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Clarifications: A basic introduction

Please read Song of Songs 1:1

In all the world there is nothing to equal the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.’

Even allowing for hyperbole, Rabbi Aqiba’s second-century statement contrasts sharply with the attitude of some Christians today, who apparently have little place for this book in their thinking or practice. They hardly ever quote it, read it or reflect on it. It has suffered what a modern writer calls ‘functional decanonization’.

Such extremes remind us that the book has sometimes been controversial. Over the years, there have been both Jewish and Christian observers who have questioned its place in Scripture. From ancient times until the present day, however, I hasten to add, its divine inspiration has never been in any serious or lasting doubt.

Its location in Scripture

In Hebrew Bibles, the Song is the fourth book (after Psalms, Proverbs and Job) in the third and final main section, the Sacred Writings. This diverse collection is mostly found between 1 Chronicles and the Song of Songs in English Bibles. Five books (the Song, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Esther and Lamentations) are traditionally referred to as the *Megilloth* or scrolls. Modest, apparently insignificant works, they are given prominence at Jewish festivals, with the Song being read at the end of Passover.

Following the Greek translation known as the Septuagint, English Bibles place the book after Ecclesiastes. Some like that order, saying that Ecclesiastes does a negative, preparatory, convicting work ('Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again', John 4:13) while the Song is more positive, complete and edifying ('... but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst', John 4:14). These two, with Job, Proverbs and certain psalms, are often spoken of as Wisdom Literature, a genre dealing chiefly with how to apply truth to daily life. Duane Garrett says that its wisdom is obvious. It prepares the reader 'for the joy as well as the trauma of love'.

Like other Wisdom Literature, the Song is poetry. It uses terse sentences and devices such as parallelism (developing ideas through near repetition), assonance and alliteration (repeating consonants or vowels), simile or metaphor (rhetorical picture language) and refrain. As with most poetry, especially love poetry, the writing is highly imaginative and artistic ('perhaps the largest concentration of imagery anywhere in the Bible' according to Tremper Longman III). These factors can make for difficulties in interpretation.

Critical interpretation of the Song

More than one scholar has called the Song of Songs the most difficult book to interpret in the Old Testament. Augustine

found it a puzzle. Tenth-century rabbi Saadia ben Joseph spoke of the key to its locks being lost. Matthew Henry said, 'It seems as hard as any scripture to be made a "savour of life unto life"'. In 1683 a gentleman called Richard Coore issued a book expounding 'the most difficult texts' in Scripture. It included work on 'the two mystical books of canticles and the revelations'. A modern preacher speaks candidly of 'much furious thought and casting about in my mind to make something of' it, and another of being 'stark-raving bonkers' to take it on. Misgivings about its place in Scripture have sprung chiefly from wrestling with these problems.

A key question to consider before we begin, then, is the correct hermeneutical approach. At one extreme are those who want to take it in an entirely *spiritual* way. It deals exclusively, they say, with the love between God and his people. At the other extreme are those who want to take it in an entirely *natural* way. For them, it is all about the love between a woman and her lover, and no more. Across this spectrum there are several schools of thought. Some of these are outlined in the appendix.

In his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Professor E. J. Young cites Church Father Theodore of Mopsuestia as one who took the Song literally. This led him to reject it from the canon, for which he was condemned in AD 533 at Constantinople. (In 1544 Calvin condemned Sebastian Castillio for a development of this same view. Castillio claimed the book was 'lascivious and obscene'.) Without condoning such radicalism, Young agrees with this broad approach. It reminds us, he says, 'in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is'. Like others, he then wants to extend the application beyond the purity of human love to include something higher, seeing here not an allegory, or even a type of Christ and his church, but a subject with a higher meaning.

The various interpretations probably all shed some light on the book. Without necessarily using Young's word 'parable' to denote the view, it is basically his approach that I adopt in this commentary. It cuts the Gordian knot and is the approach that in my opinion provides the best interpretative framework. I believe that, when he wrote, the author had in mind both a natural and a spiritual understanding, and that those who originally received it as Scripture understood it both in terms of human love and intimacy and as a portrait of the loving relationship between God and his people.

Raewynne Whiteley puts it like this: 'Song of Songs could be understood as a superb love poem, evocative and rich in imagery. As such it sets forth a high standard for mutual love and encourages the celebration of love and beauty. However, as we understand the further dimension of God's love, it becomes an intimate invitation into relationship with God, celebrating the goodness of love, the beauty of passion and the tenderness of God.'

But on what basis do we take this view? When we look at Proverbs, another book closely connected with Solomon, we find references to the women Wisdom and Folly and to the wiles of the adulteress. It is commonly accepted that such references teach us both about fidelity in marriage and in God's covenant with his people. In a similar way, the Song works on two levels. Passages such as Psalm 45; Isaiah 62:4-5; Hosea 1-3 and Malachi 2:14 seem to do the same.

When Paul speaks to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-25, we recall how he immediately moves to the subject of Christ and his church: 'Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands

in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy ...'

He adds, 'This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband' (Ephesians 5:32–33).

Here is a clue to the full understanding of the Song. It speaks not only about the important matter of human love between a man and his bride, but also the mysterious intimacy that exists, and that is to be cultivated, between true believers and their Lord and Saviour, Christ. Surely it is the sort of thing that we find in the Song that Paul has in mind when he writes, for example, 'I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him' (2 Corinthians 11:2).

Other New Testament Scriptures that may relate back to the Song are references to Christ as the Bridegroom (Matthew 9:15; Luke 5:35; John 3:29; Revelation 19:7; 21:9; 22:17).

Contemporary application of the Song

In our own day a study of this ancient book is crucially needed in both these areas.

Firstly, because in this modern world of mass media, through advertising, cinema, television and the World Wide Web, we are inundated with false images of love, sex and marriage. We are bombarded with misleading ideas and, even if we keep our minds as pure as we ought, it is still very easy for inaccurate concepts to worm their way in and have their debilitating effect on us. In 2003 *Being Human*, a report by the Church of England's Doctrine Commission, spoke of 'saturation of virtually all channels of communication by sexual imagery of an increasingly explicit kind'. All of us—virgins or not, single, married, divorced

or widowed, celibate or sexually active, young or old, male or female—need to be crystal clear on this vital subject.

Then, secondly, there is the vital issue of intimacy with Jesus Christ. Someone may be reading this who is not a believer. One of the purposes of this commentary is to help you to see how lovely the Lord Jesus is, how attractive, how appealing. I want you to fall for him and fall before him. As for believers, I truly hope that this book will help revive and rekindle our first love for him, where such a renaissance is needed. The aim is for us to see again something of Christ's beauty and glory, his comeliness and splendour, and so to be drawn to him. The Song of Songs can be of tremendous help to us in this direction.

The title of the Song

The book's title, or superscription, as found in our Bibles, is 'Solomon's Song of Songs'. This catchy title reflects something of the poetry of the original Hebrew. How old the details on this 'title page' are we do not know for sure. However, it seems to be authentic. It tells us three things.

1. Solomon

This is a book by or about Solomon, or at least it has something to do with him. Is it simply dedicated to him, or in his style, or one that was his favourite? It is difficult to be totally sure who the author was, but there is no reason to reject out of hand the tradition that it was Solomon. Also called Jedidiah, 'beloved of the LORD' (2 Samuel 12:25), Solomon has sometimes been regarded as an Old Testament parallel to the apostle John. Some see the references to him within the book as peripheral, but his name is mentioned seven times (1:1,5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11,12). There are also references to 'the king' (1:4,12; 7:5). The book seems to come from a time when Israel was peaceful and united. Note references to Jerusalem, Carmel, Hermon, etc. It is worth remembering that in Hebrew the name Solomon is similar to

the word *Shalom*, peace, as is Shulammitte (the term used to refer to the woman in 6:13). At the start of the book the idea of peace and fulfilment is in the background.

There is something attractive about the ancient Jewish view that the Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the works, respectively, of Solomon's earlier, middle and later years. Henry Morris is one modern writer who takes this view. He argues that here Solomon has in mind his first love and bride, Naamah, an Ammonitess, mother of Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 12:13), whom Solomon must have married in his late teens. Morris backs up this speculation by noting the reference to Engedi (1:14), just across the Dead Sea from Ammon, and the use of the word 'pleasant', possibly a diminutive of Naamah, in 1:16. The fact that Solomon later went astray in the very area of human and divine intimacy, with his many wives and his idolatrous ways, does not of itself undermine the book's value. Indeed, this factor acts as a warning sign discouraging the idea that there is any easy way to escape such temptations.

If we accept that Solomon is the author, the book dates from somewhere in the middle of the tenth century BC. Many who deny this view, on linguistic or other grounds, want to give it a much later date.

2. Song

It is a song—here a pleasant and joyful thing, as songs usually are, 'to stir up the affections and to heat them', as Matthew Henry puts it. It is poetry, which is good for stirring the emotions but can also be useful for didactic ends. We all know what it is to have the words of a song in our heads—whether we want it there or not. In English, the book is sometimes known as 'The Song' and sometimes, slightly inaccurately, as 'Canticles' (from the Latin Vulgate's *Canticum Canticorum*, The Song of Songs).

3. *Song of songs*

'Song of songs' could mean a song made up of different songs, a collection, a 'best of' compilation even. Although one song, it has various parts. However, the phrase probably means 'the best of songs' and is similar to biblical phrases such as 'vanity of vanities', 'King of kings' and 'Holy of holies' (hence the penchant for this term for the Song among older writers). The Aramaic Targum says that out of ten songs, including those of Moses, Deborah and Hannah, this is Scripture's ninth and best song. We learn that Solomon 'spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five' (1 Kings 4:32). Here we have the very best of them, the most beautiful. Nick Hornby has written of popular music that 'In the end it's songs about love that endure the best.' This is certainly a song about love. It is not only Solomon's best song but inspired Scripture, and so doubly worthy of careful and diligent study. It also has, as has been suggested above, the greatest theme of all—Jesus Christ, the one who is love personified. Puritan James Durham says it deals with the best subject (Christ and his church), in its most glorious aspect (their mutual love), is an excellent composition with a captivating style, and comprehensively provides 'an armoury and storehouse of songs' suitable 'for every case' and 'for all sorts of believers'.

An outline of its construction

Some see the Song as a collection rather than as a single literary unit, identifying as few as six, or as many as over thirty, different poems here. Others argue for a greater unity. The Song may lack the plot one expects from a story, but it forms a coherent totality that is the result of more than merely assembling an anthology. However the Song was put together, there is a definite cohesion, with the same characters, recurrent phrases and ideas, and similar language throughout.

Some writers reject the idea of linear development through the book but, while there is no consensus on details, there is some agreement on the broad narrative structure. The order is: first, a courtship period, which probably includes formal betrothal (1:1-3:5); second, the wedding (3:6-5:1); and third, married life (5:2-8:14). S. Craig Glickman states that all commentators accept that 'the wedding procession' (3:6-11) forms a unit. He believes that the lovemaking sections (4:1-5:1; 7:1-10), are almost as clear-cut. As 4:1-5:1 follows the wedding procession, has the beloved being addressed for the first time as a bride and sees her wearing a veil, it is reasonable to understand it as a wedding-night scene.

The section 7:1-10 has its corollary in 7:11-8:3. The section that links 3:6-5:1 and 7:1-8:3 is 5:2-6:13. This is a 'conflict and solution narrative' that can be seen as bridging the gap between the lovemaking of 4:1-5:1 and its more intense parallel in 7:1-10. That leaves the opening and closing sections, 1:1-3:5 and 8:4-14. The first of these is probably a courtship section rather than a flashback, the only such scene occurring near the end of the book, where the climax and resolution appear. The courtship can be split after 2:3, where there is increased intensity. Glickman thus ends up with seven or eight sections: 1:1-2:3; 2:4-3:5; 3:6-11; 4:1-5:1; 5:2-6:13; 7:1-8:4; 8:5-14 (or 8:5-9; 8:10-14).

Some writers are uneasy about the idea that the pair marry before the end. Those who take a 'spiritual' view rightly point out that the relationship between Christ and his church is most often seen in terms of betrothal here on earth and marriage in the world to come. However, back in the seventeenth century, Puritan Edward Pearse wrote of there being a threefold marriage between Christ and his people. He denotes these as personal, mystical and heavenly.

By 'personal' he means Christ 'the Word made flesh', what

theologians call the hypostatic union. This is foundational. By ‘mystical’ he means ‘being joined to the Lord and being one spirit with him’. This is our initial participation in Christ. By ‘heavenly’ he means the glorious union in heaven, the consummation to come. This involves full possession and enjoyment for ever. Here in the Song of Songs it is this ‘mystical’ marriage that is in mind.

Because of these and other issues, different writers have different outlines for the contents of the Song. In this book we shall use the following plan:

1:1 Clarifications: A basic introduction

1:2-4 Craving: What people rightly want and why

1:5-8 Courtship: Self-perceptions and desires—getting it right

1:9-2:2 Commitment: Models of care, devotion and fellowship

2:3-17 Coming together: The nature of true love

3:1-5 Crisis: A lover lost, a lover sought, a lover found

3:6-11 Ceremony: Two lovers married—a wedding procession

4:1-5:1 Consummation: Praising, wooing and loving

5:2-8 Coldness: The loss of close covenant communion

5:9-6:12 Captivation: True beauty and where is it found

6:13-8:4 Completeness: The nature of true love in its maturity

8:5-14 Continuing: How to continue, commence and complete a loving covenant relationship

As has already been stated, some deny that events are presented in a largely sequential way. Others posit many dream

sequences, flashbacks and reminiscences. Some do this from a quite proper concern to avoid suggesting any pre-marital sexual encounters in the book. There is, however, no need to resort to such devices in order to maintain this position.

We should also note that the Song is constructed with two main characters and a sort of chorus.

1. *The beloved—the woman, the ‘beloved’ (NIV), the Shulammitte*

She appears to be a young country girl, possibly from Shunem in Lower Galilee (see 6:13), possibly Naamah the Ammonitess. She is betrothed to her lover and marries him. For over half the time she is the one who speaks (fifty-five out of 117 verses). She is an active initiator. She corresponds to the woman in betrothal and marriage and to God’s people in ‘spiritual’ terms.

2. *The lover—the man, King Solomon, her ‘lover’ (NIV)*

His speeches take up just under forty per cent of the book. He exemplifies the role of the man in a male-female relationship and illustrates Christ’s love for his people.

3. *The friends*

From time to time we also have comments from ‘the friends, the daughters of Jerusalem’. Their contribution is small, just over five per cent, although they also act as an audience at some points, a sort of sounding board for the woman’s ideas. Who exactly they are is disputed. Are they ladies-in-waiting at Solomon’s court, friends of the woman, or general onlookers? They act as observers and serve to draw the woman out.

The nature of Hebrew is such that, although there is sometimes a doubt, it is usually clear whether a male or a female, a single person or more than one, is speaking.

There is something here, then, not only for men and for

women on the matter of courtship, love and marriage, but also for all who look on and see such things happening.

A summary of the narrative

It is useful, finally, to have an idea of the storyline that, I believe, underlies the unfolding of the book. Perhaps ‘storyline’ is too strong a term—this is a song, not a novel or a play. Despite the denials of some, however, a plot is detectable. We can debate details, but it seems that the beloved was part of a family where the father had died, or was no longer on the scene for some other reason, and where she was under the authority of her half-brothers. Naturally beautiful, she was a somewhat neglected soul, forced by her guardians to work long hours under a hot sun in the vineyards and in other agricultural pursuits.

One day a handsome stranger appears and shows interest in her. This man, it turns out, is King Solomon. He sees her hidden beauty, wins her heart, betroths her to him, marries her and takes her into his palace. Although there comes a time when she takes his love for granted, and so drives him away, they are reconciled and come to a mature love that goes on into the future with no sign of ending.