

1

SONG OF SONGS

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Roland E. Murphy O.Carm. begins his commentary on the Song of Songs (Hermeneia Series, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1990) with a quotation from Bernard of Clairvaux (Sermon 79). I would like to do the same. In reference to the Song of Songs, Bernard writes:

Who is it whom your soul loves, for whom you inquire? Has he no name?
Who are you and who is he? ...
In this marriage song it is affections, not words, that are to be considered.
Why is this, except that the holy love which is the subject of the entire song cannot be expressed by words, but only 'in deed and in truth'.
Here love speaks everywhere. If you desire to grasp these writings, you must love.
For anyone who does not love, it is useless to listen to this song of love,
for a cold heart cannot catch fire from its eloquence.

The Song of Songs makes a unique contribution to the Hebrew Bible in that it is a celebration of sexual love. The reader is left in no doubt that the yearning, the joy of discovery, the delight of consummation, are part, and a significant part, of the creation which God looks upon and sees to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). We are reminded of the statement in the Book of Genesis that it is as male and female that human beings are created 'in the image of God' (Genesis 27), and we hear the delight in Adam's voice when, at last, God gives him Eve as his companion (see Genesis 2:23). The Song of Songs is unique in giving the woman's perspective.

Though this delight in the erotic dimension of human sexual love is apparent in the text, commentators over the centuries, both Jewish and Christian, have passed quickly (perhaps too quickly) to see in the Song a mystical account of the love between God and his chosen People, between Christ and the Church. It was read in this way by Philo (died 45AD), by Rabbi 'Aqiba (died 135AD), and by Maimonides (died 1215).

There are instances in the Hebrew Scriptures of God being compared to a bridegroom and Israel to a bride:

I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her ...
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says YHWH, you will call me, "My husband" ...
And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know YHWH.

— Hosea 2:14-16, 19-20

You shall be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for Yahweh delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

— Isaiah 62:4-5

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

— Jeremiah 31:3

I looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord YHWH, and you became mine.

– Ezekiel 16:8

In Deuteronomy we hear Moses saying:

YHWH set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples.

– Deuteronomy 10:15

It was Rabbi ‘Aqiba’s interpretation of the text of the Song of Songs in this light that was persuasive in the Song of Songs being accepted as part of the Jewish Canon of inspired books. This is related also to the later practice of reading the Song during the celebration of the Passover.

The Newer Testament is full of statements of God’s love. In relation to the theme of the Song of Songs, we think of Jesus speaking of himself as the ‘bridegroom’ (see Mark 2:19-20; also John 3:29). We think, too, of Paul’s reflection in Ephesians 5:21-32, and the nuptial banquet described in the concluding chapters of the Book of Revelation.

It was Origen’s masterly ten volume commentary on the Song of Songs (only parts of which are extant), composed between 240 and 245AD, that set the pattern for subsequent Christian reflection which focused on Christ’s love for the Church, but also on the mystical love-encounter between God and the soul. It is this that accounts for the fact that Christian interpreters over the centuries wrote more reflections on the Song of Songs than on any other Old Testament text. The list includes Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, Theodoret of Cyr, Cyril of Alexandria, Pope Gregory I, William of St Thierry, the venerable Bede, Bernard, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

The long tradition of interpretation calls us to see in human love a sacrament of God’s love for us personally and for us as a community. The Song of Songs helps us avoid the danger of treating God’s love for us and our response of love in too abstract a way. We are helped to reflect on God’s yearning to love, and our profound need for divine communion. We recall the famous words of Saint Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless till we rest in you’(Confession 1.1).

There is, however, a danger that we may penetrate too quickly to the ‘spiritual’ meaning of the text, and miss what it has to say about the sacredness of sexual love. Granted the perhaps inevitable anxieties that surround human sexuality, we need the Song of Songs to remind us that our sexual yearning is a profound expression of our yearning for divine communion, and our experience of sexual intimacy is a sacrament of this communion. Of course our sexual drive when it is not motivated by love, and when it lacks respect for ourselves or for others, can, like every other dimension of human experience, be destructive. The power of the Song of Songs is that it reminds us that while we should fear our ability to distort our erotic energy, we should embrace our sexuality and that of others, for it is, indeed, a sacrament of divine encounter. As John Donne writes in his poem *The Ecstasy*: ‘love’s mysteries in souls do grow, but yet the body is his book’. The body, indeed sexual love, is, indeed, ‘very good’.

Introduction

Along with the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (and, in the Greek Septuagint, the Book of Wisdom), the Song of Songs is linked with the name of Solomon (see 1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11,12). While the Song does not explicitly offer moral teaching, the fact that it is linked with Solomon indicates a link with authoritative Wisdom literature. We should expect, therefore, to find insights into a wise way of giving expression to our sexual energies.

Scholars draw comparisons with an ancient Canaanite story of Ishtar, who makes love to the sun-god Tammuz, and so awakens nature to the renewal of Spring.

The Aramaisms in the Hebrew text and the presence of Persian loan words (e.g., 'apiryôn ('palanquin', 3:9) and pardēs ('orchard/paradise', 4:13) point to the Song being a post-exilic composition, though the understanding of the content is not dependent on establishing a precise date.