

What About the Descriptive Poems?

There are four descriptive poems in the Song of Solomon. One describes the male (5:10-16) and three the female's body (4:1-7; 6:4-7; 7:1-7).

These descriptive songs are called *Wasfs*, an Arabic word meaning "descriptive love song." These are deeply rooted in the culture of an Ancient Near Eastern wedding. In August 1861, Dr. J. G. Wetzstein was a guest at a wedding celebration in Damascus, Syria. Wetzstein wrote about his experience, and it was later published in the commentary of his friend Franz Delitzsch of Keil & Delitzsch.

The question is, how are we to understand these poems and use them in our interpretation of the book? They are not intended to be a visual of the details of the woman's body or the man's body, but simply to capture the whole beauty. Like the petals of a flower, the beauty is not in the individual items (the petals) but as they are seen together in the whole.

Commentators have dissected these body parts, and their comments are a grotesque distraction from the stated purpose of Scripture, which is to focus on the person of Jesus.

Three General Observations

First, these descriptions are between a man and his wife, in the context of a marriage ceremony. They are not the random and lustful expressions of loose morals.

Second, these descriptions speak of a clothed body. Notice the jewels on the neck (4:4) and shoes on the feet (7:1a). This point serves to highlight the fact that the general beauty of the subject is in view, not the individual parts of the body.

Third, the imagery used often highlights the character of the person rather than the physical frame. The last poem, for example (7:1-9), more than any of the others, highlights characteristics of her noble personality (prince's daughter, Vs. 1), elegant posture (tower of ivory, Vs. 4; palm trees, Vs. 8), and strength of character (tower of Lebanon, Vs. 4).

Fourth, it is best to view this vivid poetic imagery in the Reformed and Puritan tradition as symbols of spiritual realities.

We need to keep the symbolic connections closely in line with Scripture. Henry Law says that the natural beauties help us see the beauties of Christ and nourish our faith.