

The Song of Solomon

Composed by King Solomon of ancient Israel, likely about 1020 B.C.E., during the early part of his 40-year reign, this song is a love story of a shepherd boy and a country girl of the village of Shunem. The drama unfolds near Shunem, or Shulem, where Solomon is camped with his court entourage.

It is challenging for a Bible reader to identify all the speakers in the Song of Solomon, but it is possible by considering what they say of themselves or by what is said to them. In the Hebrew text, grammatical forms often imply gender (masculine or feminine) as well as number (singular or plural), thereby facilitating identification of the characters.

Solomon's abrupt change of speakers and settings can make the dialogue and plot difficult to follow. For this reason the Biblical text is here supplemented with visual textual enhancements to identify the specific speakers.

Plain and indented = Comments

Underlined = Shulammite country girl

Bold Underlined = Shepherd boy

Italics = Court Ladies/Women of Jerusalem

Bold = King Solomon

Bold Italics = Shulammite's Brothers

Note: The scripture quotes are from the 2013 NWT.

The Song of Solomon

¹ The song of songs, which is Sol'o·mon's:

While on her way to the garden of nut trees an Oriental girl from Shulem unintentionally comes upon the encampment of King Solomon. Either seen there by the king himself or noticed by someone else and then recommended to him, she was brought to Solomon's camp, into the royal tent of Solomon.

King Solomon made known his admiration for her, but this humble country girl felt no attraction for him. She is anxious only to see the shepherd boy she loves.

With longing for her loved one, the maiden speaks out as if he were present.

² "May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, For your expressions of affection are better than wine.

³ The fragrance of your oils is pleasant. Your name is like a fragrant oil poured out. That is why the young women love you. ⁴ Take me with you; let us run. The king has brought me into his interior rooms! Let us be joyful and rejoice in you. Let us praise your expressions of affection more than wine. Rightly they love you.

The ladies of the court who wait on the king, the “daughters of Jerusalem,” look curiously at the Shulammitte because of her swarthy complexion. She explains that she is sunburned from caring for her brothers’ vineyards.

⁵ I am dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, Like the tents of Ke'dar, like the tent cloths of Sol'o-mon. ⁶ Do not stare at me because I am swarthy, Because the sun has gazed upon me. The sons of my mother were angry with me; They appointed me the keeper of the vineyards, But my own vineyard I did not keep.

She then speaks to her shepherd boy as though she were free and asks where she might find him.

⁷ Tell me, you whom I love so much, Where you pasture your flock, Where you have them lie down at midday. Why should I be like a woman wrapped in a veil Among the flocks of your companions?”

As the maiden expresses her longing for her beloved shepherd, the court ladies recommended that she leave the camp, pasture her flock by the tents of the shepherds, and look for her shepherd boy.

⁸ “If you do not know, O most beautiful of women, Go follow the tracks of the flock And pasture your young goats next to the tents of the shepherds.”

But Solomon comes forward and is unwilling to let her go. He begins praising her beauty, promising to fashion circlets of gold and studs of silver for her.

⁹ “I liken you, my beloved, to a mare among the chariots of Phar'aoh. ¹⁰ Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, Your neck with strings of beads. ¹¹ We will make for you gold ornaments Studded with silver.”

The girl, though, is not impressed. She resists his advances and lets him know that the object of her love is someone else.

¹² “While the king sits at his round table, My perfume gives off its fragrance. ¹³ My dear one is to me like a fragrant bag of myrrh Spending the night between my breasts. ¹⁴ My dear one is to me like a cluster of henna Among the vineyards of En-ged'i.”

The Shulammitte’s shepherd boy makes his way into Solomon’s camp and encourages her. He voices his affection for her, assuring her of his love.

¹⁵ “Look! You are beautiful, my beloved. Look! You are beautiful. Your eyes are those of doves.”

The Shulammitte yearns for the nearness of her dear one and the simple pleasure of dwelling at one with him out in the fields and woods. She, too, assures him of her love.

¹⁶ “Look! You are beautiful, my dear one, and delightful. Our bed is among the foliage. ¹⁷ The beams of our house are cedars, Our rafters are juniper trees.

The Shulammitte is a modest girl. She says:

² “I am but a saffron of the coastal plain, A lily of the valleys.”

Her shepherd boy thinks her to be without compare, saying:

2 “Like a lily among thorns Is my beloved among the daughters.”

Separated again from her shepherd boy, the Shulammitte shows how she esteems him above all others by comparing her shepherd boy to a fruit tree among the trees of the forest, and solemnly charges the daughters of Jerusalem that they are under oath by what was beautiful and graceful not to try to arouse in her unwanted love for another.

3 “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, So is my dear one among the sons. I passionately desire to sit in his shade, And his fruit is sweet to my taste. 4 He brought me into the banquet house, And his banner over me was love. 5 Refresh me with raisin cakes; Sustain me with apples, For I am lovesick. 6 His left hand is under my head, And his right hand embraces me. 7 I put you under oath, O daughters of Jerusalem, By the gazelles and the does of the field: Do not try to awaken or arouse love in me until it feels inclined.

The Shulammitte remembers the time when her shepherd answered her call and invited her to the hills in springtime. She sees him climbing upon the mountains, leaping with joy.

8 The sound of my dear one! Look! Here he comes, Climbing the mountains, leaping over the hills. 9 My dear one is like a gazelle, like a young stag. There he is, standing behind our wall, Gazing through the windows, Looking through the lattices. 10 My dear one speaks, he says to me:

She remembers her shepherd boy’s invitation to join him in viewing the beauties of early spring.

‘Rise up, my beloved, My beautiful one, come away with me. 11 Look! The winter has passed. The rains are over and gone. 12 Blossoms have appeared in the land, The time of pruning has arrived, And the song of the turtledove is heard in our land. 13 The fig tree ripens its early figs; The vines are in blossom and give off their fragrance. Rise up, my beloved, and come. My beautiful one, come away with me. 14 O my dove, in the retreats of the crag, In the recesses of the cliff, Let me see you and hear your voice, For your voice is pleasant and your appearance is lovely.’”

The shepherd boy whom she loves has invited her to go for a walk with him on a lovely spring day. She wanted to accept her shepherd boy’s invitation, but her brothers, jealous for the chastity of their sister and not sure of her steadiness, became angry with her. (1:6) To protect her from temptation, and taking advantage of the seasonal need, they set her to work guarding the vineyards from the foxes to prevent her from going with him.

(This is the work that brings her close to Solomon’s camp. Her beauty is noticed, and she is brought into the camp. And exposed to the sun’s rays while performing this work, the Shulammitte loses the fairness of her skin.)

15 “Catch the foxes for us, The little foxes that ruin the vineyards, For our vineyards are in bloom.”

She pleads for him to hurry to her side.

16 “My dear one is mine and I am his. He is shepherding among the lilies. 17 Until the day grows breezy and the shadows flee, Return quickly, O my dear one, Like the gazelle or the young stag upon the mountains of separation.

The Shulammitte describes her detainment in Solomon's camp. Always, even during the night hours, she continues to long for her shepherd shepherd boy. Again she reminds the daughters of Jerusalem that they are under oath not to attempt to awaken love in her until it felt inclined.

3 "Upon my bed during the nights, I sought the one I love. I sought him, but I did not find him. ² I will arise and roam the city; In the streets and in the public squares, Let me seek the one I love. I sought him, but I did not find him. ³ The watchmen making their rounds in the city found me. 'Have you seen the one I love?' ⁴ Scarcely had I passed by them When I found the one I love. I held on to him, I would not let him go Until I brought him into my mother's house, Into the interior room of her who conceived me. ⁵ I put you under oath, O daughters of Jerusalem, By the gazelles and the does of the field: Do not try to awaken or arouse love in me until it feels inclined."

Returning to Jerusalem in regal splendor, Solomon took the Shulammitte along. Seeing them approaching the city, several "daughters of Zion" commented about the appearance of the procession.

⁶ "What is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, With all the fragrant powders of a merchant?"

⁷ "Look! It is the couch belonging to Sol'o-mon. Sixty mighty men surround it, Of the mighty men of Israel, ⁸ All of them armed with a sword, All trained in warfare, Each with his sword at his side To guard against the terrors of the night."

⁹ "It is the royal litter of King Sol'o-mon That he made for himself from the trees of Leb'anon. ¹⁰ Its pillars he made of silver, Its supports of gold. Its seat is of purple wool; Its interior was lovingly decorated By the daughters of Jerusalem."

¹¹ "Go out, O daughters of Zion, Gaze at King Sol'o-mon Wearing the wedding crown his mother made for him On the day of his marriage, On the day of his heart's rejoicing."

In this critical hour, the shepherd shepherd boy does not fail the Shulammitte. He follows his girl companion, who is veiled, and gets in touch with her. He strengthens his beloved with warm expressions of endearment, thereby assuring her of his love.

4 "Look! You are beautiful, my beloved. Look! You are beautiful. Your eyes are those of doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats Streaming down the mountains of Gil'e-ad. ² Your teeth are like a flock of newly shorn sheep That have come up from being washed, All of them bearing twins, And not one has lost her young. ³ Your lips are like a scarlet thread, And your speech is delightful. Like a segment of pomegranate Are your cheeks behind your veil. ⁴ Your neck is like the tower of David, Built with courses of stone Upon which are hung a thousand shields, All the circular shields of the mighty men. ⁵ Your two breasts are like two fawns, The twins of a gazelle, That feed among the lilies."

She tells him she wants to get free and leave the city.

⁶ "Until the day grows breezy and the shadows flee, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh And to the hill of frankincense."

He then bursts into an ecstasy of love. A mere glimpse of her makes his heart beat faster. Her expressions of endearment are better than wine, her fragrance is like that of Lebanon, and her skin is like a paradise of pomegranates.

7 “You are altogether beautiful, my beloved, There is no blemish in you. 8 Come with me from Leb’a-non, my bride, Come with me from Leb’a-non. Descend from the peak of A-ma’nah, From the peak of Se’nir, the peak of Her’mon, From the lairs of lions, from the mountains of leopards. 9 You have captured my heart, my sister, my bride, You have captured my heart with one glance of your eyes, With one pendant of your necklace. 10 How beautiful your expressions of affection are, my sister, my bride! Your expressions of affection are far better than wine, And the fragrance of your perfume than any spice! 11 Your lips, my bride, drip with comb honey. Honey and milk are under your tongue, And the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Leb’a-non. 12 My sister, my bride, is like a locked garden, A locked garden, a spring sealed shut. 13 Your shoots are a paradise of pomegranates With the choicest fruits, with henna along with spikenard plants, 14 Spikenard and saffron, cane and cinnamon, With all sorts of trees of frankincense, myrrh, and aloes, Along with all the finest perfumes. 15 You are a garden spring, a well of fresh water, And flowing streams from Leb’a-non. 16 Awake, O north wind; Come in, O south wind. Breathe upon my garden. Let its fragrance spread.”

The maiden invites her dear one to come into “his garden”.

“Let my dear one come into his garden And eat its choicest fruits.”

He accepts the invitation, responding:

5 “I have entered my garden, O my sister, my bride. I have picked my myrrh and my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk.”

Friendly women of Jerusalem encourage them saying:

“Eat, dear friends! Drink and become intoxicated with expressions of affection!”

The Shulammitte, after having a bad dream, relates it to the court ladies. In the dream she hears a knock. Her dear one is outside, pleading for her to let him in. But she is in bed. When she finally gets up to open the door, he has disappeared into the night. She goes out after him, but he cannot be found, and the watchmen mistreat her.

2 “I am asleep, but my heart is awake. There is the sound of my dear one knocking!”

“Open to me, O my sister, my beloved, My dove, my flawless one! For my head is wet with dew, The locks of my hair with the moisture of the night.”

3 “I have taken off my robe. Must I put it back on? I have washed my feet. Must I soil them again?”

4 My dear one withdrew his hand from the hole of the door, And my feelings for him were stirred.

5 I got up to open to my dear one; My hands dripped with myrrh, And my fingers with liquid myrrh, Onto the handles of the lock. 6 I opened to my dear one, But my dear one had turned away, he had gone. I felt despair when he departed. I sought him, but I did not find him. I called him, but he did not answer me. 7 The watchmen making their rounds in the city found me. They struck me, they wounded me. The watchmen of the walls took my shawl away from me.

She tells the court ladies that if they see her shepherd boy, that they are under obligation to tell him that she is lovesick.

8 I put you under oath, O daughters of Jerusalem: If you find my dear one, Tell him that I am lovesick.”

They ask her what makes him so special.

⁹ *“How is your dear one better than any other dear one, You most beautiful of women? How is your dear one better than any other dear one, That you put us under such an oath?”*

At that she launches into an exquisite description of him.

¹⁰ “My dear one is dazzling and ruddy; He stands out among ten thousand. ¹¹ His head is gold, the finest gold. The locks of his hair are like waving palm fronds, As black as the raven. ¹² His eyes are like doves by streams of water, Bathing themselves in milk, Sitting by a brimming pool. ¹³ His cheeks are like a bed of spices, Mounds of scented herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping with liquid myrrh. ¹⁴ His hands are cylinders of gold, set with chrys’o·lite. His abdomen is polished ivory covered with sapphires. ¹⁵ His legs are pillars of marble set on pedestals of the finest gold. His appearance is like Leb’a·non, as unrivaled as the cedars. ¹⁶ His mouth is sweetness itself, And everything about him is desirable. This is my dear one, this is my beloved, O daughters of Jerusalem.”

The court women ask her of his whereabouts.

6 *“Where has your dear one gone, O most beautiful of women? Which way did your dear one turn? Let us seek him with you.”*

She tells them that he is shepherding among the gardens.

² “My dear one has gone down to his garden, To the beds of spice plants, To shepherd among the gardens And to pick lilies. ³ I am my dear one’s, And my dear one is mine. He is shepherding among the lilies.”

Once again King Solomon confronts the Shulammitte with expressions of praise. He tells her how beautiful she is, more lovely than “sixty queens and eighty concubines,”

4 **“You are as beautiful as Tir’zah, my beloved, As lovely as Jerusalem, As breathtaking as armies around their banners. ⁵ Turn your eyes away from me, For they overwhelm me. Your hair is like a flock of goats Streaming down the slopes of Gil’e·ad. ⁶ Your teeth are like a flock of sheep That have come up from being washed, All of them bearing twins, And not one has lost her young. ⁷ Like a segment of pomegranate Are your cheeks behind your veil. ⁸ There may be 60 queens And 80 concubines And young women without number. ⁹ But only one is my dove, my flawless one. The only one of her mother. She is the favorite of the one who bore her. The daughters see her, and they pronounce her happy; Queens and concubines, and they praise her. ¹⁰ ‘Who is she who shines like the dawn, As beautiful as the full moon, As pure as the sunlight, As breathtaking as armies around their banners?’”**

¹¹ “I went down to the garden of nut trees To see the new growth in the valley, To see whether the vine had sprouted, Whether the pomegranate trees had blossomed. ¹² Before I knew it, My desire had put me At the chariots of my noble people.”

Solomon appeals to her to come back.

13 **“Return, return, O Shu’lam·mite! Return, return, That we may look upon you!”**

This prompts her to ask:

“Why do you gaze upon the Shu’lam·mite?”

Solomon uses this as an opening to express further admiration for her. He tells her of her beauty, from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head.

“She is like the dance of two companies!”

7 “How beautiful your feet are in your sandals, O noble daughter! The curves of your thighs are like ornaments, The work of an artisan’s hands. ² Your navel is a round bowl. May it never lack mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, Encircled by lilies. ³ Your two breasts are like two fawns, The twins of a gazelle. ⁴ Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are like the pools in Hesh’bon, By the gate of Bath-rab’bim. Your nose is like the tower of Leb’a-non, Which looks toward Damascus. ⁵ Your head crowns you like Car’mel, And the locks of your hair are like purple wool. The king is captivated by the flowing tresses. ⁶ How beautiful you are, and how pleasant you are, O beloved girl, above all exquisite delights! ⁷ Your stature is like a palm tree, And your breasts are like date clusters. ⁸ I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree To take hold of its stalks of fruit.’ May your breasts be like clusters of grapes, Your breath as fragrant as apples, ⁹ And your mouth like the best wine.”

The maiden resists all his arts. Courageously she declares her devotion to her shepherd, crying out for him.

“May it go down smoothly for my dear one, Softly flowing over the lips of those asleep. ¹⁰ I am my dear one’s, And his desire is for me. ¹¹ Come, O my dear one, Let us go out to the fields; Let us lodge among the henna plants. ¹² Let us rise early and go to the vineyards To see if the vine has sprouted, If the blossoms have opened, If the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will express my affection for you. ¹³ The mandrakes give off their fragrance; At our doors are all sorts of choice fruits. The new as well as the old, O my dear one, I have kept in store for you.

8 “If only you were like my brother, Who nursed at my mother’s breasts! Then if I found you outside, I would kiss you, And no one would despise me. ² I would lead you; I would bring you into the house of my mother, She who taught me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, The fresh juice of pomegranates. ³ His left hand would be under my head, And his right hand would embrace me.

For the third time, she reminds the daughters of Jerusalem that they are under oath not to try to awaken love in her against her will.

⁴ I put you under oath, O daughters of Jerusalem: Do not try to awaken or arouse love in me until it feels inclined.”

Solomon, losing out in his quest for the Shulammitte’s love, lets her go home. Her brothers see her approaching, but she is not alone. Seeing her approaching, and not alone, her brothers ask:

⁵ “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, Leaning upon her dear one?”

She recalls it to her shepherd boy’s mind that they met under an apple tree, the place of his birth.

“Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labor with you. There she who gave birth to you was in labor.

Her love is as strong as death and its blazings as “the flame of Jah.” Insistence on exclusive devotion “as unyielding as Sheol” has triumphed and has led to the glorious heights of union with her shepherd boy.

⁶ Place me as a seal upon your heart, As a seal upon your arm, For love is as strong as death is, And exclusive devotion is as unyielding as the Grave. Its flames are a blazing fire, the flame of Jah.
⁷ Surging waters cannot extinguish love, Nor can rivers wash it away. If a man would offer all the wealth of his house for love, It would be utterly despised.”

Some of her brothers’ earlier comments about their concern over her when “a little sister” are mentioned. In earlier years one brother had said concerning her:

⁸ “We have a little sister, And she has no breasts. What will we do for our sister On the day when she is spoken for?”

Another brother replied:

⁹ “If she is a wall, We will build upon her a battlement of silver, But if she is a door, We will board her up with a cedar plank.”

She declares she has proved herself a mature and stable woman. Since the Shulammite had successfully resisted all enticements, being satisfied with her own vineyard and remaining loyal in her affection for her shepherd boy, she could properly say:

¹⁰ “I am a wall, And my breasts are like towers. So in his eyes I have become As one who finds peace.

King Solomon can have his wealth! She is content with her one vineyard, for she loves one who is exclusively dear to her.

¹¹ Sol’o-mon had a vineyard in Ba’al-ha’mo. He entrusted the vineyard to caretakers. Each one would bring in a thousand pieces of silver for its fruit.

¹² I have my own vineyard at my disposal. The thousand pieces of silver belong to you, O Sol’o-mon, And two hundred to those who care for its fruit.”

The song concludes with an expression of her shepherd boy’s desire to hear her voice...

¹³ “O you who are dwelling in the gardens, The companions listen for your voice. Let me hear it.”

...and with the expression of her desire that he come leaping, crossing the mountains that separated them

¹⁴ “Hurry, my dear one, And be swift like a gazelle Or a young stag Upon the mountains of spices.”

Does The Song of Solomon condone immorality?

The Song of Solomon describes the constancy of the love of a young Shulammitite girl for a local shepherd boy. It contains some warm descriptions of their feelings for each other... The young couple committed no form of immorality. The Shulammitite girl is called “the pure one.” At the end of the song, her virtue is viewed as proved. The young shepherd himself says about her: “A garden barred in is my sister, my bride, a garden barred in, a spring sealed up.” (Song of Solomon 6:9; 4:12; 8:9, 10) No, the conduct of this couple was blameless.

Is it true that “there is no indication that the (two) are married”? Probably they were not, but notice that the shepherd calls the Shulammitite his “bride.” What does he mean? In this context, the Hebrew word *cal-lah'* means either a bride just before marriage, or a new wife. (*The New Brown, Driver, Briggs Gesenius*) Since the young shepherd calls her his *cal-lah'* several times, the couple are evidently planning on marriage. Hence, their passionate feelings are not out of place.

Is it true that the woman is “naked through most of the story”? Well, the text does not describe her clothes, but does that mean she has none? On one occasion, the shepherd says to her: “Your eyes are those of doves, behind your veil.” (Song of Solomon 4:1) If she is veiled, that sounds as if she is modest, does it not?

What about the statement, “she protests at one point that if (he) doesn’t take her to her chamber she will have to put on her gown again”? The only part of the book that mentions her gown, or robe, is chapter five. Here, the Shulammitite is describing a dream. She says: “I am asleep, but my heart is awake.” Then she relates how, in her dream, her shepherd knocks at the door of her chamber. She refuses to open to him. Why? “I have put off my robe. How can I put it back on? I have washed my feet. How can I soil them?” Surely this episode shows that the Shulammitite has a sense of decency!—Song of Solomon 5:2-6.

The apostle Paul said: “All things are clean to clean persons. But to persons defiled and faithless nothing is clean, but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.” (Titus 1:15) If looked at by people with minds tainted by this world’s immoral thinking, even something as clean and wholesome as the love of the Shulammitite for her shepherd can be made to look sordid.