

Bible Book of the Month – The Song of Songs

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“**A**lmost anything can be read into any book if you are determined enough,” C. S. Lewis recently observed. Commenting on interpretations suggested for his own fantastic fiction he added: “Some of the allegories thus imposed on my books have been so ingenious and interesting that I often wish I had thought of them myself” (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 1958, p. 99).

If you cock your ear just right perhaps you will detect afar off a chuckle and the “Amen” of the author of the Song of Songs. He has had his troubles with the interpreters too. In fact, “there is no book of the Old Testament which has found greater variety of interpretation than the Song of Songs” (H. H. Rowley’s opening remark in his helpful chapter “The Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *The Servant of the Lord*, 1952, pp. 189-234). What seems at first

bewildering but after a while amusing too is that most of these utterly contradictory interpretation's come with a manufacturer's guarantee that each claims to be the one and only understanding of the book which the totally unbiased reader can reach! Naturally the interpretation offered in this article does not lack such an endorsement – except that one enlightened prejudice is admittedly presupposed, the prejudice of recognizing that the Song of Songs is an inspired revelation of the God of truth. But then a prejudice one way or the other on that subject is unavoidable.

The Literary Genre

The particular literary form an author selects as the vehicle of his message can be the most important single clue to his true intent.

1. *Love Song*: It is being more and more recognized as archaeological discovery enlarges our library of ancient literature that the biblical Song was not a novel literary phenomenon in the world in which it appeared. In its general framework and in numerous individual motifs and metaphors it is seen to be stylistically similar to what is found in ancient love lyrics. An Egyptian love poem, found on one of the Chester Beatty papyri dating about 1100 B.C., consists of seven cantos in dialog form with the lovers addressing each other as “brother” and “sister” (For a partial translation see J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1950, pp. 468, 469). There are enough parallels to Canticles in

structure, situation, and imagery in such love songs of the New Empire in Egypt to convince W. F. Albright that they “demonstrate the Egyptian origin of the framework of the Canticles” (*Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 1942, p. 21). Other scholars are more impressed with parallels to the Song found elsewhere in the Near Eastern or in primitive love poetry.

One variety of love song is the epithalamium or wedding song. From the time of Origen many have held that Canticles was composed for the occasion of Solomon’s wedding to Pharaoh’s daughter (I Kings 3:1) and from the end of the sixteenth century expositors have tried to explain the character of the Song in terms of customs followed at ancient Jewish marriage festivals. In 1873 J. Wetzstein published his study of the marriage-week customs of modern Syrian peasants, and directed attention to the facts that bridegroom and bride played the roles of “king” and “queen,” a mock throne being set up on the threshing floor; that poems of praise (*wasf*) were sung extolling their physical beauty; and that on occasion the bride performed a sword dance. The obvious comparisons were then drawn with Canticles where the hero is several times called “king,” the lovers repeatedly sing the praises of each other’s charms, and the Shulammitte maiden performs a dance (7:1ff.). Efforts were made to demonstrate that the Song was composed of seven parts, one for each day of the wedding week, but with little success.

Critics of the epithalamium view have questioned both the existence of such a “king’s week” among the Arabs in Palestine and the reliability of modern Syrian practices as a guide to Judean wedding customs of the first millennium B.C.

They also argue that some of the poetry in Canticles is clearly prenuptial and that even the *wasf* type of song was not confined to wedding festivals. Furthermore there is an obvious reason for calling the hero “king” (1:4, 12, 7:5) if he is “king Solomon” (3:9, 11) and his beloved, it must be noted, is never designated “queen.” Certainly she is not a princess from Pharaoh’s court but a maiden from the village of Shunem.

R. Gordis in his excellent study, *The Song of Songs* (1954), seeks to meet some of these criticisms of the relevance of the “king’s week” (p. 17); but he too joins the majority of those who regard Canticles as love poetry in concluding that it was not composed for a wedding but is an anthology of various types of love songs “songs of love’s yearnings and its consummation, of coquetry and passion, of separation and union, of courtship and marriage” (p. 18).

2. *Drama*: In the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries the view was developed and popularized that Canticles was dramatic in structure. The beginnings of this view were much earlier. Origen, for example, considered it “a nuptial poem composed in dramatic form” and Milton called it a “divine pastoral drama.” Extremists treated the Song as a theatrical piece actually

intended for the stage. In this they succeeded more in displaying a flair for creating musical comedies than in manifesting a gift for exegeting ancient texts. But nineteenth century exegetes of the caliber of Franz Delitzsch, H. Ewald, and S. R. Driver also championed the dramatic view of the Song and this approach continues to enjoy some support in our century.

The dramatists are divided over the question of whether the Shulammité's true love is Solomon or a rustic lover to whom she remains faithful in a triumph of pure love over the seductions of Solomon's royal court. The second plot obviously has greater dramatic tension and that perhaps is why it is the more popular; but it has little else to commend it.

Critics of the dramatic view correctly observe that full-fledged drama was unknown among the Hebrews or the Semites in general; some of them also protest, but incorrectly, that the Song cannot be a drama because it is not a literary unit. The real question vis-à-vis sober proponents of the dramatic view is whether Canticles traces the love of Solomon and the Shulammité through a temporal sequence of scenes from courtship to their wedding and marriage life.

Expounding the thesis that such a sequence does emerge in the Song, Delitzsch locates the wedding in the third of six acts. The successive acts end at 2:7, 3:5, 5:1, 6:9, 8:4, and 8:14. Each act is divided into two scenes, the first scenes ending at 1:8, 2:17, 3:11, 6:3, 7:6, and 8:7. Hand in hand with the temporal sequence Delitzsch traces a thematic movement: "Solomon appears

here in loving fellowship with a woman such as he had not found among a thousand (Eccles. 7:28); and although in social rank far beneath him, he raises her to an equality with himself...We cannot understand the Song of Songs unless we perceive that it presents before us not only Shulamith's external attractions, but also all the virtues which make her the ideal of all this is gentlest and noblest in woman...Solomon raises this child to the rank of queen, and becomes beside this queen as a child. The simple one teaches the wise man simplicity...[he] wanders gladly over mountain and meadow if he only has her" (*Commentary on The Song of Songs*, Keil and Delitzsch series, 1950 ed., p. 5).

Though not persuaded by A. Bentzen's contention that the many possibilities advanced to explain the book as a drama prove its impossibility (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, II, 1949, p. 181), the present writer is not convinced that the scenic-chronological structure has been satisfactorily demonstrated. The criticism that the dramatic view is almost as guilty of eisegesis as the allegorical view goes much too far; but it does seem to contain an element of truth.

It is a virtue of the dramatic view that it recognizes the unity of the Song. That unity, however, is unfolded in cyclical rather than chronological fashion. The divisions suggested by Delitzsch for his six acts mark the bounds of these cycles; observe, for example, the recurring opening and closing refrains of these divisions. Within each of these cycles the dominant love motif is that of longing

and fulfillment. Each cycle closes with the satisfaction of consummation of love. Even though the Song is not structurally a drama, this recapitulated theme of seeking and finding does impart to it a certain dramatic quality.

3. *Cultic Liturgy*: In the present century the theory has appeared that Canticles is a liturgy belonging to the widespread Near Eastern cult of the dying and reviving god. This is part of the current fad of discovering cultic vestiges everywhere in the Old Testament. The interpretation rests primarily on alleged terminological similarities to the Song in extant texts of the fertility cult and on corresponding ritual themes in the cult, such as the goddess' search for and finding of the slain god and the sacred marriage. Proponents disagree as the extent, if at all, that the original pagan liturgy was camouflaged to make it acceptable to the cult of Yahweh.

The Old Testament indicates that apostate Israelites, whoring after pagan deities, engaged in the rites of the Tammuz cult. But those who share the prejudice concerning the Song acknowledged earlier cannot entertain it as a serious possibility that the covenant God adopted as a legitimate element in the worship of his name a liturgy from such an idolatrous source with all its sexual associations. Suffice it then that the great majority of all scholars is unconvinced by the liturgy theory and that it has been effectively criticized by Eissfeldt, Rowley, and others. Bentzen suggests that the ancestry of love songs as a literary form may in part be found in the ritual of the *heiros gamos*, just as

T. Gaster traces the drama through the medium of myth to cultic ritual. If so, the liturgy theory contributes something to the history of the literary genre represented by our Song, but it still contributes nothing as an interpretation of the Song itself.

Allegorical or Natural

Beyond the question of the literary genre of Canticles, but certainly not divorced from it, lies another issue which concerns our understanding of the book as a whole: To allegorize or not to allegorize?

1. *Allegorical*: That the Song deals primarily with human love, the mutual love of a man and a maid, is the least that must be deduced from the facts that it is cast in the mold of ancient human love poetry and confronts us with the human figures of Solomon and the Shulammitte as the lover and the beloved. But is there warrant for seeking a second message hidden in the Song, one concerned with the mutual love of God and his people?

As is well known the allegorical approach is ancient. Mishnah, Talmud, and Targum treated the Song as allegory of Yahweh's dealings with Israel. From Judaism the allegorization of the Song passed over into Christianity, the Church as bride of Christ replacing Israel as the beloved. The later popularity of the allegorical method is reflected in the chapter headings assigned to Canticles in the Authorized version.

The allegorists are not, of course, agreed on particulars. Some, for example, interpret Solomon's beloved not as the Church but as Wisdom; others, as his kingdom of loyal subjects. Indeed, there is no limit to the plausible possibilities. And there is the rub! Anyone with a knack for autosuggestion can readily convince himself that his latest flight of fancy is the true decipherment of the Song's esoteric sense.

It there, however, amid all the allegorical abuse a proper, verifiable, allegorical use of the Song? The most cogent argument for allegorizing Canticles is the alleged analogy of Psalm 45. This Psalm is an extended metaphor picturing Messiah as his bride, the Church, under the imagery of an ancient royal wedding such as the Psalmist might have witnessed in the court of one of David's successors.

There are, however, decisive differences between Canticles and Psalm 45. The Song speaks about king Solomon and a particular woman from Shunem. The Psalm describes directly a divine king in language which would be utterly extravagant if intended for any merely human king of Israel. Nothing in the historical narratives of the Old Testament supports the idea that the flamboyantly flattering oriental court style was adopted in Israel. Psalm 45, therefore, does not provide an analogy for a royal epithalamium with a double meaning. It is moreover most important to observe that in Psalm 45 and in every other biblical passage where the figure of marriage is used to depict the

covenantal relationship on God and men the context leaves no doubt that such is the meaning. But there is not even the slightest hint anywhere in Canticles that it was intended as an allegory of things divine. Finally, the Song differs from Psalm 45 and all other alleged biblical parallels in that the Song abounds in detailed praises of the two lovers' bodily charms and in allusions to the intimacies of conjugal love. As a song of human love this might surprise the modern Western reader of holy Scripture but it should not offend him. To interpret such imagery as a song of God's relationship to his people, however, appears to involve irreverence. Certainly it ignores the care manifested everywhere else in biblical anthropomorphism to avoid attributing to the holy One of Israel the erotic passions and sexual functions characteristic of the gods of pagan mythology. Observe the way of contrast to the Song the restraint exercised in carrying out the nuptial metaphor in the Messianic Psalm 45.

2. *Typical*: There is another view, the typical, which would also find a Messianic meaning in Canticles. But whereas an allegorist might ignore the natural meaning of the language, esteeming the mystical meaning as the only message of the Song, the typologist must always insist there is a double meaning—a typical and an antitypical. The typologist shares the allegorist's appeal to the biblical use of marriage as a literary figure for Christ's relationship to his Church, but the typical view, as its name implies, appeals particularly to the historical status of Solomon as a type of Christ. Typologists

differ further from the allegorists in not groping after a mystical reinterpretation of every detail in the Song. They are satisfied to discover a more general correspondence between type and antitype.

The fallacy of the typical view is that while Solomon in his royal office typified the kingship of Christ, nothing in Scripture justifies our regarding all and sundry aspects of Solomon's life as divinely appointed historical types. Certainly Solomon's lover relationship with one or all of his wives was no more a Messianic type than the marriage life of any other Israelite or Gentile. Since then the supposed typical elements in the Song are illusory, the typical view is not a genuine option. The only real alternatives are the allegorical and the natural.

3. *Natural*: "Natural" is preferable to "literal" as a designation for the correct interpretation of Canticles since "literal" is liable to suggest a lack of appreciation for the Song's erotic symbolism.

This view, though only in modern times enjoying ecclesiastical respectability, can be traced as far back as the evidence for the history of interpretation goes. And why should the Church stumble at the presence in her inspired canon a song extolling the dignity and beauty of human love and marriage? Considering how large the subject looms in the attention of men, had it not been remarkable if there were not such an extended treatment of it in the volume God has given us for "reproof, for correction, for instruction in

righteousness?” And all the more so when we think how sordid is the world’s attitude towards the matter and how dim had become even the Old Testament saint’s apprehension of the paradisaic ideal of marriage. Thus understood, Canticles unites with the other poetical books of the Old Testament in displaying the inspired fruits of godly reflection upon the Law and especially in eliciting the relevance of the Law for the great issues of human life.

The heading assigns the authorship to Solomon and there is no compelling reason for not regarding this certainly very ancient tradition as an original part of the inspired text. Advocates of the love song view often treat Canticles as an anthology of poems by many authors but Rowley has well observed: “The repetitions that occur leave the impression of a single hand, and there is a greater unity of theme and of style than would be expected in a collection of poems from several hands, and from widely separated ages. It is probable, too, that there is artistry in the arrangement of the pieces” (*op. cit.*, pp. 212, 213).

There is a puzzle of the selection of the Israelite most notorious for his departure from the marriage ideal to compose the biblical tribute to true love and this is not solved by facetious remarks about Solomon’s superior experience in the arts of love. More helpful is the consideration that the arts of poetry and songs were branches of Wisdom and the wisdom of Solomon needs no introduction (cf., I Kings 3:5ff.; cf. 4:32).

That, however, does not solve the enigma of why Solomon of all people should be this Song's hero as well as its author — which raises the problem of historicity. Now it should be observed that the personal perspective in the Song is consistently that of the beloved, not of the king (cf., e.g., 2:10; 5:2). If, therefore, Solomon (for that matter, anyone other than the Shulammitte herself) is the author, Canticles is, as Ecclesiastes seems to be, fictionally autobiographical. Such as fictional literary garb permits that the historical element consists in little more than that one of Solomon's favorites was the Shunem. The mutual love of the king and this Shulammitte would then have been freely adapted to the ideal, and idyllic design of the Song and this would explain the purity of the affections of the Song's king Solomon, as well as his romantic shepherd's role.

If this is so, the choice of Solomon as hero is not enigmatic but indicative of Canticles' Edenic milieu. With true insight the poet Herder observed: "That Song is written as if in Paradise. Adam's song: Thou art my second self! Thou art mine own! echoes in it the speech and interchanging song from end to end." In the unfolding divine plan of redemptive history God appoints Canaan to his people Israel as an earnest of Paradise regained. And who better than Solomon — not in his personal but official character and glory as theocratic king set over the paradisaic land of milk and honey — to recall Adam, vicegerent over the garden of God?

The Song confronts us with love as it was in the beginning and it lets us hear again the divine marriage benediction first addressed to the lover and his beloved in man's home primeval (Gen. 1:28a). What the incarnate Word did for the sanctity of marriage by his presence at the Cana wedding, the written Word does by dwelling with joy upon conjugal love in the Song of Songs.