

Is the Song of Solomon Scripture?

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Many Latter-day Saint youth may have had their first exposure to the Song of Solomon in seminary or on a mission. “Tear it out of your Bible,” “Staple the pages together,” or “Write ‘DO NOT READ’ on the title page with your red scripture marker!” are variants of stories passed on about what seminary teachers or mission presidents have advised. Since such sensational admonitions are almost guaranteed to pique teenagers’ curiosity, they are presumably more alive in student rumors than in the actual practice of seminary and institute instructors or mission leaders. Such stories may be reactions to Bruce R. McConkie’s oft-quoted evaluation of the Song of Solomon as “biblical trash,” akin to verbal pornography.¹ Yet nearly twenty years earlier Spencer W. Kimball had approvingly cited a verse from the Song of Solomon in an address entitled “Love vs. Lust”: “For love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire” (Song 8:6).² With such variant considerations of the Song, it is easy to see how Latter-day

1. Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated in a 1984 address to Latter-day Saint religious educators that “the Song of Solomon is biblical trash—it is not inspired writing.” Bruce R. McConkie, “The Bible, a Sealed Book,” in *Supplement: Symposium on the New Testament 1984* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984), 3; also available as Bruce R. McConkie, “The Bible: A Sealed Book,” in *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 127. Although McConkie was a Church Apostle at the time, his pronouncement is short of an official Church statement on the status of the Song.

2. Spencer W. Kimball, “Love vs. Lust,” Brigham Young University devotional, January 5, 1965, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/love-vs-lust/>.

Saints might wonder about the Song's proper place in the canon of the restored Church.

To sort this out, it may helpful to look at the Song's origin, content, and reception history. The Song of Solomon, now commonly called the Song of Songs (based on the opening phrase of the book), has been part of Jewish and Christian Bibles for about two thousand years. It primarily consists of words expressed between a male and female lover, metaphorically and suggestively describing and delighting in the joys of nature, each other's bodies, and their physical attraction to each other. Although traditionally attributed to Solomon, most scholars reject Solomonic authorship, and even the Bible Dictionary of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints calls this "doubtful."³ In reality, we do not know *who* composed this text, nor *when* it was produced. Suggested dates for the Song's composition range from the tenth to the third centuries BC, but most scholars favor the later end of that span. Nor has there been unity of opinion on whether the Song originated as one composition or is a compilation of originally independent songs.⁴ Currently, most scholars view the Song as ancient Israelite love poetry that did not originate as sacred literature. This is because it lacks a religious focus, does not clearly contain the name of God, and shares several characteristics with other ancient Near Eastern love poetry, especially examples from Egypt.⁵

Although at the time of Jesus there was a core of Israelite/Jewish books that were considered authoritative for all Jews (the Law and the Prophets, and some of the Writings; compare with Luke 24:44), uniformity had not yet been attained regarding all the books that eventually came to be viewed as canonical (authoritative for and binding upon all believers). The limited available evidence suggests that widespread acceptance of the Song as scripture was not achieved until the early second century AD, with Christian acceptance coming after that.

3. Bible Dictionary, in *The Holy Bible* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), s.v. "Song of Solomon," 730.

4. For a somewhat expanded treatment of the content of this essay, with references to other secondary literature, see Dana M. Pike, "Reading the Song of Solomon as a Latter-day Saint," *Religious Educator* 15, no. 2 (2014): 91–113, <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/re-15-no-2-2014/reading-song-solomon-latter-day-saint>.

5. Antonio Loprieno, "Searching for a Common Background: Egyptian Love Poetry and the Biblical Song of Songs," in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 105–35.

Historically, most Jews and Christians have interpreted this book as an allegory in which the male lover was understood to represent Yahweh/Jehovah or Jesus Christ, with the female representing Israel, the Christian church, or the individual human soul. The Song thus represented their love and reciprocal desire for each other. It is not clear whether this allegorical approach with its spiritual focus preceded and allowed for the Song's inclusion in the biblical canon (probably) or whether the allegorical-spiritual approach to the book arose later to justify its place in the canon (it certainly provided ongoing justification). James Kugel claims that anciently—when allegorical responses were taken much more seriously than they are today—the Song was drawn into the canon not because *it* was inspired, but by the force of its *interpretation* coming to be seen as inspired by God.⁶ One factor that likely influenced this interpretation is the husband-wife motif utilized in several prophetic books in the Old Testament, in which Yahweh/Jehovah (the husband) is bound by covenant to Israel (his wife). This motif continues in modified form in the New Testament, with Jesus as the bridegroom and Christians collectively as his bride.⁷

However, not everyone in the past two millennia has been persuaded by this allegorical approach to the Song. So, in at least a limited way, Latter-day Saints stand in a long tradition of wondering about the Song of Solomon's scriptural status. And if the question is reframed from "Is it scripture?" to "Is it appropriate for young unmarried people to read?" then Bruce R. McConkie would find himself in good ancient company—not only on the Song of Songs, but other scriptural books as well, especially Ezekiel.⁸ The canonical form of the Song itself may anticipate the

6. James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 493–518.

7. See, for example, Isaiah 54:5–6; Jeremiah 6–14; Hosea 2:19–20; Matthew 25:1–13; Ephesians 5:25–32; Revelation 19:7–9; 21:2, 9 (in Revelation 21, the future holy Jerusalem and its inhabitants are depicted as the bride).

8. In a similar vein, the early Church father Origen reported that Jewish traditions warn against reading too early in one's spiritual development the first few chapters of Genesis and Ezekiel's florid, seemingly idolatrously anthropomorphization (Ezek. 1:4–28) and lewd metaphors for Israel's unfaithfulness (Ezek. 16 and 23). But it is not entirely clear whether this rabbinic hesitancy has to do with concerns about youths' general maturity or, specifically, fear of exposing them too early to sexuality. Jerome also believed this to be the case among Jews; however Jewish sources on this are lacking. For an examination of early Christian understandings of ostensibly Hebrew maturity-based Bible reading taboos, see Ed Gallagher, "You Can't Read That Till You're 30!" *Our Beans: Biblical and Patristic Studies, Especially Dealing with the Reception of the Hebrew*

dangers of its own reading when it twice counsels not to “awaken or arouse love before its proper time!” (Song 2:7, 8:4 ISV).⁹ Texts can be restricted because they are holy rather than profane; sexual intimacy is a sin outside of marriage but sacred within. Perhaps the first-century AD Mishnah contributor Rabbi Akiva had something like this in mind when, according to the Mishnah, he sought to refute those who questioned the Song’s value and canonicity with, “Heaven forbid that any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs is holy. For the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy and the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.”¹⁰

Despite occasional questions about the Song’s canonical status and value, its place in scripture was generally stable until the 1700s, when some Western Bible scholars began to claim that it was not, at least originally, a spiritual representation of the mutual love between God and his people. However, most American religious leaders well into the 1800s still taught that it was. In July 1832, during his divinely directed efforts to provide inspired revisions to the biblical text (now called the Joseph Smith Translation, JST), Joseph Smith claimed, “The Songs of Solomon are not Inspired writings [*sic*].”¹¹ What is lacking from Joseph Smith and from his contemporaries is any indication of the reason for this pronouncement.¹² There has never been any official Church explanation of Joseph Smith’s comment or of the Church’s continuing view of

Bible in Early Christianity (blog), February 5, 2015, <http://sanctushieronymus.blogspot.com/2015/02/you-cant-read-that-till-youre-30.html>.

9. We have admittedly cherry-picked the translation here. Many translations now read essentially like this International Standard Version (ISV) quote, but a few others, including the King James Version (KJV), render the abstract Hebrew form *h’hbh* as suggesting letting *the lover*, rather than *love itself*, sleep until he or she is done sleeping. For a concise review of the translation issues involved here, see, for example, NET Notes, s.v. Song 2:7, n. 29.

10. Mishnah Yadayim 3:5; Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2012).

11. Scott H. Fahrling, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 785. See 70–72 for the dating of the various portions of JST OT Manuscript 2. Note that previous printings of the Latter-day Saint Bible Dictionary contained an incorrect variation of this quotation. However, this is corrected in the current (2013) edition. See Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Song of Solomon.”

12. The purpose of the plural “Songs of Solomon” in this JST statement is not known, if indeed it was intended to convey something specific. Perhaps Joseph Smith believed this song to be a composite of several songs, hence his use of the plural.

the Song, although one could postulate it has something to do with the sensual tone of the composition.

Deciphering the possible significances of Joseph's JST notation is complicated by the fact that Latter-day Saints have made various references to, and uses of, the Song over the following 140 years. In fact, variations of this phrase from Song 6:10, "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners," occur three times in the Doctrine and Covenants (5:14; 105:31; 109:73), with the latter two passages dating after the 1832 statement about the Song being "not inspired." Baffled by this, Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjödahl, in one of the earliest Doctrine and Covenants commentaries, speculated that the uninspired Song was drawing upon some other now lost but truly inspired writing. This speculation resonates nicely with the Restoration theme of lost scripture and neatly preserves both the Song's uninspired status and the legitimacy of its wording being in the Doctrine and Covenants.¹³ However, Smith and Sjödahl correctly admit this might be a notion too good to be true and alternately point out that there "is no reason why the Lord could not use [this language from the Song] in a revelation given to the Church in our own day."¹⁴

The Song of Solomon may also obliquely show up in Joseph Smith's own exegesis as a student of Hebrew under Jewish professor Joshua Seixas (1802–74). Reading the latter's *Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of the Beginner*¹⁵ may have encouraged Joseph to name his people's place of gathering in Illinois Nauvoo from the Hebrew word *navu* (beautiful), occurring in the Bible only in Songs of Solomon 1:10 and Isaiah 52:7.¹⁶

Furthermore, there were sporadic but ongoing mentions of the Song in official Latter-day Saint publications, including *Young Women's Journal* (1897–1929), *Improvement Era* (1897–1970), and *Relief Society Magazine* (1915–70). References to and brief quotations from the Song occur in these periodicals in the context of comments on the Joseph Smith

13. Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjödahl, eds., *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, 1965), 27–28.

14. Smith and Sjödahl, *Doctrine and Covenants*, 28.

15. Joshua Seixas, *Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of the Beginner* (Andover: Flagg, Gould, and Newman, 1833).

16. Val Sederholm, "Joseph Smith's New Translation and the Rejection of the Song of Solomon as 'Inspired Writings,'" *I Began to Reflect* (blog), July 13, 2010, <http://valsederholm.blogspot.com/2010/07/joseph-smiths-new-translation-and.html>. For further comments on this point, see Pike, "Reading the Song of Solomon," 110 n. 41.

Translation, on nature and the beauty of the earth, on literature, on self-improvement, and on the Bible and its books. For example, the February 22, 1934, edition of the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* (published in England) under the heading "Auxiliary Guide for March" instructs that during the third week of March, the "Opening exercises" of Relief Society should include "selections from Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Songs of Solomon read to the class."¹⁷ In the April 1959 general conference, Elder Henry D. Taylor observed in his address, entitled "Gratitude,"

Springtime is a glorious time of the year as new life begins to stir and the earth seems to awaken from its long winter nap. An ancient biblical prophet [the author of the Song!] has exclaimed:

"For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle [meaning the turtle dove] is heard in our land." (Song of Sol. 2:11–12.)

This awakening is reminiscent of the death and the resurrection of the Savior and we can appropriately dwell on the great debt of gratitude that we owe him for his atoning sacrifice.¹⁸

Beginning in 1972, the Church undertook a major initiative to correlate all lesson materials and Church publications.¹⁹ This effort paralleled new access in the 1960s–1970s to the Joseph Smith Translation manuscripts in Independence, Missouri, which are owned by the Community of Christ (then the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). This led to the inclusion of notes with certain Joseph Smith Translation readings in the Church's 1979 edition of the Bible. The development of Church correlation and increased official use of the Joseph Smith Translation appear to be major causes for the recent institutional ignoring of the Song of Solomon in official Latter-day Saint publications. Since the 1970s, references to the Song in Church publications and sermons have been very minimal and almost consistently

17. "Auxiliary Guide for March," *Millennial Star* 96 (February 22, 1934): 118.

18. Henry D. Taylor, "Gratitude," in *One Hundred Twenty-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1959), 56, second bracketed phrase in original. This address was later published as "Gratitude," *Improvement Era* 62 (June 1959): 446–47.

19. See Frank O. May Jr., "Correlation of the Church, Administration," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:323–25.

impart the Joseph Smith Translation claim that it is “not inspired.”²⁰ (Notably, the Spencer W. Kimball quote in our first paragraph is from before this time.)

However, Latter-day Saints’ interest in the Song has not entirely waned. For example, both authors of this essay have published on it elsewhere.²¹ And some Latter-day Saints still read and enjoy the Song. For example, Ellis Rasmussen called it “worthwhile to enjoy [for] its beauty as romantic literature, complementary to the other great types of the literature of Israel.” He asserts that the Song’s identification “as ‘not inspired writings’ . . . does not negate or depreciate its value as romantic prose and poetry from a very literate people.”²²

Ironically, the Song’s dubious status for Latter-day Saints has led to it enjoying a minor but special place among some Latter-day Saints for the curious issues it invites us to ponder. In a religion famous for additions to scripture, how does the institutional marginalization and folk-decanonization²³ of a biblical book also help define what we mean by an open canon? What do we make of Joseph Smith’s short, cryptic notation in the JST, mentioned above, and its seeming similarities to the current scholarly consensus? If the Song was uninspired to begin with, why does its distinctive wording show up in several places in modern revelation and preaching? What of James Kugel’s contention that it is community acceptance into a canonical context and seeing a text’s *use* (as much as its creation) as inspired that can make a work of another genre into scripture? Might this enlighten our understanding of the

20. Consider the witty observation from Boyd Petersen, “Landscapes of Seduction: Terry Tempest Williams’s *Desert Quartet* and the Biblical Songs of Songs,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 92: “that the Song of Songs is erotic love poetry probably would not have concerned [Joseph] Smith since he was not a prude, and, in fact, his teachings imply that sexual love is a divine gift. Whatever his motive was, Smith’s short notation has rendered the Song of Songs an impotent text within Mormonism.”

21. See Pike, “Reading the Song of Solomon,” 91–113; Eric A. Eliason, “Biblical Reception in Mormon Folklore,” in *Handbook of Biblical Reception in the World’s Folklores*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming).

22. Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 497.

23. Our evidence here is anecdotal rather than systematic, but by “folk-decanonization” we mean that virtually every fellow Latter-day Saint with whom we have discussed this chapter is surprised that anyone in our faith tradition regards the Song as a scripture at all. In their minds it is simply not a legitimate part of the Bible.

Doctrine and Covenants, which contains many “thus sayeth the Lord”-style revelations but also high council meeting minutes (D&C 102), a follow-up letter on a doctrinal matter (D&C 128), a proclamation on rights and government probably penned by Oliver Cowdrey (D&C 134), and an editorial epitaph traditionally but unsurely attributed to John Taylor (D&C 135).²⁴ Canonization seems to homogenize whatever previous genres a work might have been part of and invites readers to treat all sections equally as revelations, or at least as “scripture.”

With the special place of marriage in Latter-day Saint theology and the sacredness of sexual intimacy as underscored by talks like Elder Holland’s “Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments,”²⁵ the content of the Song of Solomon may be ready for a transformation in Latter-day Saint reception from “scriptural pornography” to an appreciation of the Song, its beauty, and its value in its own right. (Emma Smith’s transformation from villain to hero in popular historical consciousness over a few short decades in the mid- to late twentieth century shows such things have happened.)

An avenue for such a reconsideration may have recently opened up. From 1979 to 2012, the Bible Dictionary in the official Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible described the Song of Solomon as “not inspired scripture.”²⁶ This paraphrase was an overstatement of Joseph Smith’s actual notation and has been quoted frequently over the years, building an inaccurate impression that the Prophet directly claimed the Song was not scripture.²⁷ Drawing on the critical work done by Joseph Smith Papers scholars, the 2013 scripture revisions restore the Prophet’s actual

24. For the historical backgrounds of the sections referenced, see “Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://history.lds.org/section/revelations?lang=eng>.

25. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments,” Brigham Young University devotional, January 12, 1988, accessed May 20, 2021, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland_souls-symbols-sacraments/. This address was delivered when Holland was president of Brigham Young University.

26. Bible Dictionary, in *The Holy Bible* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), s.v. “Song of Solomon,” 776, emphasis added. Interestingly, in the same edition, a note accompanying the first verse of Song of Solomon reads, “The Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings,” as found in the actual JST manuscript.

27. See, for example, “Enrichment Section G: Hebrew Literary Styles,” in *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980), 303; Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of the Bible,” *Ensign* 2, no. 12 (December 1972): 60–63.

wording of “not inspired *writings*.”²⁸ This wording does not touch on canonical status directly but leaves open the possibility that the Song might nonetheless be scriptural—by inclusion in the traditional biblical canon and possibly by inspired interpretation, as James Kugel suggests.

Given this complex reception history as a whole, do Latter-day Saints consider the Song of Solomon scripture? This answer is based in part on the corollary question, What is scripture? The English word “scripture” derives from the Latin form *scriptūra*, “something written,” from the verb *scribere*, “to write.” When referring to *the* scriptures, it designates the authoritative writings containing divine words and will, as well as lessons and principles for a faithful life, produced by humans under the direction of the Holy Spirit (see, for example, 2 Pet. 1:20–21). Thus, believing Jews and Christians have historically referred to their written Bible as “scripture” or “the Scriptures.” For Latter-day Saints, the canon of “scripture” is larger: the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.²⁹ The Song of Solomon is thus *in* Latter-day Saint scripture.

However, Latter-day Saints bring an additional and different perspective to this issue. In 1842, Joseph Smith wrote, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (A of F 1:8). This qualification—“translated correctly”—seems to apply to transmission as well as to strictly translation matters. This provides a basis for understanding Joseph Smith’s decade-earlier Joseph Smith Translation claim. “Not inspired” indicates the Song does not contain the Spirit-communicated divine word, nor is it divinely intended allegory. It is not holy writ. Articles of Faith 1:8 has been used to support the Latter-day Saint belief that some things have been lost from, and corrupted in, the Bible. And this belief has, in turn, been employed to support the contention that the Song does not belong in the Bible, that its canonical status can be rejected. Thus, the spiritual intent of the allegorical interpretations of the Song can be (and have been) institutionally dismissed as authoritative even though they may have some value for some readers.

28. Bible Dictionary (2013), s.v. “Song of Solomon,” 730, emphasis added.

29. Compared to traditional Judaism and Christianity, Latter-day Saints have a larger canon, and one that is open to further additions. Additionally, Latter-day Saints have a further, less explicit concept of scripture. As stated in Doctrine and Covenants 68:4, whatever authorized missionaries, and presumably Church leaders by extension, teach “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will . . . the mind . . . the word . . . [and] the voice of the Lord.” This allows for a nonwritten or non-canonical dimension of “scripture.”

Even though there has never been a formal Church pronouncement on the status of the Song, the Joseph Smith Translation claim became de facto the official Church position, especially from the 1970s onward. Viewed from this perspective, it is fair to say that for current Latter-day Saints, the Song of Solomon is *in* the traditional collection of scripture, the biblical canon, but it is not institutionally regarded *as* scripture. Yet, as is fitting for an open topic, it should not be surprising if we cannot sum up the issue so neatly. It is after all the institutional Church that has never published an edition of the Bible without the Song of Songs and whose canonical Doctrine and Covenants significantly quotes it. And, by contrast, it is informally among some of the Church's membership where the notion seems to exist that the Song should be literally torn from the Bible.

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