

CLASS NOTES --- The SONG of SOLOMON

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Remarks in brackets "[...]" have been inserted by me.

Even the book of Jonah has not provoked more widely differing opinions than the Song of Solomon. Is it just an oriental love song, the love frankly sensual after the oriental pattern? If so, how did such a book get into the Bible? Is it an allegory of religious experience, as some say, of the history of Israel, or of the Church, as others say? But even in that case, why should the Bible have an allegory that describes love in such a fashion? Does the book really belong in the Bible? If it does, what is its meaning and purpose and value?

The best way to answer such questions is to let the book speak for itself. Given a fair hearing, it will authenticate itself as primarily a love story; a dramatic poetic delineation of true, pure love of a man and a woman for each other.

If it were no more than that, the Song of Solomon would have moral beauty and spiritual value of a high order. But it is more than that. Without making an allegory of it, we may be able to see in it something of what many saintly and scholarly Christians have found -- an illustration of the wonder of the divine love and of the loving relationship with God into which those should enter who have been saved by His grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Him, man comes to know and to love God, and so to find the supreme fulfillment of the religion of the Bible, Old Testament and New. Of this supreme fulfillment, we may find an earthly and human, but very beautiful, illustration in the story of the love of a man and a woman for each other, told in the Song of Solomon.

The book, with its story of a human love so strong and pure and true, "taxes the spiritual quality of the reader," to quote Dr. W.M. Anderson. Dr. Campbell Morgan says that the man who does not like this book "has never been in love and probably never will be."

But this is not the real test the book holds for us. Dr. C.I. Scofield says: "Nowhere in Scripture does the unspiritual mind tread upon ground so mysterious and incomprehensible, while the saintliest men and women of all ages have found in it a source of pure and exquisite delight."

The letters of the Scotch preacher Samuel Rutherford are devotional classics, and they are full of this book. The author of one of our most beautiful hymns, "Jesus, Thou Joy of loving Hearts," was Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote eighty six sermons on the first two chapters of the Song of Solomon before he died, and charged his favorite disciple, Gilbert, to continue his unfinished work. Origen wrote what Jerome considered his best commentary, ten volumes on these eight chapters.

Two things should be said before the story of the book is told.

First, if you have never read the Song of Solomon in the Revised version (or other modern translation), by all means do so. You will not find in it the expressions that have given to some readers of the King James Version a prejudice against the book.

Secondly, the title does not necessarily mean that Solomon wrote this book. It is good to think that he did -- that he was great enough to write such a contrast and rebuke to his own polygamous life. But the title may with perfect faithfulness to the Hebrew be read, "The Song of Songs, which is to Solomon" (dedicated to him), or "for Solomon" (addressed to him), or even "of Solomon" (about him), though he is not the main, nor by any means the most admirable character in the story.

--- AND NOW THE STORY ---

The first verse is the title: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's." The structure shows it to be a poetic drama in three acts. This is seen more easily, yet still not plainly enough, in the Revised Version. The end of Act I and the end of Act II are both marked by the same verse, which is still a third time repeated, and is, as we shall see, of the utmost significance to the author's purpose.

ACT I takes place in Solomon's palace at Jerusalem, and opens with a chorus of the palace women in praise of Solomon. The gist of this chorus is, "Who wouldn't love King Solomon?"

The palace women get an unexpected answer. There is unwillingly in the palace -- we shall presently be told how it happened -- a girl called the Shulamite, probably from the name of her native village. She speaks up apologetically but positively, saying that she knows her sun tan looks really black in comparison with their fair complexions; that her brothers made her keep their vineyard; that thus she had not kept a vineyard of her own.

This vineyard, as near the end of the drama she plainly says and here leaves to be easily inferred, is more than her complexion. It is her shepherd, whom her soul loves. Where is he now with his flock? Would that she were there, for she has no reason to hide their love!

Sarcastically, the women of the palace answer: "Fairest among women, if you don't know where he is, all you have to do is go look for the flock!"

Solomon enters and speaks. He calls her "my dear" [*"Darling" in NASB*]. He compares her to one of the spirited steeds of the chariot Pharaoh had given him, compliments her cheeks and her neck, framed with the plaits of her hair, and promises silver and gold ornaments.

She does not want them. She has something more precious -- the fragrant little memento of her shepherd which she carries on the simple chain around her neck. Perhaps she puts her hand upon it as she answers: "While the king sat at his table, my spikenard sent forth its fragrance. My beloved is unto me as a cluster of myrr, that lieth betwixt my breasts. My beloved is unto me as a cluster of henna flowers of Engedi."

Solomon looks at her admiringly. "You are lovely, my dear, you are lovely. Your eyes are like doves."

"It is my beloved who is lovely." And she pictures their trysting place, the greensward [*a flat grassy place*], overarched by cedars and firs [*lovely trees*]. There she is at home; here in the royal palace she feels as out of place as the humble crocus of the plain or lily of the valley.

"Even if you are like the humble lily, my dear, you are a lily among thorns," says Solomon, with a glance at the other women.

The Shulamite is not impressed. Her reply is not uncomplimentary to anyone, as was the king's comparison to the women of the palace, but it is so discouraging to him that he gives up for the time and leaves her. She is too occupied with her shepherd, who is "as the apple tree among the trees of the wood," with her memories of their love and of their happiness together.

When Solomon has gone, she turns to the women and says the significant thing we shall hear her say twice again: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, or by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake love, until he please" [*do not awaken nor stir up love, until love itself shall please* -- *Berkeley Version*]. She is saying that love is not a thing to be bought or forced or pretended, but a thing to come spontaneously, to be given freely and sincerely.

The remainder of chapter two is her reminiscence of a spring day when her shepherd lover had come for her, his love inspiring him to real poetry.

"My beloved spake, and said to unto me, 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the trutledove is heard in our land; the fig tree ripeneth her green figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth their fragrance [*it is Spring!*]. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the steep place, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely."

She tried to say that he had better be thinking of the little foxes and how to prevent the damage they would do to the vineyard. But she did not get far with that, and broke off to answer as she felt: "My beloved is mine, and I am his." And as she thought of him with his flock among the lilies, her heart cried out to him: "Until the day be cool, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart [*deer*] upon the mountains of Bether [*separation*]."

The first four verses of chapter three are her account of a dream she had one night after she was carried off to the king's palace in Jerusalem. In the dream she had gone about the city seeking "him whom my soul loveth," and finding him at last had gone with him to her mother's home. With the next verse the first act ends, that thrice-repeated verse already quoted and found again at the end of the second act.

ACT II takes place in Solomon's pavilion on Mount Lebanon, and begins with a chorus of villagers welcoming the king and his retinue on their arrival.

Chapter four relates Solomon's second attempt at love making, in which he waxes eloquent over the Shulamite's charms. Her eyes, even behind her veil, are like doves, as he had said before; her hair, like a flock of goats lying on Gilead's mountainside; her teeth, like a flock of ewes newly shorn and freshly washed, perfect pairs with none missing; her lips, like a scarlet thread; her temples, like a piece of pomegranate behind her veil; her neck, like the tower of David ornamented with the shields of his mighty men; her breasts, like fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies.

But his compliments make no impression, so he leaves her to her memories and dreams which are like myrr and frankincense to her. For waking or sleeping, she has her shepherd in her thoughts, and again, in contrast with King Solomon's, she recalls his lovemaking. Here also is poetry of rare beauty, in the remaining verses of chapter four and the first verse of chapter five.

She remembers how, with love as pure as ardent, he had called her "my sister, my bride;" had said that she is "a spring shut up, a fountain sealed," in tribute to her purity and fidelity; and had likened her to a garden of beautiful flowers and "pleasant fruits" and "all chief spices" -- all of which, she breaks in on his praises to say, are for him only. She seems to hear him answer that no less than ever he is sure of it, sure of it even though she is in King Solomon's palace.

She has another dream, which next morning she relates to the palace women. She was asleep but her heart waked, and she heard her shepherd's voice at her door back in her village home. She pretended to be unwilling to get up and dress and go with him. But when she could keep up the pretense no longer and went to the door, he was gone.

She started out to look for him, and, after the strange way of dreams, found herself not in her village, but in the city. Presently, making her way along its unfamiliar streets, she found herself in the ungentle hands of the watchman.

Waking from this nightmare, she asks the palace women to tell her beloved, should they find him, how truly she loves him.

They become interested, and they want to know, "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women?"

What a chance to sing his praises, and how she does it! She proves herself a poet too, and if Solomon had heard her description of her shepherd lover, he would not have wondered that his own compliments to her charms made so little impression. Omitting her beautifully poetic description of her shepherd, let us note only how she sums it all up: "the chiefest among ten thousand ... altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem." Perfection, nothing less.

Now the women of the palace are really interested. They ask: "Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women?" Not what is he, their question now is where is he, this paragon?

"Whither hath thy beloved turned him, that we may seek him with thee?" But their offer is declined with thanks. Wherever he may be, he is hers even as she is his.

Enters Solomon again. "You are fair, you are fair, O my dear, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem," he begins. Then as he sees the look in her eyes, he adds a new comparison: "Terrible as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they make me afraid."

Not so afraid, however, that he does not go on. Her teeth are like that flock of ewes, as he had said before; her temples are like a piece of pomegranate, as also he had already observed.

But he sees that he is not getting anywhere with this, so he tries something else. "There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number, but you, my dove, my perfect one, you are the only one for me. There is no one like you. Even the queens and the concubines praise you."

They have something to say to that. "Even if she does deserve all this praise from the king, why should she put on such airs that he would call her 'terrible as an army with banners'? Here she is, just as we are, in the royal harem."

Yes," answers the Shulamite, "but you know how that happened. I was there in the vineyard, seeing whether the vines were budding and the pomegranates in the flower, when the first thing I knew the king's chariots came along. I tried to get out of the way, but --"

"That is true," interrupts the palace women, "and when the guards seized you, we laughed and called to you to come and let us have a look at you."

"Why do you wish to look upon the Shulamite? I am not like the dancer yonder, doing the dance of Mahanaim."

"No, you are not. You are a peasant girl and she is a prince's daughter, with a beauty you could never have." And the chorus of women go into a description of the dancer's physical charms, concluding with the statement, "The king is held captive in her tresses."

But the king is not even looking at her. He is looking at the Shulamite, and he uses bolder language now, perhaps tries to suit action to words, to embrace and kiss her. But when he says anticipatively, "Their mouth (is) like the best wine," she interrupts quickly, saying, "That goeth down smoothly for my beloved ... I am my beloved's; and his desire it toward me."

Solomon accepts his defeat and leaves her to her thoughts of her shepherd lover. Perhaps, still more magnanimously, he not only releases her, but sends for her shepherd to escort her home. Anyway, here is another passage of exquisite beauty, whether it is her reminiscence of a former tryst, or whether it is her greeting when he comes to take her away from the royal pavilion on Lebanon.

"Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages ... at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved."

Her shepherd had called her his sister. So she says: "O that thou wert as my brother ... when I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, and none would despise me. I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother's house."

And as she thinks of being again with him there, nothing now to separate them, she had one last thing to say to the women of the palace, the significant thing she had already said to them twice; "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not up, nor awake love, until he please." And here ends Act II.

ACT III. The third and final act takes place at the Shulamite's native village. It opens with a chorus of villagers asking, "Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?"

The shepherd speaks: "There is the apple tree under which you first knew that you loved me. And there is your mother's cottage, where you were born."

The Shulamite answers: "**Set me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as Sheol; the flashes thereof are flashes of fire, a very flame of Jehovah. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, he would utterly be contemned.**" She knew, this peasant girl who had been offered the dazzling gifts of Solomon the king.

But her brothers want to be sure. They speak now to remind her of what they had said when she was an immature girl. If, when she came to maturity and was sought in marriage, she was a wall, they would dower her with silver, proud of her virtue. If she was a door, they would hide her away in shame.

She answers that she is a wall, that she had proved her character, as Solomon himself had recognized. Let him have his famous vineyard at Gaal-hamon with its fabulous production. "My vineyard, which is mine, is before me," she says, looking at her shepherd.

And her shepherd thinks that there has been enough talking. "Thou that dwellest in the gardens," he says to her, "the companions hearken for thy voice: cause **ME** to hear it."

She is as ready as he to be alone with him. In Solomon's palace, she had called to him to come over the mountains of separation. Now she says, "Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a doe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices."

--- **END OF THE DRAMA** ---

The value of such a book? Its place in the Bible?

It is the Old testament endorsement of monogamy in the face of the most glaring example of polygamy to be found in the Scriptures. It is a powerful plea to the Israel of Solomon's day to return to the God-given ideal of love and marriage.

In the world of our day, in our own native nation, there is a similar ominous departure from that God-given ideal. Sorely needed among us is the message of this Old Testament book, with its beautiful picture of purity and constancy in that affection which may be either the most degrading or the most ennobling of which men and women are capable. The mutual, strong, true love of husband and wife, next to strong true Christian faith in the heart of each one of them, is the foundation and bulwark of the home, and homes thus founded and bulwarked are the security of the nation.

The Song of Solomon is even more than a plea for return to the God-given ideal of love and marriage. In our English Bible, it comes just before the books of the prophets, more than one of whom, like Isaiah the very next in order, set forth the relation between Israel and Jehovah as a marriage relation, and sin on Israel's part as spiritual adultery. The Song of Solomon gives the basis of that conception in its story of the Shulamite maiden and her incorruptibly faithful and unreservedly devoted love for her betrothed.

(This closes the material written by W. Twyman Williams, D.D.)

Some indications that Solomon is NOT the "beloved" in this book!

* The beloved is a **shepherd** -- with a **flock** (not just a shepherd as all of the kings of Israel were called "shepherds"). There is no record in Scripture that Solomon was ever a shepherd. Even in Ecclesiastes two, where he lists all of the things he tried to do in order to find some meaning to life, he does not mention tending sheep.

* The beloved is young and enthusiastic and comes "leaping upon the mountain, skipping upon the hills" (2:8, 9). When Solomon comes on the scene, he is all perfumed and powdered, riding at ease in his luxurious chariot and surrounded by sixty armed guards (3:6 - 8).

* If the beloved is Solomon, why would the daughters of Jerusalem, who knew Solomon better than the newly arrived Shulamite, ask, in effect, "What is so special about Solomon?" (5:9)

* Contrast the somewhat coarse "speech" (probably used on one hundred and forty others he had courted before her) of Solomon in his love making (1:9 - 11; 4:1 - 5; 6:4 - 9; 7:6 - 9-a) with the reserved, tender approach of the shepherd lover (2:10 - 15; 4:7 - 15).

* Contrast Solomon, with his sixty wives and eighty concubines (already), and "virgins without number" (just waiting to join the others in his harem), who could only say, in effect, that she would be his **favorite** wife (6:8, 9) with the **one to one** relationship between the shepherd and the Shulamite (6:3 & 7:10).

* If Solomon is the beloved, how can the exalted place given to love in this book have any real meaning? Can the exhortation of the Shulamite, not to awaken love until it please, really mean much to one who had already "fallen in love" one hundred and forty times and would do so again another eight hundred and sixty times before he died? In what way is love shown to be strong as death when Solomon's love only lasted until he saw the next beautiful woman? How

does this song illustrate that love cannot be bought, when Solomon has used his wealth and position to win wife after wife after wife --? If the love in view in 7:6, 7 is the love of the Shulamite for her shepherd, and not the love of Solomon for her (**in spite of** the "love" of Solomon, as a matter of fact), then the point is well made.

* The beloved was the object of a search by the Shulamite -- and the women at the palace didn't know where he might be found. Why would it be hard to find King Solomon? With his sixty armed men, his chariot and his horses, he could be recognized from a mile away! All they had to do was just to wait in Jerusalem -- he would be back. Earlier in the book (1:7, 8), when she didn't know where he was, the women of the court suggested she go find the sheep -- that he would be with them. Again, this situation does not fit the assumption that Solomon was the beloved.

Additional lessons from the book -- for today.

* There is a warning against a shallow imitation of love which can be "stirred up," and a plea to wait for that true love which comes of its own choice, or rather -- for us today -- by the choice of our Lord.

* We learn that real love lasts, and holds out against all that would seek to destroy it (7:6, 7).

* The story at least illustrates the need for having a true love for **our** "Beloved," our Savior and our Shepherd, which will render us impervious to all the allurements of the world -- and keep us true to Him until he comes for us. When we go "home," leaning on our Beloved, what a joy to be able to say (by His grace), "I am a wall" (8:10-a). There is great spiritual blessing in meditating on the details of the relationship between the Shulamite and her beloved as we see illustrated there our relationship, personally, to Christ.

* It is blessed to notice that the love between the Shulamite and her beloved is not one sided. Not only does she long for fellowship with him, but **he** longs for fellowship with **her** also. How often we miss our time with the Lord, not knowing that He is saying to us, "**Let me see thy countenance** [lifted to Him in worship], **let me hear thy voice** [in prayer]; **for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.**"

William P Heath

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