

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

PREFACE

This book is unique in the Old Testament canon. There is no book in the whole Bible on which more commentaries have been written or more opinions advanced. This is a strange record of the past as compared to its general neglect in the present day. We are glad to observe a few writers discovering its value (See our bibliography for recent works). There is much to learn from these eight short chapters.

We have thought much about our approach to the text. How shall we interpret? There are four approaches made by men in their attempt to understand this book. (1) *Allegorical*—The literal meaning is almost ignored. In the Jewish use of this method of interpretation it becomes the song of God's love for His people. Christians, beginning with Origen in the Third Century saw in this book the love of Christ for the Christian and the love of the believer for His Lord. (2) *Literal*—If we accept the words at their face value they express a song of human love of a man and woman. (3) *Lyrical*—Some have tried unsuccessfully, we believe, to see in the record love lyrics sung at Syrian weddings. (4) *Cultic*—Was this once a pagan ritual accommodated to the worship of Jehovah? This interpretation hardly merits mention.

We ask the serious student to read at least an introduction to this book in addition to the one we give in our text.

We have chosen to use a literal interpretation of this book. However, we are also persuaded it has the potential of wonderful analogous comparisons. We do not want to ignore the emphasis of love and communion with our Lord. We shall follow the format of the BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOKS as found in Ecclesiastes.

Readers unfamiliar with the BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOKS will wonder what to do with the "Thought Questions" or the "Paraphrase" or even the "Fact Questions." There is a very definite reason, and we believe a very practical value for this five-fold format:

(1) TEXT: This is the AMERICAN STANDARD TRANSLATION of 1901. We have found this to be a very accurate rendering of the Greek and Hebrew text. Among the many translations,

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we prefer this one for its faithful adherence to the original. We ask all readers to contemplate these words as the words of God. Nothing could be more important than a thorough assimilation of every word given us by God through the Holy Spirit! Read it and re-read it—then read it again. It is God speaking to you!

(2) **THOUGHT QUESTIONS:** We have prepared these from our reading and understanding of the text. Answer every question with your present understanding of the text. *It is not important that you give the same answer to these questions that we do. It is very, very important that you attempt some answer.* We are attempting to motivate you into a personal involvement in the meaning of God's Word. We would suggest your answers be kept in a notebook. If you do not know—or you must guess—*record your response.* If after you have read the **PARAPHRASE** or the **COMMENT** you wish to change your answer you may do so, but it is vitally important that you express your response to what God has said to you and that you do it in written form.

(3) **PARAPHRASE:** This is the work of Arthur G. Clarke from his book *The Song of Songs* published by Walterick Publishers, Kansas City, Kansas. The reader will note that our interpretation is clearly spelled out in identifying the speakers of this book of dialogue. Please, please, read the paraphrase at least twice. Now refer back to the **THOUGHT QUESTIONS**—do you wish to change an answer, add an answer, or add to an answer—Do it!

(4) **COMMENT:** We want to offer our present understanding of each word in the divine **TEXT**. We wish to be very careful and thorough. For this reason we have read and reread all we could find on the book of Song of Solomon (see our Bibliography). Our **COMMENTS** shall be: (a) *Critical* in the sense that we wish to understand the meaning of each Hebrew word, both in the **TEXT** and in the **CONTEXT**. (b) *Devotional* in the sense that we want to point up the obvious, and oft times the often overlooked application of the **TEXT** to our lives. We make no apology for attempting to reach the conscience

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in our COMMENTS. (c) *Expository*: We mean that the TEXT shall be analytically considered in such a way that the present day Biblical expositor could use it in his teaching. (d) *Homiletical*: We believe many sermons could be preached from Song of Solomon in which the fulness of the union and communion of our Lord could be held up as in no other way. We attempt to offer help in this grand pursuit!

(5) **FACT QUESTIONS**: The basic purpose of these questions is reading comprehension. They are based upon all you have read from the TEXT through the COMMENT. At times we have posed in this section a question or two for discussion where the point of view is open to opinion. In this section is the largest possibility for personal fulfillment. A full honest attempt on the part of the reader to answer these questions could actually form a commentary of his own on the sacred TEXT. No higher accomplishment of personal Bible study could be contemplated than a verse-by-verse personal explanation of God's Word on the part of the reader. If the reader will do this he will have a track record of his spiritual growth to which he can refer in times of discouragement or even in times of joy. Your answers to the **THOUGHT QUESTIONS** can be a preparation and research for your much more complete answers to the **FACT QUESTIONS**.

INTRODUCTION

* By W. G. Moorehead

Angus assigns this book of Scripture to B.C. 1001. The universal voice of antiquity ascribes it to Solomon, and internal evidence confirms this testimony. His songs were a thousand and five, I Kings iv, 32; and this is called the "song of songs," because it is the best of them all.

Key-word, "Beloved"; key verse, vi, 3.

Origen and Jerome tell us that the Jews forbade it to be read by any until he was thirty years old. It certainly needs a degree of spiritual maturity to enter aright into the holy mystery of love which it celebrates. It is possible to read the song amiss; but to such as have attained spiritual maturity, of what age soever, it is one of the most edifying of the sacred writings.

Love to Jesus Christ becomes, through the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, the strongest passion which can sway the human heart. Avarice, ambition, love of power may have more of the unnatural vigor attending fever; this carries with it the quiet, enduring energy of health that brings into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. Those alone who have experienced the power of this love in its intensity are competent judges whether any language used in expressing it may be exaggerated. If the love of God to us is as incomprehensible as is His eternity and omnipresence, it is not surprising that the love of a grateful heart should struggle and strive to declare itself by appealing to the tenderest ties, by using the boldest imagery; for the love of a believer is but a dim reflection of the measureless love of God.

1. The form of the song is somewhat difficult to determine. A drama it certainly is not, although it has been thus described. It presents little or nothing of the features belonging to the drama. While dialogue is found in it, still it is not of a very sustained kind, nor is it very marked. The feature chiefly lacking is a climax, the culminating *finis* with which the drama

* W. G. Moorehead, *Outline Studies in the Books of the Old Testament*, Fleming H. Revell Company, New York, 1893. Pg. 197.

is expected to close. Its form seems to be that of a pastoral poem, with characters presenting quasi-dramatic action. The personages introduced into it are the bridegroom and king; the bride, or spouse; the daughters of Jerusalem, or the court ladies of Solomon's palace. There is scarcely traceable any plot, nor dramatic unity, although the poem is one. Most of the addresses, instead of being dialogues, are soliloquies, apostrophes, or monologues. It has changing scenes. Sometimes the scene is laid in a garden; at others in the palace; then in the country amid pastoral quiet and beauty; and in Jerusalem amidst the noise of a great city.

This much may be confidently asserted, that it is a song of love in Oriental language and imagery, with rests and pauses and varying scenery and conversation.

2. The design of the song. There are three interpretations of the poem advanced by as many schools of expositors. Each of these may be briefly mentioned.

The first is that of the merely literal and erotic. That is, it is held that the poem celebrates the love of Solomon for a young shepherdess who was a member of an agricultural family consisting of a widowed mother and several sons, who lived at Shulem. (The name of the place is derived from the spouse, viz., Shulemite.) The young woman, in the course of her pastoral duties, met with a shepherd to whom, in due time, she became espoused. Her brothers violently opposed the union. She was invited by her lover to accompany him to the fields; but her brothers, to prevent the meeting, sent her to take care of the vineyards. Here, she one day encountered King Solomon, who assisted by his court ladies, endeavored to win her love. But she remained steadfast to her affianced. The king carried her to the city, made her large promises and sought to overcome her scruples by princely presents; but without avail; and her fidelity was finally rewarded by her marriage with the shepherd and gifts from her reconciled brothers.

According to this theory, the scope of the book is to give us an "example of virtue in a young woman who encountered

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and conquered great temptations, and was eventually rewarded." If this is all, belief in its inspiration must be dismissed; and it has no better right to a place in the Bible than a tale from the Arabian Nights, or the sonnets from Shakespeare. Against this theory there are strong objections: (1) It has been doubted whether there was such a place as Shulem whence the spouse derived her name of the Shulemite. (2) It seems obvious that if we accept this view of the book as true, then we must renounce the belief in Solomon's being the author, for it is altogether unlikely that he could have written so manifest an account of his own defeat. (3) The vast majority of Bible students see no ground or foundation for the story detailed above. They find no shepherd in it; no betrothal of the Shulemite with a shepherd; no effort on the part of the king to supplant another in her affections and steal her from him. In short, the story on which the view rests is pure fiction. (4) If it be no more than a love-poem celebrating one of Solomon's amours it is incredible that it should have been incorporated with the other books of the Bible, and for so many centuries held its place with the other inspired books as one of them. It was in the Old Testament canon when the Septuagint version was made, two hundred and fifty years before the advent of the Saviour; it has kept its place there ever since. If it is only a "dissolute love song" God would have found a way to cast it out of His Book ages ago, like the Apocraphal books. (5) The strange and strong hold it has had upon some of the most spiritually minded men the world has ever seen—men like Rutherford, McChene, Gill, Stuart, John Trapp, and Thomas Goodwin—is inexplicable if the song be nothing more than this hypothesis offers. We must reject this theory.

The second view we mention which has been put forward as an explanation of the design of the book is called the moral. The song is regarded as a description of wedded love in the exercise of its highest and purest affections. In this interpretation no spiritual sense is attached to the poem. The great moral sentiments relating to the holy estate of marriage alone

are intended to be inculcated. The foundation for this opinion rests on the union of Solomon with the daughter of Pharaoh. It is held that the poem sings the praises of that princess, and celebrates the happiness the king enjoyed in union with her.

There are very grave objections which may be urged against this theory. We may safely assert that the Egyptian princess is not meant at all nor can be meant by the Shulemite. Some of the difficulties that lie against it may be stated. The delicate daughter of the haughty Pharaoh could not in any supposable manner have ever been the sunburnt keeper of the vineyards, as the spouse is described to have been, ch. i, 6. She could not have been unveiled and beaten by the watchman of Jerusalem, v, 7. She could not have come from the snowy heights of Lebanon when she had no occasion to be within one hundred and twenty miles of its base, iv, 8. And it is very unlikely that she conducted Solomon into her mother's house, which was in Egypt, iii, 4.

Moreover, on this theory it is impossible to account for the remarkable situation of the spouse. She is found wandering through the streets of the great city by night; is smitten by watchmen; her veil is torn rudely from her face, the gravest insult that could be offered an Eastern woman. In fact, her whole conduct is utterly irreconcilable with the Oriental ideas of womanly seclusion and modesty. If this spouse is a veritable woman, having the experience here ascribed to her, then her character is altogether incompatible with Eastern habits of decorum, and is questionable.

The third view is, that the song is an allegory, that under the guise of human love, the love which passes between two loyal and faithful hearts, is set forth the intimate, tender relationship existing between Christ and His people. The frame, we may reverently say, is human conjugal affection. But through this thin, skillfully carved lattice-work there glance out upon us the joy and bliss, the rapture and ecstasy, the strange, tender wondrous play of the deep abiding love of Jesus for His own, and reciprocally, theirs for Him. The Chaldee Targum, the oldest Jewish commentary on the book, entitles

it, "The Songs and Hymns which Solomon the Prophet, King of Israel, Delivered by the Spirit of Prophecy, before Jehovah, the Lord of the Whole Earth." The great body of Christians have always regarded it as a symbolical exhibition of the relations subsisting between the Lord and His people. From first to last, orthodox believers hold it bears the stamp of the allegory. In support of this view the following arguments may be urged: (1) It best accounts for the position of the book in the canon of Scripture. (2) It accords with the instincts of the spiritually-minded. (3) The names of its principal characters indicate that it is an allegory—*Shalomoh*, Solomon, the peaceful one, the prince of peace, and *Shulamith*, also the peaceful one, but feminine—the daughter of peace. These names are believed to be as suggestive, as significant, as Bunyan's "Christian" and "Christiana," or "Faithful" and "Hopeful." Read in this light, we perceive how appropriately the book represents Jesus as the peaceful one, the peace-bringer, and His people as the sharers of His peace, those to whom He gives peace. (4) The fancifulness of some of the scenes and situations render a literal interpretation absurd and impossible. See, for example, ii, 14-17; iii, 1-4; vi, 4-7; iv, 8. The Shulemite is in the clefts of the rock, in the concealments of the precipices; the bridegroom is in the garden, beyond the mountains, in the distant fields. The bride sleeps, the lover knocks at her door in the stillness of the night—withdraws when he receives no answer to his call. She in her remorse arises and wanders about the streets of the city. The rapid transitions, the remarkable situations indicate that the poem is an allegory. (5) This interpretation harmonizes best with the Old Testament representations of the relation between God and His people. This relation is often set forth as one of wedlock. The prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, in particular, make the marriage covenant existing between the Lord and Israel the ground of their passionate appeals. Nor is the New Testament silent as to the relation. The union and reciprocal love of Christ and the church are described in language closely akin to that of the song, "He is the Bridegroom who hath the

Bride." They rejoice in each other. Their delights are mutual, identical, Matt. ix, 15; John iii, 29; 2 Cor. xi, 2; Eph. v, 25-32; Rev. xix, 7-9; xxi, 7-27.

The sudden pronominal changes indicate that the song is an allegory. "Draw *me*, we will run after thee." "The King hath brought *me* into His chambers; *we* will be glad and rejoice in thee," i, 4. The bride's name is not that of a single individual, but is collective. She is the "daughter of Zion."

3. The teaching of the Song we hold is the following:

(1) The bridegroom is the Messiah, the Redeemer.

(2) The bride, His people.

(3) The daughters of Jerusalem, are the friends of both, Jno. iii, 29.

(4) The Song describes the love which exists between them. The fountain of all love for Christ is His love to us. To know His love is to love Him in return, I Jno. iv, 19.

(5) The time when the Song has its fulfillment is always. But it is believed that it will have a peculiar accomplishment in that day when the Jews are again restored to God's favor and fellowship—and for the second time the marriage bond is ratified and sealed, never again to be violated, Hos. i, ii; Rom. xi, 26-29.

(6) Traits of Christ's love. It is *unconditional*, chap. i, 2-6; comp. Rom. v, 8. *Irresistible*, ii, 8; comp. 1 John iv, 10. *Intense*, ii, 9, 10; comp. John xiv, 1-3. *Sheltering and protective*, ii, 14, 15; comp. Ps. xci, 1-6. *Exacting*, v, 2; comp. Eph. 4, i, 2. *Jealous*, v, 6; comp. Rev. iii, 20.

(7) Traits of a believer's love. It is *self-depreciating*, i, 5. *Eager for communion*, ii, 1-7. *Sometimes interrupted*, iii, 1. *Sorrowful*, v, 6, 7. *Intermittent*, v, 1, 2. *Self-sacrificing*, iii, 2, 3.

4. Structure and summary of contents: (Moody Stewart)
Canto One.—Subject, the bride seeking and finding the king.

1. The king sought, chap. i, 2-8.

2. The king found, i, 9; ii, 7.

Canto Two.—Subject, the sleeping bride awakened.

1. Call to meet the bridegroom, ii, 8-15.

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2. Response of the bride, 16; iii, ii, 5.

Canto Three.—Subject, the bridegroom with the bride.

1. The king in his bridal chariot, iii, 6-11.

2. The beauty of the bride, iv, 1-7.

3. The garden of spices, iv, 8; v, 2.

Canto Four.—Subject, bridegroom's withdrawal and re-appearance.

1. Sleep and sorrow, v, 3; vi, 3.

2. Bridegroom's return, vi, 4-10.

3. Glory of the bride, vi, 11; vii, 10.

4. Garden in the fields, vii, 11; viii, 4.

Canto Five.—Subject, the little sister, viii, 5-14.

THE STORY IN OUTLINE

We quote again from Arthur G. Clarke. Details of the beautiful story here unfolded can be gathered only from the Song itself. It is mainly from the standpoint of the Shulammitte maiden herself and runs something like this. There lived at Shunem (also known as Shulem) a humble family consisting of a widowed mother with two or more sons and a younger virtuous daughter, the maiden of the Song. The family seems to have had a double occupation. Besides shepherding flocks they had the care of certain vineyards, which they may have owned or held simply as tenants.

During the course of her duties in caring for the young of the flock the maiden became acquainted with a shepherd youth. They met one day about noon while resting their flocks at a woodland spot near the girl's home. It was here under the shade of a certain tree, which became a trysting place, that the shepherd first declared his love and found to his joy a response in the maiden's heart. Mutual vows of fidelity appear to have been exchanged.

According to Eastern custom, upon the death of their father the maiden's brothers, who were older, had assumed responsibility with the mother for arranging in due course their sister's

marriage. The brothers did not look with favor upon the growing intimacy of the young couple and made efforts to hinder their communion. The purpose, no doubt, was to protect their sister's reputation and that of the family. The mother seems to have taken a more lenient view, not only encouraging the young people but later on at the same hallowed spot confirming the lovers' vows by a more formal pledge of betrothal.

One lovely spring day the maiden sets out to visit a nut garden in a favorite valley. She desires to enjoy the sight of the fresh verdure of her beautiful countryside. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly she comes upon King Solomon with his retinue returning from an excursion to his northern territories where he possessed gardens and vineyards. The king's observant eye lights upon the damsel and, struck by her unusual beauty, his too-susceptible heart immediately determines to make her a member of his already large harem. It is probable that she turned to flee, but by royal command is seized and committed to the care of the court ladies, then conveyed to a royal residence or, as some think, to the king's pavilion at a nearby encampment.

(At some point in the story the scene changes from the country to Jerusalem but just where cannot be positively stated. Much depends upon the true interpretation of 4:8. A solution could be more readily found if it were known for certain whether or not the maiden was in the procession described at 3:6-11.)

It is not at all unlikely that it is then that Solomon has her taken to Jerusalem where she is handed over to the care of the women. Amid the splendors of the royal palace the king renews his attentions. The Shulammite is first promised gifts of jewelry, and when this offer fails in its purpose she is later offered advancement in station among the ladies of the court circle. Her resolve, however, is unshaken. She preserves her maidenly dignity and remains loyal to her betrothed shepherd-lover from whom she has been unwillingly separated. All the king's blandishments, offered inducements, and all the luxuries of court life mean nothing to the pure soul of this country maid.

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Her thoughts constantly dwell upon her absent beloved. Her heart is full of him and him only.

Solomon comes at last to realize the utter failure of his importunate advances. It is something new in his experiences with the fair sex. Impressed by such virtue and constancy he grants permission to the Shulammitte to return home. Joyfully she sends word to her beloved to come and escort her there. To this invitation the shepherd eargerly responds.

The story ends with a touching description of the homeward journey. Readers are permitted to overhear, so to speak, snatches of the lovers' conversation as they near home. They pass familiar spots and recall past experiences. Throughout the Song the formal marriage is seen only in prospect unless the passage 4:8 to 5:1 does indeed belong chronologically to the end of the book. Regarding this point see comments *in loco*.

THE SONG OF SONGS TITLE 1:1

TEXT 1:1

1 The Song of songs, which is Solomon's.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS 1:1

1. Do you imagine Solomon wrote this song right after he wrote Ecclesiastes? Discuss.
2. Is this song from Solomon or about him?
3. Why call this the best of all his many songs?

PARAPHRASE 1:1

1 The Song of Songs—Solomon's.

COMMENT 1:1

This is a form of expressing the superlative. Like holy of holies or Lord of Lords or King of Kings. Of the many songs that Solomon wrote (one thousand and five, I Kings 4:32) this is the best. We are eager to learn of its superlative value.

FACT QUESTIONS 1:1

1. In what area would you call this the best of all songs? i.e., as compared with what?
2. Was this song to be sung to music?
3. In what sense is it a poem?