

Exegetical Analysis of

THE SONG OF SONGS

Evaluating Hermeneutical issues present in the Text

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The Song of Songs has been a riddle and a fascination since long. The major problem a commentator must face with this book is deciding what sort of literature this is and what basic approach to take in interpreting it. It includes some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible. The poetry is apparently human love-poetry, even erotic love-poetry. Many theories have been given to explain it, some making it an allegory of the divine love, some seeing a ritual background to it, some breaking it into fragments.

Origins

It is a collection of love songs. The singular form of the title “the Song of Songs” seems to suggest a unified composition, but the term “Song” is frequently used collectively in Hebrew¹. The title at the beginning of Isaiah (“The vision of Isaiah”) leads no one to read the book of Isaiah as a single vision, even though the separate sections of this book are not clearly distinguished from one another.

Tradition remembers as the most glorious of all Israelite kings. A large harem and interesting relationships with women come with this territory. The rabbis of the first century A.D. thought that Solomon’s songs, as contained in the Song. Had been collected and written down by the same officials of the Judean king Hezekiah who had also put together a collection of Solomon’s proverbs (Prov. 25:1).

¹The expression “Song of Songs” is a superlative, like “king of kings” (Dan. 2:37), “holy of holies” (the “most holy” of Exod 26:33), or “ornament of ornaments” (the “full womanhood” of Ezek 16:7). The “Song of Songs” is simply the song—incomparable and most beautiful.

The Cultural Background

Solomon was thought to be the wisest of all human beings (1 Kings 4:29-34) and was therefore regarded as the patron of wisdom. Just as the cultic poetry (Psalms) stood under the patronage of David, the wisdom poetry was related to Solomon. Such patronage does not refer to authorship in the modern sense. Reflecting on the course of the world in first century B.C. Alexandrian book of wisdom written in Greek, one thousand years after Solomon carries the title. “The Wisdom of Solomon”.

The world under Solomon’s patronage was the world of upper class, of high officials and wisdom teachers who provided their sons an education. The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. bewail the collapse of this world. Their sons, used to spending their time singing and making secular music are compelled to carry millstones (Lam. 5:13-14). The wisdom teacher was the third bearer of religious knowledge in the ancient world, along with the priest, who administered the household of God in the temple, and the prophet who spoke God’s word. The wise ones did not gain their knowledge like the priests, through patriarchal instruction and contact with the holy, or like the prophets, through God’s personal address, but rather through their own alert minds, through observation of the course of everyday affairs, and through attention to the experiences of earlier generations. They regarded humanity and its work, the world and its affairs, as creation of God.

Love was an area of human life that particularly puzzled the wise. As in Prov. 30:19, “and the way of a man with a girl”. Yet wise men and teachers were less interested in the motivation than in the dangers there of. Their instructions in matters of love are remarkably

sensuous. They reject adultery primarily because it infringes on the rights of other men. While the students were scratching the admonitions onto one side of their papyri and ostraca², they, and those of their teachers who retained something of their youth, were adding a series of love songs to the other side. We find this practice in Egypt, and the Egyptian love songs are closer in language and mentality to the Bible's songs.

GENRE

From the structure, we conclude that the Song of Songs is a collection of individual love songs. Yet, the designation "Love Song" is description of a very general category of material such as "psalm". It is not a classification of genre. In 1935, F. Horst developed the following literary genres: Song of admiration; self-description; the tease; song of yearning; the description of a love related experience; the descriptive song; the boasting song; and comparisons and allegory.

i) The Songs of admiration

This genre is usually concerned with the adornment of the individual—clothing, decoration, etc. , instead of a physical attributes of a person. For example in 1:9-11. Also it relates the song of praise about the woman sung by the women in the harem. In 6:10, is the song of admiration for him.

ii) Self-description

This genre in the Song of Songs is spoken only by the women. Examples are 1:5-6, 8:8-10. The self-description arises out of situations in which the woman must justify her physical features or defend herself.

²Pottery shards used as writing material.

iii) The Tease

A “teasing song” is assumed had its roots in the general celebration of marriages in the ancient world. And still we find in some parts of the Asian culture. The tease in 1:7-8, as a familiar theme in love literature. In the Song, the man and woman engage in a light dialogue in which she inquires concerning his whereabouts.

iv) Song of yearning

This genre usually mirrors the desire of the lovers to share in one another’s presence. In 1:2-4 the woman longs for the kisses of her lover. In 8:6, the woman is asking for the presence of her lover over a period of time.

v) The descriptive song

It usually gives a detailed picture of the physical features of the man or woman. It has a long history in the ancient Near East. Examples are: 4:1-7, 7:1-6.

vi) The boasting songs

This genre boasts of the uniqueness of the woman. For example in 6:9, “one alone is my dove, my perfect one”.

vii) Comparisons and allegories

A “comparison” reflects an independent rhetorical device within a given genre rather than a specific form itself. We recognize 1:13-14 as a comparison. An example of allegory is 2:15.

The designations of genre in the Song of Songs lead one to a consideration of the poetic character of the book. The general view is that the songs reflect an artistic style which incorporates the variety of symbolism, repetitions, and rhetorical devices. It is a high quality of Song because of its parallels with the sophisticated Egyptians love lyrics. The internal evidence

of the Song does not provide an interpreter with an accurate way of distinguishing between the established categories of “popular” and “artistic” poetry.

Chiastic Structure

Many biblical scholars have suggested that the Song of Songs is chiastic. They often have an overly mathematical notion of how a literary chiasmus works; that is, they demand perfect symmetry. Chiastic perfection is rare unless the text is small. John Watts suggest that the Song of Songs is a unified work with chiastic structure and is composed of thirteen individual songs for presentation by a male and a female soloist with a chorus. He uses “soprano” for the woman’s part, a “tenor” for the man’s part, and a “chorus” for the girls of Jerusalem. The following is the chiastic structure of Song of Songs.

- A I. Chorus and soprano; the entrance (1:2-4)
- B II. Soprano; the virgin’s education I (1:5-6)
- C III. Soprano and chorus; finding the beloved (1:7-8)
- D IV Tenor, chorus, and soprano; the first song of mutual love (1:9-2:7)
- E V Soprano and tenor; the invitation to depart (2:8-17)
- F VI Three wedding night songs (3:1-5; 3:6-11; 4:1-15)
 - F_a a. Soprano; the bride’s anxiety (3:1-5)
 - F_b b. Chorus; the bride comes to the groom (3:6-11)
 - F_c c. Tenor; the flawless bride I (4:1-15)
- G VII Soprano, tenor, and chorus; the consummation (4:16-5:1)
- F’ VIII Three wedding-night songs (5:2-16; 6:1-3; 6:4-10)
 - F_a’ a. Soprano, tenor, and chorus; the bride’s pain (5:2-8)

- F_b' b. Chorus and soprano; the bride recovers the groom (5:9-6:3)
- F_c' c. Tenor and chorus; the flawless bride II (6:4-10)
- E' IX Soprano, chorus, and tenor; leaving girlhood behind (6:11-7:1)
- D' X Tenor and soprano; the second song of mutual love (7:2-8:4)
- C' XI Chorus and soprano; claiming the beloved (8:5-7)
- B' XII Chorus and soprano; the virgin's education II (8:8-12)
- A' XIII Tenor, chorus, and soprano; the farewell (8:13-14)

The above analysis shows repetition, allusion to prior texts, and sometimes contrasts with prior texts in the paired songs. This commentary argues that the Song develops a dramatic transformation of the bride; many texts throughout the Song, not only those in a chiastic pattern, describe transformation.

The Interpretation of the Song

The major problem a commentator must face with this book is deciding what sort of literature this is and what basic approach to take in interpreting it. The following are the four ways of dealing with the question.

i) Allegory

Basic to the allegorical method is the idea that a given passage contains no factual or historically true record of any past event, but is merely a vehicle for some deeper spiritual truth. The grammatical –historical meaning of the text is ignored, so that what the original author said takes second place to what the interpreter wants to say. Those commentators who allegorize the Song ignore the male/female relationship so vividly described in the poem, and interpret the

whole book in terms of God's dealing with Israel or Christ's relationship with his Church. Underlying most of this sort of handling of the text is an implicit acceptance of the Platonic or Gnostic belief that physical things, particularly those related to sexuality, are intrinsically evil, and are to be shunned by those who are seeking the spiritual life.

The assumption that the Song is purely allegorical has been amongst evangelicals. It does not settle the question whether their basic approach is true to the text itself. The recently published comment of the renowned Reformed theologian, John Murray provides a summary of difficulties raised by this approach: 'I cannot now endorse the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. I think the vagaries of interpretation given in terms of the allegorical principle indicate that there are no well-defined hermeneutical canons to guide us in determining the precise meaning and application if we adopt the allegorical view. However, in terms of biblical analogy, the Song could be used to illustrate the relation of Christ to His church. The marriage bond is used in Scripture as a pattern of Christ and the church. If the Song portrays marital love and relationship, then it may be used to exemplify what is transcendentally true in the bond that exists between Christ and the church.

ii) Typology

Many writers and interpreters make no distinction between this method and allegory, but we need to recognize the difference. Whereas allegory denies or ignores the historicity and imposes a deeper, hidden or spiritual meaning on the text, typology recognizes the validity of the Old Testament account in its own right, but then finds in that account a clear, parallel link with some event or teaching in the new Testament which the Old Testament account foreshadows. Many commentators have argued that typology is the correct approach to the Song of Songs. For

the Jewish interpreters the account was understood in terms of the Lord's relationship with Israel. The prophet Hosea (chaps 1-3) used his own unhappy marital situation to illustrate spiritual fornication that Israel committed by turning to worship the Baal, so it was any easy step from there to reading the Song of Songs in a similar fashion.

There are many variations on this basic theme. Some identify the beloved with Wisdom who is sought by the lover, for example as in Proverbs 8-9. Others read the Song in terms of another prophet them, the Lord's, or Messiah's, loving preservation of the faithful Remnant who rejected the paganism of the bulk of the population and followed God in obedience.. in Christian community the Song is understood to describe the loving concern Christ, the lover/bridegroom, has for his church, the beloved/bride, and for the individual believer. Each verse is then read through Christological eyes for what it can reveal about that relationship. A common medieval interpretation among Roman Catholic commentators identified the beloved with the Virgin Mary whom the true believer worships. There is an Old testament 'Love Song', Psalm 45, which is quoted Christologically in the New Testament. It is a 'love song' in honour of a royal wedding.

iii) Drama

This approach to the interpretation of Song of Songs is a church tradition. In 250 A.D. Origen declared that the Song was 'a marriage-song which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama'. This idea was largely ignored until the last century, when Delitzsch re-introduced it in his commentary. In this context, it is essential to distinguish *drama* from the similar but different genres of *liturgy*, *ritual* and *pageant*, as these are applied to ancient cultic texts.

iv) Natural

This approach is best described as *natural* or *literal* interpretation. This approach interprets the Song as what it appears naturally to be a series of poems which speak clearly and explicitly of the feelings, desires, concerns, hopes and fears of two young lovers, without any need to allegorize or typologize or dramatize to escape the clear erotic elements present in the text. The creation of mankind in the image of God, male and female, that is, as sexual being, was no accident. It was the divine intention from the beginning for the purpose of procreation, fellowship, mutual support and dependence. In one sense, the Song of Songs is an extended commentary on the creation story of the first love-song in history. ‘Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”’. A frequent Old Testament term for the sexual union of men and women is the verb ‘know’ (e.g. in Gen 4:1). It is to be noted that the most intimate knowledge of another person is not on the basis of intellectual exchange, but in the intimate sexual union of male and female. In this light it should not be considered obscene that at least one book of the Bible be dedicated to the celebration of one of the central realities of creation hood. The Song does celebrate the dignity and purity of human love. This is didactic and moral in its purpose.

Typological and Allegorical Recasting

Septuagint is the oldest example of work that moves beyond the traditional Hebrew text translated into Greek in first century B.C. The translator attempted to produce a literal version as possible, leaving un-translated individual words he did not understand. The Septuagint has no trace of allegorizing or spiritualizing the message. Many times the erotic sense is more blunt than in the original Hebrew.

Three passages in rabbinic texts of first and the second century A.D. show that the natural, literal meaning of the Song of Songs was still wide-spread in Judaism at that time. One of the 90 A.D. saying is: “Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: He who recites a verse of the Songs and turns it into a kind of love-song, and he who recites a verse in the banquet hall not at the proper time bring evil into the world”. When God asks what should keep people busy while eating and drinking the rabbis answer: the appropriate teachings of the law. In 140 A.D., a tradition is quoted by Rabbi Simeon: There were no days better than the fifteenth of Ab and the Day of Atonement. For on those days Jerusalemite girls go out in borrowed white dresses, so as not to shame those who owned none. They go out and dance in the vineyards and say: “Follow, look around and see, choose what you want. Don’t look for beauty, look for family”. And so it says, “Go forth you daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals and in the day of gladness of his heart” (3:11). At harvest time festivals in the vineyards and orchards gave young men and women a chance to meet. During these festivals portions of the Song of Songs were sung³.

God, sexuality and allegory

In Hebrew the word Adam translated in Genesis 1:27, is neither the proper name Adam, nor the male species man, but rather the generic term humanity. This verse states, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”. Here the sexual differentiation of the species of humanity into male and female categories, is part of God’s ordained plan. The mutual complementarity’s of two sexes is seen in the text. But the

³For example many interpreters argue 2:8-13 as one poem, that the beloved arrives and invites his lover to go with him to the vineyards.

Bible does in fact use the metaphor of marriage to illustrate the relationship between God and his people. The marriage is the covenant bond, the husband represents God and the wife stands for his people Israel. In Ezk. 16:8, “I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you”. Thus various commentators have seen in the relationship of the two lovers in the Song of Songs an illustration of the relationship between God and Israel, or between Christ and the church, or between God and the individual believer. The many differing behaviour patterns of the lovers have been used as illustrations of the spiritual walk of the believer; the desire for and the consolations of intimacy, the articulation of praise, the pain of absence, the clouding of fellowship, the restoration of communion. It must be remembered that whilst God is eternal spirit, we are earthly bodily creatures. In this exposition, the emphasis is on the natural interpretation of the Song as a warm, positive celebration of human love and sexuality in the context of marriage. Also those who interpret the Song of Songs following the typological analogies used by the Old Testament prophets and the New testament apostles, need to take care that their exposition does not go into extreme allegories. The excess of well meaning interpretation should not over rule the very spirit of hermeneutical approach.

The Fourteen Songs

Michael D. Goulder presents a new interpretation of the Song of Songs. It implies a slightly different understanding of many of the words and phrases in the poem. He made a new translation. The translator has a choice; either he can make a literal translation of the Hebrew, and say in fluent English what he means in the notes, or he can make a fluent version and justify this by reference to the Hebrew in the notes. He preferred the second. He rendered it into rough

English verses—some loose hexameters, and some traditional rhyming lyric meters, as the subject matter seemed to require. These are set out in the poem's fourteen Songs. Here in the Song of Songs, there are three speakers, the King, the Princess, and the Chorus. The following is the division of fourteen Songs.

1. The Arrival (1:1-18).
2. The Audience (1:9-2:7).
3. The Courtship (2:8-17).
4. In the Night (3:1-5).
5. The Procession (3:6-11).
6. The Wedding (4:1-7).
7. The Consummation (4:8- 5:1).
8. A Knock at the Door (5:2-9).
9. A Lover Lost and Found (5:10- 6:3).
10. The One and Only (6:4-12)
11. The Dance (7:1-10).
12. A Night in the Country (7: 11- 8:4).
13. Love's Demand (8:5-10).
14. The Queen (8: 11-14).

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