient Near Eastern love poetry, Brown remarked, “I like the Song of Solomon because it best shows the amount of influence Ancient Near Eastern texts had on the writers of the Hebrew Bible.” When asked what his favorite aspect of the Song of Solomon was, Quinten Barney, a senior who teaches seminary, admitted that he wasn’t too familiar with the text. “Honestly, I haven’t studied it that much,” Barney said. “I just remember it being the book everyone would joke about in Sunday school when I was a kid, daring each other to go read it.”

Other students, like Andy Mickelson, don’t really care much for the Song of Solomon at all. “I don’t particularly like Song of Solomon,” Mickelson said. “I’m just not a big fan of love poetry, be it from the Iron Age or the Internet age.” But while Mickelson isn’t keen on the Song of Solomon, Jasmin Gimenez expressed her appreciation for the Song of Solomon as an inspired allegory. “I won’t say it’s my favorite book, but it certainly has more merit than most LDS students will give it,” Gimenez said. “While the imagery in the Song of Solomon is perhaps graphic, it presents a powerful allegory to God’s love for his covenant people.” Likewise, Hannah Lambert thinks that the Song of Solomon just takes some getting used to. “While it may seem a little out of place at first, I think the Song of Solomon has strong principles that can be learned from, just like any other book in the Bible.”

When asked what they thought of the prevailing attitude of their peers towards the Song of Solomon, these

students all expressed disapproval towards anyone who wouldn’t at least give it a fair shake. “Seeing that most Latter-day Saints hardly read their Bibles at all anyway, the zeal that some members show for wanting to excise the Song of Solomon from the canon amuses me,” Mickelson quipped. “If direct relevance to doctrinal topics were a prerequisite for being in the canon, our Standard Works could probably be condensed to a nice little pamphlet.” To really drive his point home, Mickelson added, “My problem with people bashing the Song of Solomon is if they dismiss it without first having actually read it. It’s okay if it’s not your favorite, but criticizing literature you haven’t read is something Mormons are painfully familiar with and should avoid.”

Barney goes along with Mickelson by expressing his displeasure with any belittlement of the Song of Solomon. “I don’t think it would be appropriate to speak negatively of it, just as I don’t feel it would be appropriate to speak negatively of any religious sect’s canon.” Gimenez herself agrees with Barney. “I don’t think the Song of Solomon should ever be slandered. All are entitled to their own interpretation of scripture and how it draws them closer to God, but I myself think there is value in the Song of Solomon.” Brown, who views the Song of Solomon as interesting ancient love poetry, stresses that students should not neglect it because “it gives context to the Hebrew Bible within the literary corpus of the ancient Near East.” Finally, Lambert insisted that no scripture should be neglected. “Scripture teaches us doctrine and principles so we can learn from them and develop ourselves as far as we are able. That’s what it’s all about.”

In the end, whether you think the Song of Solomon is inspired scripture or the ancient equivalent of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Barney, with his tongue in cheek, raises a good point as to why the Song of Solomon should stay in the canon. “Well, if it were thrown out it would screw up the whole ‘Books of the Old Testament’ seminary song.” ●