

# The Song of Songs

## And The Early Church Fathers

### I. Purpose of this talk

- A. I do not have the time to give an adequate overview of the Song of Songs
- B. Inspire interest in interacting with Jesus as a Bridegroom
- C. Present this little book as relevant and practical (an in my estimation...necessary)

### II. What is the Song of Songs?

#### A. a marriage-song

- 1. It is difficult to hone in a single interpretation for the story
- 2. In general, it is the story of the Church or the Soul journeying to enjoy wholehearted union with Bridegroom Savior, JESUS CHRIST.

#### B. Written as a drama

#### C. Written from the Bride's perspective

- 1. Very personal if we pray as the bride
- 2. Gives language to our journey as espoused pilgrims

#### D. Not explicitly cited anywhere in the new testament

- 1. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."  
(Rev 3:20 RSVCE)

"I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark! my beloved is knocking.

"Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night."

(Songs 5:2 RSVCE)

- 2. "Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment."

(Jn 12:3 RSVCE)

"While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance."

(Songs 1:12 RSVCE)



3. "He who believes in me, as \* the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

(Jn 7:38)

*where in scripture does it say this?*

"13 Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, 14 nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices-- 15 a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon."

(Songs 4:13-15 RSVCE)



- E. We do know however, that Jesus spoke about Himself using the Song of Songs,
- "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." (Lk 24:27)
- F. Once source (Protestant) said that it has more commentaries than any other book except Romans and another says more saints have written commentaries on the SOS than any other book (Christopher West). Neither of these statements was substantiated...but I believe it.
- G. Considered by many to be a book for those ready for Spiritual Solid Food (as opposed to milk)
1. Origen spoke of a process (other early commentators said similar things):
  2. **Moral (Proverbs)** "putting rules for living into the form of short and pithy maxims"(Origin)
  3. **Natural (Ecclesiastes)** "distinguishing the useless and vain from the profitable and essential" (Origin)
  4. **Inspective Science (Song of Songs)**"In this he (Solomon) instills into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the paths of charity and love."(Origin)

## II. Why is it important?

### A. Forces the issue of encounter

1. It is about intimacy.
2. It is about desire.
3. It is about conformity.
4. It is about the cultivation of a soul that loves God with abandonment.

### B. When understanding of the Song of Songs is sought after through prayer, it give the heart a greater capacity to love:

Revelation of God's love comes with seeking of it....so much is hidden in SOS

"For the heart of a man is enlarged, when he is able , by taking statements from the Divine Books, to expand by fuller teaching the things that are said briefly and in enigmatic ways." (Origen)

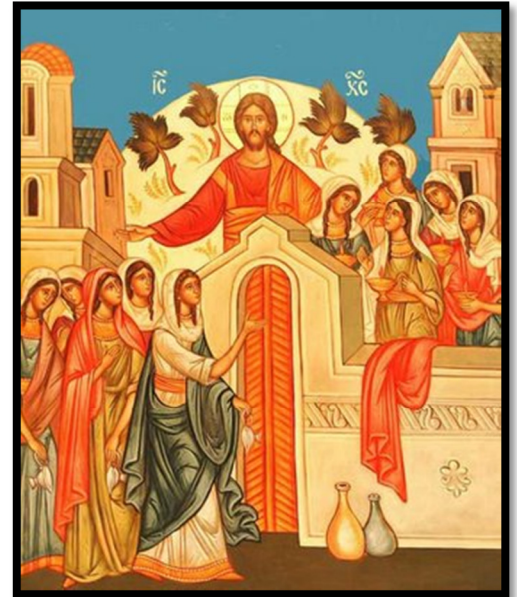
1. "And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, 'To you it has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.'" (Mk 4: 10-11 RSVCE)
2. "It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out." (Prov 25:2)
3. "I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old," (Ps 78:2)

### C. Personal note: Why the SOS is important to me

1. It gave intimate language to the Gospels
2. I revealed God as a Passionate Bridegroom...not an obligated sacrifice
3. It entertains my heart...it has a real ability to captivate a wandering mind
4. It's epic...I love it for the same reason I love Braveheart (It's amazing that this is our story!!!)
5. It gave a powerful context for suffering (mine and that endured by the wrath of jealous Lover)
6. It encourages a holy tenacity by showing me a struggling Soul that kept saying yes to Jesus

### D. Break down of vs. 1 (the importance of the SOS revealed in the SOS)

1. The Song of all Songs
2. Likened to the Holy of Holies, the King of kings, Name above names, Lord of lords by ancient commentators



a. side note: notice the bridal language when speaking of the Holy of Holies:  
 “ Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. 2\* For a tent \* was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; \* it is called the Holy Place. 3\* Behind the second curtain stood a tent \* called the **Holy of Holies**”  
 (Heb 9:1-3a RSV-CE)



b. "And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen; in skilled work shall it be made, with cherubim; 32 and you shall hang it upon four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, upon four bases of silver. 33 And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in thither within the veil; and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy."

(Ex 26:31-33 RSV-CE)

c. Through the cross the bride of Christ was made, but it also through the Cross that the Bride returns to the side of the Bridegroom, into the Holy of Holies:

"19 Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh..."

(Heb 10:19-20 RSV-CE)

d. Bridegroom Paradigm in the Eucharist

"Love of God and neighbor are perpetually revitalized in the Most Holy Eucharist where the hearts of the faithful are enflamed by the infinite love of Jesus, the Bridegroom of the Church. "It is the Eucharist above all that expresses the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church His Bride""

(*Blessed JPII - Mulieris Dignitatem*, 26)

3. Origin spends a good bit of time disagreeing that this was referring to Solomon's other songs since they were not mentioned and are not written anywhere else in scripture nor has the Church or Jewish tradition adopted any of Solomon's other songs (1 Kings 4:33 says he wrote 1005)



a. “32 He also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five.” (1 Kings 4:32)

b. “But how shall we accept an interpretation like this when, in the first place, the Church of God has not adopted any further songs of Solomon to be read; and, in the second place, the Hebrews, by whom God’s utterances were transmitted to us, have in their canon no other than these three books of Solomon that we also have in ours.” (Origin)



4. Origin said that this song is “preferred before **all** songs”. (he specifically refers to songs in scripture... Moses’ song, the Psalms, songs in Isaiah etc.)

5. St. Gregory of Nyssa stated,  
“Let us then come within the Holy of Holies, that is, the Song of Songs. For from this superlative form of this expression we learn that there is a superabundant concentration of holiness within the Holy Holies; and in the same way the exalted Word promises to teach us mysteries of mysteries by the agency of the Song of Songs. For though there are many songs within the divinely inspired teaching, through which – from the great David, and Isaiah, and Moses, and many others – we are instructed in noble thoughts about God, from this title we learn that the mystery contained in the Song of Songs transcends these songs of the saints by as much as they stand apart from the songs of profane wisdom.”

6. What are the implications of this?

### III. The Content of the Song of Songs

#### A. Traditional interpretation of

1. Allegorical – I actually didn’t find any early literal interpretations (that doesn’t mean they don’t exist)
2. Traditionally interpreted as between the Church and Christ, Origin also focused on the relationship between the Soul and the Word

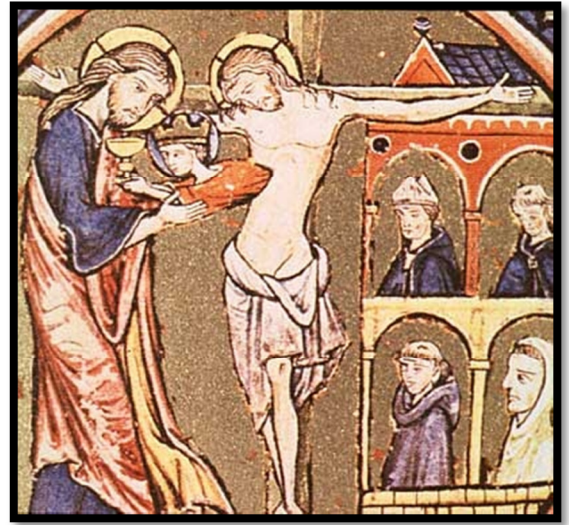
#### B. Characters

1. Solomon (Bridegroom)
2. Solomon’s Father (implicit SOS 1:2)
3. The Shulamite (Bride)

4. The Daughters of Jerusalem of Maidens (Venerable Bede and Origin equate them)
5. The Mother of the Shulamite
6. The Watchmen

#### C. Important Imagery

1. The Kiss
2. Oils and Fragrance
3. Chambers
4. Mountains
5. Young Stag and Gazelle
6. Dove's Eyes
7. Vineyards and Gardens
8. Foxes
9. Night
10. Also included could be the Crown of the King, springs, spices, and the list goes on. I chose 9, but this is not, by any means a comprehensive list. It is just a few examples.



#### IV. Allegory

##### A. Importance of

1. When understanding of the Song of Songs is sought after through prayer, it give the heart a greater capacity to love:  
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- a. "And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, 'To you it has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.'" (Mk 4: 10-11 RSVCE)
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2. Allegory gives imagery to truth. It connects emotion with reason.

##### B. typification and representations of characters (We will focus on the 3 main characters)

1. **Solomon (the Bridegroom)** – a type of Christ

- a. He is called peaceable (reigned during a time of peace in Israel)
- b. He is the Son of David (a title used for Christ)
- c. Reined in Israel (as did Christ)
- d. Revealed as a Bridegroom (as is Christ repeatedly in the Gospels and the rest of the NT)
- e. Solomon was sought after for his wisdom by Jew and Gentile alike (like our Lord)
- f. (my own thoughts) Solomon also built the temple that kept the presence of the Lord in a tabernacle.....likened to Christ building His Church to steward His physical presence



2. **Shulamite (the Bride)** – represents the Church or the Human Soul yoked to the Word of God (or Christ)

- a. some suggest that this is Abishag the Shunnamite, “So they sought for a beautiful maiden through all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunnamite, and brought her to the king. The maiden was very beautiful; and she became the king’s nurse and ministered to him; but the king knew her not.” (1 Kings 1: 3-4)
- b. I have not found an ancient commentator who has implied this...and I don’t think it’s relevant...just interesting

3. **The Daughters of Jerusalem of Maidens** – represent souls that love Jesus, but have not come into full spiritual maturity

- a. Ambrose of Milan – “renewed souls”
- b. The Venerable Bede – “the souls reborn in Christ who have cast off the uncleanness of the old self” referring to (Eph 4:22)
- c. Origin – “young souls growing up in years and beauty”

**C. Are We the Shulamite or the Maidens?**

1. The answer is Yes...both
2. None of us have arrived and in a sense all of us have or can attain perfect love for our Savior since it is a gift given to even the weakest of souls

**D. Imagery allegory Key**

*\*note: it is very difficult (impossible?) to produce a concise imagery key*



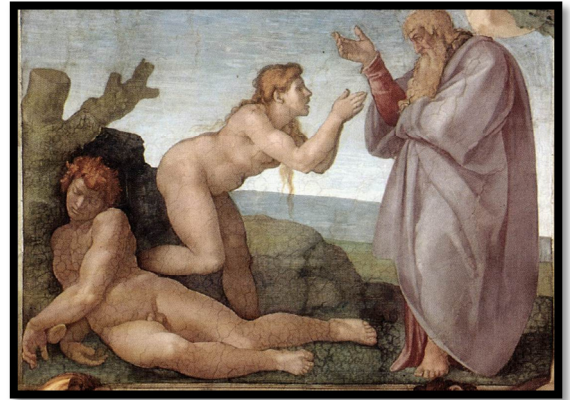
*precisely because the Song of Solomon is full of imagery. The allegorical nature of this book has produced varying interpretations of characters, events, and story elements. This is one of the reasons, in my humble opinion, the Song of Songs is so powerful. The Holy Spirit speaks uniquely to our hearts about the narrative. Interaction with this book is as deeply intimate as the story itself.*



1. **The Kiss of the Bridegroom**: The Divine Word delivered to the soul by the Divine Bridegroom Himself
2. **Oils and Fragrance**: Depending on the context and the commentator: the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the anointing of the Holy Spirit, different attributes of God based on the specific fragrance, or the knowledge of God in general (see 2 Cor 2:14), Origin said “the fragrance of Thine – ointments’ – that is spiritual and mystical meaning – ‘is above all spices’ of moral and natural philosophy.”
  - a. Ambrose referred to the fragrance of the resurrection
  - b. St. Gregory of Nyssa referring to the Name of the Godhead being poured forth like perfumed ointment, “she (the bride) makes it manifest that the divine power is inaccessible and incapable of being contained by human thought-processes; for to me it seems that by this statement there is conveyed something like the following: that the Nature which has no limits cannot be comprehended accurately by means of the meanings of words.....rather does our theological vocabulary refer to a slight remnant of the vapor of the divine fragrance.”
  - c. “Fragrance signifies fame. When the fragrance of his fame arrives it excites men to run, it leads to the experience of inward grace, to the reward of vision.” (St. Bernard of Clairvaux) He speaks of running into different types of fragrances (e.g. Mary Magdalene ran into the fragrance of God’s justice)
3. **The Kings Chamber**: a synthesis of the revelation of God’s love and infinite treasures
  - a. a comprehension of Christ’s mind (Origin)
  - b. “the perfection of love for knowledge of the hidden things of God” (St. Gregory the Great)

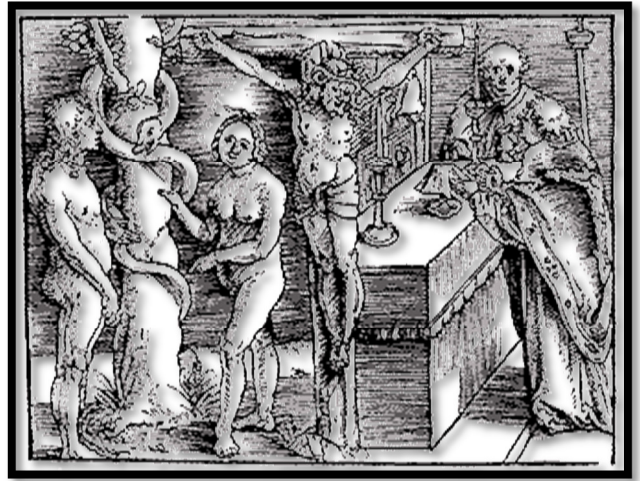


- c. “the inner joys of the heavenly homeland into which holy Church has now been brought through faith and will in the future be brought more fully in reality.” (the Venerable Bede)
- d. “ This is where the fragrance comes from, this is the goal of our running.”  
(St. Bernard of Clairvaux)



- 4. **Mountains**: the knowledge of God, spiritual maturity; depending on the context and the commentator mountains can also speak of adversity
  - a. “the name “mountains” also corresponds to the minds of those who have learned to open the eyes of the heart for the contemplation of heavenly things” (Venerable Bede)
  - b. Speaking about the Bridegroom leaping upon the Mountains of Bethel “you have conferred benefits on people here, you have subjugated the hostile Powers, and you have given the ‘power to tread upon snakes and scorpions’” (Nilus of Ancyra 10<sup>th</sup> Century)
- 5. **Young Stag and Gazelle**: the Bridegroom: agile, fast (the Word of the Lord running swiftly), keen vision, capable
  - a. “‘My beloved is like a gazelle, or a fawn.’ This refers to the preceding verse. She has just described him as leaping and bounding, so now she compares him to a gazelle or a fawn. Aptly, indeed, because this breed of animals leaps nimbly and runs swiftly. Besides, the word concerns the bridegroom, and the bridegroom is the Word. And the prophet says of God that ‘his word runs swiftly’, which fits into this context where the bridegroom, who is the Word of God, is described as leaping and bounding, and therefore resembling the gazelle and the fawn. This is the reason for the comparison. But lest any element, even the tiniest, be lacking to the comparison, remember that the gazelle excels not only in fleetness of foot but also in sharpness of sight. This refers to that part of the narrative in which the bridegroom is described as seeming not only to leap but to bound over, because only by sharp and penetrating sight would it be at all possible, especially in running, to discern where he ought to leap and over what to bound. Otherwise, a comparison with the fawn alone would have sufficed to designate the swiftness of the runner, for he is known to move with the swiftest speed. But now, while this

bridegroom, in the ardor of his love, seems to rush eagerly into the embraces of the beloved, he nevertheless knows how to direct his steps, or rather his leapings, with prudent consideration, being wary as to where to place his foot. A comparison with the gazelle as well as with the fawn is



therefore called for, since the latter expresses the desire to save and the former the decision to choose. Christ is righteous and merciful, of course, a savior and a judge. Because he loves he wills that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and because he judges he knows who are his, he knows whom he has chosen from the beginning.” (Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 55 SOS Commentary)

**b.** Recommended read: Hinds feet on High places really capitalizes on this allegory

**6. Dove's Eyes:** spiritual understanding, simple devotion

**a.** “Her eyes, moreover, are compared to doves, surely because she understands the Divine Scriptures now, not after the letter, but after the spirit, and perceives in them spiritual mysteries; for the dove is the emblem of the Holy Spirit.” (Origin)

**b.** “Your eyes are those of doves, the eyes of your heart are simple and pure and utterly free from all duplicity of deceiving or pretending; behold they are greatly blessed because such eyes as these will see God” (Venerable Bede)

**c. *Interesting tid bit – doves mate for life and have no peripheral vision – singular vision – singular devotion***

**7. Vineyards and Gardens – *depending on the context*:** the Church, place of fruitful encounter with Christ, our soul

**a.** “The garden is the Church, in which are the manifold virtues of the saints – the different sorts of herbs that provide cures for the different wounds of sinners.” (Honorius of Autun – 12<sup>th</sup> century)

**b.** “Now the Church is a garden because she brings forth diverse buds of spiritual works, which are subsequently enumerated under the names of various spices” (Venerable Bede)

c. “For she was delighted that Christ was sitting in the gardens...” (St. Ambrose of Milan)

i. We were made in a Garden, walked with God (fulfilled our purpose) in a Garden, fell from Grace in a garden, our Lord prayed for us to be with Him forever and resigned His will to the Father in a garden, our first encounter with our Resurrected Bridegroom is in a garden, we will spend the rest of our lives in



a garden if we do not forfeit our souls to Satan

ii. “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” (Genesis 3:8 RSV-CE) (inception of humanity)

iii. “1\* When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples across the Kidron valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. “ (Jn 18:1) (redemption of humanity)

iv. “15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” (Jn 20:15 RSV-CE)

v. “1 Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2\* through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life \* with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” (Rev 22:1-2 RSV-CE)

d. “‘Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines.’ This text has a moral import, and taking it in a moral sense we have already shown that these spiritual vineyards signify spiritual men within whom all things are cultivated, all things, are germinating, bearing fruit and bringing forth the spirit of salvation.” (Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 63 SOS Commentary)



8. **Foxes** – compromise, heretics, immaturity, the Devil and his demons



- a. “He says to someone, “ Do not listen to heretics; do not agree with heretics.” The answer come, “Why not?” Did not this or that other Christian do just as much evil, commit as many adulteries, engage in as much plundering? And what bad things happened to him? It is this way the foxes look from the front that those they have seduced see; and what come behind that is fire...” (Augustine referring to “Donatus, Arius, Mani, and others)
  - b. “Surely the foxes that ruin the vines are the heretics and schismatics who try as much as possible to tear up the blossoming vines of Christ (that is, the immature minds of the faithful) with the tooth of false doctrine.” (Venerable Bede)
  - c. “princes and authorities and world-rulers of darkness, and spirits of wickedness – are little foxes, wretched and treacherous, consigned under your power.” (Gregory of Nyssa)
  - d. “We can understand the foxes to represent teachers of heretical ideas...” (Origen)
9. **Night**: contemplation of things unseen, ignorance, the Dark Night of the Soul (a removal of God’s tangible presence)
- a. “Now the word night points to contemplation of things unseen...” (St. Gregory of Nyssa)
  - b. “...that is, the darkness of profound ignorance, for there was no angel or prophet or any reliable teacher at all to show me the light of divine knowledge.” (Venerable Bede)
  - c. *He is not a Church Father, but I thought it would be worthwhile to quote St. John of the Cross here*  
“You inquire: Since Him Whom my soul loves is within me, why don't I find Him or experience Him? The reason is that He remains concealed and you do not also conceal yourself in order to encounter and experience Him. Anyone who is to find a hidden treasure must enter the hiding place secretly and once he has discovered it, he will also be hidden just as the treasure is hidden. Since, then, your beloved Bridegroom is the treasure hidden in a field, for which the wise merchant sold all his possessions [Matt. 13:44], and that field is your

soul, in order to find Him you should forget all your possessions and all creatures and hide in the interior, secret chamber of your spirit. And there, closing the door behind you (your will to all things), you should pray to your Father in secret [Matt. 6:6]. Remaining hidden with Him, you will experience Him in hiding, and love and enjoy Him in hiding, and you will delight with Him in hiding, that is, in a way transcending all language and feeling.”

Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodrigues, trs., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1979), pp. 410 & 419



- V. Practical Application of the Song of Songs**
  - A. SOS reminds us that Jesus is Person**
    - 1. He is not merely a theological concept
    - 2. Not a fairy tale
  - B. SOS reminds us that Jesus has desires**
    - 1. That we would be with Him to behold His glory (Jn 17:24)
    - 2. That he would have us as a bride, equally yoked (1 Cor. 6, Eph. 5)
    - 3. That we would desire Him (Ps. 27:4)
  - C. SOS reminds us of the objective of the Gospel**
    - 1. To see God rightly, as a Person worthy of Love
    - 2. To direct hearts into the love of God forever (our own and everyone we encounter)
  - D. SOS reminds us of the joy of pursuit**
    - 1. We have been and are being pursued by our Creator
    - 2. He is the object of our abandonment
  - E. SOS reminds us that romance is not a human invention**
    - 1. Our inception began with a wedding
    - 2. Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> miracle was at a wedding
    - 3. Jesus died to purchase a Bride from death
    - 4. This all ends in a wedding (Revelation 19)
  - F. Reading the Song of Solomon**
    - 1. With a commentary
      - a.** There is no way around it, this is an erotic book and a good commentary can keep the mind from wandering into unhealthy places

- b. A good commentary written by a fiery soul also hems us in with an attitude of prayer
  - c. A good commentary should also filter the SOS through the 4 Gospels
- 2. Slowly and Lovingly
  - a. Remember the objective is intimacy with Christ
  - b. Acquiring knowledge is only good if it ends with acquiring the Person of Jesus Christ (My beloved is mine and I am his...Songs 2:16)
- 3. With a Pen and Paper
  - a. The prayer of the Bride to the Bridegroom becomes powerful when it is put into your own words
  - b. Practice using the language of the NT mixed with the SOS when writing. This is also very powerful.



#### Good Commentaries Include:

- The Venerable Bede: On the Song of Songs and Selected Writings
- The Church's Bible: The Song of Songs
- Ancient Christian Writings: Origin - The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies
- Sermons on the Song of Songs - St. Bernard of Clairvaux:  
<http://pathsoflove.com/bernard/songofsongs/contents.html>
- Gregory the Great's Commentary on the Song of Songs:  
<http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/great.html>
- Hippolytus Commentary on the Song of Songs (oldest known Christian SOS commentary):  
[http://independent.academia.edu/YancySmith/Books/450960/Dissertation\\_Revision\\_for\\_Book](http://independent.academia.edu/YancySmith/Books/450960/Dissertation_Revision_for_Book)

***I purposefully included only ancient commentaries, but there are some awesome commentaries besides these.***