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THE SONG OF SOLOMON IN PASTORAL TEACHING

“The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” is the last of the five poetical books of the Old Testament in our English Bible, an arrangement derived from the Septuagint. The book is one of the five smaller rolls which in the Hebrew Bible formed a group called the *Megilloth*, meaning “rolls” or “volumes”. These rolls were probably read in the synagogue on special feast days, and for convenience on such occasions, each was written on a separate roll. The Song was read on the eighth day of the Passover festival, “the book being allegorically interpreted with reference to the history of the exodus” (Davis’s *Bible Dictionary*).

The correct title, “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s,” does not indicate a collection of songs but has, rather, a superlative force, like the expressions, “holy of holies”, “Lord of lords”, “vanity of vanities”, etc. In other words, it denotes that it is a song of the very highest character—a thought which must be borne in mind throughout our approach to the book. In the Vulgate the title is literally translated, *Canticum Canticum*, and so the name Canticles is derived.

Before the pastor can decide how he is going to make use of Canticles he must choose one of the methods of interpretation, and there is quite a selection. The choice is not easy. Indeed this is one of the main problems of the book. There are three leading methods of interpretation—the allegorical, the literal and the typical methods. As already noted, the Jews, who highly prized the Song, generally regarded it as a spiritual allegory. They expounded the Song in terms of Israel’s history, showing God’s love for and His dealings with the chosen people. Israel stood in a marriage relationship to Jehovah, who was married even to the backslider. In the Christian Church, we find Origen, a great allegorizer, introducing a similar approach to the Song, but his interpretation underwent considerable modification, and Christ became the Lover of the Church or the individual soul. This became the dominant Christian attitude to the book. Thus the page headings in our A.V. are significant—“The mutual love of Christ and His Church”; “The graces of Christ and His Church” and “The Church professes her faith and desire”. That represents the allegorical interpretation of the Song.

On the literal interpretation, the poem is an historical tale,

a true story of Solomon's love for the Shulamite. This view was adopted by the majority of the German critics, with variations. Professor Edward J. Young, of Westminster Seminary, in his excellent *Introduction to the Old Testament*, states that "the Second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 533) condemned Theodore of Mopsuestia, not because he questioned the canonicity of the Song, but because he held to a literal interpretation. He regarded it as a mere song of human love, written by Solomon upon the occasion of his marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh". Dr. Young continues, "There is certainly an important element of truth in this interpretation of Theodore's. The Song does celebrate the dignity and purity of human love. This is a fact which has not always been sufficiently stressed. The Song, therefore, is didactic and moral in its purpose. It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is". Dr. Young goes on to admit that this does not exhaust the purpose of the book. Its very inclusion in the Canon—and in the last analysis, it is God who has placed it there, not man—reminds us that God, who has placed love in the human heart, is Himself pure. Dr. Young writes, "In my opinion, we are not warranted in saying that the book is a type of Christ. That does not appear to be exegetically tenable. But the book does turn one's eyes to Christ. This is certainly shown by the history of interpretation in the Christian Church. The book may be regarded as a tacit parable. The eye of faith—as it beholds this picture of exalted human love—will be reminded of the one Love that is above all earthly and human affections—even the love of the Son of God for lost humanity". But to Dr. Young, the Song considered in its own bounds, and on the principles of strict exegesis, is only a "picture of exalted human love". He does not believe that the Book is a type of Christ, and therefore cannot accept the historic allegorical interpretation.

The typical interpretation largely harmonizes the allegorical and literal approaches to the Song. Thus "the pure, spontaneous, mutual affection of a great king and an humble maid was seen to exemplify the mutual affection between Jehovah and His people, and the story was told, not merely because it was beautiful, but chiefly because it was typical of this great

religious truth" (Davis's *Dictionary*). Thus the Song is made analogous to the outstandingly Messianic Psalms, which are based to a large extent on the personal experiences of King David or Solomon. Those who support either the allegorical or typical interpretation are quick to point to the comparison made in the New Testament of the mutual love between the Church and Christ and that of a bride and a bridegroom (Eph. v. 25-33; Rev. xix. 7-9; xxi. 9, etc.).

There are other problems, too. There is a variety of opinions as to the number of speakers, who they are, their relationships to one another, and whether the book was a drama or not. These subjects are discussed at length in Patrick Fairbairn's *Bible Dictionary*, in an article by Professor Duncan H. Weir, one-time Professor of Hebrew in the University of Glasgow. Professor Weir's article covers over eight and a half pages of small type, and will richly repay the careful reader. Professor Weir provides a masterly presentation and defence of the allegorical interpretation, and he classifies the various expositions, which he carefully examines, under two main heads—*literal* and *allegorical*. We may not accept all that Professor Weir asserts, and it is possible that in places he is a little over-enthusiastic in finding support for his thesis in the Song, yet his effort does present the allegorical position in a thorough, scholarly and impressive manner. The modern conservative student of Scripture will probably choose between Dr. Young's position and Professor Weir's. He will not follow the "higher critical" views.

Dr. Young says that to hold that the Song is a type of Christ, appears to him "to be exegetically" untenable. "In my opinion, we are not warranted in saying that the book is a type of Christ", declares this conservative scholar. But Professor Weir, having answered the various objections to the allegorical method of interpretation, and having duly noted the failure of the literalists "to lay bare the group of facts which must, according to their hypothesis, form the centre of the poem", and finding support for the allegorical method from what he terms "the mutually destructive views of those who reject it", proceeds to furnish what he describes as "the positive evidence which the poem itself furnishes of its allegorical character". Briefly stated his case, based on exegetical grounds, is as follows. The names of the leading characters in the poem are *Shelomo* (or Solomon) and *Shulammith* (or the Shulammitite). They come

from the same root and correspond in signification. This resemblance, he feels, is not accidental; "it must be designed". He attaches great significance to the meaning of these names. And, in passing, we may note that names often do play a vital part in an allegory—compare Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, for example. The Hebrews did attach great significance to the meanings of names, and we are inclined to overlook this in reading our English translation. In chap. i. 3 of the Song, direct reference to one of the names is made—"Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee". The name Shelomo means peaceful, peacegiver. Solomon was a man of peace, unlike his father, and the spreading abroad of peace has been compared to the pouring out of the sweet ointment which "maketh the face to shine". In Ps. cxxxiii, we read of brotherly unity, peace, and how it is like "the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments". In chap. viii. 10 of the Song, Shulammith seems to explain her own name, describing herself as one who has found peace (*shalom*). The name Shulammith is not found in the earlier parts of the Song, but only towards the close, chap. vi. 13, "after her union with Shelomo has been perfected, and she has found peace in his love". Here, Professor Weir compares John xvi. 33, where we read: "These things I have spoken upon you, that in me ye might have peace."

Thus the conclusion is reached that the names Shelomo and Shulammith are employed significantly as *Peace-giver* and *Peace-receiver*. If Professor Weir is right in his contention, he has partly succeeded in establishing the allegorical interpretation on strictly exegetical grounds, despite the dictum of Professor Young that the allegorical approach is exegetically untenable. Professor Weir refers to the argument, supported by the Septuagint, that the name *Shulammith* is equivalent to *Shunammith* or Shunammite, i.e., inhabitant of Shunem (cf. 1 Kings i. 3, etc.), but he states that "there can be no question that Shulammith is the right reading", and that "we have no evidence that Shunem was also called Shulem by the ancient Hebrews". He thinks that the connection between Shulammith and Salem, the old name for Jerusalem, a view favoured by the older expositors, is more probable, the two words coming from the same root.

The name given to the bride is not Shelomith, the feminine form of Shelomo, but *Shulammoth*, which, says Professor Weir, "does not appear to be a proper noun at all, but a common noun formed from the Pual conjugation *shullam*, and having the passive signification of a *reconciled one*—from which we gain a clear view of the spiritual relation of Shelomo and Shulammoth." Throughout, Shelomo is the peace-giver: his bride is, to begin with, a peace-seeker and finally a peace-finder. "Further, Shulammoth is described by the poet as dwelling in the wilderness, and brought up from thence by her beloved, chap. iii. 6; viii. 5. Everyone familiar with the Scriptures," he maintains, "must be aware that this is one of the most common figures employed by the sacred writers to describe a state of affliction. Compare especially Rev. xii. 6 and Hos. ii. 14-16, in which last passage there is a contrast between the wilderness and the vineyard which strikingly illustrates the descriptions of this Song". Professor Weir attaches much importance to this passage in Hosea, stating that it throws very great light on the Song, and is "in fact a summary of it". The passage in Hosea reads: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be at that day, saith the LORD, that thou shalt call me *Ishi* (my Husband); and shalt call me no more *Baali* (my Lord)." Turning to the Song, we find that at the commencement Shulammoth is represented as driven out of her vineyard into the wilderness. And at the close the picture shows her coming up from the wilderness leaning upon her beloved (viii. 5) and taking possession of the vineyard she had lost (viii. 12), sitting in her gardens with great joy and peace (viii. 13, 14). Professor Weir then appeals to passages which, he claims, support "the internal evidence for the allegorical interpretation", including Ps. xlv, which is said to be the key to the Song—the points of similarity are striking—and which is applied to Christ by the Holy Spirit in Heb. i. 8. Matthew Henry, who declares the Song to be an allegory, argues that as Ps. xlv is a key to it, and that Psalm is applied to Christ, we ought, therefore, to apply the Song in a similar fashion. Not all would admit that Ps. xlv. is a "key" to the Song. Professor Weir sums up his position as follows, "Shelomo is the

peace-bestower. It is in his love that Shulamith finds peace. He may be regarded, therefore, either as the representative of Jehovah, the Covenant-God and King of Israel, or as a type of the Messiah, the Prince of peace. There is no reason that we should give an exclusive preference to one or other of these expositions. For an allegorical representation, like a prophetic word, may have more than one form of realization or fulfilment. And so, too, of Shulamith. She may be regarded as the representative of the Church, or of the individual soul which seeks and finds rest in Christ. If we have any preference for the former view, it is only because it seems to be more in harmony with the national character of the dispensation under which the Song of Songs was written, and by the principles of which we must to a certain extent be guided in its interpretation". Dealing with the *form* of the Song, Professor Weir describes it as "simply a descriptive nuptial song or poem". He deals, too, with the objection of Dr. Davidson, who, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, refers to the bridegroom's praise of his bride in chap. iv of the Song and says: "The following language supposed by the allegorical interpreters to be spoken by Jehovah to Israel, or by Christ to His Church, appears to us indecorous and irreverent on that hypothesis." And Professor Weir replies: "No judicious interpreter ever supposed the language in question to be 'spoken by Jehovah to Israel, or by Christ to His Church'. All that is meant is that Jehovah does love His Church, and thinks her most beautiful and precious. The language quoted is to be regarded not as the expression which Jehovah gives to these feelings, *for if it were, the poem would not be an allegory at all*; but as the expression of corresponding feelings, glowing in the breast of a human lover."

Professor Weir finds support for the allegorical approach in Professor E. W. Hengstenberg, the great conservative German scholar. Calvin, in his comments on Ps. xlv, takes pains to show how Solomon in his grace and beauty was a type of Christ. And he sees in the psalm a primary application to Solomon. The translator's note to his comments on verse 6, however, rightly points out that Solomon is not a type of Christ in all things, and asserts that the psalm "applies exclusively to the Messiah, and to the mystical union between him and his Church; set forth in an allegory borrowed from the manners of an Eastern court, and under the image of conjugal love, he

being represented as the bridegroom, and the Church as his bride". This is a much more satisfactory view of Ps. xlv and forms an interesting commentary on the allegorical interpretation of the Song.

But Dr. Young maintains, rightly enough, that "there is a distinction between allegorical interpretation and the interpretation of allegory". Then he goes on to say: "There is no justification for allegorical interpretation unless there is first of all an allegory to be interpreted, and there is no evidence to show that the Song of Solomon is an allegory. In other words, the arguments generally used to support the allegorical interpretation are really irrelevant" (ibid.). If Professor Weir's statement on the names employed in the Song is correct, then he has gone a long way towards producing evidence to show that the Song is an allegory, in which case, the other arguments could not be disposed of as irrelevant. And it is interesting to notice that Professor Weir deals with this very objection which Professor Young urges. He admits that the objection is not without weight, and that it is only on closer study that the allegorical character of the book is detected. He does not, however, yield to the theory that "every allegory must contain within it—in its composition, in its phraseology—some decisive evidence that it is an allegory". Indeed he feels that the most perfect type is veiled by the allegorical in its entire composition. He cites several of our Lord's parables which contain no internal evidence that they are parables, as, for example, the parable of the prodigal son, which has some points of resemblance to the Song of Songs. Their parabolic character, he says, is established by their adjuncts—the character of the One who uttered them, the circumstances in which they were spoken, etc.—and not by anything in them. So the Song comes to us in the Sacred Writings and from an age in which it was "usual to represent and portray the spiritual and heavenly by carnal and earthly symbols".

Even if one hesitates to affirm dogmatically that the Song is an allegory, one should also hesitate to state dogmatically that it is not an allegory. Professor Young is undoubtedly handicapped by lack of space. His splendid *Introduction to the Old Testament* is all too brief, and he could not possibly do his case justice in the brief space devoted to the Song. Even Professor Weir in his lengthy study contents himself with

examples. It is hardly surprising, therefore, if the reader turns from Young to Weir, only to find himself more impressed by the latter. No doubt Dr. Young could say a great deal more in defence of his position. He makes no reference to Professor Weir's article in Fairbairn's *Dictionary*, nor is it listed in the special literature on the Song given at the end of Dr. Young's chapter on it. He does mention Hengstenberg and Keil as supporters of the Christian allegorical method.

As far as Dr. Young's treatment goes, one will hardly dispute it—that is in its positive survey of the Song. And we agree that the great lessons taught by the Song on “the dignity and purity of human love” are not stressed as they should be. We are indebted to Dr. Young for bringing that truth to the fore. To state, however, that “we are not warranted in saying that the book is a type of Christ”, even although qualified by the words “in my opinion”, seems tantamount to saying that the allegorical method is completely wrong and without any support. To Dr. Young, the allegorical method is not “exegetically tenable”. He makes his position quite clear. But he allows that the book “may be regarded as a tacit parable”. It “reminds” us of the love of Christ.

Before the pastor can preach on a verse from Canticles on the lines of strict exegesis, or use it exegetically in the pulpit, he must make up his mind whether he is going to regard the Song with Dr. Young as a “picture of exalted human love” which may remind Christians of Christ's love, or view the love of Christ, with Professor Weir and the rest, as already set forth in it. If Dr. Young is right, then the page-headings in our English Bibles are wrong, and many sermons preached in the past on such verses as “I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine”, “Behold, thou art fair, my love”, “He is altogether lovely”, etc., may have been on rather shaky ground from the strictly exegetical point of view. On Dr. Young's view, it would seem almost essential to restrict the usage of the Song in the pulpit to its original meaning and message—although the preacher could always point to things of which the book reminded Christians. But he would not be justified in taking it as a type of Christ. On the other hand, if the Christian minister decides to follow in the footsteps of men like Matthew Henry or C. H. Spurgeon in the pulpit, and accept the position outlined in Fairbairn's *Dictionary*, he can include all that is

positive in Dr. Young's thesis, and go a great deal further with the actual text, interpreting by the rest of Scripture, as he would in the case of a psalm.

Great wisdom is required in making use of the Song, whichever view we adopt. The Jewish doctors advised their young people not to read it till they were thirty years old, "lest by the abuse of that which is most pure and sacred the flames of lust should be kindled with fire from heaven, which is intended for the altar only" (M. Henry). But the preacher should reverently approach this portion of God's Word, praying for guidance, seeking its inner message, laying its lessons to heart, and breaking them to the people, sometimes in passing, as it were, at others by actually preaching on a verse, phrase or passage in the Book. Matthew Henry gives us a final warning and encouragement: "When we apply ourselves to the study of this book we must not only, with Moses and Joshua, put off our shoe from off our foot, and even forget that we have bodies, because the place where we stand is holy ground, but we must, with John, come up hither, must spread our wings, take a noble flight, and soar upwards, till by faith and holy love we enter into the holiest, for this is no other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven" (*Introduction to the Song*). If we approach the book in that spirit, we shall find much material with which to encourage and instruct the young convert, gladden the aged saint and even invite the unconverted sinner. On Sabbath, and in the prayer meeting, we shall find texts on which to dwell, and rich spices with which to beautify and enrich our presentation of the gospel, even when our text lies elsewhere.

Belfast.

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