

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT
COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 19

TOTC

THE SONG OF SONGS

To Barb,

You captivated me with one glance from your eyes,
in the rainstorm when we first met.

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 19

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CONSULTING EDITOR: TREMPER LONGMAN III

THE SONG OF SONGS AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

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CONTENTS

General preface	7
Author's preface	9
Chief abbreviations	11
Bibliography	13
Introduction	19
1. Title, authorship and date	19
2. Interpretation	24
3. Canonicity	38
4. Themes and message	39
5. Structure and unity	52
Analysis	55
Translation	57
Commentary	71

GENERAL PREFACE

The decision completely to revise the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries is an indication of the important role that the series has played since its opening volumes were released in the mid-1960s. They represented at that time, and have continued to represent, commentary writing that was committed to both the importance of the text of the Bible as Scripture and a desire to engage with as full a range of interpretative issues as possible without being lost in the minutiae of scholarly debate. The commentaries aimed to explain the biblical text to a generation of readers confronting models of critical scholarship and new discoveries from the Ancient Near East, while remembering that the Old Testament is not simply another text from the ancient world. Although no uniform process of exegesis was required, all the original contributors were united in their conviction that the Old Testament remains the Word of God for us today. That the original volumes fulfilled this role is evident from the way in which they continue to be used in so many parts of the world.

A crucial element of the original series was that it should offer an up-to-date reading of the text, and it is precisely for this reason that new volumes are required. The questions confronting readers in the first half of the twenty-first century are not necessarily those from the second half of the twentieth. Discoveries from the Ancient Near East continue to shed new light on the Old Testament, whilst emphases in exegesis have changed markedly. Whilst remaining true to the goals of the initial volumes, the need for contemporary study

of the text requires that the series as a whole be updated. This updating is not simply a matter of commissioning new volumes to replace the old. We have also taken the opportunity to update the format of the series to reflect a key emphasis from linguistics, which is that texts communicate in larger blocks rather than in shorter segments such as individual verses. Because of this, the treatment of each section of the text includes three segments. First, a short note on *Context* is offered, placing the passage under consideration in its literary setting within the book, as well as noting any historical issues crucial to interpretation. The *Comment* segment then follows the traditional structure of the commentary, offering exegesis of the various components of a passage. Finally, a brief comment is made on *Meaning*, by which is meant the message that the passage seeks to communicate within the book, highlighting its key theological themes. This section brings together the detail of the *Comment* to show how the passage under consideration seeks to communicate as a whole.

Our prayer is that these new volumes will continue the rich heritage of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries and that they will continue to witness to the God who is made known in the text.

David G. Firth, Series Editor
Tremper Longman III, Consulting Editor

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I first started to teach the Song of Songs at Westminster Seminary in California back in 2000 as part of a course on Psalms and Wisdom Literature. I found it intimidating and overwhelming, so I gave it as small a part of the course as I felt was reasonable. However, the more I started to study the book, the more my interest in it grew, along with a conviction that it was not generally being preached adequately (or at all) in the evangelical and Reformed circles in which I move. That was understandable. If tackling such a complex book seemed an overwhelmingly daunting task for a seminary professor, armed with a PhD in Old Testament, how challenging must it be for preachers without such training? I resolved to get to grips with the Song and eventually to preach through it myself.

Following the invitation to write this volume for the Tyndale series and thanks to a sabbatical break from teaching at Grove City College, I was able to fulfil that goal during the Fall of 2012 and the Spring of 2013 at Christ Presbyterian Church in Grove City, PA. Our regular attendance of students was significantly boosted by the topic! The research that went into preparing those sermons forms the basis for this volume, while the sermons themselves will eventually be published as part of the Reformed Expository Commentary series.

I would therefore like to thank TOTC Series Editor Dr David Firth and Dr Philip Duce at Inter-Varsity Press for the invitation to contribute to this series, and for their patience as I missed several deadlines along the way. David, in particular, contributed many thoughtful observations that improved the manuscript significantly.

I am indebted as well to my wonderful, eagle-eyed student assistant, Clint Estes, who read early drafts and pointed out many errors I might otherwise have missed.

I would also like to thank Grove City College for granting me the aforementioned sabbatical to work on this book and for providing such a wonderful collegial atmosphere with my colleagues in the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies. The congregation of Christ ARP provided an enthusiastic and supportive audience for the good news of the gospel, from whatever portion of Scripture. I am grateful too to my fellow pastors and elders there: Matt Harmon, Jonathan Kuciemba, Scott Miller and Lee Wishing – a pastor couldn't wish for better comrades-in-arms. Revd Jim Wittke and the good people of Kirkridge ARP in Maryland kindly provided another context for me to try out an earlier version of this material, as did the faculty and students of Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

Last, but by no means least, my thanks and love go out to my family. My children, Wayne, Jamie, Sam, Hannah, Rob and Rosie, have grown up while I have been working on the Song. Sam was married last year, and he and his wonderful wife, Peggy, graciously allowed me to preach from the Song at their wedding. My greatest debt is owed to my wife, Barb, who has taught me so much about the love described in the Song: both showing me the wonderful love of a dedicated spouse and pointing me repeatedly to the even more wonderful love of our beautiful Saviour. Thank you all once again.

Iain Duguid
Grove City College

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>AJSLL</i>	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature</i>
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDB	<i>Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon</i>
<i>BETS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament
<i>BR</i>	<i>Bible Review</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CT</i>	<i>Christianity Today</i>
FB	Focus on the Bible
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
ITC	International Theological Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTsup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary series
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary

NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Translation
OTL	Old Testament Library
REC	Reformed Expository Commentary
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplement
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Bible versions

ESV	English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
HCSB	The Holman Christian Standard Bible © copyright 1999 [2004] by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.
KJV	King James Version.
NASV	New American Standard Version. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
NIV	New International Version®. NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
NKJV	New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.
RSV	Revised Standard Version. Copyrighted 1946, 1952, © 1971, 1973, by the Division of Christian Education, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Title, authorship and date

The book begins with a title, most commonly translated: ‘The Song of Songs which is Solomon’s’ (1:1; KJV; ESV; NASV). It is generally agreed that the heading ‘Song of Songs’ should be understood as a superlative, identifying this as the ‘best of songs’, just as the ‘Holy of Holies’ was the most sacred part of the tabernacle and temple (Exod. 26:33; 1 Kgs 8:6) and the ‘Lord of lords’ is the supreme ruler of the universe (Ps. 136:3). However, the phrase ‘which is Solomon’s’ leaves open the question of how exactly the book means to define its relationship to Solomon. Many scholars understandably treat this as a *lamed* of authorship, such as we find in the book of Psalms, as well as in Habakkuk 3; that would mean that Solomon is here being explicitly identified as the author of the Song. However, the Hebrew preposition *lamed* has a wide variety of uses in the Bible and could indicate a different and more complex kind of relationship to David’s son. In fact, as discussed in more detail in the comments on 1:1, the exact form of the superscription deviates from the normal

ascriptions of authorship in the Psalms. It may therefore be taken as indicating a more general relationship between the content of the Song and the biblical character.

In addition, Solomon's name is invoked, described or addressed a further five times in the book (1:5; 3:9, 11; 8:11; 8:12), which has led many interpreters to identify Solomon not only as the author, but also as the subject of the book, the ideal lover. In principle, this is a separate question from authorship: Solomon could be the author and main character; he could be the author and not the main character, the main character and not the author, or neither the author nor the main character. However, in practice it means that questions of authorship and interpretation are intertwined in the Song.

If Solomon is identified as both author and main character, which makes the Song his own story, the question arises of how to harmonize the main character in the Song with the Solomon known from the rest of the Bible as the collector of a thousand wives and concubines (see 1 Kgs 10 and 11). Even if that reputation would associate him with the concept of 'love', he hardly seems the best model of the kind of exclusive, lifelong, one-man-and-one-woman marriage relationship that the Song depicts. Following a tradition at least as old as the Midrash Rabbah (mid-to-late first millennium AD), some interpreters assume that Solomon wrote the book while he was young, before he married all of his other wives (e.g. Dillow 1982: 7). That would presumably make the woman in the Song the daughter of Pharaoh mentioned in 1 Kings 3:1; however, she hardly fits the description of the woman in Song 1:6, who has been outside working in the vineyards, or in 1:8, where she is keeping goats, or in 8:8–9, whose marital destiny seems to rest in the hands of her brothers. Even if Pharaoh's daughter were preceded by some other wife not mentioned in the Bible, surely Solomon's subsequent lifestyle would have completely undercut the Song's teaching. What would we say about a man who gave a wonderful testimony about his true love for his bride – but then swiftly and comprehensively betrayed her through serial polygamy? Would we keep that testimony to the beauty of single-hearted devotion prominently posted on our church website, even if everything he had said about love and marriage were true and profound?

If Solomon did not write it when he was young, did he perhaps pen the book later in life as an act of repentance (O'Donnell 2012: 23, following Rashi)? This may be plausible if the idealized couple in the Song represent a contrast to Solomon in their love for each other, but could hardly work if Solomon is the hero of the story. Once again, what would we say if an older man gave his testimony about the wonderful romance he claimed to have shared with his one and only true love, but omitted any mention of his own long history of serial adultery? That would hardly qualify as an act of repentance.

Of course, as Craig Glickman rightly points out (2004: 173–175), sometimes those who know most about failure are the best teachers and guides to others. Who better to teach us about faithful perseverance under pressure than Peter, who once denied his Master (1 Pet. 5:8–9; cf. Matt. 26:69–75)? Who better to instruct us about salvation by grace alone than Paul, the former Pharisee of the Pharisees (Phil. 3:3–11)? If Solomon was indeed the author of the Song, who better to show us what true love looks like in marriage than a man whose own life was a walking marital disaster? As a result of his own deep personal failure, he would have been equipped not merely to give us various practical hints and tips for our own marriage relationships, but to point us beyond even the best of human marriages to our desperate need of a better husband whose love alone is perfect. Once again, though, this interpretation only works if Solomon is describing something other than his own personal experience, for it would be deeply hypocritical for Solomon to paint his own story in such glowing colours when in reality it was so different.

Another long-standing argument against Solomonic authorship of the Song lies in the language of the book, which diverges from so-called 'classical biblical Hebrew' in a number of significant ways (see Fox 1985: 186–191). For example, with the sole exception of the superscription, the poet consistently uses the *šē* prefix form of the relative pronoun, rather than the classical form *'āšer*. It is often noted that the language of the book contains a number of Aramaisms, some Persian loanwords (such as *pardīs* ['park'; 4:13]) and even some that apparently come from Greek, such as *'appiryôn* ('palanquin'; 3:9). There are also a variety of grammatical forms that seem closer to Mishnaic Hebrew than classical Hebrew. These

features are often regarded as a conclusive sign of late provenance (e.g. Dobbs-Allsop 2005: 27–77).

This developmental model of the history of biblical Hebrew has been challenged in various ways. Ian Young (1993) has argued to the contrary that prior to the exile there were at least two dialects of Hebrew functioning: classical Hebrew and colloquial Hebrew. The latter incorporated many Aramaic loanwords from a very early date, while the former, being a prestige language, was carefully kept clear of slang and annoying intrusions from the related language of global trade. It has also been suggested that there were regional variations in dialect in biblical Hebrew, so that ‘northern Hebrew’ might have been distinct from ‘southern Hebrew’ (Noegel & Rendsburg, 2009; cf. Fredericks, 1988). In addition, it is difficult to establish definitively the source of obscure loanwords.

However, even if the linguistic situation in Israel prior to the exile was significantly more complex than has sometimes been depicted, that hardly helps to argue the case for *Solomonic* authorship. Why would the crown prince whose entire life was lived at the court in Jerusalem speak with either a regional or ‘common’ dialect? If anyone might be expected to speak and write in ‘proper’ Hebrew, it would surely be Solomon. It is worth remembering, of course, that linguistic arguments by themselves are hardly decisive. One might still argue for ‘essentially Solomonic authorship’ of a poem that was then rewritten and stylistically updated some centuries later. Yet in this case, the person responsible for such a comprehensive rewriting of the poem would probably deserve the title of ‘author’, rather than merely ‘editor’.

An early date has also been argued on the basis of the parallels between the Song and ancient Egyptian love poetry, which flourished in Egypt in the late second millennium (Gerleman 1965: 76–77). Such influences on love poetry are exactly what would be expected, it is asserted, during the reign of a monarch who had himself taken an Egyptian bride. Could such poetic forms be preserved unchanged for over a millennium in Israel? Would the poetry not have been influenced more by Greek forms if it were substantively post-exilic? Again, though, we have very little information about what forms of love poetry may have been present within Israelite and Judean culture at various points throughout

their history, and certainly not enough data to make definitive judgments.

The same could be said for other arguments for early or late dates based on the content of the Song. For example, it has been argued that the range of spices and exotic perfumes with which the poet seems familiar fits best with the Solomonic era of widespread trade and prosperity (Rabin 1973: 205–219). Likewise, it is noted that the poet uses images such as alabaster pillars and the chariots of pharaoh in a way that suggests that he was personally familiar with these objects (Garrett 2004: 19). Yet there were several other periods in the history of Israel and Judah when there was widespread trade with Egypt and beyond, for example, during the time of King Hezekiah, at the end of the eighth century BC (Keel 1994: 4). It is hard to build a conclusive argument for the date of the book from such limited data.

Additional support for an early date has been sought in the reference to Tirzah in 6:4. Tirzah was a leading city in the northern part of Israel during the Solomonic period, and it became the first capital of the northern kingdom, after the division of Israel under Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:17). It retained this position of pre-eminence until Omri built Samaria in the early ninth century BC (1 Kgs 16:23–24), after which it faded into the background. It has been argued that the pairing of Jerusalem and Tirzah suggests that they are broadly comparable in magnificence at the time of writing, something that was certainly not the case after the exile. In addition, Garrett argues that a southern poet writing for the court in Jerusalem would hardly have bracketed the two capitals together in this way during the period of the divided kingdom, let alone after the exile (2004: 20). Yet part of the reason for the choice of Tirzah in this verse is the play on the name's meaning ('desirable'; see commentary). Michael Fox maintains that Tirzah would have retained its almost legendary connotations as the old capital of the north, particularly if a much later (post-exilic) date of authorship is entertained, by which time the rivalry between the two cities was no longer a live issue (1985: 151).

In the absence of conclusive evidence, it is probably best to leave the question of the date of the book open, although a date after the exile may be regarded as more likely. Obviously, if the book is later

than the tenth century BC, Solomonic authorship is ruled out. Even if the book is early, though, Solomonic authorship is not the necessary, or even perhaps the most likely, interpretation of the opening verse, as we shall argue more fully below. While Solomonic authorship is possible, it seems more plausible that the authorship of this book, like that of many other biblical books, is unknown.

Some commentators have suggested that the unknown author of the Song was a woman, on the grounds that the female voice is dominant (Landy 1983: 68–69; LaCocque 1998: 41–43). The woman speaks significantly more than the man does, and her words begin and end the Song. She also uses the pronoun ‘I’ and ‘myself’, along with the phrases ‘my soul’ and ‘my heart’, far more frequently than he does: he hardly talks about himself and engages in little of the self-reflection that she does. Women authors of poems are well known in Scripture, including Miriam (Exod. 15:20–21), Deborah (Judg. 5), Hannah (1 Sam. 2) and Mary (Luke 1:46–55), so there is no reason to rule out such an identification. Yet at the same time, skilled authors excel at creating believable characters of both genders, and there is no doubt that the writer of the Song was a very skilled author indeed. So, while it is plausible that the author was a woman, there is no conclusive reason to rule out a male author.

2. Interpretation

a. A love song

Part of the difficulty of understanding the Song of Songs comes precisely from the fact that it is a song. Poetry is the art of condensation: expressing the maximum meaning in the minimum number of words. As a result, poetry is often more evocative than explicative. It doesn’t take the time to unpack its figures of speech or to explain analogies. Poetry tends to be open-ended, designed to leave the reader pondering its implications, rather than tying up every loose end with a watertight argument. Unlike the book of Job, there is no narrative framework in the Song to explain the setting or to identify the characters of the poem. In contrast, the Song explodes straight into action with the woman’s passionate declaration, ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!’ (1:2), without the slightest explanation of who the speaker is or the identity of her lover. The

answers to these questions emerge, insofar as they emerge at all, only through the hints and incidental details in the text. This is part of the skill of poetry: in the same way that the Psalms speak to a multitude of human conditions because the threats facing the psalmist are expressed through multivalent metaphors and images, so too the impressionistic nature of the Song opens up its message of love to a variety of people living in a variety of different situations.

On one level, of course, the subject of the Song is easy to identify: it is a song about love. But whose love? Is it an originally secular song about the love of two human beings that acquired a religious cast simply by being included in the Bible? Was it composed as an allegory of love that really has nothing to do with human love at all, but was intended from the beginning to illustrate God's love for his people? Or is it something in between, a poem that speaks to love in all of its dimensions?

b. Allegorical interpretation

Historically speaking, an allegorical approach that sees the Song of Songs as depicting the love of God for his people has been the most popular among preachers and religious readers.¹ In Jewish circles, the Talmud saw the Song as depicting the relationship of Yahweh and Israel. In this, Jewish readers were following the lead of 2 Esdras and 4 Ezra, from as early as 100 AD (Hess 2005: 22). The Church Fathers adopted a similar approach, but adapted it so that the book now spoke of Christ and his bride, the church. Thus, according to Cyril of Alexandria (fifth century AD), when the woman describes her lover lying between her two breasts like a sachet of myrrh, what she was really talking about was Jesus standing between the Old and New Testaments (Rowley 1952: 196). Following this allegorical method of interpretation, Bernard of Clairvaux preached no fewer than eighty-six sermons on the first three chapters of the Song of Songs.

This allegorical approach to the Song remained popular throughout the Middle Ages and the Reformation era, and is preserved in

1. For a comprehensive survey of the history of interpretation of the Song, see Pope's monumental study (1977: 89–229).

the chapter headings of the King James Version. It is the approach of classic works like the Puritan James Durham's *Clavis Cantici: or, an Exposition of the Song of Solomon*. Nor has such an interpretive strategy lost its attraction for preachers as we move into the modern era. The promotional material for a recent book by Malcolm Maclean (2012) claimed, 'In this devotional work we too will learn what it is like to have daily contact with Jesus, the lover of our souls as pictured in Songs of Solomon.'

In a similar vein, Richard Brooks confidently declares,

The two leading characters in the song, the bridegroom and the bride, are the Lord Jesus Christ and the church/individual believers. Regarding others who feature along the way, the virgins are interpreted as more mature believers, of like spiritual mind with the Shulammitte in their devotion to Christ; the daughters of Jerusalem are believers who are young in the faith; and the watchmen are ministers of the gospel, those who have the care of souls.

(Brooks 1999: 9)

It is not hard to see why this approach has been attractive to preachers. Without having to descend to the embarrassing matter of talking about sex from the pulpit, their hearers (even monks who have taken a vow of celibacy, like Bernard of Clairvaux's audience!) can be encouraged and directed in their spiritual lives with all kinds of edifying observations about spirituality, prayer, Bible reading and the importance of loving Jesus.

c. Natural interpretation

Other interpreters have argued that such a spiritualized reading of the Song of Songs is a profound mistake and that the book is intended instead to be a celebration of human love and sex. The argument in favour of such a reading is simple. To begin with, that more literal understanding is typically how people who stumble across it without religious instruction tend to read it. In one of Dorothy Sayers' detective novels, Lord Peter Wimsey says, 'In my youth, they used to make me read the Bible. Trouble was, the only books I took to naturally were the ones they weren't over and above keen on. But I got to know the Song of Songs pretty well by heart'

(Sayers 1958: 257). He didn't memorize the Song of Songs because he thought it spoke about Christ, but rather because he thought it spoke about sex – and as an adolescent in a British upper-class culture that never spoke of such things, of course he found it fascinating!

This interpretation too has a long history. Rabbi Aqiba pronounced a curse on those who sang portions of the Song at banquets, declaring, 'He who trills his voice in the chanting of the Song of Songs and treats it as a secular song has no share in the world to come.' The existence of such an anathema presupposes that some in his community were committing the offence. Likewise, the Westminster divines were concerned about people in their day interpreting the Song as 'an hot carnall pamphlet formed by some loose Apollo or cupid' (Rowley 1952: 233, n. 3). In the past, such ideas were largely limited to the musings of adolescent boys and subversive elements of the faith community, but this view has now become a staple not only of critical commentaries, but even within the evangelical world. Tremper Longman deems the book 'an anthology of love poems, a kind of erotic psalter' (2001: 43). Less provocatively, Daniel Estes writes, 'As its primary purpose, the Song of Songs is written to celebrate erotic love within the bounds of marriage as God's good gift . . . [and] to teach about the nature of intimacy' (2010: 300).

d. Typological interpretation?

Some scholars have sought to separate out a typological approach as a third way, similar to allegory but distinct from it. In true allegory, the literal meaning is of no significance; however, in typology, the literal meaning is recognized as valid in its own right, but the interpreter then goes on to link that meaning with an event or teaching in the New Testament that is here foreshadowed. Thus, Iain Campbell argues for a distinctly typological (rather than allegorical) reading of the Song of Songs, focusing particularly on the significance of the fact that the Song is *Solomon's*. While wishing to avoid the excesses of allegory, he argues,

If the Song's meaning is exhausted as a celebration of human love, it is difficult to attach any theological significance to it, particularly given the absence of God's name from the composition. To have a book devoted

to the joys of physical love in a collection of spiritually oriented and theologically significant writings would appear to make the Song superfluous.

(Campbell 2000: 21)

Campbell has raised some important issues to which we shall return. Nevertheless, in my taxonomy of approaches I have come to the conclusion that it is more helpful to retain two broad categories, which we may call the ‘spiritual’ approach and the ‘natural’ approach. The ‘spiritual’ approach encompasses all of the allegorical and typological interpretations; what binds them together is the common conviction that the primary meaning of the text is in terms of the spiritual relationship between God and his people as a whole, or God and believers as individuals. The ‘natural’ approach, on the other hand, includes all of those interpretations that see the primary signification of the text as describing human relationships.

e. A twofold division

This twofold division into spiritual and natural interpretation enables us to recognize that *both* of these broad categories cover a wide spectrum of approaches to the book that range from responsible attempts at biblical interpretation to the kind of free association of ideas that people often link with allegory. In other words, ‘allegory’ is not just a facet of the ‘spiritual’ approach, but of the ‘natural’ approach as well. The contemporary Christian relationship manuals that take the Song of Songs as the departure point for their lessons on courtship and marriage are simply the modern equivalent of the ancient allegorists. Both use the Scriptures to lend a veil of authority to their (often helpful) teachings, but neither is well grounded in a proper understanding of the text itself.

Some examples may illustrate this point. From the ‘spiritual’ side, Richard Brooks makes the following comment about Song of Songs 6:11 (‘I went down into the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley, and to see whether the vine flourished, and the pomegranates budded’, KJV):

Why is the church described now as a ‘garden of nuts’ (NIV: grove of nut-trees)? The garden is already a familiar picture in the Song where the

church is concerned (for example, 4:12). The nut in question is probably the walnut, having a hard shell with a sweet kernel. This would be suitable as a figurative expression of the church in its relationship both to Christ and the world, going through many tribulations in entering the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). The life of the believer is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people (Ps. 125:2).

(Brooks 1999:161)

Notice that the text of the Song doesn't say that the church is like a nut, or even that Israel is like a nut; merely that the lover went down to a garden of nuts to see whether there was any evidence of new growth and fruitfulness. There seems no obvious reason why that thought should be connected with hard shells and sweet kernels, or with believers being 'hidden with Christ in God'. In fact, I can think of some churches that might aptly be described as 'a garden of nuts', while using the image in an entirely different sense!

Yet this kind of free association of ideas is not limited by any means to the 'spiritual interpretation' approach. On the 'natural interpretation' side, Tommy Nelson says this about 5:10–12 ('My beloved is white and ruddy, chief among ten thousand. His head is like the finest gold; his locks are wavy, and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set', NKJV):

He was pure in his motives and behaviors toward her. Repeatedly she referred to him as white . . . his head (in this case his mind) was filled with wisdom more valuable than gold. He was respected even though he was youthful. His hair was black with no evidence of the weakness of age. Sin is often pictured in the Bible as the weakness of aging (See Hos. 7:9). He was gentle; his eyes were soft and tender toward her. He was sober. The whites of his eyes were white, not reddened by alcohol or debauched living.

(Nelson 1998: 125)

These may all be excellent attributes to affirm in a husband – there is much practical advice in Nelson's book, just as there is much spiritual truth in Brooks – but none of the connections that Nelson

makes grows out of a solid understanding of the text. The word for ‘white’ (*ṣāḇ*) used in describing the beloved here may better be translated ‘radiant’ (NIV; ESV), and is not used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe purity; the Hebrews would never have equated the head with the mind, and the fact that the whites of the man’s eyes were, well, ‘white’ has nothing to do with his avoidance of debauched living.

Now the kind of free association that Richard Brooks and Tommy Nelson are engaged in is, of course, precisely the problem with allegorical interpretation. Given enough imagination, radically different messages can be drawn out of the same passage: the Song can relate to Yahweh and Israel, God and the church, wisdom and the individual soul, or an ordinary husband and a wife. Instead of the text controlling the interpretation, the text becomes a flexible vessel in the hands of the interpreter, a container into which meaning may be memorably imported.² Positively, of course, this uncontrolled subjectivism – whether of the spiritual or natural variety – generally flows from a conviction of the importance and the pastoral relevance of Scripture. As a result, when faced with a text that is hard to understand, the interpreter defaults to making it support doctrines and truths that he or she believes to be true and important. Like a mirror, allegorical exegesis tells us much more about the interpreter than it does about the biblical text. The difference in interpretation of the Song between Brooks and Nelson flows more out of a different evaluation of what is relevant to their respective hearers than from any essential difference in method. The modern prevalence of therapeutic interpretations of the Song of Songs in preference to older Christ-centred allegories may thus tell us something significant about the functional priorities of the church in our day and age, but it doesn’t help us to understand the text.

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2. Thus the image of a dove in the clefts of the rock in 2:14 is often interpreted allegorically in terms of believers hiding themselves in Christ; yet in the original poem the force of the image is that the woman is inaccessible to the man, not that she is hiding herself in the man (see Fountain 1966: 100).

The fundamental twofold division of views on the interpretation of the Song can therefore help to identify a danger to which any interpreter may be prone: the desire for relevant application of the biblical text can make allegorists of us all. Claiming an attachment to the ‘literal’ or ‘natural’ sense of the text does not automatically free an interpreter from the temptation to wild speculation, as anyone who has ever read end-times prophetic fiction will understand. The danger of misreading the Song is present whichever view is adopted, and the only way to avoid that danger is by careful, patient and disciplined study of the text in its original context, against a proper biblical and Ancient Near Eastern background.

f. Key interpretive questions

Recognizing that people who genuinely want to do justice to what the text says come to radically different conclusions, what are the key interpretive questions that we need to ask the text in order to understand its proper import? We may start by eliminating some commonly used approaches to the question that lead in wrong directions.

For example, it has often been asserted that because the book is part of the biblical canon, it must, by definition, be about God. That seems to be Campbell’s argument in the passage cited earlier (Campbell 2000: 21). According to him, a book that was simply devoted to the joys of human love would be superfluous in Scripture. In one sense, of course, that is true: the Bible is a book about God, a book of spiritual truth, so Song of Songs must have something to teach us about God. Yet not every part of the Bible teaches us about God in the same way. The book of Esther, for example, is not an allegory: it is a history – a history in which God’s name is never mentioned, even when the main characters have to work very hard to avoid doing so. In this case, the book deliberately teaches us about God without mentioning his name in order to demonstrate that God is as sovereign and involved in this world when he works through the providential working of the ‘coincidences’ in our lives as he is when he thunders from Mount Sinai or parts the Red Sea (Duguid 2005: 7).

Likewise, when the book of Proverbs says, ‘Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life’ (13:12), it encompasses every deferred hope with which human beings struggle. It

speaks to the deferred hope of the lonely for friends, of the single for a spouse, of the childless for children, of the sick for health, of the unemployed for jobs. Because it is in the Bible, it surely invites us to put all of our deferred hopes in the context of God's promises of every desire fulfilled in the New Jerusalem, which, like the original Garden of Eden, contains the Tree of Life (Gen. 2:9; Rev. 22:2). Yet at the same time, the proverb is not ashamed to acknowledge our present this-worldly fears and disappointed longings as well. The Bible is not less holy when it speaks to us as human beings than when it speaks to us about God.

As Calvin noted, 'Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts – the knowledge of God and of ourselves' (1960: 35). True and sound wisdom is not simply about knowing God. If we are truly to serve God, we also need to know ourselves and the world in which God has placed us. Biblical wisdom may begin with the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7), but it must work itself out in the context of the specific contours of the world in which we live, as the rest of the book of Proverbs demonstrates. Biblical wisdom teaches us how to interact with fools as well as with God (Prov. 26:4–5); it counsels us to consider when a soft answer to our neighbour is appropriate and when we need to speak out (Prov. 15:1), and so on. There is nothing inappropriate per se in a book of the Bible whose primary focus is on knowing ourselves and those with whom we live, so that we can live with our spouses 'in an understanding way', as Peter puts it (1 Pet. 3:7).

On the other hand, some have suggested that, since the Song of Songs contains explicit erotic language and describes a sexual relationship, it must certainly be describing human relationships, for to use such speech of God would be irreverent.³ This argument is

3. So Kline 1959: 23. C. J. Mahaney states, 'The Song is full of erotic phrases, yet our relationship with God is never portrayed in the Bible as erotic . . . When describing our relationship with God, or when communicating our passion for him in prayer or worship, it's right to use a vocabulary of love. But this language should never include anything erotic. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24)' (2005: 153).

equally flawed. Many believers from previous eras have not been at all uncomfortable in using erotic imagery to speak of the relationship of the believer and God. The language of longing for God in the medieval mystics or the Scottish Presbyterian, Samuel Rutherford, can be quite surprising to modern readers. Rutherford, for example, writes, 'You shall lay soul and head down in the bosom, and between the breasts of Jesus Christ; that bed must be soft and delicious, it is perfumed with uncreated glory' (1803: 14). It may be hard to imagine a contemporary preacher using such language, but older believers found in such language alone a suitable vehicle to express the intensity of their passion for their Lord. In fact, that was one of the reasons why they treasured the Song of Songs and deliberately picked up its language as an expression of their devotion.

Indeed, it is worth noting that the most explicitly erotic language in the Old Testament is found precisely in an extended metaphor: in Ezekiel 16, the relationship between Israel and her lovers is portrayed in language that would make most of us blush, even in its toned-down English translation, and which caused Charles Spurgeon to comment, 'A minister can scarcely read it in public' (cited in Thomas 1993: 108). The prophet describes the history of Israel's relationship with the Lord and with the nations around her by means of the common biblical metaphor of marriage, in frankly sexual terms that are much more explicit than anything found on the pages of the Song of Songs. Indeed, some have argued precisely on the grounds of the explicitness of the language that the Song *must* be an allegory since, as John Wesley put it, 'The description of this bridegroom and bride is such as could not with decency be used or meant concerning Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter' (Longman 2001: 34).

In fact, the supposedly explicit erotic nature of the language of the Song has been vastly overstated. To be sure, many commentators have found erotic euphemisms behind almost every image of the book, but many of these are as fanciful as the thoughts of any medieval allegorist. To find erotic referents in the shape of a henna bush or the fact that the hair on the bridegroom's head is wet with dew is far from self-evident. Even if there are subtle poetic euphemisms at play here, the obvious point that these are so subtle

as to be easily missed by most readers seems overlooked in the eagerness of some commentators to unpack any possible sexual innuendo in precise anatomical detail. In the process, the subtlety of the poet's art seems lost, and the impression is given that the book's racy contents are only suitable for the ears of a mature audience. In reality, however, the poet's rich use of metaphors means that there is no reason why its contents cannot speak appropriately to a much wider audience, provided that the teacher or preacher is willing to follow the Song's lead and allow certain things to remain veiled and alluded to rather than put on public display.

The key question that should be asked about the Song is not whether it is appropriate to have a book of the Bible that speaks primarily about sex and marriage, nor whether such imagery may with propriety be used about God. Rather, it is whether the central relationship of the Song is intended by God as a typological picture of the relationship of Christ and his church, as, for example, the New Testament reads Psalm 45 (see Heb. 1:8–9), or if the background of the Song of Songs is more properly to be found in the world of wisdom literature. In the latter case, we should read it against the backdrop of passages like Proverbs 5, where the father says to the son,

Let your fountain be blessed,
 and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
 a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
 Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;
 be intoxicated always in her love.
 Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman
 and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
 (5:18–20)

Clearly, both interpretations are possible and each has some biblical warrant. As the book of Ephesians teaches us, marriage is the primary picture of the relationship of Christ and his church, while the book of Hebrews certainly sees in the royal wedding of Psalm 45 a foreshadowing of the wedding feast of the Lamb. Yet at the same time, the New Testament does not regularly pick

up the language of the Song of Songs to describe that relationship, a fact that might be surprising given its popularity in later centuries.⁴

The relationship of Solomon to the book that bears his name is obviously central to this question. Is King Solomon the chief character and male lover of the book, so that the relationship described is that between him and the Shulammitte? Or does his character play a different role within the book, as a kind of anti-hero? If Solomon *is* the chief character, either a spiritual or a natural interpretation remains viable. Spiritual interpretations invariably assume that Solomon is the chief character (and usually author), as Campbell's article makes clear. If the man in the relationship represents God, who better to fulfil that role than the Solomonic king (Campbell 2000: 21–22)? However, many natural interpretations, especially of the more popular variety, also assume that Solomon is author and main character as well (e.g. Dillow 1982). If Solomon is *not* the main character in the book, and the poems concern a more anonymous idealized couple, then explicit typology seems ruled out. If any and every married couple is potentially a 'type' of Christ, then typology has been stretched beyond the normal bounds of the meaning of the word; the background of wisdom literature seems more compelling. As we shall see, that doesn't mean that the Song of Songs cannot still speak to us about God, for, as with the rest of the Old Testament, wisdom literature also points to Christ and the gospel. Yet it does so in different ways from typology.

So, is Solomon the main character of the book? Several problems with the view that Solomon is both author and hero were mentioned above, in the section on authorship. But even if the author is someone else, presenting an idealized view of Solomon, problems remain. For example, if Solomon is the hero of the story, what is he doing out in the fields with his sheep in 1:7? While Israel's kings were metaphorically shepherds of their people, they would never have literally been found out in the fields with their flocks. Nor would royal sons have been assigned such a risky calling: they had

4. The New Testament is not completely devoid of echoes of the Song. Rev. 3:20 in particular may draw on Song 5:2; see commentary below.

servants to take care of such things. The focus of this passage is not on any metaphorical aspect of shepherding, but rather the fact that if the woman visits him at noon, she will need to undertake a difficult journey.

Moreover, if the beloved is Solomon, how does the Shulammite's unique love for her man illustrate the central theme in chapter 8 that true love cannot be bought for any price (see 8:11–12)? Solomon, we are told, has an expensive vineyard worth a thousand shekels that he rents out to keepers (the vineyard is a key metaphor for the lovers' bodies throughout the Song; see 1:6). His vineyard is at a place called Baal Hamon, which means literally 'Lord/husband of a crowd' – an apt description of Solomon's relationship to his thousand 'vineyards' (wives and concubines) in 1 Kings 11. The woman in the Song, though, gives her unique vineyard to her lover freely. She cannot be bought.

Yet if someone is about to marry one of the richest men in the world, it surely undercuts the force of such boasting about the purity of their motives. This is rather like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* suddenly deciding that Mr Darcy isn't so sullen and proud immediately after having seen his gorgeous estate in Derbyshire. A person who marries a wealthy husband may protest that money has nothing to do with attraction, but she is hardly in a position to validate that claim.

In fact, the Song of Songs is best understood as a wisdom piece about two idealized people, a man and a woman, whose exclusive and committed love is deep but, like all loves in this fallen world, far from perfect. Their idealized love story is contrasted with the alternative Solomonic model of 'love' that we see in 1 Kings 11, a model that views marriage primarily as a commercial and political transaction, a means to wealth, security or political advancement.

g. The three-character interpretation

At the same time, this is not to affirm the so-called 'three-character' interpretation of the Song, in which the Song depicts an ongoing love triangle between Solomon, the Shulammite girl and her shepherd lover. This view goes back to Ibn Ezra, the twelfth-century Jewish commentator, and has most recently been argued by Iain Provan (2001: 245–246). Like my view, this interpretation sees the portrayal of Solomon in the Song as negative. However, it constructs

a dramatic storyline behind the Song in which the Shulammitte has been carried off against her will from her rural home to become part of Solomon's harem in Jerusalem. On this view, her heart still belongs to her true love, the shepherd, to whom she remains faithful in spite of the seductive attractions of life in Solomon's harem, and with whom she sneaks away to maintain an ongoing relationship.

This interpretation seems problematic on several grounds. To begin with, it requires introducing sharp breaks into the dialogue of the Song, so that, for example, the woman moves from thinking about King Solomon in 1:12 to speaking of her shepherd lover in 1:13–14 (Provan 2001: 269). There is no evidence for such a shift in the focus of her attentions in the text. Even more troubling are the pastoral implications of this view: the woman is *ex hypothesi* fantasizing about, and perhaps actually, being unfaithful to her present husband with another man (Provan 2001: 271). Even though she did not freely consent to her union with Solomon, the woman is nonetheless still legally married to him according to this view, which seems to open the door to serious pastoral problems. For example, a woman might argue that even though she is married to Joe, she didn't want to marry him in the first place and was pressed into it by her parents; now, though, she has rediscovered her high school sweetheart. Surely God doesn't want her to stay in a loveless forced marriage, any more than the Shulammitte did? Isn't she free to follow 'true love'?

I believe it is possible to see Solomon portrayed as a negative character in the book and to contrast the Song's image of true love with the commercial model, as Provan does, without the Shulammitte actually being married to Solomon in the poem. This provides a more natural reading of the text, in my view, and avoids potentially justifying acts of adultery on the basis of 'true love'.

h. Combining natural and spiritual interpretation

To conclude, I believe that the 'natural' interpretation is the correct one, reading the Song against the backdrop of wisdom literature rather than of typology, and seeing it as providing profound spiritual insight into the marriage relationship. Yet I think we can go further than this and bridge the two interpretations.

As wisdom literature, the Song is designed to show us an idealized picture of married love, in the context of a fallen and broken world.

As it does so, it intends to convict each of us of how far short of this perfection we fall, both as humans and as lovers, and thus to drive us repeatedly into the arms of our true heavenly husband, Jesus Christ. He is the only One whose love for his bride is complete and perfect, and whose perfect love is our only hope in life and death. This more ‘parabolic’⁵ approach to the text enables preachers to apply it to both literal and spiritual contexts: the Song speaks to us as whole people, in need of wisdom in our relationships with other human beings and in our relationship with God. Many of the problems that we face in our human relationships are analogous to the challenges of our spiritual relationship with God, while at the same time, the good news that we need as people with broken human relationships is found in the unbreakable relationship that God has forged with us in Christ. Or, to put it in more explicitly biblical terms, our broken human relationships tell us something about our broken relationship with God (1 John 4:20), but the remedy for our failed loves is to be found always and only in God’s unfailing love: ‘In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’ (1 John 4:10).

3. Canonicity

The discussion of the inclusion of the Song into the canon is as old as the discussion of the proper interpretation of the Song. We must assume that it was in regard to a question about the Song’s inclusion that Rabbi Aqiba affirmed, ‘No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies’ (*m. Yadayim* 3.5, cited in Hess 2005: 20). Aqiba’s statement seems to represent the majority view in the Jewish community at the end of the first century AD.

In Christian circles, the Song was included on the earliest lists of scriptural books recorded by Eusebius, which go back to the second century AD. It is often confidently asserted that this nearly

5. The term comes from Fountain, 1966.