

## LOVE SONG

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Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"My beloved speaks and says to me:  
'Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away;

For lo, the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone." Song of Songs 1:10-11

We begin with a question: how did this thing get into the Bible?

A straightforward answer is provided by Professor William Cole in his book, Sex and Love in the Bible. "It won its way there" by means of "a double fiction."

The first fiction was that this book was written by King Solomon. The opening line is obscure, but reads roughly:

"The Song of Songs which is Solomon's."

The phrase "Song of Songs" was an idiom which meant "the best" or "most beautiful of songs." Legend held that Solomon had written some 1005 songs; so the implication is that this one is the most beautiful of all. The phrase translated "which is Solomon's" is uncertain in meaning and does not necessarily mean that Solomon wrote this material. But people came to believe that he did. A consensus of unbiased scholars today believes that in its present form "The Song of Songs" was written around 250 A.D., or seven hundred years after the time of Solomon. The language leads to that conclusion. But in ancient times people believed that Solomon was the author. Had they not believed that it is very doubtful the book would have been included in the canon, or official list of sacred books.

The second fiction was that "The Song of Songs" is an allegory. Around 100 A.D. a council of rabbis debated whether this book should be included among the Jewish scriptures. Some of the rabbis thought they knew a sexy lyric when they saw one and they were dead against letting such lyrics rub shoulders with the Psalms. But the famous Rabbi Akiba stood up and made an impassioned speech in which he said:

"The entire age from the beginning until now is not worth as much as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel!"

It is hard to beat that for extravagant praise. Akiba insisted that these lyrics are not really about men and women at all. He said that they are an allegory or symbolic tale about the relationship between God and Israel.

Not only Jews, but Christians, swallowed that theory. Throughout the Middle Ages people wrote devotional works in which the Song of Songs was taken as an allegory depicting the relation between Christ and the Church, or sometimes Christ and the individual Christian. The work of Bernard of Clairvaux is the best known of these efforts. He tells us that in that passage we heard this morning, Christ is telling the church to get up and start pruning the souls of the saints. If the Song of Songs had not made it into the Bible, Sigmund Freud would not have had such a field day with medieval devotional literature.



Jr. Solomon wrote it and it has to do with the love of Christ for his church. That's the double fiction. When I say it is a fiction, I do not suggest that our spiritual forebears meant to deceive us. They believed these theories about "The Song of Songs." Even today many Christians sincerely believe in them. In his book, The Greatest Book Ever Written, Fulton Oursler tells us that despite all evidence to the contrary, the church declares "The Song of Songs" to be Solomon's masterpiece about God and his people, and so we must believe that to be so. But suppose we were to lay aside tradition and take the evidence seriously. Suppose we have here a collection of erotic folk songs with which Solomon had little, if anything, to do. If they got into the Bible by mistake, perhaps we do well to take them out again. What good are they except for providing titles for Broadway plays?

The Well, in order to start answering that question we need to try and find out what sort of literature we are dealing with. I am no expert on this matter. The fact is that when I was so foolish as to tell you in advance that I would preach on this forbidden book, I never really had studied it. So I went down to the public library last week. Let me say in passing that the buckets under the skylight are impressive and that Minnehaha in the window looks extremely worried. She is very anxious about what is going to become of her. I was tempted to take her home. I thought we might set her up over the choir loft and solve another problem that way. Now while I was worrying about Minnehaha, I did a little research into the Song of Songs.

s; not One scholarly theory holds that we have here a collection of songs e- that were part of ancient wedding ceremonies. A hundred years ago a Prussian consul stationed in Damascus collected some songs used in contemporary in Syrian wedding celebrations. He discovered striking similarities between en those Syrian lyrics and those in the Bible. Today most scholars feel that clu- the wedding celebration theory is too neat. Some of the lyrics may fit, but Had others do not. It is worth noting that the new Episcopal wedding service uded lists the passage we read in church today as an optional reading. But then, of course, we heirs of the Puritans know about those Episcopal cavaliers.

und Another theory holds that "The Song of Songs" contains an ancient fertility cult ritual celebrating the marriage of a god and goddess. This d theory would help explain why this material was looked upon as religious y literature. On the other hand, while you might fool a Jewish rabbi about ub a sexy lyric with the notion of an allegory, it is hard to believe that you an could make him swallow a polytheistic fertility ritual. And once again the book is not neatly organized enough to support such a theory. So most scholars reject it although some agree that the language of ancient fertility cults may have crept in here and there.

se The prevailing view seems to be that we have here not one poem, but an rather a fairly loose collection of poems. We have an anthology of ancient love songs. Compared to the rest of the Bible they are highly sensuous in he places, though by contemporary standards they are hardly shocking. A special feature is the background of natural scenery. In general we have h, here a kind of celebration of nature, both human and non-human that distin- f guishes this book from others in the Bible.

Once we recognize the kind of literature this is we find ourselves on fairly familiar territory. To be sure some of those images are rather fantastic to us prosaic westerners. Who wants to have legs like "alabaster columns set on bases of gold"? But allowing for such differences in taste



songs of this sort have been part of the human scene everywhere since people first began to speak.

The problem with this book is not so much what is in it as what isn't in it. There is no reference to God here at all. Nothing of the spiritual and moral message found elsewhere in the Old Testament seems present here. The book seems to be completely secular. Sensuous love songs may be all right in their place, but after all, we do read the Bible in church. We have a hard enough time as it is getting the preachers to stick to religion these days without the Bible compounding the problem.

Well, that problem opens up the vexed question of what is religious and what is secular. Much of the discussion centering about that question in recent years has turned out to be both confused and confusing. But I think one important insight has emerged in our time, an insight rooted in the Bible itself. A Christian is not a person who tries to live in two separate worlds, a sacred or religious world on the one hand, and a secular or profane world on the other. A Christian is a person who lives in this one world that God has created, this secular world which is the place where we are asked to live as God's children. In order to do that we don't have to engage continually in a lot of pious language in order to justify what we are doing. You don't make a ping pong game religious by shouting "Praise Jesus" every time you score a point. All ping pong games are holy so long as you join in the spirit of the game and treat your opponent fairly.

By the same token you don't need to drag God's name into an anthology of love lyrics to keep them from being profane. The book that stimulated so much of the discussion about the religious and the secular in recent years was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prison letters. In those letters smuggled out to a friend, Bonhoeffer attacked this idea of a religious world set over against a secular world. As one facing death and who spoke daily with others who faced death he said that it was wrong to be looking toward a life to come in a way that distracts us from the here and now. And then he wrote something which I think is quite pertinent to our theme this morning:

"I believe that we ought so to love and trust God in our lives, and in all the good things that he sends us, that when the time comes (but not before!) we may go to him with love, trust and joy. But, to put it plainly, for a man in his wife's arms to be hankering after the other world is, in mild terms, a piece of bad taste, and not God's will..."

Had some pious editors come along and tacked on some religious tract to these ancient love lyrics that too would have been in bad taste.

Now if we want to avoid some false distinction between the sacred and the secular, we need to avoid making too sharp a separation between different kinds of love. I believe with Bernard of Clairvaux that we should love God for himself and that our love for God cannot be confused with or absorbed into our love for anything else.

Yet I also agree with a modern scholar in the Interpreter's Commentary when he suggests that the allegorical interpretation of the "Song of Songs" is right in so far as it traces a connection between such passionate lyrics and our love for God. He writes:



"It is only from a profound knowledge of human love, in all its manifestations, that men can rise to an understanding of the love that unites God with his children."

Certainly that is true. Beyond that we may say that love is all one fabric. Like an oriental rug it may have many colors and shapes, but it is one rug nevertheless. Love may be distorted and abused in a thousand ways, as I have said many times from this pulpit. But I will say quite categorically that all true love is sacred. That goes for the rather sensuous love expressed in portions of the Song of Songs no less than for the love that Jesus showed for the blind and the halt. The worst mistake we could make is to assume that the Song of Songs is profane because the kind of love it talks about is outside the love of God.

But aren't we likely to make that mistake just because these poems never talk about God. Perhaps. This seems to bring our line of thought full circle. Thinking about the hereafter can be bad taste. But for the Christian all relationships are grounded in God's love and to lose sight of that is to cheapen a relationship. It may be bad taste to tack pious language onto lyrics such as these. But they do need to be seen in the context of a larger view of life that includes other forms of love. Otherwise they too can be cheapened in the eyes of the reader and undoubtedly have become so cheapened many times.

What is so wonderful is that these playful, passionate, erotic songs are given a context. They are given the context of the message about a God who created a world and put man and woman in a garden and who said it was very good. They are given a context of a message about how when people distrust God and one another they become estranged and begin to mistreat one another. They are given a context of laws defining responsibilities in human relationships. They are given a context of poems equally passionate about the renewing power of forgiveness and hope. In short, these erotic songs are set down in the context of the whole Bible. They help fill out the Bible picture of human life. Without them something basic would be missing. Yet these songs need to be seen as part of the larger picture which the Bible paints for us.

I began with a question: How did this thing get in the Bible? I said, by a double fiction. But that is only a superficial answer. I think the deeper answer is this: they got in there by a divine trick. It was not the rabbis of old who deceived one another; it was God who deceived the rabbis. Or perhaps we should say that God and Rabbi Akiba formed an alliance, an alliance which the rabbi may not fully have understood, but which he served. I would not go so far as to say that the day God gave us the Song of Songs was the greatest day since the beginning of the age. But it was a better day than most, and without it a certain sparkle would be missing from holy writ.