

the Shulamite's brothers

Song of Solomon 1:5-6

1:5 I am dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. **1:6** Do not look upon me, because I am dark, because the sun has tanned me. **My mother's sons** were angry with me; They made me the keeper of the vineyards, But my own vineyard I have not kept.

Song of Solomon 8:1

8:1 Oh, that you were like **my brother**, who nursed at my mother's breasts! If I should find you outside, I would kiss you; I would not be despised.

Let's focus on purity.

How best to teach the Song of Solomon is much debated. It is obviously about the courtship and early stages of marriage of a young Shulamite woman and her beloved who is probably King Solomon.

Problems arise when readers and interpreters try to apply the vast store of figurative language in the book to the love of God. There are undoubtedly some parallels between the romantic love of the young couple and Christ's love for the church, but the most obvious purpose of the book—the promotion of moral purity in courtship and marriage—can easily be lost by focusing on Christ and the church.

Perhaps, more than anyone else in the book, the Shulamite's brothers show the need for sexual abstinence before marriage and loving loyalty after marriage. This study is centered on them.

Song of Solomon 8:6-14

8:6 Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. **8:7** Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned.

8:8 **We** have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: what shall **we** do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for? **8:9** If she be a wall, **we** will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, **we** will inclose her with boards of cedar.

8:10 I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favour. **8:11** Solomon had a vineyard at Baalhamon; he let out the vineyard unto keepers; every one for the fruit thereof was to bring a thousand pieces of silver.

8:12 My vineyard, which is mine, is before me: thou, O Solomon, must have a thousand, and those that keep the fruit thereof two hundred.

8:13 Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice: cause me to hear it.

8:14 Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices.

negatives

In various biblical love stories and marriages, the brothers of the bride or would-be bride are involved in some way. They do not come through as noble characters in the process, however.

Rebekah's brother, Laban, was obviously covetous and deceptive (Genesis 24 and 29). Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, deceived and killed Shechem and all the males in his city (Genesis 34). Tamar's brother, Absalom murdered their half-brother, Amnon (Second Samuel 13). Since rape was involved in two of these cases, the brothers' anger is understandable.

Interestingly, the first thing we read about the Shulamite's brothers (in 1:6) was that they were angry at her. Was their anger justified? We do not know, but for some reason she called them her mother's sons rather than her brothers. There probably was some conflict between the brothers and the Shulamite early on, but this disappears completely in chapter eight.

The biggest negative about the Shulamite's brothers is that they are not prominent compared to most other characters in the Song of Solomon. Even the "daughters of Jerusalem" are mentioned many more times.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() We do not know much about the Shulamite's brothers.
A-1	() She did not say much about them (1:6, 8:1).
A-2	() Like everyone, except Solomon, they are unnamed.
A-3	() Their figurative speech is difficult to understand (8:8-9).
A-4	() They probably were silversmiths and carpenters (8:9).
B	() The Shulamite's brothers were secondary characters.
B-1	() They did not say very much (8:8-9).
B-2	() She did not speak well of them (1:6, 8:1).
B-3	() They were uncertain about what to do (8:8-9).
B-4	() They did not live in Jerusalem (1:6, 8:11-12).
B-5	() She, rather than they, had the last word (8:10, 14).
B-6	() They were opposed to their sister's romance (1:6, 8:7-9).
B-7	() If they were omitted, it would not change chapter eight much.
B-8	() They had more authority only because they were older (1:6, 8:8).
B-9	() She interacted more with other women (1:4-6, 2:7, 5:8-9, 6:1-2, 8:4).

positives

The main passage about the Shulamite's brothers and the one by which their importance should be judged is in the final chapter rather than in the first one. How would chapter eight be different if they were omitted (B-7)?

The brothers appear in a flashback, speaking in 8:8-9 about what they would do in the future when their sister becomes a mature woman who is ready to marry. She already was such (8:6-7) and had in fact already married. Yet, they are overheard speaking about her to one another years before as if she was still a little girl with "no breasts." Why is there a flashback?

The flashback shows that there is a close connection between happiness in marriage and how one lives as a youth before marriage. The brothers were probably concerned about how their little sister would behave as a teenager.

The brothers helped their sister remain pure (8:9), but she herself was even more responsible (8:10). The conditional sentences in 8:9 show that they could only do so much. The Shulamite herself was the primary actor. Chapter eight does not show how important she or her brothers were as much as it shows how important sexual purity is.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() They cared about their sister's future (8:8).
C-1	() They watched over her from an early age.
C-2	() They wanted her to get married someday.
C-3	() They probably believed in arranged marriages.
C-4	() They were probably able to pay a huge dowry (8:7-9).
D	() They cared about their sister's moral purity (8:8-9).
D-1	() They knew how powerful and painful romantic passion can be (8:6-7).
D-2	() They worried about what kind of young woman she would become.
D-3	() They wanted her to be careful and defensive with men, like a wall.
D-4	() They were afraid she might be open to immorality, like a door.
D-5	() She agreed with them about the importance of purity (8:10).
D-6	() Remaining pure is more important than finding love (8:10).
D-7	() They expressed concern that she might be raped (8:8-9).
D-8	() They set limits (8:9) and sometimes disciplined her (1:6).
D-9	() The context implies that they did a good job (8:10-14).

worksheet answers

The figurative language in Song of Solomon is often difficult to understand, but the brothers' words in 8:8-9 are clear (A-3). They were concerned about their sister's purity (D). There is nothing to indicate that they were afraid she would be raped, however (D-7). Rather, their main concern for her was about what kind of woman she would become when she came of age (D-2). They hoped that she would guard against immorality and compared this to being like a wall (D-3).

Thankfully, the Shulamite agreed with her brothers about the need for purity (D-5), declaring in 8:10 that her beloved (probably Solomon) was attracted to her because she had consistently rejected immorality. Thus she shows that remaining pure is a key aspect of finding true love (D-6). In light of her high moral standards, there is no reason to think that her brothers were opposed to the romance and marriage (B-6).

That said, the Shulamite indicates in 1:6 that her brothers had been angry with her for some reason (D-8). Her words, however, probably indicate that she did not believe that their anger was justified. Thus line B-2 may be partly correct.

Line B-8 is incorrect. The brothers had more authority because they were men and because they were older. Lines A-4 and C-4 are also incorrect.

So what?

If the Shulamite's brothers were omitted from chapter eight, it would change the chapter greatly (B-7). Much of the emphasis on moral purity would be lost. Moreover, it would wrongly imply that romance and marriage are strictly personal and should not involve one's family. Although the Shulamite spoke more with the daughters of Jerusalem than with her brothers (B-9), the brothers and their moral emphasis are still important.

Did the brothers believe in arranged marriages (C-3)? The answer is "no," if arranged marriages are seen as an alternative to courtship. There is far too much about courtship and romantic love in the Song to hold such a view. (See 2:11-13 for instance.) On the other hand, the brothers and the author of the Song show that family involvement is normally a good thing, since it helps prevent sexual immorality.

The setting of the Song of Solomon is ancient, but basic human nature has not changed in three thousand years. Jealousy and romantic love are just as powerful emotionally today as they were back then (8:6-7), and fornication is just as destructive as ever. (Carefully read 1 Thes. 4:3-8.) The Shulamite's brothers appear at the end of the Song to remind us all of this.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
