

## SOME NEW THOUGHTS ABOUT THE SONG OF SOLOMON

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The most beautiful OT expressions of transport and delight are found not in the prophets but in the poets, more specifically in the "Song of Songs, which is Solomon's." Here, embedded in the ancient Hebrew canon, is undoubtedly the most exquisite love poem ever written. Like another magnificent poem, the book of Job, it is hidden in the midst of OT books that recount the wars, massacres, assassinations, treacheries, invasions, sufferings and starvation of the Hebrew tribes and their neighbors, all of which are accompanied by dire predictions of judgment and wrath to come. There is divine grief, sorrow and anguish over sin throughout the OT. Such expressions fulfill a prophetic role and have an honored place in the oracles of God, but they never should blind us to the unparalleled beauty and ecstasy of other passages. Jesus was well acquainted with both.

The Song of Solomon is a love poem. It is primarily a beautiful exchange between two lovers. Until one has absorbed the Song verse by verse, in all its exotic flavor and mysterious references, one cannot fully appreciate it.

The Song of Solomon has been called the most obscure book in the Bible. Early Christian commentators (Origen and Jerome) quote a Jewish saying that no one should study the Song until he (or she) has reached thirty years of age. Goethe called it the most divine of all love songs. Franz Delitzsch says, "No other book of Scripture has been so much abused, by an unscientific spiritualizing, and an over-scientific unspiritual treatment, as this has."<sup>1</sup>

The Song is not scientific at all. It is a joyous dialogue, a sunny interchange between a lover and his beloved, a bridegroom and his bride. It radiates expressions of warm affection, using the imagery of flowers and fruits, gardens and perfumes, wind and water, fields and mountains, spices and jewelry. While the transitions are not always easy to follow, the total effect is enchanting.

Today Christian and Jewish marriage counselors are using the Song of Solomon to break down barriers between couples—barriers that are keeping husbands and wives from fully expressing their love for each other.

Ever since the rabbis received it into the Bible, the Song of Solomon has been a subject of controversy. The language is so sensuous, and the role of

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<sup>1</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, n.d.) 15.

Shulamith, the woman, is so obviously equal in importance to that of her lover, that the book could only be accepted into the Jewish culture by taking it as an allegory. King Solomon, it was decided, was God, and the beloved young lady, Shulamith, was the people of Israel. Accordingly the subject of the Song was held to be Israel's history from the exodus until the future coming of the Messiah.

So much for the Jewish view of the Song of Songs. The Church in turn accepted the poem symbolically, but the early Christian writers changed the *dramatis personae* and made it an allegory of the love between Jesus Christ and his Church. According to this interpretation King Solomon represented Christ, while Shulamith was the holy bride, the beloved, the chosen elect of the Lord. This view is still popular in Christian circles and is not without its validity, but it fails to reveal to us how the poem came to be composed in the first place. Sensuous love poems are not usually written for religious reasons.

On its face the Song of Solomon is a rare and unforgettable paean of joy, a passionate, tender, rapturous, human expression of love between a young man and a young woman. In the hands of early theologians it became something much more complex. Origen wrote twelve volumes to elaborate his allegorical interpretations. Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century monk famous for his hymns and devotional spirit, preached eighty-six sermons on the Canticles, as they were called, and when he died he had only reached the end of the second chapter. Ernst Hengstenberg, an otherwise reputable German evangelical scholar, carried his allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs to such lengths that he declared the "rounded navel" (7:2) of the beloved, Shulamith, to be "the cup from which the Church revives the thirsty with its refreshing draught."<sup>2</sup>

I have personally found passages in the Song of Solomon that genuinely stirred me to a closer relationship with Christ. To cite just two:

I am a rose of Sharon,  
a lily of the valleys (2:1).

He has taken me to the banquet hall,  
and his banner over me is love (2:4).

It is not my purpose to impeach the work of Christian scholars in their efforts to spiritualize the Song of Solomon. I am convinced, however, that the only natural interpretation of the Song is to acknowledge it to be what one Christian counselor has described as a "joyous celebration of sacred married love":

How beautiful you are and how pleasing,  
O love, with your delights! (7:6)

<sup>2</sup> Cited by H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1952) 197-198 and n. 1.

Show me your face,  
 let me hear your voice;  
 for your voice is sweet,  
 and your face is lovely (2:14).

You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;  
 you have stolen my heart  
 with one glance of your eyes (4:9).

No wonder that on the day of his wedding the lover's heart was enraptured!

The joy that the two lovers knew in the Song of Solomon is just another facet of the jewel that is the gospel treasure. In the Christian view, true love between husband and wife draws its richness, its beauty and its joy from the love that Jesus brought from heaven to share with his friends. That love, when it is planted in the human heart, brings with it the joy of life everlasting, the gift of God himself. It is a holy thing, but no less delightful because it is holy, and it is certainly what God intended for Christians—and for Christian marriage.

One commentator, R. A. Redford, says, "No one can accept the Song of Solomon as a book of Scripture . . . without forming some theory of interpretation which shall justify the position of such a book amongst the sacred writings."<sup>3</sup> Before leaving this delectable poem with its garden of delights, I would like to add my own theory concerning its proper interpretation. I claim no special qualification for offering it except the word of Jesus: "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt 12:34).

I believe the Song of Songs was written to, rather than by, King Solomon, and by someone living during his reign. I believe that the song was neither by Solomon nor about him. Rather it is a dramatic love dialogue between a shepherd and a country girl, who use the imagery of royalty to address and describe each other in fantasy. To the Shulammite girl, chaste and beautiful, her young love is King Solomon in all his majesty. She sees him wearing a crown, riding in a chariot and escorted by warriors. This is her man, "her own Solomon," as Hugh Thompson Kerr, Jr., expresses it,<sup>4</sup> and she infinitely prefers him to the fabulously wealthy king and the great lover of women. Yet in her mind she likes the royal trappings.

The young shepherd on his part imagines his beloved as a prince's daughter, spreading her perfume at the royal table, admired by queens and surrounded by the "daughters of Jerusalem." In his fantasy she is as fair as the moon, bright as the sun, and majestic as troops with banners. Among the ladies she is herself the queen.

King Solomon, his retinue, his horses and chariots become in this Song nothing but the word pictures and imaginative expressions that lovers use.

<sup>3</sup> R. A. Redford, *Song of Solomon* (Pulpit Commentary 22; London: Funk and Wagnalls, n.d.) viii.

<sup>4</sup> H. T. Kerr, Jr., in *IB*, 5. 132.

Once we see that, the puzzle is solved. All the vexing questions, such as how and where the girl from the vineyards of Galilee fits into the dazzling atmosphere of the royal palace as the king's lover (along with the hundreds of wives and concubines), are laid to rest. Lovers have always used the language of the royal court in their most private conversation—sometimes in jest, sometimes in passion. We may say to our spouse in such moments of intimate seclusion, "You're my prince! You're my sovereign lord!" or, "You're my queen! You're my princess royal!" In past centuries the monks who wrote sermons about the Canticles may not have understood such endearments—but we do.

In a sermon he preached in Solomon's colonnade, recorded in the third chapter of Acts, Peter speaks of a time coming when God will restore everything. Perhaps it is a welcome sign of the early return of our Lord that the human element is being restored today to the Song of Songs. We can now read and enjoy it as it was originally composed, with all the unnecessary religious symbolism and allegorizing peeled away.

Perhaps what is happening to this love poem is also happening in our generation to the gospel of Christ itself, and the joy of our salvation that is so evident in the NT is being felt once again in some of our churches. Perhaps the artificial solemnity and ponderous religious severity that has accompanied so much of our divine worship in a minor key is being lifted, so that we can begin to praise God as the psalmist did, with gladness of heart and fullness of joy.