

BOOK REVIEW

Song of Songs: The Bible's Great Love Poems in Calligraphy

By Margaret Shepherd

Reviewed by Deacon Beth Caywood, ACC

Song of Songs is a unique book of the Bible. As author Margaret Shepherd points out in her introduction:

- "It includes no family trees, no battles, no dietary rules, no legends, no historical events, no religious doctrines, and no promises from God.
- Song of Songs does not mention the name of God and it refers to Solomon in only three places. When Song of Songs does mention Solomon, it is to describe his possessions: his splendid palanquin, his wedding crown, his numberless wives, and his well-managed vineyard. He plays no role and speaks no words.
- The young woman's voice and her point of view dominate the scenes and events, an unusual perspective for an era when women had very little social or legal power. She describes her desires in striking detail, boldly pursues her lover, meets him for private trysts, and seizes the initiative in physical love. When she is hurt or disappointed, she pushes back. Her lover, in contrast, does not talk about how he feels, but mainly describes how beautiful she is. In one place, he tries to coax her to come from the wilderness.
- Although Song of Songs comes from a patriarchal society, it makes seven references to mothers but none to fathers. The young woman brings her lover not just to her family home, calling it "my mother's house," but also "into the chamber of her who conceived me." And the crown that King Solomon wears is placed on the head of his mother.
- The young woman and those around her scarcely allude to her traditional role of wife and mother. In the last chapter, she speaks with confidence about someday making a success of marriage and a husband - a role that she intends to shape for herself. In this poem about sexual longing, children are not even mentioned.
- The verses describe physical love and emotion in language so explicit that some of it still seems too frank today.

While we find this Book so very different in style from the rest of the Bible, it has never been out of the Canon. Many have poured over its contents and differed in its interpretation.

Margaret Shepherd has pulled together many translations to not only educate her readers, but to encourage continued study of these verses. The author is foremost a well-known calligrapher, and even if you do not desire to explore this Book of the Bible

in more detail, I would encourage you to especially enjoy her brilliant calligraphy. One can thoroughly appreciate her exquisite skill with ink and pen and detailed artistic design captured in the verses. She also speaks to the work of scribe and God's Word over the centuries. The writing by hand of Scripture was not (is not!) considered a purely laborious task but one that brought inner blessings to the scribe in what could almost be called sacramental. Abbot Trithemius, quoted in this book, describes this blessing: "While [the scribe] sits in silence and solitude and immerses himself pleasantly in his manuscripts...his mind is illumined, and his sentiments are enkindled."

Whether you pick up this book to learn more about the fine art of hand-lettering and how Shepherd chooses her colors and designs to create pages and pages of exquisite artwork, or you seek to learn more about the Biblical translations and manuscripts on which the author based her versions of the text, you will not be disappointed.

Margaret Shepherd's career as a calligrapher spans 45 years. Her diverse designs can be found throughout the United States, but her many works have made her well-known and loved throughout the world. She has been featured through reviews and interviews in *The New York Times*, *Kiplinger*, *Newsweek*, *NPR*, *BBC*, *CBS Sunday Morning* and more. She has authored numerous titles on calligraphy. I would encourage you to learn more about Shepherd and her scope of work at margaretshepherd.com [Margaret Shepherd, Author, Calligrapher, Transformer of Words Into Art](#) where you can see excerpts from *Song of Songs* and much more.

This is a book to be enjoyed simply for its beauty or to delve deeper into study and meditation. It is a meticulously produced work of art that will also educate its readers.