

Allegory or Anthology

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Text:

Introduction:

- I. I have not been as thorough in my study of this book as I usually try to be for such an assignment as this. I have not gone down all the alleyways and side roads.
 - A. Notable omissions include Haupt's work relative to the Anthology interpretation, G. Lloyd Carr's study relative to the Drama interpretation and the question of the existence of Drama in ancient Israel.
 - B. More time needs to be spent investigating the Jewish allegorical interpretations.
 1. Were they ancient, or were they a response to Christian interpretation applying the Song to Christ and his church?
 - C. I have not thoroughly tested all the conclusions presented herein.
 1. In order to evaluate the significance of the appearance of chiasmic structure based on isolated words and brief phrases, I would like to see if it is possible to arbitrarily select a section of poetry from an *Anthology of English Literature* and create a picture of a chiasmic structure on the same basis. But I have not yet done this.
 2. The observations made herein are tentative and offered only as a springboard for our discussion and for your own future study.
- II. Two methods of interpreting the Song of Solomon are discussed here, but there are others.
 - A. Garrett discusses seven methods (Allegorical, Dramatic, Historical, Cultic, Funerary, Wedding, and Love Song).
 - B. Pope describes 16 methods.
 - C. The two discussed here are considered respectively "the oldest and the most recent." Of course, if neither is correct, we would suspect that some other interpretation is in fact the oldest.

Body:

- I. **ALLEGORY OF CHRIST AND HIS BRIDE**
 - A. Richard Davidson says: "For fifteen centuries the allegorical method held sway....During these 1,500 years only one church leader of stature dared to protest against the allegorical interpretations. Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) asserted in his commentary that the Song should be understood according to its plain and literal sense--as a love song in which Solomon celebrates his marriage. This view was considered so radical that even his student, Bishop Theodoret, considered Theodore's literal interpretation 'not even fitting in the mouth of a crazy woman.'"
 - B. The precise identity of the bride varies, with some supposing it is the *church corporate*, some supposing it is the *individual believer*, and some supposing it is the *Virgin Mary*.
 1. In the introduction to his translation of Bernard's sermons on the Song, Samuel Eales provided a list of those who advocated each variation. Here, I will include only a partial listing of those mentioned by Eales for each variation.

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2. According to Eales, the following are among those who saw **the bride as the individual believer**:
 - a. Origin (d. A.D. 253)
 - b. Eusebius of Caesarea (d. A.D. 340)
 - c. Macarius the Egyptian (d. A.D. 390)
 - d. Gregory of Nyssa (d. A.D. 394)
 - e. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus (d. A.D. 457)
 3. According to Eales, the following are among those who saw **the bride as the church corporate**:
 - a. Athanasius - *Expositio in Cant. Canticorum* ("now lost")
 - b. Epiphanius - *Commentarius super Cant. Salomonis* ("of doubtful authenticity")
 - c. Cyril of Jerusalem
 - d. Cassiodorus - *Expositio in Cant. Cantic.* ("of doubtful authorship")
 4. According to Eales, the following are among those who saw **the bride as the Virgin Mary**:
 - a. Ambrose ("who explains Cant. iv. 12, 'a garden inclosed . . . a spring shut up, a fountain sealed' of the perpetual virginity of St. Mary.")
 - b. Gregory the Great
- C. In addition to the foregoing, a number of expositors interpreted the bride in all three ways at the same time.
1. My reading of Origen is that he saw more than one of these as possibilities, depending on the particular passage in view.
 - a. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, he wrote, "the appellations of Bride and Bridegroom denote either the Church in her relation to Christ, or the soul in her union with the Word of God" (p. 58). So, for example, Origen interpreted the Bride's head in 2:6 as representative "of the perfect soul or of the Church." (p. 200)
- D. Hippolytus is actually the first known to have interpreted the Song as a Christian allegory. An example of his method is offered by Pope who says he interpreted the breasts in 4:5 as the Old and New Covenants. (114)
- E. But it is Origen who set the tone for almost all interpreters during the next millennium.
1. Pope says, "Origen's influence on later commentators on the Song was considerable" (116)
 2. Lawson quotes Pope Damasus: "While Origen surpassed all writers in his other books, in his *Song of Songs* he surpassed himself" (265)
 3. Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs has been preserved as translated from Greek into Latin by Rufinus and Jerome. His explanations of the supposed spiritual significance of various phrases were reasoned even if speculative. He especially appealed to the idea of the Jewish nation as an imperfect embodiment of the incipient church, which became mature as the church inclusive of the Gentiles. The following will serve to exemplify his method:
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- a. *The bride* “represents the church gathered from the Gentiles” (92)
- b. *The kisses of his mouth* are “the words of faith and love and peace” that came from the mouth of Christ himself, and which are contrasted with the kisses delivered by his messengers of old, the angels and the prophets. (60)
- c. *Ointments* (1:3) are the anointing of the Holy Spirit.
- 1) Origen interpreted 1:3 in accordance with Gal. 3:24 to which he refers in this connection. From the LXX, Origen read, $\kappa \alpha \iota \grave{\alpha} \omicron \sigma \mu \grave{\eta} \mu \acute{\upsilon} \rho \omega \nu \sigma \omicron \upsilon \acute{\upsilon} \pi \epsilon \rho \pi \acute{\alpha} \nu \tau \alpha \tau \grave{\alpha} \acute{\alpha} \rho \acute{\omega} \mu \alpha \tau \alpha$, “and the fragrance of your ointments is above all the spices.” Origen took the spices to be the “words of the Law and the Prophets.” These were surpassed by the anointing of the Holy Spirit which is “your ointments.”
- d. *The daughters of Jerusalem* are “the daughters of this earthly Jerusalem who, seeing the Church of the Gentiles, despise and vilify her” (92)
- e. Being *dark* is due to “the sun of Justice” having “looked askance” because of the Gentiles’ “unbelief and disobedience” (108-109); “by reason of her former sins.” (113)
- f. *Our bed* (1:16) is the place we share with Christ.
- 1) Origen appeals to 1 Cor. 6:15 where Paul says “our bodies are members of Christ.”
 - a) Origen reasons, “when he says ‘our bodies,’ he shows that these bodies are the body of the Bride; but when he mentions the ‘members of Christ,’ he indicates that these same bodies are also the body of the Bridegroom.”
 - b) The idea seems to be that in considering the church as Christ’s body, the bride and bridegroom are considered to be united, as in bed. Again, Origen is working from the Septuagint which has $\kappa \lambda \acute{\iota} \nu \eta \grave{\eta} \mu \acute{\omega} \nu \sigma \acute{\upsilon} \sigma \kappa \iota \omicron \varsigma$, “our shady bed.”
 - c) With Psalm 121:6 in mind, Origen says: “If then these bodies are shady...in the sense that they are full of good works and leafy with the abundance of spiritual perception, then we can truly say of them that the sun shall not burn thee by day, nor the moon by night. For the sun of temptation does not burn the righteous man, resting as he does beneath the shadow of the Word of God.”
- g. *The lily of the valley* is Christ.
- 1) However, this seems odd inasmuch as it seems to be the bride that speaks of herself this way and even in Origen’s system, Christ is the bridegroom, not the bride.
 - 2) Origen has the field (a cultivated ground) being the people cultivated by the Prophets and the Law, and he has the valley (“stony and uncultivated places”) being “the Gentiles’ place.” (176)
 - 3) Origen sees the “flower” as being inferior to the “lily.” He writes, “because the Law brought no man to perfection, the Word of God could not there advance beyond the flower...In that valley of the Gentiles however, He became the Lily.”
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- h. *Little foxes* (2:15) are the wicked powers of the demons, the “opposing forces and the wicked powers of demons who by means of base thoughts and perverted notions destroy the bloom of the virtues of the soul and ruin the fruit of faith” (255)

F. What accounts for the tendency?

1. **Jewish interpretations of the Song of Solomon:** Eales characterized the *Jewish allegorical method of interpreting the song as* “mystico-historical...sees in the Song of Songs an allegorical description of various periods of the history of the Theocracy of Israel.”
 - a. Lawson writes: “Already the Synagogue had identified the bride of this Song with Yahweh’s chosen people Israel; and so the thought quite readily suggested itself to the Fathers that the bride should be sought in God’s new people, in the mystery of its nuptial union with Christ” (Lawson’s introduction in *Origen, the Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies*, translated and annotated by R. P., Lawson, 7)
 - b. However, Eales says, “there is no clear proof that the Song was interpreted in an allegorical manner by any Rabbi before the Christian era.”
 - c. Cant. 4:8 as transl. in the LXX, along with Eccus. (xlvii.4-17), and the Book of Wisdom (viii.2) have been cited as evidence that the allegorical interpretation existed prior to the Christian era. Eales finds these unconvincing^(x), as did Pope, (20)
2. **Scripture itself:** Of course, Paul likened the relationship between Christ and the church to the relationship between a husband and his wife.
 - a. This idea was already present in the OT: Psalm 45 portrays a marriage scene and is shown to be Messianic by Hebrews 1:8-9.
 - b. Isaiah 62:4 portrays the church as “married” (*beulah*).
 - c. Idolatry was condemned as marital infidelity (e.g., Ezek. 16, Hosea).
 - d. And then in Revelation 21:2, there is the figure the new Jerusalem as a bride adorned for her husband.
3. **Greek philosophy** is given some credit.
 - a. Garret refers to Neoplatonic influence (356).
 - b. Pope made much the same point, noting Origen’s self-castration (an act doubted by some) and commenting, “Origen fully espoused Plato’s interpretation of love as distinguished by two opposing types, the earthly and physical versus the heavenly and spiritual.”
 - c. As further evidence of this mentality, Pope quoted Origen’s comment on S. 1:4 where Origen described “a love of the flesh which comes from Satan, and there is also another love, belonging to the Spirit, which has its origin in God; and nobody can be possessed by the two loves.... If you have despised all bodily things...then you can acquire spiritual love.” (115)
4. The notion of the individual soul (as opposed to the church corporate) as the bride of Christ is attributed by Harnack to Greek Philosophy by way of **Gnostic influence**.
 - a. Harnack cites “the sublime description in the Excerpta ex Theodoto,” Tatian’s Oration to the Greeks (XIII), and as an example of an “offensively realistic form

not be displayed publicly, and in the open air.” Thus he reasoned that $\mu\alpha\sigma\tau\omicron\acute{\iota}$ (“breasts”) must have been the authentic reading, and then went on to discern a spiritual meaning behind the term.

- G. Evaluating the allegorical interpretation on its merits.
1. I am not reluctant to acknowledge that human sexual love in marriage is a reflection of divine love (though the lyrics, “I keep falling in love with him, over and over and over and over again,” are problematic for me).
 - a. The mutuality of conjugal love in marriage is certainly noble.
 - b. There is even a self-sacrificial aspect in the husband’s responsibility to restrain himself in order to bring pleasure to his wife.
 - c. Moreover, graphic sexual imagery is used in scripture to communicate spiritual lessons.
 2. But many would concur with Garret when he says: “Fairly unambiguous allusions to love play appear in the text...Such language is simply inappropriate as a description of the love between God and his people, other biblical metaphors notwithstanding.”
 3. There is a difference in the efficacy of using sexuality allegorically to condemn idolatry and using sexuality allegorically to encourage devotion to Christ, and we need to think about why this is true.
 - a. The graphic imagery of Ezek. 16:25 (“you spread your legs to every passer-by) evokes a visceral repulsion in any husband. He does not want to tarry on the thought of such behavior by his wife. He can readily empathize with a man whose wife so behaves. And there is no attraction in the imagery that prevents his coming to understand that this is how God views His people’s spiritual infidelity. Thus the graphic imagery used to portray the heinousness of idolatry is effective.
 - b. On the other hand, graphic sexual imagery in a positive context takes a man’s thoughts longingly and properly to his wife, and from thence they are not so easily transferred.
 - 1) In commenting on Cant. 2:6 (“*his left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me*”), Origen recognized the literal import of the words, but urged the reader to mentally move on:
 - a) “The picture before us in this drama of love is that of the Bride hastening to consummate her union with the Bridegroom. But turn with all speed to the life-giving Spirit and, eschewing physical terms, consider carefully what is the left hand of the Word of God, what the right; also what His Bride’s head is—the head, that is to say, of the perfect soul or of the Church; and do not suffer an interpretation that has to do with the flesh and the passions to carry you away.” (200)
 - 2) Without lingering on the literal meaning, the imagery loses its force. But if one lingers on the literal meaning that it may have its full impact, Origen is right to suppose one may well be carried away from spiritual thoughts. And so I see a difference in the efficacy of using sexuality in contexts condemning idolatry and using sexuality in contexts encouraging devotion to Christ. The former are effective, the latter are not so much so.

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4. Foreshadowing is based on an existing thing that is the shadow, and therefore, if the Song foreshadows Christ and his church, it would be necessary that it first describe the human love that is the shadow.
 - a. It can be said that Origen allowed this to a degree. This can be seen in his comment on Cant. 1:2:
 - 1) "...because the bridegroom delays his coming for so long, she, being grieved with longing for his love, is pining at home and doing all she can to bring herself at last to see her spouse and to enjoy his kisses...This is the content of the actual story, presented in dramatic form. But let us see if the inner meaning also can be fittingly supplied along these lines." (58f)
 - 2) He went on to develop the spiritual meaning of the allegory, but clearly he recognized the literal meaning first.
 - b. However, some others who have taken the allegorical approach seem to deny actual sexual love as a first meaning of the Song.
 - 1) John Wesley, in his commentary on the Song, said the descriptions of the bridegroom and bride "are such as could not with any decency be used or meant concerning Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter. There are many expressions and descriptions, which being applied to them, are absurd and monstrous. Hence it follows, that this book is to be understood allegorically concerning that spiritual love and marriage which is between Christ, and his church." (<http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/notes/notes/Songs.html>)
 5. If the Song were an allegory, it would be a profoundly well developed allegory, far surpassing any other part of scripture in its development of the relationship between man and woman as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church.
 - a. It would be a whole book devoted to this one idea. It would be the most thoroughly Messianic book of any in the OT.
 - b. Does it not seem odd that if this were the case, it would not be once quoted, or even alluded to, in all the New Testament?

II. ANTHOLOGY OF LOVE POEMS

- A. The arguments for viewing the Song as a collection of unrelated love poems include, but may not be limited to, the following:
 1. **Drama didn't exist** among the Jews
 - a. "Whatever dramatic interpretation is adduced faces the insuperable difficulty mentioned by Oesterley, namely that among the Semites generally, and the Hebrews in particular, drama as such was unknown." (Harrison, 1054, referencing Oesterley, *The Song of Songs*, 10a, and also Gordis, *The Song of Songs*, 1954, 11ff)
 - b. Pope notes that "When Herod built a theatre (Josephus *Antiquities* xv 81) , it was regarded as an affront by pious Jews." (35)
 - c. Against the foregoing, see Pope: "The grounds for the dramatic view consist of the fact that the book presents the speakers and dialogue without introductory statements or transitional directions and that where action or account of speech are given in the third person, as in 3:1ff, 6ff, 5:3ff, 8:8ff, the narrator appears to be one of the actors. The poet-author nowhere appears. Thus if the book is a unity, and if there is a plot, we have the basic features of drama." (35, Anchor Bible

Commentary, Song of Songs, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, by Marvin H. Pope, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1977, 2nd printing 1980)

- d. It is also worth noting that Origen considered the Song to be a drama.
 - 1) He says Solomon wrote it “in the form of a drama.” (Prologue, 21)
 - 2) Again, he says the book “is written in dramatic form,” and explains, “we defined a drama as something in which certain characters are introduced who speak; and from time to time some of them arrive up the scene, while others go or come, so that the whole action consists in interchange between the characters.”
 2. Similarities between the Song of Songs and various marriage poems from surrounding cultures have been seen by some as evidence that the work is of the same sort. See for example “Remarks on the Song by Dr. J.G. Wetzstein” in an appendix to Delitzsch’s commentary.
- B. The argument against the anthology view is the evidence that the song is a literary unit.
1. The difficulty of this argument is evidenced by the multitude of arrangements claiming to show a unifying structure.
 - a. Dorsey says that “an overall chiasmic structure in the book is proposed by a number of scholars,” but then has to acknowledge that of those he mentions, each “arrives at a different identification of the Song’s constituent units.” (211, n. 30)
 - b. Noting the lack of agreement upon the number of discrete units or individual songs into which the Song of Songs should be divided,” Shea says, “The numbers proposed in the past have varied between 7 and 44.” (378)
 2. Various recurring phrases and themes are thought to provide evidence of unity. But common themes and phrases might be found in any modern collection of otherwise unrelated love poems. The subject matter itself is sufficient to account for some similarity in vocabulary and theme.
 3. Nonetheless, it does seem to me that there is a strong case to be made for the overall literary unity of the Song. There seem to be 7 distinct units that are tied together by common characteristics and arranged symmetrically.
 - a. Dorsey identifies seven distinct units in part on the basis of the theme of separation/union. They are 1:2-2:7, 2:8-2:17, 3:1-3:5, 3:6-5:1, 5:2-7:10, 7:11-8:14, 8:5-8:14 (212). With the exception of the last, each poem portrays the separated lovers being brought together. The last has them united throughout.
 - b. The same seven units can be identified on the basis of distinct content consisting of action and/or dialogue. The following brief observations about each of the seven poems will serve to illustrate this.
 - 1) **Poem 1** (1:2-2:7) has her asking, “Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon?” He replies, “If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds’ tents.” She says, “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” He counters, “As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women,” and she returns the compliment, “As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men.”

- 2) **Poem 2** (2:8-2:17) begins with the young woman likening her lover to a gazelle bounding over the hills. She tells of his invitation to her to “Arise...and come away,” and his description of a destination of vibrant fauna coming into bloom. She concludes, “My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains.”
 - 3) **Poem 3** (3:1-3:5) has a complete narrative about a night time search for her beloved and an encounter with the night watchmen, and concludes with an adjuration to the “daughters of Jerusalem.”
 - 4) **Poem 4** is a wedding scene. After the description of the procession, Solomon extols her virtues and concludes by comparing her to a luscious garden and he implores, “let its spices flow.” She replies, “Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.” He accepts and says, “I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk.”
 - 5) **Poem 5** begins with a narrative similar to the one in Poem 3, but here the encounter with the night watchmen has a sinister twist and subsequent adjuration to the “daughters of Jerusalem” is a plea that a message be delivered to her lover. This leads into a dialogue with the daughters of Jerusalem. They ask “What is your beloved more than another beloved?” She replies at length. Then they ask, “Where has your beloved gone?” Her reply serves to introduce him into the dialogue and thenceforth, the dialogue of the poem is primarily between him and her.
 - 6) **Poem 6** is an invitation from the young woman to her beloved, and a promise to give him her love. It concludes with a statement indicating that he accepts her invitation, and an adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem.
 - 7) **Poem 7** begins with an introductory statement about the power of love. The subsequent speeches contain interconnected dialogue. The flow of the dialogue can be seen in the following phrases: “If she is a wall” and “I was a wall”; “she has no breasts” and “my breasts were like towers.”
- c. Notwithstanding the distinctive character of each of the seven units, several devices occur repeatedly throughout. *E.g.*, “gazelle” or “gazelles” is found in each one except for the sixth. The phrase “daughters of Jerusalem” is found in poems 1, 3, 4, 5, & 6.
- d. There is symmetry in the arrangement of these seven units.
- 1) Dorsey (212) describes the following pattern:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ opening words of mutual love and desire <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ young man's invitation to the young woman <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ young woman's nighttime search <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ their wedding day ▪ young woman's nighttime search ▪ young woman's invitation to the young man ▪ closing words of mutual love and desire |
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- 2) Dorsey finds more evidence of symmetry in various phrases and references within the seven units. I don't concur in all of Dorsey's observations about the points of symmetry, but most are worthy of consideration. The table at the end of this outline highlights these.
- 3) An even more elaborate, even stunning, chiasitic structure is uncovered by R. L. Alden and is reproduced in Garrett's commentary, p. 376. The centerpiece of the whole structure are the parallel phrases, "into my garden" (4:16) and "into his garden" (5:1). Note that these are the culminating phrases of the center poem as laid out above.
- 4) See also the articles by and William H. Shea and J. Cheryl Exum cited in the bibliography.

Conclusion:

- I. The Song celebrates romantic, sexual love.
- II. The Song is a unit, composed of several parts all designed to fit together as a whole.
- III. But the very case for unity points to a climactic point at the center of the Song, not at its end. This (I think) argues against the interpretation I was taught which treats all sexual references prior to chapter 8 as wishful rather than realized.

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<p><u>UNIT 1</u></p>	<p>My mother's sons were angry with me (1:6)</p>	<p>they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept! (1:6)</p>	<p>As an apple tree among the trees of the forest (2:3)</p>	<p>your companions (1:7)</p>	<p>my breasts (1:13)</p>	<p>Solomon (1:5)</p>
<p><u>UNIT 2</u></p>						
<p>Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.... The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land (1:10-12)</p>						
<p><u>UNIT 3</u></p>						
<p>On my bed by night (3:1)</p>						
<p><u>UNIT 4</u></p>						
<p>I slept, but my heart was awake. (5:2)</p>						
<p>I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. (5:6)</p>						
<p><u>UNIT 5</u></p>						
<p>Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields (7:11)</p>						
<p>let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom.... The mandrakes give forth fragrance (7:12f)</p>						
<p><u>UNIT 6</u></p>						
<p>Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he let out the vineyard to keepers;...My vineyard, my very own, is before me; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred. (8:11-12)</p>						
<p><u>UNIT 7</u></p>						
<p>Under the apple tree I awakened you. (8:5)</p>						
<p>with companions (8:14)</p> <p>has no breasts (8:8); my breasts (8:10)</p> <p>Solomon (8:11)</p>						

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