If it is not inspired scripture, why does a passage from the Song of Solomon appear three times in the Doctrine and Covenants?

When I ask my Old Testament students at BYU what they know about the biblical book Song of Solomon, they respond almost in unison, “It’s not inspired!” “How do you know that?” I ask them.

“Joseph Smith said so,” they reply. My students accept the Prophet’s assessment, as indicated in the Joseph Smith Translation. And so do I.¹

But when I ask my classes what else they know about the Song of Solomon, I get little or no response. “Since it is not inspired scripture, why is it in the Bible?” Silence. “Since it is not inspired scripture, what is it?” More silence. “Since it is not inspired scripture, why does a passage from the Song of Solomon appear three times in the Doctrine and Covenants?” Further and somewhat confused silence. These are questions I think all Latter-day Saint students of the scriptures ought to be able to answer. My Old Testament students are required to learn the answers.²

Although the Song of Solomon (hereafter, the Song) is generally ignored in the standard Latter-day Saint Church curriculum,³ it is part of the traditional biblical canon that Latter-day Saints share with Jews and other Christians. It has been the object of much study by many Bible believers.

Reading the Song of Solomon as a Latter-day Saint

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during the past two millennia, and an exceptionally large amount of commentary has been produced on this small book during this time. Furthermore, there are a few distinct Latter-day Saint connections to the Song. I therefore think there is value for all students of the Bible in knowing a few basic points about this book, rather than being willfully ignorant of it. Following a brief introduction to the Song, I will answer the four questions posed in the opening paragraphs.

Introduction: About the Song

Containing no third-person narration, the Song employs only spoken words, primarily those of its two main characters: a male and a female lover. The opening line of the book, “The song of songs, which is Solomon’s” (1:1), provides the basis for its two most common names in English, “Song of Songs” and “Song of Solomon.” It is also known as “Canticles,” anglicized from its Latin name Canticum Canticorum (Song of Songs) in the Vulgate. Most modern-day Jews and Christians now refer to this book as the “Song of Songs,” based on the first phrase of the book, while those who still use the King James Version (KJV) usually refer to it as the Song of Solomon, in harmony with the older tradition represented therein.

The expression "song of songs" represents a Hebrew idiom used to express the superlative. Thus the "song of songs" means “the best song, the most wonderful song.” As grammarians routinely indicate, other biblical examples of this type of superlative phrasing include holy of holies (usually translated “most holy” in the KJV, e.g., Exodus 26:33), “God of gods, and Lord of lords” (Deuteronomy 10:17), the “heaven of heavens” (usually translated “the highest heavens,” 1 Kings 8:27), and “king of kings” (Ezekiel 26:7). Thus the opening phrase of the book declares the nature and status of the book. It presents itself as a great song, celebrating certain aspects of human love.

According to 1 Kings 4:32 (Heb. 5:12), Solomon composed 1,005 songs. However, actual Solomonic authorship of the Song is now generally viewed as having no real basis in history. There are, of course, allusions to Solomon and some of his possessions in the Song (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12), as well as the fact that the woman refers early on to her lover as a “king” (1:4; although see 1:7, in which she depicts him as a shepherd). However, the LDS Bible Dictionary rightly indicates that the traditional ascription of this book to Solomon “is doubtful.” So, while linking the Song to Solomon in antiquity presumably helped provide the text with a regal aura, may have increased its

The fact that Latter-day Saints institutionally ignore the Song of Songs is, I presume, primarily due to what is probably the best known fact regarding the Song in the Latter-day Saint tradition: that the Joseph Smith Translation, Joseph Smith’s inspired revision of the Bible, not only provides no revisions with respect to the Song, but contains the comment “The Songs of Solomon are not Inspired writings [sic].” This statement dates to July 1832.

Among other things, this assertion implies that the other books of the Bible, in whole or in part, are inspired writings, thus giving the Song a lesser status compared with the rest of the biblical canon. Given that Joseph Smith taught that there was even some potential religious value in the Apocrypha and that the Holy Spirit could guide one to whatever truths were found therein (see D&C 91:1–6), my interpretation of the JST claim that the Song is “not inspired writings” is that it was not produced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and that it contains no explicit religious truths. Seen as such, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints views the Song of Songs as void of religious authority and value.

A secondary question raised by Joseph Smith’s claim is, what does the plural form “Songs . . . are” convey in the statement “The Songs of Solomon
are not Inspired writings”? Although this could be viewed as support for the position mentioned above, that the canonical form of the Song resulted from the compilation of several originally independent songs, it is perhaps just a slip of the tongue or the pen. 

The fact is that neither Joseph Smith nor his peers provided any surviving commentary on this JST claim.

This latter point makes it difficult to confidently suggest why the Song is considered “not inspired.” Although the Song’s sexual nature and its dearth of explicit religious content are potential reasons for its status, no official reason has been stated by the Church beyond the JST statement itself (see also the discussion of what the Song was originally, below). Thus the JST statement has, in effect, come to represent the official Latter-day Saint position.

**Question 2. Since the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture, why is it in the Bible?**

Commentators usually attribute to Rabbi Aqiba the influence that swayed early Jewish rabbinic leaders to include the Song in the Hebrew canon of scripture. Aqiba was active in the early decades of the second century AD (lived ca. 50–135). Reading in its full context the oft-quoted statement from the Mishnah (Yadayim 3:5) that is attributed to Aqiba is instructive because it illuminates the debate that occurred among at least some Jewish leaders concerning the status of the Song.

A. All sacred scriptures impart uncleanness to hands [i.e., are holy and inspired].
B. The Song of Songs and Qohelet [Ecclesiastes] impart uncleanness to hands.
C. R. Judah says, “The Song of Songs imparts uncleanness to hands, but as to Qohelet there is dispute.”
D. R. Yose says, “Qohelet does not impart uncleanness to hands, but as to Song of Songs there is dispute.”
E. Said R. Simeon b. Azzai, “I have a tradition from the testimony of the seventy-two elders.
F. “on the day on which they seated R. Eleazar b. Azariah in the session, G. “that the Song of Songs and Qohelet do impart uncleanness to hands.”
H. Said R. Aqiba, “Heaven forbid! No Israelite man ever disputed concerning Song of Songs that it imparts uncleanness to hands.

Aqiba’s claim in this passage is an eloquent overstatement, presumably made to help fortify in rabbinic circles his perspective of the Song. Unfortunately, neither this nor any other ancient text indicates the basis for the determination by some early Jewish leaders that the Song of Songs was holy scripture. About a century later, early Christian Father Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254) expressed a sentiment similar to Aqiba’s: “Blessed . . . is he who understands songs and sings them . . ., but much more blest is he who sings the Songs of Songs!”

The standard explanation for the Song’s canonization as a biblical text is the allegorization of its content—the Song’s portrayal of the delightful love of a man and a woman seen as representing Yahweh’s/Jehovah’s love for Israel, or for Christians, Jesus’ love for the Church, or for individual Christian souls.

However, allegorization of the Song is a process about which nothing is known. It is not clear whether the Song was viewed allegorically prior to canonization or whether it was later allegorized to justify its canonization. If the latter option is true, that the allegorization of the Song came after its canonization, there is no ancient indication of how or why the Song gained the popularity necessary to be canonized in the first place. I assume Aqiba’s statement indicates allegorization had taken place by his day.) The remains of four copies of the Song of Songs were found among the Qumran manuscripts (Dead Sea Scrolls), suggesting the text had a certain amount of popularity among some Jews in the Herodian period (30 BC–AD 50), but again, no explanation of how the Song was actually viewed has survived from before the Jewish Mishnah (ca. AD 200; quoted above).

Whether the allegorical (sometimes called the spiritual) approach to the Song of Songs was intended from the start or later developed, the Song was accepted by the majority of premodern Jewish and Christian exegetes and Bible believers as allegorically representing the reciprocal love and desire between the Lord and his people.
Question 3. Since the Song of Solomon is not originally inspired scripture, what is it?

Joseph Smith is not the only one to claim that the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture. Already in the eighteenth century some scholars asserted the song was not about God and his people. For example, William Whiston (1667–1752), known for his translation of Josephus’ works, wrote in 1723 that “the Book of Canticles is not a Sacred Book of the Old Testament; nor was it originally esteem’d as such, either by the Jewish or the Christian Church.” A century later, Harvard University professor George R. Noyes, who considered the allegorical view of the Song as “mere fancy,” declared in 1846, “I do not regard . . . the Song of Solomon, to have an express moral or religious design.” Noyes went on to cite scholars in Europe, and specifically in England, who in the preceding century had rejected the allegorical or “spiritual” view of the Song, including Eichorn, Jahn, and Ewald, as well as “the distinguished Methodist, Adam Clarke” and “the Calvinist dissenter, John Pye Smith.” Adam Clarke skeptically asked in his commentary, originally published in eight volumes between 1810 and 1826 (the 1830 edition is used herein), “In a word, does Solomon here represent Jesus Christ? . . . And where . . . is the proof?” After then reviewing the various allegorical proposals known to him, Clarke defiantly claimed, “Nothing but a direct revelation from God can show us which of these opinions is the correct one, or whether any of them are correct. The antiquity of an opinion, if that be not founded on a revelation from God, is no evidence of its truth.”

There is no reason to suggest a cause-and-effect influence from Clarke or anyone else on Joseph Smith and his thinking that the Song was “not inspired.” There is no explicit support for such a supposition. Rather, Joseph Smith appears to be one of several independent thinkers—and an inspired thinker, as Latter-day Saints would add—arriving at the same conclusion concerning the status of the Song. But in the early 1800s, religious leaders (as opposed to scholars) in the United States who shared his view were definitely in the minority. As Noyes observed in 1846, “in this country [the USA], the old notion, that the book sets forth the mutual love of Christ and the church, is probably the most prevalent.” Furthermore, Joseph Smith is the only religious leader I know of in his time period (or any other) who made his assertion about the Song in the context of his role as a prophet.

Currently, the vast majority of Bible scholars agree that the Song did not originate as inspired scripture. As indicated above, the opening line of this book concisely indicates its genre: “The song of songs, which is Solomon’s” (1:1). And since this poetic book is about love, the Song is best understood and is now commonly accepted as an example of Israelite love poetry. This conclusion is supported by at least three points: (1) the Song is devoid of the name of God, (2) it demonstrates no obvious religious intent, and (3) it shares several features with Egyptian love poetry. These factors have led some scholars, attempting to distance the Song from the traditional view of divine allegory, to refer to the Song as “secular” poetry.

Some similarities between the Song and Egyptian love poetry can easily be illustrated with these excerpts from the Egyptian text known as Papyrus Chester Beatty I:

**The Beginning of the Sayings of the Great Entertainer**

**Boy** (Number 31)

One alone is my sister, having no peer:
more gracious than all other women.
Behold her, like Sothis rising
at the beginning of a good year:
shining, precious, white of skin,
lovely of eyes when gazing.
Sweet her lips when speaking:
she has no excess of words.
Long of neck, white of breast,
her hair true lapis lazuli.
Her arms surpass gold,
her fingers are like lotuses.
Full (?) her derrière, narrow (?) her waist,
her thighs carry on her beauties.
Lovely of walk when she strides on the ground,
she has captured my heart in her embrace.
She makes the heads of all men
turn about when seeing her . . .

**Girl** (Number 32)

**Second Stanza**

My brother roils my heart with his voice,
making me take ill [i.e., love sick].
Though he is among the neighbors of my mother’s house,
I cannot go to him . . .
O brother, I am decreed for you
by the Golden One . . .
(Girl) (Number 36)
Sixth Stanza
I passed close by his house,
and found his door ajar.
My brother was standing beside his mother,
and with him all his kin.

The first shared trait illustrated here is that the male and female lovers refer to each other in the Egyptian text as “my sister” and “my brother,” respectively. See similarly in Song 4:9–10, “You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; . . . How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!” (ESV; see also 4:12; 5:1, 2, for “my sister”; and Song 8:1 for “brother”). Clearly, the language in both Egyptian and Israelite texts does not refer to incestuous activity; rather, these are expressions of endearment, and similar usage appears sporadically in other ancient Near Eastern texts.38

The second shared trait, evident between this passage of Egyptian love poetry and the Song, is the male’s poetic description of the female, beginning with features of her head and moving down her body.39 See similarly, the male’s description of the female’s body in Song 4:1–7:

Behold, you are beautiful, my love,
behold, you are beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
leaping down the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes . . .
Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.

This situation is a classic illustration of how knowing something about the cultural world that lies behind the biblical text helps us better understand and interpret the contents of the Bible itself.40 Thus the answer to the question “since the Song of Solomon is not originally inspired scripture, what is it?” is, it was originally Israelite love poetry. This interpretation correlates with the JST claim that the Song is “not inspired.”

Question 4. Since the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture, why is a passage from the Song of Solomon quoted several times in the Doctrine and Covenants?41

Joseph Smith’s claim that the Song of Solomon/Songs is not inspired appears to be at least superficially at odds with his use of Song 6:10 in the 1836 dedicationary prayer for the temple in Kirtland, Ohio (D&C 109). Song 6:10 reads in the KJV, “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?” The Hebrew word shahar,42 translated “morning” in the KJV, more specifically designates the “dawn, the first light of the new day.”43 It is generally accepted that the “comparison [of the female in Song 6:10] to the dawn, moon, and sun suggests the radiant beauty of the woman.”44

The restoration passage in question is Doctrine and Covenants 109:73, presented here in the context of verses 72–74:

Remember all thy church, O Lord, with all their families, and all their immediate connections, with all their sick and afflicted ones, with all the poor and meek of the earth; 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;
And be adorned as a bride for that day when thou shalt unveil the heavens, and cause the mountains to flow down at thy presence, and the valleys to be exalted.

Although this paper is not the place for a detailed study of this or of the other two passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that contain the language of Song 6:10 (mentioned below), it can at least be observed that D&C 109:73 is part of a passage that contains bold imagery from several passages from the Bible: verse 72, Daniel 2:44–45; verse 73, Song of Songs 6:10 (however, the phrase “come forth out of the wilderness of darkness” is only found in D&C 109:73); verse 74a, Revelation 21:2; verse 74b, Isaiah 64:1; and verse 74c, Isaiah 40:4.

Joseph Smith shows no apparent concern about quoting from a biblical book that four years earlier he labeled as “not inspired writings.” The Song of Songs is, after all, in the traditional biblical canon, and as such the Prophet utilized it as a source for imagery depicting the latter-day Church (then beginning to “dawn” upon the world), along with imagery from other canonical sources, in this temple-focused prayer. Seen this way, the lyrical line
Two other passages in the Doctrine and Covenants contain language from Song 6:10. D&C 5:14 uses the language of this verse in reference to the Church, but reverses the adjectives describing the sun and moon: “And to none else will I grant this power, to receive this same testimony among this generation, in this the beginning of the rising up and the coming forth of my church out of the wilderness—clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.” This text is dated to March 1832, and thus precedes Joseph Smith’s work on the JST. As with D&C 109:73, D&C 5:14 employs the description of the female’s radiant and overpowering beauty in Song 6:10 to signify the nature of the restoration as it dawned upon the world. Accepting D&C 5 as a revelation from the resurrected Christ through Joseph Smith, as Latter-day Saints do, implies that the Lord himself approved of utilizing this phrase from the Song for its symbolic value.

The final text in the Doctrine and Covenants that contains the language of Song 6:10 is section 105:31: “But first let my army become very great, and let it be sanctified before me, that it may become fair as the sun, and clear as the moon, and terrible as an army with banners.” This text is dated to March 1829, and thus precedes Joseph Smith’s work on the JST. As with D&C 109:73, D&C 5:14 employs the description of the female’s radiant and overpowering beauty in Song 6:10 to signify the nature of the restoration as it dawned upon the world. Accepting D&C 5 as a revelation from the resurrected Christ through Joseph Smith, as Latter-day Saints do, implies that the Lord himself approved of utilizing this phrase from the Song for its symbolic value.

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6:10 is more theologically focused in the Doctrine and Covenants, and its use therein is attributed by Latter-day Saints to the inspiration of the Lord.

Concluding Thoughts on the Latter-day Saint Position

Obviously, there is much more that can be (and has been) said about the Song of Songs/Solomon. And there are certainly some understandable reasons why the Church has chosen to avoid the Song of Songs in its curriculum and other venues. Besides the claim that the Song is not inspired writing, the next most likely reason for this stance is the imagery and language employed to express the beauty and appeal of human bodies and the emotions and desires these can arouse. The exotic and sometimes erotic nature of the text, with its frequent use of nature imagery to convey sexually oriented allusions and double entendres, is presumably what led Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in a 1984 address to students at Brigham Young University entitled “The Bible, a Sealed Book,” to claim “the Song of Solomon is biblical trash—it is not inspired writing.”53 In this statement, Elder McConkie not only cited the JST claim about the Song, but went further by employing the pejorative term “trash” to emphasize what he considered the Song’s inappropriate and uninspiring sexually oriented contents.53

Finding support from the era of Joseph Smith and the Restoration, Elder McConkie’s view is much closer, for example, to that of non-Mormon Professor George Noyes, who, in arguing against the allegorical view of the Song in 1846, compared it to “erotic poetry,” claiming that “there is language in the Canticles which I could not apply to the Supreme Being . . . without feeling guilty of blasphemy.”54 However, this perspective is far removed from the one expressed, for example, by John Wesley (1765), who claimed the Song was “pious . . . breathing forth the hottest flames of love between Christ and his people, most sweet and comfortable, and useful to all that read it with serious and Christian eyes.”55 Similarly, Watson, who accepted the Song as an allegory, claimed in 1852 that “it is justly entitled Song of Songs, or most excellent song, . . . tending, if properly understood, to purify the mind, and to elevate the affections from earthly to heavenly things.”56

I understand why the Song is not in the seminary and youth Sunday School curricula. However, the Song is in the Bible. Commentators have wrestled with it for centuries. Preachers have employed it in sermons for just as long. Although Latter-day Saints have never institutionally accepted the allegorical approach to the Song of Songs, such an approach has been productive for many Jews and traditional Christians over many centuries. Still today, for example, many Jews read the Song of Songs at Passover as a celebration of God’s love for his chosen people, whatever each individual Jewish person might think of the Song. And, as reviewed above, one passage of the Song is employed in the Doctrine and Covenants to symbolically convey the beautiful nature of the Lord’s restored Church.

Beyond its theological value for some readers, the Song is also a cultural artifact. Artists and authors have applied their talents to expressing the content and mystery of the Song and its evocative imagery.56 As former BYU religion professor Ellis Rasmussen wrote, the Song is “worthwhile to enjoy [for] its beauty as romantic literature, complementary to the other great types of the literature of Israel . . . [the Latter-day Saint designation] ‘not inspired writings’ . . . does not negate or depreciate its value as romantic . . . poetry from a very literate people.”59 Furthermore, a number of popular sayings derive from the Song, including “your love is better than wine” (1:2);60 “the flowers appear on the earth . . . and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land” (2:12);61 “the little foxes that spoil the vines” (2:15);62 and “set me as a seal upon your heart . . . for love is strong as death” (8:6).

For all these reasons, I believe it is important for students of the scriptures to at least know these few basic things about the Song of Songs, not just that it is “not inspired.” It is possible to understand and appreciate the Song, like most other literature, for what it is without wholeheartedly embracing it as divinely inspired or without completely denigrating it. Reading the Song of Songs can be viewed as comparable to going to an art museum. Depending on individual inclinations, some people will marvel at the skill of a painter or sculptor to express the beauty and subtleties of the human form, including depictions of nudes, while some others may avoid representations of the nude human form because they deem them inappropriate. This latter perspective does not diminish the skill of the artist or the power of the work to convey beauty or emotion, but is a personal choice about taste.63 That some people have long struggled with the sexual nature of the canonical Song is evident in statements such as this one by Origen of Alexandria: “I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it.”64

As David Rolph Seely has observed, “the Song of Solomon can be profitably read from many perspectives.”65 One illustration of this is evident in the
statement by Rasmussen, quoted above, “[the Latter-day Saint designation] ‘not inspired writings’ . . . does not negate or depreciate its value as romantic . . . poetry.” Another perspective is now evident in the non-allegorizing view found in the writings of some conservative commentators. For example, Trepter Longman III, a conservative Christian Bible scholar, writing in the series preface to a commentary on the Song states that “the Song of Songs is a passionate, sensuous love poem that reminds us that God is interested in more than just our brains and our spirits; he wants us to enjoy our bodies. It reminds us that we are not merely a soul encased in a body but [are] whole persons made in God’s image.”66 And the introductory comments to “The Song of Songs” in The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible claims that perspectives such as Longman’s are “to be welcomed by our various faith communities, since they affirm that the God who created us is concerned with our sexuality and romantic dimensions, that these are significant aspects of marriage, and that religious people can enjoy them without shame.”67 Such comments, of course, are made within canonical constraints or parameters to which Latter-day Saints do not feel bound (Articles of Faith 1:8).

Thus, although the Song is institutionally marginalized by the Church, it has proven to be a rich, long-term source of imagery for artists, theologians, and Bible believers, as well as for the imagery incorporated into D&C 5:14; 105:31; and 109:73 (all utilizing Song 6:10). In following the Lord’s injunction to learn what we can about the world and people around us, past as well as present (see D&C 88:78–79, 118; 90:15; 93:53), it is worth knowing a little bit about the Song and its unique status as ancient Israelite love poetry that according to Latter-day Saints has the unique status of being biblical but not inspired. 16

Notes

I began outlining this paper several years ago. The impetus to finish it came from my work on another paper: “Fair as the Moon and Clear as the Sun: The Song of Songs in the Latter-day Saint Religious Tradition,” presented at the November 2012 national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. I thank my former student assistant Courtney Dotson for her assistance in gathering material for this paper, and my colleague Kent P. Jackson and my wife, Jane Allis-Pike, for suggestions to improve it.

1. I accept Joseph Smith’s statement as theologically valid, and this position is expressed throughout the rest of this article. The Joseph Smith Translation statement is discussed below.

2. Given the size and nature of the Song of Solomon, I have my university students do a little background reading on it, and then we spend about ten to fifteen minutes discussing it in class.

3. This claim is easy to verify by examining, for example, current and past Sunday School (youth and adults), seminary, and institute manuals, as well as the Ensign magazine. All these are available at https://www.lds.org/manual?lang=eng and also https://www.lds.org/ensign?lang=eng.


The Song also occasionally includes comments to and by a group of women who are several times referred to as “daughters of Jerusalem” (e.g., 1:3; 7:6; 5:12; 6:13), and one short passage presumably representing the comments of the female’s brothers (8:8–9).

6. See, for example, Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 270, §4.5d.

7. The NET Bible Notes on Song 1:1 accessibly summarize the possibilities of how the Hebrew preposition lā can indicate possession or ownership, but also dedication to and topic (about). I agree with their assessment that the ancient intent here was most likely authorship, but that this is a traditional ascription, not proof of actual authorship. See further, for example, Michael D. Coogan, The Old Testament, A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2011), 487; Collins, A Companion to Your Study of the Old Testament, 1:1; and Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 335. Contrast the views of older commentators who assumed Solomonic authorship, such as Adam Clarke, The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments: The Text carefully printed from the most correct copies of the present Authorized Translation, including the Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts with A Commentary and Critical Notes, A New Edition with the Author’s Final Corrections, vol. 3 (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1830), 841; and Franz Delitzsch, Commentary on the Song of Solomon and
Ecclesiastes, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968; originally pub. 1875), 111.

8. See, for example, Longman, Song, 16, who accepts both of these depictions (1:4, 1:7) as “figurative,” providing a basis on which this literary creation was built, but not as “historical” connections. Coogan, as well as others, uses Song 8:11–12 as support against Solomonic authorship. Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 487.


10. See for example, Exum, *Song of Songs*, 66–67, and Hess, *Song of Songs*, 17–19, 37 n 1. In support of a later dating, commentators often cite the relative pronoun *še-*, words whose etymologies are usually traced to Persian and Greek, and the names of spices. I agree with those commentators who ultimately view such elements as non-defining of the Song’s compositional date, since they could merely represent a later reworking of an earlier composition.


12. Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsburg, *Solomon's Vineyard: Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 184. Their perspective on the Song’s creation in northern Israel is based on their seeing "these Aramaic and M[ishnaic] H[ebrew] parallels not as signs of lateness but as indications of northernness . . . [with comments about Phoenician and Ugaritic]. . . . The totality of the evidence, as realized long ago by Driver, is that the Song of Songs was composed in the northern part of ancient Israel” (54; see 53–55). See, for example, Carr’s challenge to this view in *Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, 439 n 22.

13. As Roland Murphy rightly observed decades ago, "very little can be said with confidence about the authorship and date or social provenance of the Song." Murphy, *Commentary*, 5. See also Longman, Song, 18–19.

14. Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 487: "probably also an anthology of love poems, perhaps from several periods." See also Exum, *Song of Songs*, 53–57; Longman, Song, 19; and Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 1. Earlier authors, such as William Wright, writing in 1845, observed that "the learned are divided on the point whether the Canticles consist of one continued and connected poem, or of a number of detached songs or amores." Wright, *Canticles*, in A *Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*, ed. John Kitto, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1845), 383. See similarly, Thomas Edward Brown, "Canticles," in the first edition of *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. William Smith (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1861), 383 (see also 269). Additionally, there is disagreement over the number of literary units in the Song. Collins notes that the suggested number of poetic songs in the Song "ranges from as few as six to more than thirty." *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 431 (see also, 480–81). See also Exum, *Song of Songs*, 37–41.

15. This same point can also be made about fifteen books in the Bible, thirteen of which are in the Old Testament, so by itself it is not too persuasive. See Scott H. Fahling, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2004).

16. Fahling, Jackson, and Matthews, *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible*, 784. Initial printings of the Latter-day Saint Bible Dictionary included this not-quite-literal version of this statement: "the JST manuscript contains the note that 'the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture.'" However, this has been corrected in the current version. See, for example, http://www.lds.org/scriptures/bd/song-of-solomon?lang=eng&letter=s, accessed September 12, 2013.

As an aside, I find it an interesting irony that, based on the canonical order in the English Bible, the “not inspired” Song of Songs is placed just before the book of Isaiah, whose writings were loved by the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi and praised by the resurrected Jesus (see respectively, 2 Nephi 25:5, “my soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah,” and 3 Nephi 23:1, “great are the words of Isaiah”).


18. In theory, the plural form could result from misspeaking or mishearing the traditional singular form, or from personal convictions of Joseph Smith, or from impressions from the Spirit. Common usage at the time, based on non-Latter-day Saint publications from the early 1800s, was to refer to the Song in the singular, "the Song of Solomon." Note that many centuries earlier (about AD 450–550), Origen of Alexandria complained, "let us not overlook the further fact that some people write the title of this little book as Songs of Songs. That, however, is incorrect; it is called the Song of Songs in the singular, not the plural." Origen, *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, trans. and annot. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman, 1917), 55.

19. See, for example, Seely, "The Song of Solomon," 468.

20. On the rabbinc notion, still challenging to understand, that sacred objects, including inspired scripture, defiled the hands of a person touching them, see Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung: Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 25–31, who provides discussion along with Talmudic and modern academic citations.


22. A fuller quotation is "Blessed too is he who enters holy places, but much more blest the man who enters the holy of holies! . . . Blessed likewise, is he who understands songs and sings them . . . but much more blest is he who sings the Songs of Songs! And as the man who enters holy places still needs much to make him able to enter the holy of holies . . . so also is it hard to find a man competent to scale the heights of the Songs of Songs, even though he has traversed all the songs in Scripture." Origen, "The First Homily," in *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, 266. The careful reader will have noted the plural form "Songs of Songs." This is unusual in light of Origen's comment quoted above; see note 18. Other Church Fathers, including Hippolytus (ca. AD 170–256) similarly shared Origen's opinion about the Song's canonical status and allegorical representation. For an overview, see "Solomon, Song of," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., ed. F. L. Cross (New York: Oxford, 1997), 1117.

23. This point is so commonly made that I provide only two references here: Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 488 ("so erotic is the Song that from early in the Common era, Jewish and Christian commentators generally interpreted it allegorically"); and Exum, *Song of Solomon*, 536. Note also that Adam Clarke in the early nineteenth century cited six different interpretations for the Song of Songs of a spiritual nature, each of which "has its powerful supporters." Clarke, *Commentary*, 3:842.

24. As Exum has stated, "whether the Song was included in the canon because it had been allegorized or was allegorized because it had been included in the canon has long been debated." She further claimed, "allegORIZATION alone cannot have been the reason the Song was included, since the text must have already achieved a certain status—perhaps as national
religious literature—for anyone to have taken the trouble to develop an allegorical interpreta-
tion of it.” Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 356. On our lack of knowledge about how and why the
Song was canonized, see also, for example, Murphy, Commentary, 5–6; and J. P. Fokkelman,
who claims that because of the sexual nature of the Song, “interpreters decided to whitewash
all offensive elements . . . by . . . allegorization. . . . [Jews and Christians] tried to sell this
interpretive technique as a form of spiritualization.” Fokkelman, Reading Biblical Poetry, An
25. Crawford notes that “the presence of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes at Qumran
would at least indicate their acceptability as reading matter during the Second Temple
Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: New York, 2000), 295. For sum-
mary comments on the fragmentary remains of the manuscripts of the Song of Songs found
at Qumran, see Crawford, 295, and Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich, The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible, 612.
26. As true as this general statement is, Jenson points out, “there was no consensus
among commentators about what the Song says about them [the man and woman / the
Lord and his people] in any individual passage.” Jenson, Song of Songs, 10. See also page 11.
See similarly in older publications such as, for example, Adam Clarke, Commentary, 3:842;
and Richard Watson, A Biblical and Theological Dictionary: Explanatory of the History,
Manners, and Customs of the Jews and Neighboring Nations, “Revised by the American

Jenson is one modern commentator (2005) who has proposed that the Song did not
originate as simply love poetry but originated with coding to invite hearers to think of divine
love for humans. He asserts, “there seems to be no reason why such an Israelite poet should
not have written these songs for that love [between the Lord and his people]:” Jenson, Song
of Songs, 7 (for the quote; Jenson discusses his suggestion on pages 8–9). Although it really
is not proof of his position, Jenson does not see how else to explain that allegorization “was
the unanimous answer of Jewish and Christian premodern exegesis—of the ancient rabbis
and the later Jewish commentators, and the Fathers of the church and the medieval and
Reformation commentators—that these poems belong in the canon.”

27. William Whiston, A Supplement to Mr. Whiston’s Late Essay, towards Restoring the
True Text of the Old Testament, Proving That the Canaletics Is Not a Sacred Book of the Old
Testament; Nor Was Originally Esteemed As Such Either by the Jewish Or the Christian Church
(London, 1725), 5. A century later, John Brown complained, “in vain Whiston, and others,
upon scarcely the shadow of a ground, have denied its [the Song’s] authenticity.” “Song, or

Munroe, 1846), 123, 119.

29. Noyes, A New Translation, 121. See also the names provided by Thomas Brown,

30. Clarke, Commentary, 3:842. Because he thought that there was no scriptural support
for an allegorical reading of the Song, Clarke further wrote, “I advise all young ministers to
avoid preaching on Solomon’s Song . . . I repeat it, and I wish to be heard by young minis-
ters, take the plainest texts when you attempt to convince men of sin.” He further observed
that “What eminent talents, precious time, great pains, and industry have been wasted” in an
attempt to “explain the Canaletics” in a way that Clarke saw as invalid (849).

31. For the possibility of Joseph Smith’s exposure to, or at least proximity with a copy of,
Clarke’s Commentary in the late 1820s, see, for example, the comments by Ronald V.
Huggins, “Without a Cause’ and ‘Ships of Tarshish’: A Possible Contemporary Source for
Two Unexplained Readings from Joseph Smith,” Dialogue 36, no. 1 (2003): 175. However,
there are no specific reports of Joseph Smith consulting the commentary on the Song or any
other issue, so no direct link can be established. References to Adam Clarke and his commen-
tary in the Times and Seasons are too late for consideration with the status of the Song.

32. George R. Noyes, A New Translation, 122. See further pages 120–21, where Noyes
claimed the allegorical view “would seem to be the most general opinion at the present day,
if we may judge of the opinion of the Christian church by what is expressed in the popular
commentaries.” See also Thomas Brown’s overview of the developing “literalist” movement in
the 1700s into the 1800s, and of those who reasserted the “allegorical” approach (“it must not
be supposed, however, that the supporters of the allegorical interpretation have been driven
from the field”) in “Canaletics,” in Smith’s A Dictionary of the Bible, 770–71; quotation from
271b.

33. D&C 35:20; 42:56–59; and 76:15 all connect Joseph Smith’s JST “new translation”
with his prophetic call. See also such later claims as Elder Dallin H. Oaks’s statement that
the JST “contains inspired revisions to Bible . . . there should be no doubt about the current
status of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. It is a member of the royal family of
scripture.” Scripture Reading, Revelation, and Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible, in
Plain and Precious Truths Restored: The Doctrinal and Historical Significance of the Joseph
Smith Translation, ed. Robert L. Millet and Robert J. Matthews (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft,
1995), 11, 11.

34. See, for example, Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 335, and Michael V. Fox, The Song of
Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Songs (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985).

commentary and a sample of Egyptian texts, with annotations. Still the most extensive work
on the Song of Songs and Egyptian love poetry is Fox’s The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian
Love Songs (1985). For comments on Mesopotamian love poetry and its relationship to the
biblical Song, see Tawny L. Holm, “Ancient Near Eastern Literature: Genre and Forms,” in
285–87, See also the review by Exum, Song of Songs, 47–61.

36. For example, Gary A. Rendsburg, “Song of Songs, Book of,” in The Oxford
York, 1997), 653 (“manifest secular character”). See also Exum, “Song of Songs,” 356; and
Jenson, Song of Songs, 2. While I understand this distancing effort, the word “secular” seems
to me oddly out of character with the ancient Near Eastern world.

37. Michael V. Fox, “Papyrus Chester Beatty I (1.51),” in The Context of Scripture,

38. As observed for example in the NET Notes, Song 4:9 (note 15), “The appellatives
‘my sister’ and ‘my brother’ were both commonly used in ancient Near Eastern love literature
as figurative descriptions of two lovers. For instance, in an Ugurian poem where Anar tried
to seduce Aqhat, she says, ‘Hear, O hero Aqhat, you are my brother and I your sister’ (Aqhat
18:14). In the Old Testament Apocrypha husband and wife are referred to several times as
‘brother’ and ‘sister’ (e.g., Add Esth 1:58; Tob 5:120; 7:16).”

39. Such descriptions, found in Song 4:1–7; 5:10–16; 6:4–7; and 7:1–7 (moving in this
last passage in reverse order from foot to head), and which involve metaphorical analogies,
are sometimes compared with later Arabic love poetry known by the term waṣf. See, for example, comments by Hess, *Song of Songs*, 31, and Exum, *Song of Songs*, 10.

40. Of course, there are other minority views currently held on the original intent and context of the Song, but they are not the focus of this paper. See summary comments in, for example, Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 5; and see John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 481. For an overview of the opinions of early Christian authors, see, for example, P. Meloni, *Song of Songs*, in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino, trans. Adrian Walford (New York: Oxford, 1992), 786–87.

41. In addition to what follows in this section, it is interesting to consider that the name of a city Latter-day Saints established on a bend of the Mississippi River is “Nauvoo,” which is a transliteration of the plural form of a rare Hebrew verb form, *na'vu*, that means, “to be pleasing, delightful.” This particular form occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah 52:7 and Song of Songs 1:10, which reads, “Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments” (plus, there is a related adjective *na'vēh*, which means “lovely, delightful”). Joseph Smith and some other early Mormon leaders began to study Hebrew in Kirtland, Ohio, in late 1835. Professor Joshua Seitz was hired to teach biblical Hebrew in Kirtland from January 6 to March 29, 1836. They used Seitz’s *A Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of Beginners*, 2nd ed. (Andover, MA: Gould and Newman, 1834). In 1839, Nauvoo was named. Although it cannot be proved, this interesting datum provides one more potential link between Joseph Smith and the Song of Solomon. I thank my colleague Matthew Grey for reminding me of this fact.

42. In this article I have used the “General-Purpose Style” of transliterating Hebrew words, as found in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, ed. Patrick H. Alexander et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 28, § 1.2.

43. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the Hebrew words translated “moon” and “sun” are not the usual Hebrew words for these celestial bodies, but descriptors. The word *leba-nâh*, “white one,” represents the moon in this verse, and *hemnâh*, “hot one,” denotes the sun. These two words also appear together in a different context in poetic passages in Isaiah 35:1–2; 44:1–2; 42:13; 50:26. Presumably, these terms occur in the Isaiah and Song passages to more fully evoke the aspects of whiteness, brightness, and heat that the moon and sun represent, respectively.

44. Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 178. There is some debate on who actually speaks the boast of the female’s beauty in 6:10. Some commentators think the group of women say this, while a few suggest it is the man who makes this claim.

45. A major challenge, which must be dealt with elsewhere, is the meaning or intent of the last phrase of Song 6:10, “terrible as an army with banners.” How does this relate to the church of God coming out of darkness to light? Is the church of God as referenced in this phrase supposed to be “terrible or fearsome”? Is it supposed to be “like an army [charging forth] with banners”? Some earlier non-Latter-day Saint commentators have argued that it is, at least in regards to “heretics” and rebellious people. See, for example, Richard F. Littledale, *A Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New York: Pott and Amery, 1849), 273.

46. See, for example, Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, who suggest with no real basis: “this beautiful expression [Song 6:10], it is reasonable to suppose, is not original with this uninspired book and we may well suppose, was a current expression in ancient times.” They go on to say, however, that whatever its source, there “is no reason why the Lord could not use it in a revelation given to the Church in our own day.” The *Doctrine and Covenants Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith Jr*, the Prophet, with an Introduction and Historical and Exegetical Notes, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978, reprint of 1955 2nd ed.; originally published in 1919 as *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*), 278–79. See also Joseph F. McConkie, who commented that the use Song 6:10 in the Doctrine and Covenants suggests the “possibility” that it comes from “a scriptural source now lost to us.” “Joseph Smith and the Poetic Writings,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1985), 106. Also, Monte Nyman wrote in reference to D&C 5:14 that “[t]he book [Song of Songs] may be quoting from other inspired writings which are now lost.” Nyman, *More Precious Than Gold*, 100. See also Monte S. Nyman, *It Came from God: Commentary on The Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 1 (Orem, UT: Granite, 2009), 145.

47. This point, of course, is one that is made by those who have justified the allegorical interpretation of the Song. See, for example, John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* (Bristol: William Pine, 1765; reprinted Salem, OH: Schmul, 1975), 5:1926.


50. Latter-day Saint Church leader Heber C. Kimball observed in a sermon in 1861, “You know the old proverb says that it is the little foxes that spoil the vines,” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9, 40. This suggests the possibility of Joseph Smith’s use of this expression from Song 2 as being dependent on popular usage in his day. Likewise, Brigham Young employs the “little foxes” expression in a sermon preserved in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:138.

Perhaps language from the Song of Songs lies behind two other expressions attributed to Joseph Smith: (1) Richard C. Galbraith (STPJS, 149, n. 13) suggests connecting Joseph Smith’s statement “that every species of wickedness and cruelty practiced upon us will only tend to bind our hearts together and seal them together in love” with Song 8:6, which in the KJV reads, “set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death.” (2) Galbraith (STPJS, 153 n. 4) suggests connecting Joseph Smith’s statement “those who have not been enclosed in the walls of a Prison without cause or provocation can have but little idea how sweet the voice of a friend is” with Song 2:14, which in the KJV reads, “O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.” These statements from Joseph Smith occur, respectively, in (1) a letter written from Liberty Jail, 20 March 1842; found in History, 1838–1856, volume C-1, p. 81, and available at: http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/...

51. Henry D. Taylor, “Gratitude,” found at http://scriptures.byu.edu, accessed May 14, 2013. Similarly, many different modern Church leaders have quoted non-scriptural poetry or other literature to help illustrate or clarify points they were emphasizing in their remarks.

52. Available at https://www.ld.org/manual/teaching-seminary-preservice-readings-religion-170-471-and-475/the-bible-a-sealed-book?lang=eng&query=Song+of+Solomon; accessed October 18, 2013. Although presumably representing his own opinion, at the time of his remarks Elder McConkie was one of the Twelve Latter-day Saint Apostles. The full sentence in which his comment was made is “Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations are interesting books; Job is for people who like the book of Job; and the Song of Solomon is biblical trash—it is not inspired writing,” spoken in the context of a paragraph in which he overviewed the books of the Old Testament, commenting on their varying worth.

53. A further additional example of concern about the Song was expressed to me in personal communication by someone in relation to 3:1–3, in which the young female relates that her unrealized desire for her male companion to join her results in her roaming the city at night looking for him. While I agree that this teaches an undesirable model for youth, there are certainly more challenging and troublesome passages elsewhere in our canonical Old Testament.


55. Wesley, Explanatory Notes, 3:1927.

56. Watson, A Biblical and Theological Dictionary, 218. See, similarly, Brown’s claim that “to such as have experienced much fellowship with Christ, and read it [the Song] with a heavenly and spiritual temper of mind, it will be the savour of life unto life.” John Brown, A Dictionary of the Holy Bible, 639–40.


58. For a brief overview of the Song in art and other media, see J. Cheryl Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 2:138–139.


60. The four phrases quoted here from the Song are taken from the English Standard Version translation.


62. See, for example, Joseph Smith’s use of this expression, as recorded in the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 31 August 1842, p. 81, at http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book?p=78, accessed May 14, 2013. See also Heber C. Kimball’s claim in a sermon in 1861: “You know the old proverb says that it is the little foxes that spoil the vines.” Journal of Discourses, vol. 9, 40.

63. There are, obviously, literary and graphic depictions that cross the line between artistic and pornographic. Additionally, I am always perplexed and distressed when I hear what I consider to be extreme action in admittedly anecdotal incidents about a few mission presidents who have instructed missionaries to either staple together or rip out of their Bibles the pages containing the Song of Songs/Solomon (personal and written communications, in my possession). Ironically, there are more explicit things than the Song in the Bible itself (e.g., Gen 19, including verses 30–38), as well as what can be found almost instantaneously on the World Wide Web and in many public places.

64. Origen, The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies, 2:5. Note, however, that Origen was a severe ascetic.


66. Longman, in Hess, Song of Songs, 8. Likewise, Hess, another conservative Christian Bible scholar, writes in his own preface to his commentary, Song of Songs, 11, “In a fallen world in which the first couple was expelled from the garden of Eden, this song [the Song of Songs] offers the hope that couples today may find something of that garden again and may see in their love that which is beautiful and good, from the good God.”

67. Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich, The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible, 651. Of course, there is no clear indication in the Song that the lovers are actually married; they certainly do not live together. However, Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich appear to be applying the theme(s) of the Song to married couples, as premodern commentators had done. See also, for example, Jenson, Song of Songs, 13, 14.

68. I realize that some may object to me citing D&C 88:11:8 or 90:15 here, since they may think the Song does not qualify as among the “best books” or “good books,” but I am thinking in the broader perspective of these D&C passages.