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The Riddle of the Song of Songs.

PART of the fascination of the Bible lies in its unsolved riddles. For despite all the intensive study of modern scholarship, there are not a few which still defy solution. And amongst these is the problem of the Song of Songs. Indeed, there is probably less agreement to-day than ever as to the type of literature it contains, or the real significance of the work.

To the plain reader, who comes to it without any presuppositions, it would appear to be an erotic poem, dealing with the mutual love of a man and a woman, with a stronger emphasis on their physical attraction for one another than suits our modern taste. There have been some through the ages who have taken this view of the Song, and amongst them not a few have felt that such a work is quite unsuited to a place in the Canon of Scripture. Others have agreed that a work which dealt with human love would be unworthy of a place there, and hence have argued that it must have had some deeper meaning. Between these groups there is a common agreement that human love is too coarse and common for such an honour. Yet it is sometimes pointed out, even by those who adopt such a view, that human love provides us with the purest images to represent the divine love.

At the heart of such an attitude lies an inner contradiction. If human love is so fair that it can fitly typify the divine love, it can scarcely be so foul that it is to be abhorred in itself, and to me there is something richly significant and beautiful in the thought that the pure love of man and woman should be consecrated in the Canon of Scripture, as well as at the altar of matrimony.

Much of the older interpretation of the Song was dictated in part by this feeling of the unworthiness of human love in itself, and innumerable have been the attempts to read into the book an esoteric meaning. Attention was turned from the supposedly ignoble form in which its message was presented to the richness of the teaching enshrined in it. Thus, the Rabbis found the Song to outline God's dealings with His people Israel, and traced the history recorded in the Old Testament in the images of the Song. Nor is this view quite dead, for it was presented anew by a Christian scholar less than thirty years ago. More commonly, however, Christian

scholars from the earliest ages have thought rather of the relations of Christ with His Church, or of the individual soul with God. Some verses were referred to the Virgin Mary, and in the Middle Ages it became a favourite principle of interpretation to find her everywhere in the Song. The common view of Roman Catholic scholars to this day follows this line, and combines all these ideas. They find in the Song an allegory of rich and varied significance, depicting at one and the same time the bond that unites Christ with His Church, and that which unites God with the ardent soul, yet in a special way declaring His relations with the Virgin Mary. On this view the Song may be legitimately taken to mean anything except what it appears to mean.

Where the allegorical view is still maintained in Protestant circles—and it no longer flourishes extensively there—it is given a somewhat different form. Instead of the images of the Song being regarded as the mere insignificant husk, immaterial to the real thought of the writer, in which the pure teaching is enclosed, it is recognised that they were his primary thought. But it is supposed that alongside this he cherished a deeper thought of the things they represented.

Yet another form of the allegorical view has found a few supporters, and since it has found one so recently as a decade ago, it calls for mention. To this school the bride represents Wisdom, and the Song is an allegory, either of the historical Solomon's search for Wisdom, or of the true seeker's search in any age. On this view, it is not without reason that the Song has commonly been classed with Israel's Wisdom literature.

Rarely, however, is the allegorical view in any of its forms defended by Protestant writers to-day, for it is perceived that while they may be devotionally justified, they are exegetically indefensible. That the relations between God and His people should be spoken of under the metaphor of the marriage bond would be in no way surprising, for it is frequently found in the Bible. But no instance can be found that is remotely comparable to the allegorical interpretation of the Song. Similarly, parables are familiar to the readers of the Bible, and especially to readers of the Gospels, but again there is no case that can fairly be placed alongside this view of the Song.

Nevertheless, as I have said, there is a devotional value in such a view, and it is precisely that value which has kept it alive for so long. When our Lord saw a sower casting seed on the ground, or a woman searching for a lost coin in the house, these things became for Him analogies of higher things. For Him all life was aglow with God, and life's common experiences, and even annoyances, were full of reminders of rich spiritual

truth. It were well for us if we could cultivate the penetrating eye, and find messages from God in all that we experience, well for us if, instead of the annoyance we feel as we hunt for the thing we have mislaid, our hearts might know the impulse to a keener desire for the treasures of the spirit. And it is well for us to find, not only in the metaphors of the Song, but in the experience of our own emotions, and in the relationships of our own homes, that which will speak to us of God.

But all this does not mean that our simple experiences, and our rich emotions, are given to us in order to do this for us. There was nothing in a sower's scattering seed on the ground which of itself proclaimed spiritual truth. Countless eyes had perceived a similar sight, but our Lord's alone penetrated to that truth, for it did not inhere in the act He witnessed, but was brought to it out of the treasures of His own soul. In the same way the Song of Songs was not written in order to outline the soul's relation to God, or Christ's relation to His Church, but to express the warm love of human hearts for one another. Yet we may bring to it the penetrating eye that finds it to reveal to us spiritual truths on these things. Those truths are not inherent in the Song itself, but are brought to it by the interpreters, and while they may be profoundly true for them, we are not entitled to suppose that they were also true for the author of the Song, or that they entered into his mind. We should learn to distinguish between what is devotionally profitable, and what is exegetically sound.

But when the allegorical view is set aside, and no longer regarded as explaining the author's purpose in writing the Song, what other can be set in its place? Many have been suggested, for it has been a cardinal principle of the vast majority of writers that on no account must the Song be supposed to be what it appears to be. A favourite view, especially in the nineteenth century, was that the book is a drama. Some found in it just two characters, Solomon and the Shulamite, with a chorus; some three characters, Solomon, the Shulamite, and her rustic lover, together with a chorus; some two pairs of lovers, or even more characters, together with two choruses. Not all who have adopted the dramatic view have supposed that it was written to be acted. Some have regarded it as a dramatic poem, composed to be recited, rather than designed for the stage.

Most of the dramatic theorists have sought to impose some moral message on the book. Thus Delitzsch, who adopted the two-character view, supposed that Solomon fell in love with the Shulamite and carried her off to his palace, but was there lifted by her from a merely physical attraction to a purer devotion. In his hands the book is turned into a tract against polygamy,

for he holds that the Shulamite drew Solomon out of the wantonness of polygamy to the pristine purity of monogamy. On the other hand, the large company of authors who have followed Ewald in the three-character dramatic view, have found the book to tell the story of the triumph of true love over all the attractions of Solomon's court. They have supposed that Solomon carried the Shulamite off to his harem, where despite all his efforts he failed to win her affections from the country swain to whom she had plighted her troth. Even in the king's harem she managed to preserve her honour, until the king was forced to allow her to return to her true love.

Again, it would seem, the high moral teaching found in the Song by this view reflects the contribution of the interpreters, rather than the thought of the author. For nothing of all this is apparent to the simple reader, and no didactic purpose can be supposed to be very clearly discernible. The ingenious plots are brought to the book, and the profitable lessons forced upon it.

In modern times, what is known as the wedding-cycle theory has been very popular. The customs of modern Syria have been described for us, and they are held to throw light on the origin and meaning of the Song. At Syrian weddings, we are told, the bride and bridegroom are crowned as king and queen, and for the seven days of the wedding feast their reign lasts. Poems are sung in their honour, describing their physical attractions, and also poems of war, while the bride performs a sword dance with a naked sword. All of this, with the exception of the war songs, is read back into the Song of Songs, and it is held that we have here a selection of such songs as were sung on similar occasions in some one locality. The poems have nothing to do with the Solomon of history. It is merely the rustic bridegroom who is called Solomon for the brief duration of his reign.

But again, there is nothing in the simple reading of the Song which would suggest this view, and it would appear to be once more a view which is brought to the Song and imposed upon it, rather than one which is discovered there. There is no reference anywhere to the marriage ceremony, and it is at best only a great assumption that the present-day customs of Syria have continued unchanged for two thousand years.

The most recent substitute for the allegorical view is that which makes of the Song a liturgy of the Tammuz cult. It is known that the Tammuz cult was widely spread throughout the East, and there are ample evidences in the Old Testament that it had a hold on the common people of Palestine. It was linked to Nature-myth and the old fertility cult, that the prophets so often denounced. In this cult the rites culminated in the marriage and union of a man and a woman, who represented

the god and goddess, to the accompaniment of much licentiousness, and this union was supposed to affect the god and goddess represented, and to bring about general fertility in nature. Part of the ritual represented the descent of Ishtar into the underworld, and there was a dark side to the rites. The weeping for Tammuz was not all pretence that finally gave place to unclouded joy.

To me this is neither devotionally nor exegetically justified. That there are allusions to the Tammuz cult in the Song is highly probable, but that the Song is a liturgy of the evil cult that was hated of the prophets does not seem very likely. The advocates of this view believe that the inclusion of the book in the Canon can be more easily explained by a view which makes it to have been a religious work from the start. On the contrary, it would seem that the problem of canonicity is greatly increased. That the liturgy of one religion should be included in the Canon of another, whose leaders had denounced all that was connected with it, is by no means easy to suppose. It is perfectly true, of course, that all of Israel's leaders did not resist the evil fertility rites, and the prophets were hardly representative of their age when they denounced them. But in the age when the Canon of Scripture was being collected, Judaism was at least true in this respect to the teaching of the prophets, and was not likely to make terms with such a cult.

In fairness to those who hold this view, however, it must be admitted that they hold the liturgy to have been revised before it was incorporated in the Canon, so as to make it innocuous to the worshippers of Yahweh. Indeed, they hold that it was revised for ritual use in connexion with the worship of Yahweh. Yet so thinly did the revision disguise the old ritual that all its old meaning is still apparent to the advocates of this view, while there is no agreement amongst them as to which were the elements that constituted the revision, and none of those they produce has any real connexion with the fundamental ideas and practices of Yahwism. Had anyone undertaken a revision of the old liturgy to baptise it into the service of Yahwism, he would surely have taken care that the new significance of the liturgy was abundantly plain. It is the work of a bungler to forget at once to eliminate what was characteristic of the old, and to introduce unequivocally the new.

Yet once more, therefore, it would seem that the scholars who follow this line of interpretation bring to the Song what they find in it. Because they are looking for Tammuz, they read him into the most innocent of terms, and impose him ruthlessly upon the helpless author of the Song.

Let us therefore return to the plain meaning of the Song.

That it deals with simple human love can scarcely be denied, if we allow it to speak in its own behalf. There is nothing whatever to suggest that the author was thinking of sinister rites or of lofty abstractions, nothing to suggest that he was looking back over history, or forward into the future, nothing to suggest that he was writing a polemic against polygamy or a moral story to illustrate the triumph of love over many obstacles. Nor is there anything that compels belief that we have a cycle of songs connected with a rustic wedding ceremony. The love of a man for a woman, and of a woman for a man, is here described. But all beside is still in the realm of conjecture.

Not a few who have believed that here we have pure songs of love have treated the book as an anthology, and have supposed the poems did not all come from one hand. The appearance of unity they hold to be due merely to the fact that they deal with a common theme. It must be agreed, however, that the repetitions, both of form and of idea, that are found in the Song create the impression that somehow the songs belong to one another. They are not casually strung together in haphazard order, but are full of artistry, both in themselves and in their arrangement, and I find it hard to escape the belief that they came from one author. What his purpose was I cannot say. It is the way of love to express itself. And I am content to find here a series of poems in which a lover enshrined the love he gave and the love he received. He did it in the terms of his age, making allusions to the rites that were freely practised around him, perhaps, and writing with less restraint on the physical side of love than our age would prefer—save, perhaps, in a certain type of fiction—but with vastly more delicacy than many of his interpreters. But I find no reason to doubt that the love he was expressing was true and pure, for there is nothing essentially impure even in the physical side of true love.

H. H. ROWLEY.

BROXTOWE HALL, of which we published a picture in our last volume, once the home of Thomas Helwys, has vanished. It had been submerged by bungalows belonging to the Corporation of Nottingham. The Thorston Society urged the Corporation to preserve it, but no tenant offered, so it has been demolished. Thus it shares the fate of the chapel where Carey preached his great sermon. The Corporation is lengthening its cords and up-rooting its stakes.