

Grounded: in the Body in Time & Place, in Scripture

“Descending from the Hills of Gilead”: Undressing Descriptions of the Lover’s Body and How Australian Women Can Reclaim and Embrace Their Embodiment

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Meet the author

Erin Martine Sessions is completing her PhD on how Song of Songs can contribute to the primary prevention of Domestic and Family Violence. She publishes on Song of Songs, Psalms and Baptist history. Erin is an errant poet and arrant academic. She bends time and space to binge-watch Netflix.

Chapter overview

The Song of Songs is a sensuous celebration of intoxicating love and exalted embodiment, and there is much that we can learn from this rhapsody. The Song consists of some of the world's most beautiful—romantic, erotic and complex—love poetry, and this chapter focuses on the concentrated description of the woman of the Song's body at 4:1–7. This poetic portrait is the backbone of the man's (the beloved's) enraptured depiction of the woman's (the lover's body), and it is grounded in pastoral, architectural, and military imagery.

And this discussion is grounded in: the body—first the lover's body and then extended to women everywhere to be understood as whole embodied humans; time and place—both the Hebrew thought-world of the Song and a modern Australia grappling with attitudes and beliefs about women and our bodies; and Scripture—contained within the pages of the Bible is a book which centres on a woman's embodied experience, and illustrates for us how a woman's body can be lovingly and respectfully explored and lauded without objectification.

This chapter takes a look at how women's bodies have been sexualised and objectified, particularly through a Women's Health Victoria study into gender inequality in advertising, in contrast to the *wasf* (a poem which describes and celebrates its subject) at 4:1–7. From here, we can consider how women may reclaim and embrace our own embodiment.

General Study Questions

Question 1

Poetry, especially poetry in the Hebrew Bible, can be difficult to understand at first. But, to begin to understand the poetry of the Song of Songs, we can begin with modern poetry. What are some examples of love poetry—or love songs—that have stuck with you? Why?

Question 2

Jay Parini (Why Poetry Matters, xiv) argues that “Poetry cannot be read... it can only be reread.” (Re)Read Song of Songs 4:1–7. What stands out to you? Are there similarities with the love poetry or song you chose?

Question 3

Defining what makes a poem a poem is a tricky enterprise. William P. Brown (Psalms, p.2) has offered 3 features that can help us to identify a poem:

- 1) artistic or aesthetic quality
- 2) density or compactness of expression
- 3) performative power

Where can you identify each of these qualities in Song of Songs 4:1–7?

Question 4

If you haven’t thought about/discussed this already, what are some of the positive ways in which the woman’s body is portrayed?

Question 5

Take a look at pages 2-3 of Advertising (in)Equality. Have you noticed these trends in advertising? Did any of this information surprise you?

Question 6

What are some of the differences between the depictions of women’s bodies in media content, and the poetic description of the lover’s body?

Question 7

How do you think women can be reclaiming and embracing our embodiment?