Preaching from the *Song of Songs?* Allegory Revisited

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Introduction: Varieties of Interpretation of the *Song of Songs*

The *Song of Songs* has traditionally been interpreted by both Christian and Jewish commentators in allegorical terms.[1] In recent years, however, this has been supplanted with naturalistic understandings which, whilst being more faithful to the text, have made the question of the application of the *Song of Songs* harder to answer. When the *Song of Songs* was seen as a description of the soul's longing for God it was relatively straightforward for mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux to preach from it without embarrassment because they did not have to engage with the plain terminology about thighs and breasts. Modern commentators like Marvin Pope[2] and G. Lloyd Carr,[3] however, have shown beyond reasonable doubt that the language of the *Song of Songs* is first and foremost that of erotic rather than spiritual love. This being the case, the question of application, particularly in preaching, becomes more problematic.

Initially, the recognition of the naturalistic element in the *Song of Songs* led to its being treated as typology, representing either God's relationship with Israel or Christ's relationship with the Church according to Jewish and Christian commentators respectively. More recently, commentators have seen the *Song of Songs* as a loosely related collection of love poems or as a drama in poetic form which is then generally interpreted as a celebration or endorsement of human love and sexuality. Some modern writers, particularly American evangelicals, have treated it as a sort of 'Marriage Guidance' manual—a 'Gospel According to James Dobson'.[4] Others, such as the feminist Phyllis Trible, have found in it a treatise on female emancipation.[5]

Studies of the *Song's* structure have gone some way towards establishing its unity and identifying its themes. David Dorsey[6] in particular, drawing on the earlier work of J.C. Exum and W. Shea, argues plausibly for a sevenfold chiastic structure.[7] However, even given the attractiveness of his presentation, an understanding of the *Song's* structure does little to unlock the secrets of its intended application. The most it seems to tell us is that the *Song* is a carefully crafted work rather than a compendium of

otherwise unrelated snippets and that therefore we do well to pay attention to it. Dorsey's article itself makes no attempt to move from analysis to application.

Those commentators who insist that we first see the *Song* as a depiction of human eroticism are no doubt right. The difficulty for the preacher is knowing how to move on from there. Do we simply unwrap its metaphors to catalogue the delights of sexuality? Or do we, as the Americans suggest, use it as a critique of our own relationships? Do we perhaps see it as a critique of Solomonic hedonism? Or do we simply enjoy it as an island of unalloyed pleasure in a biblical sea of woe and trouble?

The *Song of Songs* as Song

If we are to preach the *Song of Songs* usefully we need to hear it first and foremost in the form in which it presents itself to us, namely as poetry—indeed as *song*. Only in this way will it address us correctly. The proper question to ask of poetry initially is not 'What is it *for*?', but 'What does it *do*?' The language of poetry moves us at a different level from prose, not *beneath* words but beyond the outward *sum* of words. As music is to sound, so poetry is to prose. We may be moved by the story of Ruth or instructed by the Proverbs, but something else happens, and is meant to happen, as we read the *Song of Songs*.

Nevertheless, there need to be controls.[8] We need to hear it *properly* to be moved by it to a right response. Here we return to the question of interpretation. As we read the *Song* are we to be inspired by thoughts of Christ's love for us, to rejoice in the pleasures of human sexuality, to resolve to have better marriages or to encourage the development of 'strong women'? All these applications and more have been suggested. To discern between them, we need to look not merely at the form but at the context within which it presents itself.

The *Song of Songs* and Solomon

Brevard Childs points out that the ascription of the *Song of Songs* to Solomon 'performs a different and far broader role from that of establishing authorship in the modern sense of the concept'.[9] At very least, he argues, it establishes the *Song* as belonging to the genre of 'Wisdom literature'. However, we would want to go still further. The several references to Solomon (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12) and the absence of direct references to 'Wisdom' *per se* suggest that it is *Solomon himself* who provides an important key to the *Song of Songs*' intention.

In this respect, what is important is not whether it was written within the reign of Solomon, much less whether it was written by Solomon himself. It is not even of final significance what role Solomon plays as one of the characters in the *Song of Songs*. What matters is *the context of Solomon*—specifically of his 'Golden Age'. This was the zenith of the outworking of God's salvation blessings in the history of mankind, a time of 'angels

bending near the earth'. Many of the items used as metaphors for, or accompaniments to, lovemaking in the *Song* are amongst the commodities depicted as typifying the abundance of wealth during Solomon's reign in 1 Kings 3–10. As we read the opening line 'The Song of Songs which is Solomon's', we are surely meant to travel in our imagination back to that era when, 'all the vessels in the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold', when 'silver . . . was not considered as anything', when 'once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes and peacocks' and when 'the whole earth brought . . . garments, myrrh, spices . . . year by year' (1 Kings 10:21–22). Michael Fox writes: '. . . the images [of the *Song of Songs*] . . . combine to form a cohesive picture of a self-contained world: a peaceful, fruitful world, resplendent with the blessings of nature and the beauties of human art . . . a rich and blessed world.'[10] Surely the *sitz im leben* of the *Song of Songs* corresponds to that time when 'Judah and Israel dwelt in safety . . . every man under his vine and under his fig tree' (1 Kings 4:25). Of what, then, does it sing to us?

The Melody of the *Song of Songs*

It locates itself at the apogee of Biblical Salvation experienced as physical blessing. It is the time of 'shalōm' *par excellence* (1 Kings 4:24). To what does the biblical spirit aspire from these heights? It is helpful to be reminded here of the psychologist Abraham Maslow's concept of the 'Hierarchy of Needs'. According to this, when physical needs for food and shelter have been met human beings look to the satisfaction of other needs such as companionship or status, each in order of basic priority. As each need is met so the meeting of other, less fundamental but equally pressing, needs claims their attention and energy.

The 'Golden Age' of Solomon was a time when, in terms of Maslow's hierarchy, not merely the basic needs but many of the higher needs of the inhabitants of Israel had been more than adequately met. What is the need, in such a context of satisfaction, which nevertheless might remain unmet? The answer the *Song of Songs* gives is unequivocal: 'If a man offered for *love* all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned' (8:7b). Indeed, although according to the *Song of Songs* Solomon may have obtained the valuable vineyard at Ba'al-ha'mon through his abundant wealth, the lovers of the *Song of Songs* are entirely content with their own 'vineyard' of love: 'My vineyard, my very own, is for myself' (8:12).[11] It thus presents love between a man and a woman as the final 'need' to which one might aspire even during such an era of blessing as Solomon's 'Golden Age'.

We must not underestimate the astonishing nature of this proposition. According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the 'chief end' (or, we might say, the ultimate need) of man is, 'to glorify God and to enjoy him forever'. This is not apparently the answer given by the *Song of Songs*! We

might reasonably have expected that a book in the Bible presenting the final horizon of human blessing to be transcended by those who have everything else would point to the Temple and to worship. Instead, it seems we are pointed to the bedroom and to sexual intercourse! Are we not in a hermeneutical blind alley with little apparent connexion between our theological expectations and what the *Song of Songs* is evidently saying?

Clues to the Message

A. The Absence of the Cultic

The answer to our question lies, we would suggest, in three distinctive elements of the *Song*. The first element, which has been noted by many commentators, is *the absence of cultic language*. Not only is there no mention of God[12] or the events of salvation history, but even the most basic theological terms such as 'truth', 'blessing', 'glory' or 'wisdom' are absent.[13] The impression one gets is not simply that the *Song* fails to use these terms but *that it has been deliberately stripped of them*. We should certainly ask why this is so, especially when we compare it with Psalm 45.[14] This is clearly a love song sharing many words in common with the *Song of Songs* but it also contains many explicitly cultic terms. It is thus not simply the case that the biblical authors avoided mixing erotic and religious language. But one probable factor in the omission of cultic language is to distinguish the *Song* from similar love poetry from the Ancient Near East which draws heavily on such terms. It is, in this sense, *anti-cultic*. It specifically avoids being recruited to advocate sexuality as a form of liturgical expression.

However, there is another possible factor involved, for when God is located nowhere specifically it may not be because he is *completely absent* but rather because he is *everywhere present*: 'I saw *no temple* in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the almighty and the Lamb' (Rev. 21:22). Paradoxically, it may be that God is not mentioned because he is *assumed*. The Divine is located nowhere specifically because it is present everywhere generally. The *Song* then confronts those who would dissociate the erotic from the sacred. The deliberate emptying from it of cultic language may be because the writer is both discouraging us from confusing sexuality with cultic worship and yet encouraging us to see God in and through sexuality.

B. The Presence of Loss

The second important element, again noted by many writers, is the dimension of *loss*. On the one hand there are the so-called 'Dream Sequences' where the girl searches anxiously for her beloved (3:1–5, 5:2–8). On the other hand there is the defiant declaration in 8:6 that 'love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave'. According to Childs, these words 'are unique in the book because they represent a clear example of reflec-

tive generalization, which is characteristic of wisdom literature'.[15] The sentiment in this verse is clearly one we should note. Furthermore, as H. Fisch writes, 'the terror of loss and emptiness . . . are more central to the poem than fulfilment itself or descriptions of beauty'.[16] It seems to be telling us that though the joys of erotic love correspond to and appear to satisfy the ultimate need we may confront, they cannot, *even in this world at its best*, provide a secure answer. Both temporal uncertainty and the separation of death make this impossible. And this is of profound significance, for if we cannot guarantee that our highest need can be met then life is ultimately unreliable. Yet the experience of erotic love itself points us beyond the grave to 'something else' akin to what C.S. Lewis wrote about 'Joy': 'considered only in its quality . . . [it] might almost equally be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief . . . [but] I doubt whether anyone who tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world'.[17] Though its eroticism is stripped of cultic elements which might tempt some to use the *Song* as an excuse for orgiastic worship, yet through the theme of loss it is invested with a noumenal quality which confronts us and points us towards the eternal.

C. The Use of Metaphor

This brings us to the third element, which is the *Song's* use of metaphor. Fisch points out that metaphor and simile blur and combine with subtle effect. In 2:1 the Shulammite declares 'I am . . . a lily of the valleys'. But immediately the lover turns metaphor into simile: 'As a lily among brambles so is my love among maidens' (2:2). She who *is* a flower stands out *like* a flower amongst thorns. And as metaphor and simile interchange, the one closing the distance between reality and image, the other opening it, so (Fisch argues) image and referent become confused. Is A being compared to B or B to A? In extolling the virtues of the Shulammite in 4:12–15 the *Song* 'becomes a poem about a garden rather than a girl'.[18]

The same characteristic has been noted by other writers. Ellen Charry, reviewing Phyllis Trible's work, writes, 'By use of garden and plant metaphors, the erotic garden of the Song *becomes the woman herself*'.[19] The overall effect is that the *Song of Songs* turns into a poem about a fantastic land and its flora and fauna as much as a poem about two lovers: 'Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices' (8:14).[20] Fox comments:

> . . . the metaphors offer little information about how the lovers look, often seeming actually to interfere with the formation of a mental picture of them . . . For me it is the imagery itself that makes the sharpest, most enduring impression, and I think that this is the author's intention.[21]

Thus according to Fox, a major aim of the *Song* is *to give a picture of the*

land as well as the lovers. And here, Fisch argues, it *finds its point of contact with the rest of Scripture,* for both the land of Israel and its people are elsewhere the beloved bride of the LORD: 'You shall be called "My delight is in her" (Hephzibah), and your land "Married" (Beulah); for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married' (Is. 62:4). Fisch comments that in the *Song of Songs*, 'There is a kind of imaginative overspill, as the rapture of the lovers overflows into the sphere of geography, transforming the whole land into an object of love'.[22]

Taking these three elements (the absence of cultic references, the theme of loss and the identification of the lovers with the land) together, we are now in a position to suggest how the *Song* may be preached. To do this we must note three final considerations.

The Message of the *Song of Songs*

First, the absence of cultic references is not totally complete. The mention of Jerusalem (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 6:4; 8:4) forms a significant exception. Jerusalem seems to be the home of the maiden (*cf.* 5:7–8) and is a metaphor for her beauty, 'You are . . . comely as Jerusalem' (6:4). In the *Song of Songs* as a whole the bounty of the land provides the primary source of metaphors. However, the reference to Jerusalem reminds us that it is *the* land which is in view—the land which God promised to Abraham, which is one pole of the Covenant promise and which is both a fulfilment and a foretaste of the eschatological hope. This is the cultic and theological centre of the *Song of Songs.* Thus even the progress of love is paralleled with the seasonal development of the land, from its awakening in springtime (2:10–13) to its consummation in the summer garden (4:16). We are meant to identify the love of the couple with the quintessence of the land, and through that with the God of the Covenant and the Covenant of God.

Secondly, the love referred to is specifically that of 'eros'.[23] It is a sexual passion, physically expressed in the realm of kisses and caresses, lips and eyes, thighs and breasts, which is the point of similitude between the covenant[24] of the lovers and the land of the Covenant. For the writer, sexual love between a man and a woman is 'heaven on earth'.

Thirdly, the note of loss prevents us stopping at the human experience, for the human experience can never be either certain or permanent. We are carried by metaphor from the lovers to the land. We are driven by harsh reality from the world to God. And yet what do we find in God but our Divine lover? 'Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard'—not now words from the *Song of Songs* but from Isaiah concerning Israel (5:1). Admittedly Israel proved to be a faithless bride, but in Christ the Church finds a husband who will not only cleanse her but keep her for the great day of their wedding (Eph. 5:25-27). The Allegorists were right in this—that they went beyond the surface message to a transcendent message of the relationship of God with his people. (Interestingly, as

Bernard McGinn points out, '. . . the Song was probably the most commented book of the Bible in the Christian Middle Ages . . . it was only with the growth of modern Protestant "biblical theology" [i.e. the historical-critical approach] that the Song was relegated to a marginal position in biblical research'.[25]) The Allegorists were wrong only, and yet crucially, in that they tried to avoid the erotic offence of the *Song*.

If our analysis is correct, then in our preaching we should rather take up and extend this theme as pointing to the Covenant relationship of God with his people, for whilst the *Song of Songs* is certainly a celebration and endorsement of human eroticism it is surely also in some sense a sacralization of it. The marriage of Christ and the Church need not be understood as concretely sexual, but if it is to be a marriage in any meaningful sense at all it cannot be devoid of what we might call 'erotic equivalence'. Conversely, if we are to understand ourselves and our proper place within the world which God has made, then in the light of the *Song of Songs* we would be hard pressed to overestimate the significance of our own sexuality in general or of erotic love in particular.

Conclusions

It is unlikely that the *Song of Songs* will form the basis of more than the occasional sermon in most churches. Perhaps it could usefully be explored in groups for married or engaged couples. It is more likely to be useful, however, not so much in direct preaching as in informing our preaching and our view of God generally. We need to ask whether we have really come to terms with the erotic as an aspect not only of the human personality but of the world around us as it reflects the nature and intentions of God. Do we endorse it, incorporating it into our 'spirituality' as the *Song of Songs* seems to do? Or do we consign it to the merely 'temporal' like those Christians who swiftly (and with apparent relief) declare there is 'no sex in heaven'?

The allegorizing of the *Song of Songs* no doubt arose out of and contributed to the Church's discomfort with human sexuality based on a false dichotomy between the physical and spiritual. Its rescuing from allegory, however, has not yet meant its rehabilitation into Christian preaching. At the same time, the theological agenda on sexuality is increasingly dominated by non-biblical ideology. On the one hand the traditional limitations on sexual expression are attacked and dismantled; on the other hand we are told that God is 'beyond gender' and that sexuality is merely a matter of biology or convention. The *Song of Songs*, rightly interpreted, could provide an essential corrective, but it may require a revolution in our own thinking before we are able to preach what it teaches.

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NOTES

1 G.L. Carr, *The Song of Solomon: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* Leicester: I.V.P., 1984, p. 25, argues that Jewish commentary has generally been typological rather than allegorical in recognizing two levels of meaning, the 'plain' and the 'occult'. However, most reviewers speak of early Jewish approaches as being allegorical.
2 M. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977.
3 *Op. cit.*
4 S.G. Glickman, *A Song for Lovers* Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1976, provides a typical example of this approach.
5 P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.
6 D.A. Dorsey, 'Literary Structure in the Song of Songs', *J.S.O.T.* 46 (1990), pp. 81–96.
7 *Ibid.*, but *cf.*, for example, Carr's fivefold structure, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
8 J. Moye, 'Song of Songs—Back to Allegory? Some Hermeneutical Considerations', *A.J.T.* 4:1 (1990), pp. 120–125, writes that even the allegorical interpretation of Bernard of Clairvaux was controlled by 'a worshipping community that received, shared and tested his interpretation' p. 121.
9 B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* London: S.C.M. Press, 1979, p. 573.
10 M.V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 329–330.
11 This passage suggests, incidentally, that Solomon is not the male lover in the *Song*, *cf.* Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
12 Bar a disputed reference in 8:7. See Carr *idem*, pp. 170–171 for a discussion of this.
13 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–44 for a fuller examination.
14 *Cf.* Carr, 'The Old Testament Love Songs and their Use in the New Testament', *J.E.T.S.* 24:2 June 1981, pp. 97–105.
15 Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 578.
16 H. Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 85.
17 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* London: Fontana, 1959, p. 20.
18 Fisch, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
19 E.T. Charry, 'Female Sexuality as an Image of Empowerment: Two Models', *S.J.J.T.* XXX:3 (June 1987), pp. 201–18 (my emphasis).
20 *Cf.* Y. Mazor, 'The Song of Songs or the Story of Stories?', *S.J.O.T.* 1 (1990), pp. 1–29: '. . . the modifying component extends and transforms into an enlarged, independent image, not bound any more to its initial metaphorical system in which it was of secondary moment' (Fn. 24, p. 10).
21 Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 329.
22 Fisch, *loc. cit.*
23 Though see Carr (1984) pp. 60–63 who points out that *eros* is not, in this sense, exclusive of *agapē*.
24 In marriage.
25 B. McGinn, 'With "the Kisses of the Mouth": Recent Works on the Song of Songs', *J.O.R.*, pp. 269–275.