

*Love Is Stronger
Than Death*

**A COMMENTARY ON
THE
'SONG OF SONGS'**

by
Geoffrey Bingham

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'Song of Songs' the

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Song of Songs

Introduction

This Book is called things such as ‘the Song’, ‘the Song of Songs’, ‘the Song of Solomon’ and, ‘Canticles’, and the opening verse has ‘The Sublime Song of Solomon’ (M. H. Pope), ‘The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s’ (*RSV, JB*). Many and varied are the views regarding the authorship of this Book as well as the time its writing. So varied are they that we cannot enter into a discussion on them. As for *authorship*, the text credits Solomon with having written it, and we know that Solomon was certainly a composer of songs. I Kings 4:32 says, ‘He also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five’. This context tells us he was deeply interested in flora and fauna—things which are certainly mentioned in the Song of Songs. ‘The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s,’ certainly seems to make him author, but it could simply mean that it was a Song dedicated to King Solomon, i.e. that he owned it, having been given it. The King is mentioned six times in the text, but if we look at the allusions (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12), none of them refers directly to the story itself. There are references to ‘the king’ (1:4, 12; 7:5), but these need not be applied to Solomon, although that would seem natural when we think the poem is his. Whether we regard Solomon as the author of the Song will depend greatly on which one of the many views we hold.¹

As for *date of writing*, there are no historical allusions in the Book, and that makes it difficult. Often the time of writing of a Book can be ascertained on literary grounds, but here literary critics differ greatly. For example, the period of Solomon was 971–931 B.C., and Aramaic became the accepted language of the peasants from 450–300 B.C., but Aramaic was extant from 1200 B.C. and some of the Aramaisms may have come in to the Book via other channels. The literary arguments do not seem enough to date the Book. Again, our *view* of the Book may determine when we think it was written. The main thing, of course, is that it was written. We would like, then, to understand its text. The fact that it has been accepted into the canon² of the Old Testament by the Jews and also by the Christians means generally that it as an accepted Book although there have always been critics who have thought it was not canonical in essence.

¹ See later note regarding the possible authorship of the Book by Solomon.

² It was, in fact, accepted into canon because it was assumed to be an allegory. Scholarship seems largely to have discounted that interpretation. Does that, then, invalidate the Book? Scarcely, since other views would equally invalidate it. Canonicity has always demanded that indefensible element of inspiration—Divine inspiration,—and although there is not one mention of God in the Book, yet the sense of the genuinely spiritual is there.

Different Views of the Nature of the Text

There are four main views, namely the Allegorical, the Cultic, the Dramatic and the Lyrical.

The Allegorical View

It has long been asked whether this Book is a simple love narrative—an exposition or revelation of what human love is, i.e. that between a man and a woman—or whether it refers to a higher, more spiritual relationship, namely that of God with His bride Israel. This view was generally taken by Jews, as Israel was understood to be the covenant bride or wife of God (Isa. 54:5; Ezek. 16:8ff.; Hosea 2:19). Christians, of course, applied it to Christ and his church (John 3:29; Eph. 5:22–23; Rev. 19:6–9; 21:2, 9; 22:17)—a view consistent with the OT view of God and His wife, Israel, so that in the poems God is the great lover and Israel the recipient of His mercies, e.g. deliverance from Egypt. For Christians Christ, of course, is the true Lover and Bridegroom. Only allegory could make the Song canonical, for the Book would otherwise be inadmissible simply as a human love story. By ‘allegorical’ we mean, technically, the telling of one story which gives a description of a subject under that guise. In the Song it would mean a symbolic representation of something other than that contained in the narrative itself. This interpretation lasted for some seventeen centuries for both Jews and Christians. There can be no doubt that the *principle* of man–woman love is the same as that of Christ and his Church, but whether the Song of Songs is intended to be an allegory is another question. F. B. Knutson (Art. in *ISBE*, Vol. 1, pp. 606–608) says,

Some Scripture passages could be taken to justify allegorical interpretation. The figure of the bride is used in Hosea and Ezekiel, and for the Church in Rev. 21f. Metaphor, however, is not allegory. Neither does Canticles have to do with prophetic speech or apocalyptic. Moreover there are some difficulties as raised by the allegorizing of any other book of Scripture: (1) there is no hint that Canticles understands itself as allegory: (2) allegorizing is the result either of the interpreter’s failure to find what he seeks in the literal understanding of the text, or his finding elements that may be offensive or embarrassing. In the first case, the allegorical interpreter sees profound hidden spiritual truths, in the second he covers what he regards as embarrassments. Allegorizing is therefore always highly subjective, often resulting in ‘eisegesis’.

The allegorical interpretation also has problems. How do the sixty queens and eighty concubines (6:8) figure in such a monogamous allegorical relationship, and why are there just sixty heroes (3:7)? The document is all too human to be purely allegorical, although it may well be typical, a sort of analogue of the Divine Bridegroom and the covenantal Bride. In saying that the document is ‘all too human’ we do not mean it is not a ‘great mystery’ as Paul uses that term in Ephesians 5:32. Human love is a great mystery, deriving as it does from Divine enablement and gifting, and rare as it is in purity because of the fall of the first couple and so the entire human race. If writing is to be allegorical then the substance of the allegory—in this case the two lovers and their love—must be *essentially* of the highest order.

Very close to the allegorizing method is the typological one, i.e. the story which is told can be literal, but it is typical of the truth the author is seeking to emphasize. The Song may not be meant at all to be typological, but it is, by nature of the case, particularly if we wish to draw knowledge and wisdom from the analogue. In other words, the analogue—like the allegory—must have richness of character in order to be worthy of use in setting forth the archetype.

The Dramatic View

This view maintains that the whole Song was in the form of a drama. When the allegorical view became more or less discredited by the end of the eighteenth century, it gave place to the idea that the Song was a drama, the three chief actors³ being the woman, her lover the shepherd, and Solomon the king. The woman was in love with the shepherd but Solomon as king was able to claim her for his harem, but she remained loyal to her lover, refusing the attempted seduction of her by Solomon.⁴

There are certain notes in the margins of some ancient manuscripts of the Canticles, and so by the aid of them the theory was developed in the eighteenth century by Jacobi (1773), and in the nineteenth century by Umbreit (1820) and Ewald (1826), and taken on by others that the Song was structured in dramatic form with the three players—as mentioned above. Commentators note that if it was a drama then it was not one which was played, since that form of art was not practised in Judaism. In fact that kind of art long remained an affront to the Jews. The portrayal of Solomon as the villain of the piece was scarcely likely to be accepted by canonists or tradition, and since the title ascribes the Song to Solomon it is scarcely likely that the dramatic view is authentic. M. H. Pope in a long and comprehensive Introduction to his commentary on the Song in the *Anchor Bible* (pp. 17–229) covers the multitudinous theories regarding the Song which have developed in Jewish and Christian thought. Whilst the Dramatic Theory seems to fit the facts—particularly the problem of King Solomon becoming as a rustic shepherd—yet there are many difficulties in the way of substantiating it. There is no real textual evidence for the shepherd hypothesis.

The Cultic View

This is a view which purports to find parallels in non-Jewish religions but which the Jews secularized and turned into Jewish use. The Canaanite male and female deities were Baal and Anoth, and the Babylonian, Tammuz and Ishtar. The male lover is a deity who dies in autumn and rises in spring, whilst the female one—sister or mother—bewails the death and rejoices in the resurrection. The frantic seeking of the lover in the Song is that, either of the sister or the mother. It is interesting to read the critical rationalizations of these pagan practices being introduced into Israel, but there seems to be no objective proof that this was the case. The article by N. K. Gottwold in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Vol. IV, pp. 420–426) is worth consulting on this theory, which, anyway is generally discredited by Gottwold and other scholars.

The Lyrical View

The detailed form of this view is that it was a collection love songs and epithalamia, i.e. wedding songs in which the bride was praised and in which sometimes the bridegroom was described in good terms. These songs and epithalamia were used during the seven days of the

³ Some commentators—e.g. F. Delitzsch—have opted for a two-person drama, i.e. Solomon and the Shulammitte woman. Again, it would not be a drama which was enacted, so much as an historical drama of events.

⁴ This interpretation is a comparatively modern one, and is perhaps suspect because of that. However, once having been stated it seems to be the obvious nature of the text. It certainly is the easiest way to treat the Book, but that does not necessarily authenticate the interpretation. The more difficult understanding is not necessarily the incorrect one.

wedding ceremonies and feasting. Syrian wedding festivities use such love songs and epithalamia, but then the Syrian tradition is far from the Jewish, and because of this many scholars discount this form of the lyrical theory. Even so, the Song does appear to be a collection of songs and it seems best to treat the Book after this fashion.

Some see these songs as having a connecting theme or plot, but if this is the case it is not altogether easy to follow. That is why the dramatic theory gained so much acceptance: it had a plot in which there were three characters and a story continuity. Even so the lyrical theory is probably closest to the meaning and purpose of the Song. The songs themselves can be read and understood, each for itself. It also helps to explain a certain lack of plot or continuity in the Book by seeing the songs as separate entities, epithalamia for those wedding occasions when the songs would have been used.

On any reading the Song of Songs is lyrical—a series of lyrics—but accepting the lyrics does not mean one has to accept the Lyrical Theory.

The Human-Love View

As we have suggested, the Song found its way into the canon of Scripture because it had a high allegorical meaning which certified it as being spiritual. This view was held in the Christian Patristic writings, medieval times, and is held today by a great many devotional readers. However, there have been those who, over many centuries, have seen this Book as a simple song of love. In other words, it finds its place in Scripture because it exalts love and sexuality, a divine gift in creation. E. J. Young in his *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Tyndale, 1949, p. 327) says,

The Song does celebrate the dignity and purity of human love. This is a fact which has not always been sufficiently stressed. The Song, therefore is didactic, and moral in its purpose. It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is. This, however, does not exhaust the purpose of the book. Not only does it speak of the purity of the human love, but by its very inclusion in the Canon, it reminds us of a love that is purer than our own.

H. H. Rowley (quoted by Pope, p. 193) says,

. . . if we have songs that express pure human love, and the mutuality of lovers to one another, even though the physical side of their love is expressed with a frankness we should not emulate, I do not think the Song is undeserving of inclusion in the Canon. For there is no incongruity in such a recognition of the sacredness of pure human love. The Church has always consecrated the union of man and woman in matrimony, and taught that marriage is a divine ordinance, and that it is not unfitting that a book which expresses the spiritual and physical emotions on which matrimony rests should be given a place in the Canon of Scripture.

Again, R. B. Laurin in an Article ‘The Life of True Love: The Song of Songs and Its Modern Message’ (*Christianity Today* 6: 10/1062–11/1063) has similar thoughts:

There are other lessons about love in the Song of Songs—the joy that it brings to the one loved, how it lays hold of one’s life, so that separation can never be a permanent situation, how it cannot be taken for granted (cf. 2:5–6, 3:1–5, 5:2–8, 8:14). But there is something else which cannot be forgotten. The Song of Songs is in the canon; the Old Testament is Christian Scripture. The difference that Christ has made must be integral to our use of the book. The Christian faith has brought a new power, a new force into the love relationship. It can transform the commonplace and help us to achieve the true use of sex and real

fulfilment in love that mere biological and romantic love cannot. And something more. It can help us to understand that our love for one another is an imperfect example of God's love for us. The maiden said that "love is as strong as death; Paul tells us God's love in Christ has overcome death (Rom 8:35–39).

Speaking of the Song as a story of human love does not make love profane but lifts the understanding of love on to a higher plane. This is surely the effect of reading the Book. It increases the quality and tempo of human love which is, after all, divinely given in creation.

The View of 'the Song' Taken for Purposes of Our Study

It seems strange that this Book should be subject to such differences of interpretation⁵. When it comes to the actual text all schools have to explain the text as it stands, but the interpretation is, of course, different. It seems to me that if one were to come to the Book uninfluenced by the above stated schools of interpretation that the reader would tend to take the Song as it stands. Doubtless the insistence that the author was Solomon would condition the thinking of a reader who knew something about Solomon, and especially if he or she also knew the geography, history, culture and conditions of the time of writing.

I propose to take the view which I am calling human-literal, lyrical and typical. It appears to me it is a collection of songs with a loosely connected narrative, and that it purposes to show the love of man-to-woman—woman-to-man—as it is. The writing is entirely uninhibited by false morality, is frank as to what happens when two people love one another, and faces the difficulties which sometimes arise within such a relation by reason of the community and culture in which the two live. This, then, is the *human-literal* aspect of the Book.

Even so, *literal* never means *literalistic*, as such. Something may happen literally and have meanings within it, both subjective and objective⁶. In Ephesians 5:21–33 Paul is giving teaching to wives and husbands in their literal situation. *Literally* this is how they should behave, yet Paul then tells us he is not speaking of the wife and the husband but of Christ and his Bride. The human husband/wife draw the pattern of their behaviour from, and in accordance with, the archetype of Christ and his Bride. They not only imitate that relationship but move within the genre or ethos of it. This is true wife–husband relationship. Whilst the Canticle does not intend to be didactic and teach us what-is-what in a love-union, yet that is what it does. We have almost no example, principle or paradigm shown us elsewhere—not, anyway, one which is a constant. If, for example, we take the example of Jacob and Rachel, we find many problems which arise from their union, even though Jacob loved Rachel in a way which he did not extend his love to Leah.

We do have the entirety of Scripture to gather general understand of a love-union, but we cannot blame readers for coming to allegorical or typical understandings of the Book.

In so opting for the *human-literal* approach one is naturally seeing that the text is composed of songs, some of which have descriptions of action in themselves, but they are *songs* rather than narratives which tell one the outcome, the nature, and the substance of the written

⁵ It is a fascinating and useful exercise to read Marvin H. Pope's comprehensive Introduction of 215 pages, which covers the vast materials written about the Song over thousands of years. The writings are a testimony to the fact that Book is an important one, and one which cannot be dismissed out of hand.

⁶ The fact that the allegorical view held sway for so long means we cannot dismiss it out of hand. Is there some link with the allegorical—such as the typical—which may preserve the Song from being only a three-person drama? I believe we should work along these lines in order to discover the rich reality the Song seeks to bring to us.

material. For example, whilst we concentrate on the impressions, feelings and actions of the loving couple, we do not discover the historical outcome of it all⁷. The Song is not woven into history even though its events are in history—the history of the man and the woman.

The *literal-lyrical-typical* view is primarily *literal-lyrical*, as it seems it was intended to be. To use it as typical is certainly in order, for one may draw a principle from a narrative and apply it generally as it seems suitable⁸. If the Song is an allegory of Christ and his Church, and fits that situation, then this is close to a typical view, even though it is not strictly allegorical. It means—in the ultimate—that although the Song is not intended to be didactic—i.e. a teaching unit—since it is simple-descriptive, yet we do learn from it, and it certainly lights up for us the reality and experience of our own man–woman unions⁹—particularly the man–woman union as set out in Genesis 2:18–24. Even though this can be the case, it is certainly not a stated—or even inferred—intention of the Book. That being so, we are, nevertheless, not precluded from using it this way.

The Unusual Nature of the Book

It is part of our humanity to try to understand everything—perhaps in order to get it under our control¹⁰. This Book of the Canticles defies us. It is not just that it is trying to defy the reader, else why would it have been written?¹¹ It seems to have been written—i.e. its songs to have been composed—with an indifference to all but its own passion for love¹². Linguistic analysts cannot find its equal anywhere. There is just no point or place of comparison. Attempts to show the effects of cultural elements—both within and outside of Israel—just have no starting point. Poetically it is a unique composition—something on its own.

One of our problems with this Book is that it is so different from all other books of the Bible—and in particular the Hebrew books—that we have no basis for any comparison. T. J. Meek in *The Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1956, Vol. 5, p. 92¹³) says, ‘The

⁷ For example, we might be tempted to think that if Solomon had such a love and such a lover that it would be mentioned elsewhere in the canon other than by the means of this Book.

⁸ Ephesians 5:21–33 comes close to doing this, if, in fact, it is not what it actually does.

⁹ By this I mean that the ontological union—such as seen in Genesis 2:18–24—may well be an image that is ever in the human mind. If so, this would account for the deep disappointment men and women have, whose unions seem to prove to be barren of that deep psycho-physical dynamic which the Genesis passage appears to indicate.

¹⁰ The saying is, ‘Knowledge is power’. Ecclesiastes 3:11 speaks of Man seeking to ‘find out the end from the beginning’, and in 8:17 he adds, ‘However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out’, i.e. ‘the work that is done under the sun’. He says, ‘even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out’. His instance is ‘That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?’ (7:24).

¹¹ A certain amount of modern literature seems to be written with the view in mind of baffling the reader. Some of it is quite clever, esoteric, and yet seems not to have genuine content. Perhaps the writers are trying to show themselves as brilliant beyond the understanding of ordinary mortals. Great writing is always understood by ordinary mortals who grow in stature as they read and understand.

¹² The view taken in this commentary is that in the Song of Songs we have a revelation of true human love. It is beside the point to call it either secular or religious. It is primarily spiritual. My own understanding of love differs from—say—that of C. S. Lewis in his *Four Loves*. I accept the fact that we can speak of affection (*philein*), *eros* (supposedly sexual love) and *agape* (supposedly divine love), but I believe there is one love which catches up the ideas of affection, sexuality and pure expression of God’s love without inadequate motivations. *Eros* was really understood by the Greeks as the highest form of altruistic endeavour, but our English use of it—e.g. ‘erotic’, ‘erotica’—has limited its scope of operation. There is no such thing as true sexual love which is not *agape*, hence *philein*, *eros* and *agape* are all of the one piece. It is the fallenness of man which has caused them to be seen as separate elements, with one being higher than another in quality. We can say generally, ‘All is *agape* when the spirit of a person is united with God’s Spirit.’

¹³ Meek has eleven points showing the characteristic and unusual nature of the Song, and they are worth reading. They show

Song is unique in Hebrew literature; there is nothing remotely like it anywhere else in the Bible.’ He suggests it is folk poetry and not *belles lettres*, i.e. poetry that was elegantly, deliberately and artistically formulated¹⁴. Although we have the Dramatic Theory to explain it, there is little of drama in it, and what is there is wholly unconscious. It has a beautiful naïvete about it that is one of chief attractions. Sometimes we cannot believe what we are reading. Perhaps this is because of our habitual shallowness in appreciating something so simple as human man–woman love. We note the curious comparisons—figures we would not use in extolling the beauty of the woman, or the handsome nature of the man. Whilst it is true that figures differ from culture to culture, it is also true that that same [ontological] *sense* of a man and a woman is equal in all cultures even if that *sense* cannot easily be rationalized.

It seems to me that we are forced to conclude that the Book is unique in Hebrew literature, and in many senses unique amongst books which constitute love-literature. I am sure this claim will be well justified when we seek to understand the text. The fact that it has attracted so many readers—readers who seem unable to resist interpreting it—assures us that it more than strikes a chord in us, a note that keeps us seeking to know increasingly the *substance* of its text. It is for this reason I have attempted to write the essay, ‘Human Love and the Song of Songs’ which is included in this volume.

The Structure and Outline of the Book

Scarcely a commentator is prepared to give an outline of this Book. Andrew Harper in the *Cambridge Bible For Schools and Colleges* gives an outline, but it is based on the Dramatic Theory J. A. Balchin, who comments on the Song in *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (IVP, 1970), also adopts the Dramatic Theory, and has four simple sections to the Book. Marvin Pope has a fine translation of the Song, and it appears he sees the Book as being composed of eight Songs, each one constituting a chapter. He seems unwilling to divide the Book into more detailed portions, probably because of the nature of the writing. Possibly this is the best we can do in trying to divide the Book into study units.

If we view the Song from the literal-lyrical-typical point of view then we have to determine whether at times some of the songs are dialogue or colloquy, or whether they are soliloquy. Often it is difficult to distinguish the two, e.g. chapter 1, verses 9–11. The woman has been talking up until this point, and it seems the king-lover takes over, and then at verse 12 she resumes her adoration. Again, in 2:8–3:5 it seems that the women are addressed—within the text of these songs (cf. 1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10, 11; 5:8, 16; 8:4), and it would appear

the unique nature of the Book in regard to structure, the fact that it is mainly monologue and not dialogue, that it is seemingly ‘secular’ and not theological—God never once appearing in it—that it is poetry, filled with beautiful symbols and even extravagant description—and so on.

¹⁴ Poetry, whether folk-poetry or *belles lettres* is tremendously powerful. Both can be equally powerful, for poetry in general is able to move the human spirit in its depths. That is why the Song of Solomon is a deeply moving document. It is not a discursive treatment of man–woman love, but a living document of the action of that love. Certainly the lyrical element of the Book is very powerful.

these women responded as in 1:8; 3:6f.¹⁵. 5:9; 6:1; 8:5. With all this in mind we can make something like the following outline of the Song¹⁶:

- (a) 1:1—2:7: this is the first song of the bride in which she longs for the bridegroom and expresses her adoration.
- (b) 2:8—3:5: as their affection deepens the bride continues her soliloquy, heaping praise upon praise for her lover.
- (c) 3:6—5:1: here is a description of the coming of King Solomon, the praises by him of his bride, the praise of the bride and of their wedding.
- (d) 5:2—6:9: the bridegroom is absent for a time, during which the bride longs for his return and renews her praise and admiration of her lover.
- (e) 6:10—8:4: the king again praises his beloved for her unusual beauty. Note that 6:11–12 may possibly be said by the bride.
- (f) 8:5–14: the concluding section which speaks of the lasting nature of love, and deals with details that need to be discussed.

This outline is open to question because the continuity of the songs and the actions are not clearly stated. These matters will be discussed in our commentary on the text. The outline which F. Delitzsch gives in his beautiful commentary on the Book is somewhat similar to the one above, and is said by him to fall into six Acts:

- (1) The mutual affection of the lovers, 1:2—2:7, with the conclusion, ‘I adjure you, ye daughters of Jerusalem.’
- (2) The mutual seeking and finding of the lovers, 2:8—3:5, with the conclusion, ‘I adjure you, ye daughters of Jerusalem.’
- (3) The fetching of the bride, and the marriage, 3:6—5:1, beginning with, ‘Who is this . . . ?’ and ending with, ‘Drink and be drunken, beloved.’
- (4) Love scorned, but won again, 5:2—6:9.
- (5) Shulamith the attractively fair but humble princess, 6:10—8:4, beginning with, ‘Who is this . . . ?’ and ending with, ‘I adjure you, ye daughters of Jerusalem.’
- (6) The ratification of the covenant of love in Shulamith’s home, 8:5–14, beginning with, ‘Who is this . . . ?’

¹⁵ R. K. Harrison suggests that 3:6–11 is the response of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and 8:5 the inhabitants of Shulem.

¹⁶ Here I am indebted to R. K. Harrison and his article on the Book in the *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Vol. 5, 1976, pp. 486–493) for something of this outline.

The Solomonic Author

It is generally agreed that we may use the adjective ‘Solomonic’, in the sense that whoever wrote the Book was linked somehow with the thought, wisdom, and practice of Solomon, even if the Book were not written by Solomon. A similar claim is made for the Book of Ecclesiastes. When we wish to think it was Solomon, what will we understand by such a person writing the Song of Songs? This man’s wisdom was great and the truth of wisdom is that it is really God’s love being worked out in history, in the events of history, and particularly in the lives of men and women. There seems to be no reason why Solomon could not have written this Song, but if he did then it would surely have to be something written early in his reign, if 6:8–9 is an indication of the state of the King’s court:

There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
and maidens without number.
My dove, my perfect one, is only one,
the darling of her mother,
flawless to her that bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her happy;
the queens and concubines also and they praised her;

for from I Kings 11:3 we know that Solomon had ‘seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines’. We also know that by this later time Solomon had moved from his early single devotion to the Lord and had become linked with the worship of his wives to whom ‘he clung in love’. He ‘went after Ashtoreth the goddess of Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites’. He also built shrines for Chemosh, and Molech—gods of his foreign wives. Thus corruption and disintegration came to Israel.

If, then, the Shulammitte woman was Solomon’s ‘dove’ and ‘perfect one’, then the experience of such a love must have been unique to him. With our views of monogamous marriage it seems difficult for us to accredit such a Song to Solomon, especially as the Song itself seems to treat monogamy as the only way: multiplicity of loves seems impossible within the ethos of the Book. It is no wonder many espouse the Dramatic Theory, which puts Solomon in a bad light as the seducer and not the true lover of the woman. Such cynicism may seem naturally to arise from the written history of the king.

Whatever the difficulties may be, the fact is that if the author was Solomon then he had a unique experience of love—even in the face of being polygamous. Perhaps the Book has an even deeper significance if this were the case. What it teaches—although it does not set out explicitly to teach—is that the love of a man and a woman can be intimate, personal, and glorious, and certainly is—in itself—the fullest love that is marital. Did Solomon then have a transcending experience of love? At least for this experience of love the author is in the midst of it. If the Book is simply a collection of love songs then it no less conveys the same great but simple truth that love given by God for man and maid is beautiful because Man is made in the image of God.

The King and the Shulammitte Woman

We cannot close this Introduction without some mention of the two main characters, namely King Solomon, whose place in the Song we have scanned above. His character in the story is

not that of the man we would visualize after having read the scriptures concerning him, except perhaps the humble man asking God for wisdom, and then walking for some time in that wisdom. Whatever the case may be, he is certainly a strong but gentle lover. His love is magnificent. Has the great beauty and the simple sincerity of the Shulammitte woman brought him into a new and unique experience of love? This would seem to be the case. It would be the case with any man who might meet such a person.

In regard to the Shulammitte woman one can do no better than simply quote Franz Delitzsch in his commentary (pp. 4–5):

Shulammitte is not Pharaoh's daughter¹⁷. The range of her thoughts is not that of a king's daughter, but of a rustic maiden; she is a stranger among the daughters of Jerusalem, not because she comes from a foreign land, but because she is from the country; she is dark complexioned, not from the sun of her more southern home, but from the open sunshine from which she has been exposed as the keeper of a vineyard; in body and soul she is born to be a princess, but in reality she is but the daughter of a humble family in a remote part of Galilee; hence the childlike simplicity and the rural character of her thoughts, her joy in the open fields, and her longing after the quiet life of her village home. Solomon appears here in loving fellowship with a woman such as he had not found among a thousand (Eccles. vii:28); and although in social rank far beneath him, he raises her to an equality with himself. That which attached her to him is not her personal beauty alone, but her beauty animated and heightened by nobility of soul. She is a pattern of simple devotedness, naïve simplicity, unaffected modesty, more purity and frank prudence,—a lily of the field, more beautifully adorned than he could claim to be in all his glory. We cannot understand the Song of Songs unless we perceive that it presents before us not only Shulamith's external attractions, but also all the virtues which make her the ideal of all that is gentlest and noblest in woman. Her words and her silence, her doing and suffering, her enjoyment and self-denial, her conduct as betrothed, as a bride, and as a wife, her behaviour towards her mother, her younger sister, and her brothers,—all this gives the impression of a beautiful soul in a body formed as it were from the dust of flowers. Solomon raises this child to the rank of queen, and becomes beside this queen as a child. The simple one teaches the wise man simplicity; the humble draws the king down to her level; the pure accustoms the impetuous to self-restraint. Following her he willingly exchanges the bustle and outward splendour of the court life for rural simplicity, wanders gladly over mountain and meadow if he has only her; with her he is content to live in a lowly cottage . . . The Song transfigures natural but holy love. Whatever is the splendour of the divinely-ordered marriage relation makes love the happiest, firmest bond uniting two souls together, is presented to us here in living pictures. "The Song," says Herder¹⁸, "is written as if in Paradise. Adam's song: Thou art my second self! Thou art mine own! echoes in it in speech and interchanging song from end to end."

Whether Delitzsch is more fulsome in his praise and discernment of this woman than is appropriate we will see as we look at the text, but his description of her must be a good key to understanding the ontological nature of true woman, the one who possesses 'the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit' of whom the apostle Peter speaks.

¹⁷ One theory was that Shulammitte was Pharaoh's daughter, for Solomon certainly married such a one.

¹⁸ A German poet contemporary with Goethe, and a contender for the Song as being that of superb poetry.

Human Love and the ‘Song of Songs’

When we read the Canticles we are confronted by the fact of the uninhibited love of a man for his woman, the woman for her man. In some ways—especially in our modern Western climate, and particularly so because of the feminism–masculism debate—the Book is somewhat scandalizing. I suppose this is so because it seems to make the man–woman thing central to our human thinking and thus central to human living. Marvin Pope’s extraordinary Commentary on ‘the Song of Songs’ has a fascinating section entitled ‘The Song of Songs and Women’s Liberation’, in which Pope quotes Professor Phyllis Trible¹, who denies that the Bible is sexist. She is able to

. . . affirm the intentionality of biblical faith, as distinguished from a general description of biblical religion, is neither to create nor to perpetuate patriarchy but rather to function as salvation for both men and women. The Women’s Movement errs when it dismisses the Bible as inconsequential or condemns it as enslaving. In rejecting Scripture women ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations and thereby capitulate to the very view they are protesting. But there is another way to reread (not rewrite) the Bible without the blinders of Israelite men or Paul, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and a host of others. The hermeneutical challenge is to translate biblical faith without sexism.

Trible’s view is that the Bible is not sexist, and whilst her arguments may or may not find acceptance with all scholars, it has to be a basic assumption for us to enter into the Song and seek to understand it. Whether Trible’s view is a correct one or not—and I believe it is, though I would personally approach it from another angle—we are faced with the general problem of human views of gender², of what it is or means to be male and female. These views may be many and varied, but I believe they are not *ad hoc*, nor that there is not some particular—and even universal—drive which causes us to have such views.

I am convinced that we have not approached the matter of relationships fully from a biblically ontological point of view. I am sure that relationships can only be understood when we view them as arising from the nature of God as Creator, but then God as Trinitarian. In other words, the relationships between the three Persons of the Trinity—they *having the one*

¹ ‘Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation’, JAAR 41: 30–38 see Pope pp. 206, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, cf. p. 285.

² This is not the place to enter into the whole question of gender, although it is pertinent to the whole of our Essay. To work from human masculinity and liken it to God’s ‘masculinity’—recognizing that the male pronouns and adjectives are always used for Him—would be a major error. God is ineffable, and so we cannot read human masculinity into Him, any more than we dare read human femininity into Him. Making man in His own image as ‘male and female’ tells us that both these elements issue from Him who is uniquely Creator. They issue as one entity—Man—and Man is a male–female entity. Thus God’s so-called masculinity subsumes both human masculinity and femininity in it. This gives us a wider reading of what we might call ‘Divine masculinity’. Certainly—we repeat—we cannot read human masculinity or human femininity—or both together—back into God. Nor—for that matter—may we ever view Man apart from God and know him truly as Man. We dare not look at the male apart from the female, and the female apart from the male. The word ‘gender’ is not strong enough to carry the weight of the differentiations.

*centre of consciousness*³—are the key to human relationships. Man⁴ has such union or unity in himself as man–woman as do the Persons of the Godhead. If this is so, then the fall of Man is not one incident which happens along the path of history. It is the prime tragedy the human race can know, because of the ontological unity of man–woman which is innate in the creation of Man. This unity was in some sense fractured⁵, and so the basic ‘one-flesh’ unity is never fully achieved in the whole stream of human experience. That is why I think the Canticles constitutes a beautiful and brilliant demonstration of true human—[male–female]—unity⁶. It is the closest one comes to seeing the creational relationship of man–woman. In this sense this book is unique amongst all others.

I believe that the ‘one-flesh union’ of the man and the woman is the most psychodynamical union the human race can know—if ever it does! I don’t think we can understand the statement ‘Love is as strong as death’ if we are outside that man–woman union. When love is perverted into sexual passion, then it can be ‘strong as death’, especially because it ceases to be ontologically true and becomes irrational: the drive of created human nature is still there. That is surely why so much deep sin and heavy crime is linked with passion—especially illicit passion. When we realize that the quest for pure love is the deepest drive in humanity—and this because love is the true ontological order—then we understand that when love is perverted the damage done by it is enormous. This is generally how love—so-called—has been since the fall of Man, and so a true view of love is most difficult, if indeed, possible. Impossible as it may seem to go back to a pre-Fall relational situation of the man and the woman, we nevertheless derive some understanding of it when we are told, ‘Therefore a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall

³ This raises, of course, the question of modalism, i.e. God having one subject-centre of consciousness but three modalities of action or expression, nominated as ‘Father’, ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’. The counter-argument—Tritheism—gives the three Persons separate subject-centres of consciousness which appears to make them into three Gods. How the Persons can have one subject-centre of consciousness and yet be Persons is not a principle that can be explicated by an analogy of the anthropological, especially as it is understood today. It has to be seen theologically, i.e. by a revelation of God. To experience God as one is to experience the unity of the three Persons as one, i.e. their ‘one-spirit’ union. If we go back to the anthropological argument we may argue that a man and a woman have separate centres of conscious and not the one centre. Genesis 2:24 is surely asserting they have the one centre *in their union*. Is there then any true autonomy of a male or a female, or do they each find themselves being truly themselves only in union? This, of course, leads us on to the further question of whether a daughter is ever a separate entity when under the union-coverage of parents—and so on. Indeed, it leads us on to the wider matter of whether persons are truly persons when seeking to exist within themselves, and to develop a discrete identity when their discrete identity may only develop in the context of (all) other persons.

⁴ By the use of the word ‘Man’ we mean man–woman = Man. This is more than a mere generic use of the term. It is the only authentic use when it insists that the man and the woman together constitute Man, i.e. that it is sexist to think of the man apart from the woman, and the woman apart from the man. They are not two ‘races’ but one male–female entity. It may be called a dual-entity, but it is one which is an ontological unity. In this sense the psycho-dynamics of humanity are seen rightly and their value preserved. If this is so ontologically, then the union that is Man—male–female—is only truly so where there is *communion*. *Communion* is the basis of the one-subject consciousness of the Triune Godhead.

⁵ I confess that the term ‘fractured’ is inadequate. The division between male *qua* male and woman *qua* woman has nothing basically to do with the differentiations of the two, but rather has come from the Fall. Differentiations *per se* are not divisive, but rather unitive. Division between the man and God and the woman and God is what makes division between the man and the woman. The NT teaching of the extraordinary unity of *all* in the church does not simply transcend the basic disunity caused by the Fall but brings as a *gift* to the community the essential unity of the Triune Godhead.

⁶ Whilst agreeing in principle with Phyllis Trible—that the Bible is not sexist—I wonder whether Trible is still not caught in the principle of equality of both ‘sexes’—a term I wish we could avoid. It may be that Paul and other theologians who she nominates were not seeing Scripture from a male-dominating point of view but from a point of view entirely outside the present feminist–masculist debate.

become one flesh.⁷ When we remember that the temptation to the woman was, ‘You shall be *as* Elohim⁸, knowing good and evil,’⁹ we have to ask whether the woman saw herself as becoming a god (*elohim*) and her husband (also) becoming a god (*elohim*), and both constituting a unity—achieving this *without* Elohim Himself. Genesis 1:26–27 tells us they were already *like* Elohim, but were not *as* Elohim. In separating from Elohim they did not achieve godhead and they badly damaged their unity as Man—i.e. as the entity man–woman.

The Aversion to, or Ambivalence of, Sexual Experience

It is interesting to note that most commentators agree that the sexual language of the man and the woman in the Song is unusual, and often even an embarrassment to Western readers¹⁰. In an age when ‘sex’¹¹ has been ‘unmasked’—if ever it was masked—one wonders why anyone should be embarrassed. Modern emancipation from sexual bondage by the sexual revolution forms the whole issue which journals like *Cleo* and its brother-journal *Playboy* are always renovating to their reading public¹².

I think it is not overstating the case to say that the human race is much embarrassed by what it calls ‘sex’. It is so intimate a matter¹³ that it has either to be ‘demythologized’ and made a utility for all, or it has to be played down by a romantic view on the one hand or by vulgarity on the other—this latter being a hardening of our opposition to having a reverence of it—or by relegating it to the realm of the unknown, the unclean and mere biology.

What we call ‘the romantic’ can be over-idealistic or idealistic in an irrelevant way, can build images and make demands which are impossible. There is the ‘Mills and Boon’ mentality on the one hand, or that of the age of chivalry—knights in armour and swooning

⁷ ‘One flesh’ here does not mean ‘one-body’ but a union which includes sexual union but is not only that or wholly that. Paul’s statements of I Corinthians 6:15–19 are pertinent. Joined to a prostitute the man becomes ‘one body with her’. Joined to Christ he becomes ‘one spirit with him’. The man and woman in authentic union are ‘one spirit’. Whilst this may appear to be mystical it is eminently practical.

⁸ The word *Elohim* can be used for high celestial creatures as well as for God. It has a plural sense which may be taken either as an intensifier of the word *El* (God) or as an indication of some plurality and so (perhaps) of some sociality within the Being of God. Doubtless the woman was excited by the prospect of ‘being-in-autonomy’ as against the creational order ‘being-within-God’.

⁹ ‘Knowing good and evil’ must in some way be connected with the quality of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—‘a tree to be desired to make one wise’. Wisdom that is true wisdom never comes from below, from Man, especially as he lives and thinks on the horizontal level, but comes down from God (cf. James 1:5; 3:15f.). Man cannot have true wisdom when he is autonomous.

¹⁰ It was not only so for Western readers. Had the allegorizing view not been accepted by Jewish scholars it is almost certain the Book would not have been canonized. Similarly the Christian canonization of the Book was linked with its—supposed—allegorical nature.

¹¹ I don’t believe it is true to say that this is genuinely sex or sexuality.

¹² It is interesting that such journals—and other forms of media—are seeking to emancipate their readers and hearers from old inhibitions in regard to sexual behaviour, when in fact they address that public which is for the most part prurient and—by nature of the case—cannot understand pulchritude as such, i.e. they cannot appreciate beauty in pure ways, thus missing the reality of that which is beautiful.

¹³ True sexual experience is wholly private, wholly confined to marriage and so, to the marriage partners. The moment it is taken out of this private situation its essential nature is subjected to elements which destroy its intimate communion. The present custom of explicitly exposing the act of cohabitation conceals rather than reveals the true nature of sexual experience. Such exposure makes a travesty of authentic sexuality. In the Canticle the sharing of the couple is a beautiful revelation of man–woman love, but does not break the true privacy of their union, since it points primarily to communion.

maidens—a plethora of Sir Galahads and Lancelots, along with Elaines. The romantic view¹⁴ helps to shape impossible images in the minds of both men and women, and these images can spell disaster in marriage.

Probably the opposite view to this is the cynical one—those who have been disillusioned about the matter of sexuality through unfortunate experiences or the inability to find or have experiences. What we call ‘the sexual drive’ seems present in most of us, and the lack of fulfilment—even in the midst of sexual happenings—can contribute to cynicism. Both the romantic and cynical views are probably related to a high view of sexuality, but both—it seems to me—make emotional and functional demands incapable of fulfilment.

More to be deplored is the prurient approach to the matter. Sexuality is surely the sane and natural gift for the procreation of children, for emotional, spiritual, social and biological fulfilment and satisfaction—especially where it has expression within marital–familial relationships¹⁵. Prurient approaches to the fact of sexuality¹⁶ work in a number of ways. Humorous vulgarity makes a mockery of sexuality, giving it a depraved element, and insinuating that genuine satisfaction cannot be obtained from it. Linked with this is the degrading habit of giving the genitalia certain names¹⁷—sometimes pet ones—in a patronizing manner which demeans the creation of God. This is seeing humanity with an evil eye, with a twisted anthropology. Perhaps it partly springs from fear of something quite holy and wonderful—a sense of inferiority in the presence of something they cannot understand. Often those who have this approach find themselves impotent and unfitted for proper sexual experience. Persons in these states of mind are not simply to be rebuked and criticized, but attempts to teach the beauty and power of true sexuality should be made.

When, in accordance with troubadours romantic singers and those bellowing and screaming out their protestations that *love is it!*, those who hear them do not find fulfilment, they think it must be a matter of the right partner, the right chemistry, the right conditions, the right performance—and so on. Seemingly lacking these elements they may feel

¹⁴ It is a curious thing that modern exposure of sex—so called—is nevertheless thought to be romantic. The terms ‘fornication’ and ‘adultery’ are looked upon as impossible in this ‘enlightened age’. The media do not speak of ‘fornicators’ but of ‘lovers’. This ‘loving’ is supposed to arise from ‘personal chemistry of the two’, and is gloriously fulfilled in any bed around the place. Films are said to be exciting in romance when a couple mouth their kisses in the sight of vast audiences, and have tongue-to-tongue and other practices which, if they are valid, are reserved for the intimacy of true union and proper privacy. It is said, even by some whose views on sexuality claim to be ‘normal’, that in the love of spouses ‘anything goes’, i.e. nothing is ‘kinky’ provided it happens in the marital bed.

¹⁵ Not all sexuality gets its fulfilment in physical sexual union. Many never marry, and sexual acts take up a very small portion of time in even the most ardent of practitioners. Sexuality embraces all the elements of husband–wife, parents–children, inter-family, and inter-society relationships. The restricted and constricted view of sexuality is that the gifts of femininity and masculinity are only for the man and his wife. Maleness and femaleness have a dynamic polarity about them which makes for rich enjoyment of society. Wrong use of it can cause much damage, but that does not invalidate the true expressions of our sexuality.

¹⁶ There is a certain kind of comedy which is quite humorous, but its resources in pure fun seem to be few. There is always a quick resort to smutty humour. It is interesting to listen to the kind of laughter which comes from rich humour, and that which comes from unclean humour or the degradation of the human body and its biological actions. It should be recognized that behind this humour is fear of creational reality, anger at God and hatred for the world He has made. Bitter and cynical humour also has its devotees.

¹⁷ This giving of names has the effect of turning biological genitalia—functional members of the body—into personal beings, which they are not. It then allows an intimate relationship to be established with the genitals. It is somewhat akin to depersonalizing women by calling them ‘blondes’: women may be blonde in colour but a characteristic is not the full person. The curious habit of calling a mature woman ‘baby’ or ‘babe’ has the effect of divesting her of maturity. To be consistent, the same term ought to be applied to a grown male, but this is not the case. In all the cases mentioned it gives the person using these terms power over the subject of the statements.

themselves to be failures. Many are the manuals which profess to have the answer to a person's lack of satisfaction both inside and outside of marriage. When disappointment comes, then couples think that there is something missing in their biological make-up or actions, hence the introduction of deviant and 'kinky' actions called 'sex'.

Having said all this, I am still unable to convey my understanding of genuine sexuality. Perhaps I err in even using the word 'sexuality'¹⁸, since it has a certain limited connotation. It might be better to talk of 'true humanity' and 'true relationships'. Certainly we ought not to read the Song as an exercise for imitating the two players. The Song is not even there to train others in genuine loving. I believe that so far as the 'one-flesh' union is concerned, the more unselfconscious¹⁹ genuine love is, the more natural and satisfying it will be.

The real point to which I have been trying to move is the revelation in the Song that human love is really beautiful, that the human form is in no way unclean²⁰, but is wholly pure and rightly functional²¹, that there is a love which need not lead to disappointment, disaffection, bitterness, and cynicism, but which can lead to reality which does not have to be romantic as some understand that term, ideal as some demand that level, or simply gloriously satisfying *as an end in itself*. In other words, human love can be very down to earth, very reassuring regarding the human body, can give its delights, as it also can call upon the genuine feelings and desires of our humanity. I believe this is what the Song is about—and nothing else. Yet this does not mean that the principle which obtains in human love does not obtain in Divine love, in Divine-human love and in human-to-human love²².

We have mentioned above that some persons fear sexual union. There may be many reasons for this and we are not seeking to cover them all in this essay. Children may have been warned against 'sex', may have heard it discussed scornfully, mockingly and pruriently, in which case they may have developed a jaundiced view of it. Those who have suffered child molestation or rape may have an understandable fear of it. There may be fear of the act of sexual intercourse because of misunderstanding of the act, or associations arising from

¹⁸ For example, whilst male and female can be named by their genders, and there is polarity of the male and female, yet the actual sexual acts do not constitute the whole of sexuality. Some males and females never have such acts, even though biologically capable of them. This does not mean they are less sexual than others. Nor do sexual actions—especially those of intercourse—constitute a major portion of any life. When we see Man as a male-female entity, and recognize that being a male is always in context with femininity, and being a woman is always in context with masculinity, then we realize our modern use of the word 'sexuality' has to be defined as far as possible.

¹⁹ Commentators on the Canticles rightly note that the two in the Book are wonderfully self-conscious yet all this is in 'other-person centredness'. Each sees the glories of the other, and there is mutual admiration which is beautifully expressed. This is surely the nature of true love.

²⁰ Of course, here we are faced with differing world views, and dualism—particularly as in gnosticism—sees the body as evil. Anything material is on a lower level than spirit. The OT and the NT have a view of man which is not dualistic, i.e. man is not flesh *and* spirit, but man is *a* spirit of which flesh is one component, a component which is mortal but will be transformed by resurrection into 'the body of glory'. Romans 12:1 (cf. I Cor. 6:19) makes it clear that the body—especially when offered to God—is holy.

²¹ Paul goes to some length to emphasize this fact. In I Corinthians 12:23–24 he says, 'Those parts of the body which we think less honourable we invest with the greater honour, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty . . . God has so composed the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior part'.

²² Here I am saying that *all* love is *agape*, especially in its proper practice. This being the case, the principle of the union in love will obtain in all situations of loving. This helps to explain something of the joy of the mystics, especially those who view union with Christ to be a thing of great joy.

having viewed parents or others in that act²³. A deeper reason may be that spouses may fear having children, not feeling competent to handle the relationships that result from children being born. This is often the case in *de facto* relationships.

In Genesis 2:18–24 it seems evident that premarital intercourse is not envisaged. The man does not ‘cleave’ to his wife, until he—and she—has left the parents, and this is what happens only in the marriage service. Death of parents does not constitute ‘leaving’, nor does geographical separation from them constitute ‘leaving’. Marriage is the time for leaving and for authentic cleaving. Those who have intercourse before marriage—either with their partner, or with some other—set up difficulties in genuinely ‘leaving’ their parents. Since biological satisfaction in intercourse is not true relational union nor true ‘one–flesh’ fulfilment, partners are cheated of the genuine act of union, which, once having happened, is then indissoluble. This causes deep anger in many and a dislike of sexual intercourse, though often—perversely—a sort of slavery to it²⁴.

Sexuality Not a Mockery

In any study of human love we must include the fact there *is* such a thing, and that it is not only wholesome but it is essential to human living. It is not simply of the *bene esse* but of the *esse* of true human living. By this we mean that sexuality is ontological, it is indispensable to human living and the pressure of ontological necessity²⁵ is always present to the human person—to heart and conscience. I believe the Song of Songs is a reminder and an assurance to us that true love—genuine sexuality—is a reality, a gift given in creation²⁶, and that there is no need to fear it, utilize it lustfully, or be disillusioned in regard to it. At best we can pursue it with assurance that even in a sinful world it can be better and more than Hollywood would assure us it is. By ‘sexuality’ I do not only mean the coming together of a man and woman in marriage, but gifts of femininity and masculinity given to all members of the human race so that *all* men and *all* women can relate as one across the board, not even in order to have biological intercourse but in order to fulfil the whole of the creational mandate given in Genesis 1:28. Masculinity and femininity are not only sexual but wholly relational.

Now I am sure that the human instinct that tells a person he or she will reach the highest in the love that the Song portrays is not at all wrong. As I keep saying in this essay, if we put the fulfilment of love as a demand or requirement on another, or if we go about the action of

²³ This is especially the case where cruelty or deviation has been viewed.

²⁴ Disappointment is often levelled at God because He seems not to have made all things well, nor to have done all things well. This disappointment arises from love—in this case so-called—not fulfilling the person. This can happen within marriage, especially when the couple do not come together in chastity. There is always the thought that ‘One day it might happen,’ or ‘When I find the true partner, then it will happen.’ That is why some persist through as many as three divorces.

²⁵ By ‘ontological necessity’ we mean that the human heart knows what truth is, i.e. that God is, that His law is functional and so not optional, and that pressure is always there—to live in accordance with that law. It does not mean that fallen sinful man—or even Man, or even redeemed Man—will always fulfil the law, but his joy will ever be in the endeavour to render ‘ontological obedience’.

²⁶ Being a male or being a female is what God made each of us—‘male and female made he them’. If the question of sexual deviancy and perversion is raised, it must not first be examined along psychological or even biological lines but along theological lines, i.e. a person’s rebellion against God can cause him or her to reject the *modes* of humanity and to opt for another mode. Just as people can reject the three causes for marriage as set out in the marriage service, so they can reject the modes and forms of true sexuality. Perversion and deviancy have their own inbuilt emotional excitement that attends things illicit, but because they are anti-ontological they must end in misery and non-accomplishment.

loving in a self-centred way, our efforts will be counter-productive. I am trying to say that there is nothing greater or more powerful than love if it is genuinely love, i.e. love that ‘bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things [and] endures all things’.²⁷

I am also trying to say that since love is the greatest thing, then a failure to achieve a proper experience of it will sometimes bring the most terrible backlash in human relationships and human experience. Grand opera is not altogether wrong in its portrayal of this fact, and—for that matter—neither are soap operas wholly wrong. What is wrong is the judgement of love by the disappointment of those who will harshly criticize, reject or mock the matter of love and this generally from irrational anger.

Love and the Effects of the Fall

When the first couple had their eyes opened by eating of the forbidden tree and so came into ‘a knowledge of good and evil’²⁸ we have to see that this knowledge was not an authentic one. Paul’s statement, ‘To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and conscience are corrupted’, must obtain in regard to all things, sexual activity included. With the loss of true knowledge of God came also loss of true understanding of humanity and of creation²⁹. Thus the human race lacks a true understanding of its sexuality. I am sure this is the basis for what I call ‘irrational views of sexuality’. Whatever they term themselves as being, i.e. ‘romantic’ or ‘realistic’, human beings only fully understand sexuality by grace. I think that is what Paul is saying in Ephesians 5:21–33. All the matter of Israel being God’s wife, and the church being Christ’s Bride teach us what Paul calls ‘a mystery’ (Eph. 5:32), but the mystery helps us to understand the human situation of man–woman love.

When we come to the outcome of the Fall it is clear that some change has taken place in the original creational relationships indicated in Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:18–24. The woman is told that the man is to rule over her, and this statement must indicate something of a change in the order of things. That the woman will desire her husband may mean either that she will still desire him even though he rules over her, or that she will seek to rule over him.³⁰ Whatever the case, it is clear that total amity will be difficult to establish. I am suggesting, then, that ambivalence in marital relationships cannot be traced back to local or psychological causes alone, but must have its genesis in the fall of the race³¹. In other words, the cause of disaffection with sexuality is not primarily psychological but theological.

²⁷ I Corinthians 13:7. The whole chapter shows the nature of what love *is* as well as what it *isn't*.

²⁸ See Genesis 2:17; 3:5; 3:22.

²⁹ I have always found it strange that some commentators on Genesis have linked the Fall with the act of sexuality. I cannot see how they arrive at this conclusion exegetically. Furthermore, the idea is often presented that a person is ‘innocent’ until that one has sexual intercourse, after which they are—presumably—no longer innocent. This is a strange conclusion. One can go through marriage and sexual relationships without losing purity. Sexual intercourse is *not* impure.

³⁰ This latter idea has arisen by comparing Genesis 3:16 with 4:7, where ‘desire for you’ in the latter reference must mean ‘rule over you’. It is probable that if this is the case then Genesis 3:16 means the woman will seek to rule over the man.

³¹ In this whole matter of human sexuality I suggest the reading of my books *God’s Glory: Man’s Sexuality* (NCPI, 1988) and *The Heavenly Vision* (NCPI, 1987). Also my—as yet—unpublished Thesis *The Glory of God and Human Relationships* (1990).

What I called idealistic advice has been written regarding relationships in marriage, especially in Christian marriage. Models are presented—e.g. Christ and the Church—and readers are urged to follow these models. Grace has virtually removed the curse, so that now relationships can be as they were in the pre-curse period. Of course the curse has not been removed: women still have pain in birth, husbands rule their wives, and wives seek to rule over husbands or—at best—desire them in intimacy. There are always those in the church who seek to fashion the penultimate age as though it should—and could—be the same as the ultimate age.

I am sure the best we can do—and that is the proper thing to do—is to live wholly under grace, and thus have the very best possible in this age in human relationships. This principle carried out in marital relationships should bring much relaxation, peace and enjoyment, even in a world which is painfully sinful³².

We come then, in our essay, to the final point—in fact that which motivated the essay—namely, ‘What has the Song of Songs to say to us in our human situation of man-to-woman love, woman-to-man love?’ I think the Book is important, for it is saying—curse or no curse—that a beautiful and natural relationship can—and does—take place. It is not the relationships which the world of Hollywood offers us—for that is a travesty of the true. In fact the Song is saying—all unconsciously—‘Set about loving and love: that is all. The rest will follow where there is mutual love.’ If love is strong as death and if many waters cannot quench true passion, then human beings can be about this.

I have no desire to modify or even qualify this message that comes from the Book. We do have to look at the fact that whilst it seems idyllic it is not so; the woman-lover is beaten and wounded and her mantle is taken away—all in the cause of love. Certain conditions are ideal for love. Love must not be stirred up prematurely. Loving does not prevent the woman loving her sleepy luxury, thus losing him at the precise moment of his love: and so on. The usual weaknesses of humanity may still be present, no matter how strong the love of the couple.

What I would say is that this is a book for all lovers—young and old—but the heart of it is *not* sexual passion. Certainly this may well be present. What is primary is love, and love is filled with admiration and concern for the other. Each wishes to be attractive to the other and each extols the other’s virtues, but what is primary is the wonder with which each views the other. This need not be limited to any age or stage of human living. It need not even be dependent upon sexual stimulation and fulfilment, though this is more than an acceptable ingredient in the Song. No, it was what one sees in the other, and the natural union of their excellencies. If true romance exists, then this is it! Each is desirous of seeing the other, living with the other, and all nature is not only at their feet but shares with them in their glorious miracle.

In human loving of man and woman it is often—as Martin Buber revealed—not a ‘I-thou’ relationship but an ‘I-I’ one. The relationship is wholly selfish. The idolizing of the other is the making of a false image of that one. An ‘I-I’ relationship is a person living to himself—or herself—and so a contradiction of true maleness and true femaleness. The other persons is used without being known, without true union. This, then, shows prostitution is

³² When in Romans 12:18 Paul says, ‘If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all,’ he must mean that no matter how good your intentions and actions, complete relationships will depend upon the willingness of others. You can only go as far as you are able.

simply the 'I-I' with an 'I-I', and the attempt to have sexual action within oneself (masturbation, mind-fantasy, and the like) are shown to be wholly out of order.

When the person—for some reason or another—is awakened out of the 'I-I' relationship to begin an 'I-thou' relationship, then the other spouse—or person—may appear as a stranger, an unknown entity. The true action of love has then to begin and develop, with the acceptance of differentiations and even idiosyncrasies. The relationship of the man and the woman in the Song is richly an 'I-thou' one. That is why it is so valuable as both a witness and a paradigm. The Christian teaching is that no true 'I-thou' relationship can be really so apart from the 'I-Thou' relationship with God by each of the two persons, so that the direct relationship with God brings true union and communion to the two lovers. In the Song of Songs this relationship with God is not mentioned, but since the love-relationship is within the covenant of Israel with God, it can be presupposed.

It is easy, then, to see that thoughtful readers of the Canticles can scarcely believe this beauty of love is limited to this special pair. No wonder they have been seen as types of God and Israel the Bride. No wonder Christians see them as Christ and his Bride. Perhaps more wonderful than all of these—wonderful as they are—is the message to the human race that love can be like this *now*. 'I sought him whom my soul loves,' is worthy of seeking Christ the Divine Lover, yet one human can love another with this kind of love. Knowledge of this fact destroys the cynic, illuminates the dull, gives sight of something wonderful to the blind, rouses the lethargic from their torpor, and stimulates the spirit of a man and woman to know they do not have to look beyond their spouse to see the excellencies they desire, to honour the person of the other, and to know such love; even if the fires of youth are not blazing merrily, yet the evening of life can know a love no less wonderful where beauty is not only in the eye of the beholder, but has been placed there by God in creation, albeit the body is ageing and weakening. It is here love accepts this reality with joy and even looks to the greater glory into which the beloved shall enter.

Certainly the Song of Songs has a rich message for the world, and for couples in particular. It shows that sin has not irreparably devastated the human scene and that human selfishness cannot be overcome by that love whose fountain is God, and at which all true lovers must drink. 'The Great Mystery'—the Eschatological Man and the Eschatological Woman³³ What we need to understand—as we have been seeking to do above—is that what Man is, as a male–female 'one-flesh' entity, is a mystery, i.e. truth that is hidden until God brings revelation of it to the human heart. For a man to seek to understand what a woman is, and woman what a man is, is virtually impossible, especially if each views the other objectively, i.e. subjects the other to intellectual scrutiny. In the Scriptures all true knowledge is relational.

What we first need to see is that the Man and the Woman were not created in the same manner. God created Man and then withdrew from him the woman. If they had been created

³³ Here I would recommend a close study of my *The Heavenly Vision* (NCPI, 1987), *God's Glory: Man's Sexuality* (NCPI, 1988), and also my, as yet unpublished, thesis *The Glory of God and Human Relationships*.

in the same manner, then it would be difficult to speak of a polarity, and of a complementarity of the two. They could not become one. Because of creation they are in fact, one:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.

When we remember that ‘there is one God, the Father’, and that the Son proceeds from the Father, then in a somewhat similar way the Woman proceeded from the Man, and that meant they could have the one centre of consciousness, even whilst being discrete persons.

Even so, the man and the woman cannot be satisfactorily scrutinized, since Man created as the man–woman entity whilst being creationally complete were as yet untested, as yet unfallen, and as yet unredeemed. Man is not simply ontological in his creaturehood, but teleological. That is, he is moving forward to his ultimate or eschatological being. When Man is glorified then we will see what Man is. When all are conformed to the image of the Son and all are his brethren, and all have ‘the body of glory’ and enter into ‘the liberty of the glory of the children of God’, then we will know what Man is. As things stand, it is impossible to know Man as he will be in the ultimate.

Even so, when Paul speaks of the union of the husband and the wife he calls the matter a mystery. Primarily the ‘mystery’ is that of Christ and his church, i.e. the Eschatological Man and the Eschatological Woman. The Man is the Bridegroom and Husband, the Woman the Bride and Wife. When we ultimately see the Bride and the Bridegroom—‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’—then we will understand in all fullness what is true femininity and true masculinity, and what is true union, true communion and true love. Until then we must rest on the intimations the Spirit gives³⁴.

We must then confess that in the present we do not fully know what is Man; we do not fully comprehend what is a woman and what is a man. This is because they are made in the image of God, and whilst we may say that ‘male and female’ derive from God—as we have said—we cannot read human sexuality back into Him, whether we call it ‘male’ or ‘female’ or even ‘male–female’. The reality of God cannot be grasped by analogies.

When we come to the truth that God is love, that the Triune God is One and that that oneness is love, then we begin to understand ‘the great mystery’, i.e. the man and woman are one in love. They are not this because they ‘come together’ and have union in this manner, but because already in the Triune God they have been created as one, so in that marriage they can express that oneness, just as in the Trinity the three Persons do not join to be one, but are essentially one. Man made in their image and likeness must be one. What we must keep firmly in mind is that God did not create a man and a woman as separate entities, and then bring them together, since they would thus constitute two separate races—a male one and a female one—but He created Man and then drew the woman out of him, so that their centre of consciousness was one. They derived from the one source, and the man recognized the woman was indeed very much bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, so that the coming

³⁴ In I Corinthians 2:6–10 Paul speaks of the glorification to come, the ineffability of all that, but the revelation of it to redeemed man—even in the present—of what is to come.

together of a man and woman constitutes the expression and reality of the original creation of Man. Only in this way could they be one flesh, and they could not be otherwise.³⁵

When we apply this principle to the Song of Solomon, then we see—almost uniquely — the purest love that a man and a woman have mutually, and it is a rich revelation of what true human love can be. The revelation comes through human actions and expressions. We are not elevated to some some celestial sphere where all is ideal. The glory of the Canticle is that it portrays, reveals and demonstrates the love that is profound, the love that is ‘a great mystery. So great is this love as to be called indescribable. It is no wonder that it is for many unbelievable, although the songs and sonnets of the ages have always lauded it as such!

The Pastoral Value of the Song of Songs

It has been an old custom among Jewish people for the husband and wife to read this Book together. It has its own immediate impact. All poetry has the value of communicating into the depths of a person what mere discursive writing cannot accomplish, since poetry speaks to the heart, though never apart from the mind. The reality of a true love is surely what folk need to see in these days of so much shamming of love, so much singing without sincerity of love—as though it were the cure-all when a man meets a maid. We have seen a steady decline in purity, the rise of a false romanticism, the lack of dedication and application in the matter of building up relationships, a superficial view of the nature and endurance of marriage—and so on.

This Book—as we have said—presents both a witness to true love and a paradigm for us to follow. We need to study it closely to detect our own relationship with our spouses. It is a pity that we have not stuck to the term *agape* for all love, even though there are the useful nuances of *philein* and *eros*. *Eros* was not necessarily sexual love to the Greek: it seems we have taken over that word and used it mainly for that. All love—whether it be Divine, sexual (so called), brotherly and sisterly—is truly *agape*. Wonderful man–woman love is possible, even if not in utter perfection. It is deeply satisfying, wonderfully rich, but it requires us to live in the very love of the Triune Godhead, and that we may live fully—in communion—with all humanity.

This is the hope we can bring to our spouses, our families, to all our people.

³⁵ It is only from this understanding that we can see the utter perversity of deviant forms of sexuality. Homosexuality is a contradiction of, and an attack upon the created unity of Man.

Chapter One

1 The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

The editorial superscription. As his name and life indicated, Solomon was certainly a 'prince of peace', not being a man of war, but he was a great songster. I Kings 4:32 says he was the author of one thousand and five songs. The word 'song' covers all kinds of songs, such as sad songs, elegies, dirges and laments. Songs are many in the Old Testament. Some see this song as by an author other than Solomon, but either dedicated to him, or even a rebuke given to him. It is best seen as an introduction to the whole of the love sequences which now begin.

2 O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine,

Possibly the place is Solomon's garden or woodland park. Here is the immediate passion of love. The bride wishes to be kissed. It is Solomon the king whom she desires should kiss her, i.e. 'mouth to mouth'. (Note: the 'you' and 'your' in the text are 'he' and 'his' in the Hebrew; she is not as yet addressing him.) Addressing him she says his love is better than wine. Often wine was associated with love (4:10; 7:9 where love is *more* than wine). Kisses stir more than wine!

3 your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is oil poured out; therefore the maidens love you.

Proverbs 27:9 says, 'Oil and perfume make the heart glad', so here kisses are even better than accompanying love-scents. Just the name of the beloved is like fragrant ointments and unguents—she needs no actual scents or pomades. See the lovely parallel picture in Psalm 45:13–15. **therefore the maidens love you.** The young virgins, the adolescents admire you and have a passion for you—you are so attractive.

4 Draw me after you, let us make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.

The drawing is the drawing of love so that the one drawn breaks into running, in eager haste and joy, calling the others to hasten with her. The matter is personal for **the king has brought me into his chambers.** If the others are also called in, they can join together, saying they, too, will rejoice and exult in him, praising his love—his love for the Shulammitte maiden. They love 'rightly', i.e. uprightly and honourably. All is done in order, i.e. properly.

5 I am very dark, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. ⁶ Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has scorched me. My mother's sons were angry with me, they made me keeper of the vineyards; but, my own vineyard I have not kept!

As we saw in the Introduction, the Shulammitte addresses the other young women, telling them that her darkness is not genetic, but from the sun. This was because her brothers sent

her to keep their vineyards at harvest time. The brothers were harsh in not preserving her fair skin and in wanting her labour at the hot time of the year. Keeping their vineyards she could not look after her own, i.e. her own fair complexion (cf. Isa. 1:8 for the protective booths in a vineyard). **Kedar** was the son of Ishmael (Gen. 25:13), and the Bedouins wove beautiful coloured tents out of goat's hair which rivalled the glorious draperies of Solomon's palace. This maiden knows she is beautiful, and yet is not egotistical or pretentious in her claim. She is simple, but discerning.

7 Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon; for why should I be like one who wanders beside the flocks of your companions?

The Shulammitte now wants to be with her lover—'you *whom my soul* [i.e. 'I, myself'] *loves*'—as with a shepherd and his flock, out in the rural scene. She loves him from her depths and it seems she would have him be a shepherd and delight with him in all that is rustic. Note that the flocks always rested in the heat of the day, i.e. at noon (cf. Gen. 31:40). **wanders** here can mean 'veiled' so that the sense is, 'Why should I be as sheep here in the palace, among these young women, so that I am one of a flock of sheep. I would rather be alone with you, unveiled.'

8 If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your kids beside the shepherds' tents.

Here it could be her lover replying, or the women telling her to go where the shepherd's (Solomon's flock) is normally, i.e. follow the tracks of his sheep. In either case, she is highly praised as **fairest among women**, a very high compliment considering she seems swarthy. If she is to be with the shepherd then she must be a shepherdess and feed the kids beside the shepherds' tents, i.e. not just one shepherd will be present for the shepherds are a community.

9 I compare you, my love, to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots. 10 Your cheeks are comely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels. 11 We will make you ornaments of gold, studded with silver.

The King now addresses her personally, heaping praise upon praise—'a mare of Pharaoh's chariots' was a rich form of compliment because of the nobility of the animal. The royal steed would be adorned with trappings about the head, and the Shulammitte would look no less beautiful with jewels, and the king will see to it that she has everything of the decorative nature. She will have strings of jewels, chains of gold, studded with silver. Maidens had pendants in the form of coins hanging down from the forehead and on the cheeks.

12 While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.

The Shulammitte now replies with the fact that her very expensive scent reached him in the banqueting room when he was eating with the men, and drew him forth.

13 My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh, that lies between my breasts. 14 My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-gedi.

In beautiful poetry the bride continues her adoration of the man. He is to her close to her heart and a fragrant presence. Henna blossoms are clusters of yellow blossoms. Their juices are

also used for toiletries, such as dye for hair and the staining of hands and feet for beauty. The vineyards of En-ge-di must have been noted for their beauty, for this was a luxuriant oasis west of the Dead Sea. Note that verses 1:13—2:2 is a sort of duet of the woman and the man.

¹⁵ Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves.

Now the king speaks, appreciating her loveliness. Her eyes are not *like* doves, but they *are* doves, soft and beautiful, quiet and gentle (cf. 4:1).

¹⁶ Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely. Our couch is green; ¹⁷ the beams of our house are cedar, our rafters are pine.

As she is beautiful so is he, she is telling him. Their resting place is rural, a woodland bower of cedars and pines covering them overhead, and their couch or resting place is soft and green and luxurious.

Chapter Two

1 I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

Sharon is the maritime plain between Caesarea and Joppa (Isa. 33:9; 35:2; 65:10). The crocus is the rose. The lily of the valley is generally a wild red flower, but there are violet and white ones also. Both flowers are wild ones, simple, and not cultivated, and the woman is saying she is humble and simple as these. These little blooms were admired by Jesus (Matt. 6:28–30).

2 As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens.

Little flowers grow up amongst brambles. The bramble is a strong plant, so that she is comparatively simple and beautiful amongst the surrounding young women. Perhaps the idea is that she is not flamboyant, yet exquisitely beautiful.

3 As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

In this continuing duet or dialogue of song, she tells him that he, too, is outstanding amongst other young men. Ordinary trees in the wood may be ‘pleasant to the eyes’ but they are not ‘good for food’. She would delight to have the restfulness of his shadow cast over her, and she would delight to taste his fruit as such is known in matrimony.

4 He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.

The banqueting house was where he smelt her nard, rose from his couch and came to her. It was the royal palace where he entertained his friends. Now he is bringing her in, and his protective and proclamatory banner has one word on it—Love! He introduces this rural maiden to these members of the royal household. He is proud of this one for whom he publicly proclaims his love.

5 Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am sick with love.

The whole situation is almost too much for her, so intense is her feeling, so wonderful his confession. The thick pressed cakes of raisins are needed to give her strength, as also the apples. She needs something for she is not sick *from* love but sick *with* it. It is a love-sickness which is a love-happiness.¹ Few people have escaped some measure of it; many have been deeply occupied with it. The maiden thinks she will swoon under it, and go down, so great

¹ I have seen people many times in this state of love when they have realized God’s love for them. Delitzsch (p. 44) describes the experience of a man J. R. Hedinger in the early eighteenth century who was on his deathbed and was ‘overpowered with such a stream of heavenly delight that he cried, “Oh, how good is the Lord! Oh, how sweet is thy love, my Jesus! Oh, what sweetness! I am not worthy of it, my Lord! Let me alone; let me alone!”’ He also speaks of a St Ephrem who was once overcome by such a joy that he cried out, ‘Lord, withdraw thy hand a little, for my heart is too weak to receive so great joy.’ This may seem somewhat mystical, but the physical presence of a beloved person may prove to be almost too moving for a lover.

does his love seem for her who—in her own eyes—is but a little prairie flower! If we miss this depth of human love² we will never understand Divine love in its wonderful fullness. Whilst the Queen of Sheba was astonished by the splendour of Solomon and how much more the little flower of Sharon. Overwhelmed by all things she may have felt, she would die with love!

6 O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!

Not all translations use the subjunctive here—the understood ‘would that’, but the indicative, ‘His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me’. Whichever is correct, it is clear that in her swooning state she needs the support of the left hand under the head, and the embrace of the right to reassure her, and sustain her. The word ‘embrace’ is used more in the sense of stroking and caressing, i.e. Solomon is soothing and comforting the love-disturbed maiden. Some have interpreted these two lines as going beyond mere reassurance to the very depths of physical and emotional loving.

7 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the hinds of the field, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please.

Swearing of oaths being denied, the maiden uses a powerful adjuration. We might say, ‘By the glugs of Glos!’ to avoid swearing. She adjures by the gentle gazelles and hinds of the fields—those delicate feminine creatures like herself—not to ‘stir up or awaken love until it please[s]’. This could mean that she is saying, ‘Don’t disturb the King but leave him alone with me,’ or ‘Don’t disturb us both, so immersed are we in the dear dream of love, that we are “lost in wonder, love and praise” as we share the glory of this love.’ In any case the daughters of Jerusalem are to leave matters as they are, and are neither to disturb or excite.

At this point it seems there is a break in the narrative or sequence of events. The scene seems to change, but without explanation. There is, however, no break in the intensity of the love of the two.

8 The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.

This passage has been given varying titles, ‘The Mutual Seeking and Finding of the Lovers’, ‘A Serenade in Springtime’, ‘The Deepening Love of the Shulammite and Her Beloved’, ‘The Springtime Rhapsody’. Certainly from 2:8—3:5 there is the action of love. We are not told where the maiden was, though some conjecture she was in the country, at home with her family in the hills, surrounded by vineyards, for the description does not easily fit that of the royal palace. So she hears a voice and asks others to recognize it. It is the voice of her beloved. She could never mistake it. Look at his impatience, driven by love, making him fly to her. Love allows no indolence. A ‘laggard in love’ is no less than ‘a dastard in war’.

9 My beloved is like a gazelle, or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.

If she has represented herself as a shy and gentle gazelle, he is a strong stag, feet planted squarely, and he has come up to her house as might a curious seeking male animal. He is

² When we remember this Song is pure poetry, and when we realize how moving and powerful poetry is, we will also recognize there is a poetry of living which is not simply rational, but moves a person in the inner depths.

looking for her, first through the windows, and then through the lattice work. He is about to serenade her. It is a song that has moved the hearts of innumerable people—lovers or not—down through the millenniums. It is ‘The Song of Spring and of Love’.

10 My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;

His voice resumes the love pliant and praise they have known in the past. To where is she to come away? Surely to share with him the beautiful spring season. Has his love of what some call ‘nature’ and others ‘creation’ driven him forth? We know that he had a great love of all these things for ‘He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish’ (I Kings 4:33). This was the man who was at the same time the song-maker. Was he on a chance hunting expedition or was he the young stag that sought to find its mate?

It is here we see the great love of creation—and delight in it—that characterized the true members of Israel. God was Creator, and His creation a thing of delight for Man. In this Song we find no darkness as though creation were to be feared. The couple have their idylls in the rural pastoral background, yet creation is more than a backdrop to their stage where actions and interchanges of love take place. Only one discordant note is found regarding creation, i.e. ‘the little foxes’ that gnaw at the roots of the vines’.

11 for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

The rainy season is the winter one and it prepares the land for new growth. That cold and wet time gives way to rising of the sap and the budding of the flowers. It is the time ‘when a young man’s heart turns to love’. He is telling her to cast off formal restraints and come with him.

12 The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The spring flowers are bringing colour to the countryside. The delightful voice of the turtledove—a migratory bird returning—is everywhere as mating and nesting begins.

13 The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

The vines have broken into leaf and flowers.³ The fig trees also promise fruit. How can she resist the rising of the spring both in the land and in his heart and in her heart? She must have a careless abandon to all that is domestic and ‘come away’.

14 O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is comely.

In 5:2 and 6:9 he calls her ‘my dove’. He desires to have access to her. Just as a dove in the clefts of rocks or secure in the cliffs (cf. Jer. 48:28; 49:16) is inaccessible to the one who can only observe with helplessness, so behind the latticework he cannot have access to her. Her

³ It is said that grape-vines do give forth a noticeable fragrance, and some have thought that as in 7:13 it might mean ‘the mandrakes give forth fragrance’. It does not matter: spring has arrived.

love must spontaneously respond to his. Meanwhile he is yearning to see her fully for her voice is sweet and her face comely.

Who speaks in the next verse? Is it the King who sees the vines are being destroyed in the maiden's family vineyards, or is it the maiden who is concerned for her brother's inheritance?

15 *Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.'*

Foxes dig holes in the soil, making their homes under roots, and gnawing them to loosen them. So damage is caused. Perhaps Solomon is speaking to a retinue who are with him for the hunting and he sees a way of protecting the vineyards. Could it mean that the spring of love can be the time of the destruction of its vineyards—little things, perhaps cares and annoyances, that attempt to interfere with their love?

16 *My beloved is mine and I am his, he pastures his flock among the lilies.*

Now it is the Shulammitte who speaks, though in this verse to herself, reminding herself of his love. The saying 'My beloved is mine and I am his' is the beautiful refrain of love. It is no wonder that commentators down through the centuries see it as an allegory of Divine love, and that mystics see it as what they feel when in communion with God. This is not only *union* but magnificent *communion*. **he pastures his flock among the lilies** means to her that he is true shepherd, feeding his flock in the best pastures, and somehow her being a lily is involved in this poetic utterance.

17 *Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle, or a young stag upon rugged mountains.*

She now salutes him with a song of beauty. She knows he is the king who has much to do, and not just time to wander with her on the hills. May he quickly accomplish what he has to do—this leaping stag of hers—'on the mountains of separation', i.e. the rugged or cleft mountains, and having done what he must do, let him come to her in the evening when they can together have the love he has promised. In another sense, then, love must not be stirred up until the appropriate moment. In 4:6 and 8:14 these mountains are 'mountains of spices', i.e. of myrrh and frankincense.

Chapter Three

Is there continuity of the narrative, or is this another occasion of her love? We cannot say, for it is a new song which commences, and that is all we know. Verse four tells us she brought her lover to her mother's house. Is this the same as her brothers' house? We do not know.¹

- ¹ Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.

Upon my bed is a familiar statement. That is the time when human beings meditate, ruminate and cogitate. In Psalm 63:6 the writer says,

When I think of thee upon my bed,
and meditate on thee in the watches of the night;
for thou hast been my help,
and in the shadow of thy wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to thee;
thy right hand upholds me.

This is a love song of the Psalmist to God, and Shulammitte expresses similar hunger for the one she loves. **by night** may give the sense of 'by nights'. On the other hand if 3:1 follows on from 2:16–17, then she is expecting his return and it has not happened. In any case because she loves him in her depths she seeks him in yearning for him, and perhaps, also, in dreaming of him. She cries out for him but there is no response.² This waiting is part of the deepening of love, the self-admission of its being.

- ² 'I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves . I sought him, but found him not.

She must break the dreaming—if that is indeed part of her experience; she must fulfil the yearning. Possibly doubts are entering her mind in regard to his love for her. She must rise, even though it is night, and find him. Thus true love seeks its lover and its fulfilment. **in the streets and in the squares** seems to indicate a large city, so that her home seems to be in Jerusalem. Certainly each large city had to be kept by watchmen who looked for invaders, or kept a police-watch on buildings and homes (cf. Ps. 127:1; Isa. 62:6). **whom my soul loves** is used three times in three verses showing the intimacy she has in her mind with the king.

¹ Some commentators understand by 'her brothers' her step-brothers. Thus her mother's home may have been different from their home.

² That she cries out for him is in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew text.

3 The watchmen found me, as they went about in the city. ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’

In 5:7 the watchmen beat the Shulammitte, wounded her and took away her mantle, but here they do no such thing.³ Do they see her distraught state and understand it? Did the intensity of her love undo them? Or was it simply that being a dream nothing marred its goodness?

4 Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me.

Her desire is met with fulfilment and she brought him to her mother’s house, i.e. that situation where the women of the family dwelt (cf. Gen. 31:33; 24:28; 24:67). What transpires with his coming is not described so that we cannot draw any conclusions. If it is a dream then her tensions are released. He has come to her home and is welcomed.

5 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the hinds of the field, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please.

For comments on this verse see 2:7, but it must be either that the maidens are present in her dream and she dreams she is again supported by her lover, or she is speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem as they are present, saying they must not awaken love and cause it to rise up before its due time.

The scene now changes: a new factor is in sight. The palanquin of Solomon is approaching, ostensibly to fetch the bride who is to be brought with the bridesmaids to the house of his parents, i.e. the palace at Jerusalem.

6 What is that coming up from the wilderness, like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?

Some translations have ‘Who is coming up?’, but the main object of sight is the litter or palanquin of the bridegroom—an ‘it’ and not a ‘who’. The column of smoke is from the incense that is burned, though some would see it as the cloud of dust being sent up by the many horses of the warrior-friends of the bridegroom. Certainly the incense must have been strong—with myrrh, frankincense, and other aromatic powders being burned or sprinkled. In Exodus 30:34–38 is described the holy incense the priest shall use. This prescription must never be used for profane purposes, but other high quality incenses could be made. Incense was often employed in worship, so in the honouring of the bride heavy incense is used—she must be received as one raised to the status of royalty.

7 Behold, it is the litter of Solomon! About it are sixty mighty men of the mighty men of Israel,
8 all girt with swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against alarms by night.

The palanquin of Solomon was something very special, as we shall see. Now it was guarded by the sixty mighty men of Israel. They who normally escort Solomon now escort the bride. These seasoned warriors are used to defending royalty, especially against the robbers that

³ This is what has caused some commentators to think the whole thing is a dream, that the maiden is not even in a city but at home on the mountains, and so the dream is ‘a wish-fulfilment’ dream.

were so prevalent in the hills country. Obviously sixty warriors was considered to be a special royal detail.

9 King Solomon made himself a palanquin from the wood of Lebanon.

Now follows the description of the litter which is the equivalent of an Indian palanquin, or a Venetian gondola. The first point is that it is made from Lebanese cedar.

10 He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple; it was lovingly wrought within by the daughters of Jerusalem.

The nature of the litter is that of a bed with a canopy, its posts being cedar and overlaid with silver and the support with gold, whilst the cushioned seat was of costly purple material. Its interior—under the hanging curtains—had been furnished through the love of the ‘daughters of Jerusalem’.

11 Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.

A call goes out to these ‘daughters of Jerusalem’ to see the crown Solomon is wearing. This was not the crown of kingship but a wedding crown, for it was the custom of men to crown themselves (cf. Isa. 61:10; Job 31:36; Ps. 103:4). This is evidence that the queen-mother approves of the marriage. the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart is a beautiful statement showing the glory of marital love now anticipated.

Chapter Four

The bridegroom now pays his tribute of love and adoration to the country maiden.

- ¹ Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead.

Whilst this kind of description is not the Western style of the day we can easily warm to it, and perhaps men could wish for more boldness in adoration. That she is beautiful—repeated—is no mere cliché but the *cardiphonia*—the utterances of his heart. She is veiled as a bride but her bright eyes shine through the veil: they are not *like* doves, but *are* doves. Her hair-style reminds the king of a flock of black goats moving down a mountain-side, but seated, not moving, and showing beautiful waves of locks hanging down even over the shoulders.

- ² Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved.

Shorn sheep are beautifully white and their little kids are the same. Thus are the teeth of the young maiden. No tooth is missing!

- ³ Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.

Against the white teeth the lips are red, and so black and white and red make a lovely picture. The cheeks are a full red, too—as are pomegranates—and smooth as the same.¹ They are discernible even under the covering of the veil.

- ⁴ Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an arsenal, whereon hang a thousand bucklers, all of them shields of warriors.

So far as we can know, the tower of David was ‘the tower of the flock’ (cf. Micah 4:8), i.e. a high point from which David surveyed the flock of his people. In Nehemiah 3:25f. it is called, ‘the tower projecting from the upper house of the king at the court of the guard’. It does not need much imagination to see the sheer tower, and then below it the shields of the warriors hanging, in this case the coins of the bridal necklace about her neck with the hanging coins above her breasts.

- ⁵ Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies.

The bosom of the bride is like a soft field, lily-filled, on which twin fawns graciously graze.

¹ Some translations have ‘temples’ instead of ‘cheeks’.

6 Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will hie me to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.

Who is now speaking? Is it the bride who wishes to have a time for quietness and relief from the overwhelming panegyric of her loving bridegroom which is stirring her so much? Is it possibly the bridegroom speaking, who looks upon his fragrant spouse as ‘the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense’—perhaps a figure of her beautiful breasts? Whatever his or her desires may be, he insists on completing his adoration of her.

7 You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you.

Whether the bridegroom has had experiences of other women, and sees in his chaste bride the epitome of true womanhood, we cannot say, but he is—so to speak—looking at her through and through. All of her is fair: all of her is flawless. She is unique among women.

8 Come with me from Lebanon, my bride; come with me from Lebanon. Depart from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards.

This verse is puzzling. Delitzsch sees the bridegroom wanting his bride to ascend the Lebanese hills and from their peaks to look out across the land of Israel below. Is this a honeymoon jaunt—something unknown in those days—or has his imagination taken a flight and he sees this beautiful woman with him on the high hills? Certainly she is not from these hills herself, so the vista will be new. Others see the words of Solomon as promising her she will never again have to live in hills and mountains but in the beauty and security of the royal palace.

Whatever the meaning of verse eight, the bridegroom is launched further into his panegyric of his spouse. This may not have been difficult for the writer of over one thousand songs, but pure poetry is not made, not constructed, but flows as the expression of the deepest in a person, and it speaks into the deepest part of the hearer. Those of us who have never been thus moved may find the praise exaggerated, but then, perhaps we have never been in love this way!

9 You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride, you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.

Her beauty and her person have reached his heart, the centre of all mind and will and emotion. Has the espousal fully taken place? Is her veil now lifted?² He now sees her eyes and they fascinate and move him. Just the movement of her body, the flashing of a jewel in her necklace stirs him deeply.

10 How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! how much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!

We need to remind ourselves that the language of the Song cannot be transferred to our present situation, or vice versa, i.e. this is not ‘sex-talk’ as we presently know it. The bridegroom

² The order of a marriage as we know it was not the order practised in the days of Solomon. There was no small liturgy and the spouses were then joined together. Marriages could take many days. Thus the Shulammitte woman had asked the young maidens not to stir up love in either of them. They must await the moment. First there is a gentle wooing to be done, a knowing of each other before any conclusion is reached.

is talking about love—the same love that previously made the bride swoon. It is the kind of love mystics and others attribute to God. It is beautiful beyond human description, even though part of true human experience. As for ‘love’ and ‘wine’ see 1:2. From herself she exhales the fragrance of her being, and it is this he inhales—her soul so to speak—and so he knows her love in this communion.

11 Your lips distil nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.

Here is not raw sensual stimulation but two in communion. The gentle stimulation of each other is not lustful, for the next verse tells us that, as yet, the garden is locked. There is sensuality but it is not the forced union of two which each have an ‘I-I’ relationship, but that of ‘I and thou’, ‘thou and I’.

12 A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed.

This woman is chaste. Her beauties have been locked against defilement and invasion. How she has done this—a young woman who works in a vineyard and lives in the rural setting of the hills—does not much matter: she has kept herself inviolate. Proverbs 4:23 (cf. Prov. 25:26; 5:15f.) has enjoined, ‘Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life’. Her fountain has been pure, locked against any element which would defile it.

13 Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, 14 nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices—

Now Solomon is speaking of the beauties of her garden, and he uses the figures of a fruitful garden, an aromatic orchard, a spiced environment.

15 a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.

A garden fountain is a fountain in a garden. Living water is just that, as against still water that stagnates. The figures change but the idea is still the same—of purity and life and living vibrancy. In all this she resonates for him. He is captivated by it all, but in no way so infatuated that he does not see the essential beauty, naivete and wholesomeness of the bride.

The bride has listened to him, related to him, heard his praises and knows he has recognized who she is, and what she is. She now wishes to share all of this with him.

16 Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its fragrance be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.

Figures are not mere figures. Metaphors can be more dynamic than immediately described realities. The poetry is what moves the heart, and equivalent poetry must be used—this time in a loving reward. The winds are those which move the scents and fragrances, and cause them to flow out of the enclosure. The north wind is cold, and the south wind hot, and each has its function. As Esther had to be prepared before she could come before the king (Esther 2:12), so the Shulammite woman had to be prepared before the king could enter her garden and share her gifts.

Chapter Five

At her quiet invitation the bridegroom comes, and the two are truly man and wife.

- 1 I come to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gather my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey, I drink my wine with my milk. Eat, O friends, and drink: drink deeply, O lovers!

Notice the repeated use of the word ‘my’—nine times—for now the garden is his. How beautifully their union is described. The last injunction is in order if the bridegroom is saying, ‘In a similar situation my friends, do as I am doing’, or, ‘As I have eaten and drunk so well with my beloved, you now eat and drink the good things provided for you at this wedding feast’. He has delicacies of one kind, and they of another.

The situation has changed somewhat. Doubtless the wife is in the house provided by her husband, in the women’s section of the palace, and he quietly visits her. She is drowsy, half-dreaming and then surprised at his hand on the latch and his voice summoning her.

- 2 I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark! my beloved is knocking. ‘Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.’

The present Western understanding of two living in the one house and available to each other all the time they are not working, does not fit the culture of Solomon’s day. As a king he might not be seen for long periods of time. She would need to be alert when he came. **I slept, but my heart was awake** is seen by some to mean that the bride is dreaming again, that she is wanting him to come. It seems better to see her as sleeping but her mind intent on his coming, even as she sleeps. Half-asleep she hears his voice. His are the words we have read before—**my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one**—and he has been out for much of the night, the dew being upon him. She should respond, jump out of bed and hurry to undo the latch.

- 3 I had put off my garment, how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet, how could I soil them?

In the East one does not necessarily go barefooted as some seem to suggest, for sandals were the main footwear, but washing one’s feet meant that the moment they were put on the floor they would again be soiled. Her garment of the day had been taken off—she was disrobed. All this would take time. Perhaps she was even in a glowing state and did not wish to move, *for the moment*.

- 4 My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me.

After the voice, the action at the latch which she must also have recognized. my heart was thrilled within me in the AV is ‘my *bowels* were moved for him’. The term ‘bowels’

(cf. Jer. 4:19 where the AV has ‘My bowels! My bowels!’) was also used in the NT of being deeply moved, the bowels being where emotion is most deeply felt. She certainly loved his appearing.

5 I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt.

Did the Shulammitte have a bowl of the precious myrrh and did she dip her fingers in it before she hurried to the door, or were his hands dripping with the precious ointment, and did she find it on her hands? It does not much matter which it was, but it seems he had come prepared for her, only to think she was not prepared for him. For some reason he withdrew quickly, perhaps regretting he had disturbed her.

6 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.

Now comes the deep disappointment. He has withdrawn, but her heart is all for him. She speaks of her soul failing¹—a strong statement—but she means that in the sheer love-ecstasy she had experienced when he had called her, she had been unable to hasten at his bidding. Now he has gone and she cries out to him in the dark, but he had bounded away like the stag he was. Her heart still burns within her, but she feels she has failed him.

7 The watchmen found me, as they went about in the city; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those watchmen of the walls.

She had put on her mantle and again she goes around the city, trying to find him. The keepers of the city treat her with contempt for no woman should be wandering around after dark. She is chastised for being in this state. They do not sense she is a woman bereft because of love, and suffering deeply for that love. It would seem that in order to escape them she had slipped out of her mantle². The mantle was an upper garment that covered the shoulders. Her veil—which all women wore—may not have been disturbed, and her garment beneath would not have been touched: the watchmen would have been ashamed to make her naked.

8 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love.

It would seem that the daughters of Jerusalem (cf. 1:5; 2:7; 5:16, etc.) are not immediately present at this juncture, but perhaps after the occasion she confers with them. They may meet him, and she wishes the message of her love to come to him. She is filled with a mixture of sorrow for her seeming reluctance to open the door to him, sad that he might think her ‘a laggard in love’. Again, she is sick with love. (See commentary on 2:5–7). Her whole being is near to swooning because of the matter of her love. She puts a solemn responsibility on the young women for she adjures them, i.e. almost puts them under oath to do what she demands.

9 What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us?

Rightly the daughters of Jerusalem want to know what is so special about her beloved, since they are under adjuration. Is it a womanly pertness which makes them ask? Is it the kind of

¹ It can be translated ‘her heart departed’.

² It can be translated ‘my upper garment took away from me’, rather than that they took it from her.

gossip-information they love to hear and mouth? Do they want her to describe the king's manliness that they may savour it as a group of sisters? It is probably that they want to see Solomon through the eyes of his entranced lover. Others see their beloveds as handsome and special: now she will have to prove that he is unique as a man and a lover.

10 My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand.

He is her 'beloved'. His face shines white with dazzling radiance—almost a reminder of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He glows with health and manly beauty, and is conspicuous—standing out among thousands.

11 His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven.

We might say, 'His head is 24 carat gold', i.e. of the purest gold, gold standing for nobility and regality. As for his hair, her description is clear enough. For **locks are wavy** *JB* translates 'as palm fronds'.

12 His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set.

Doves have a beautiful languishing look from their eyes—very moving. It is primarily to the pupils the maiden is referring, for these are bathed in white—as though in milk—so the whites are also beautiful. M. H. Pope translates **fitly set** by 'sitting by brimming pools', i.e. the doves (pupils) are in eyes that are filled with moisture, shining, perhaps tears.

13 His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh.

These garden beds of spices are raised, are beautiful with their blooms—so his cheeks are thus. They give forth aromatic fragrance. His lips are as the red lilies, and they flow in words that are sheer poetry that are likened to liquid myrrh.

14 His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels. His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires.

Most translators speak of **His arms** as 'his hands', some seeing his nails as meaning **set with jewels**. Pope translates 'His arms are rods of gold studded with gems'. Delitzsch translates, 'His hands are golden cylinders filled in with stones of Tarshish'. The strong white body³ looks like something sculptured out of a slab of marble, and the strong blue veins that show through the skin are like the blue of sapphires. The maiden, being his wife, is in a position to describe the uncovered body and does so with pure naivete.

15 His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars.

If the body is as ivory, then the legs are like white marble columns, set in sockets of gold. The description needs no explanation. His whole appearance is noble, awe-inspiring, full of dignity like Lebanon, the king of the mountains. Just as the cedars rise high, so does this man above other men. He is an aristocrat among humans.

³ Some translators see 'the body' here as the loins or the belly.

16 His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.

Not only does he look well, but he speaks well. She had said his lips distilled myrrh, and she is saying ‘gracious words proceed out of his mouth’—the sign and seal of a person of maturity and greatness. Pride and arrogance are absent. For her part the wife can sum up with pride that he is beloved to her, and is her friend—a word which speaks all that is needed.

Chapter Six

- 1 Whither has your beloved gone, O fairest among women? Whither has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?

Recognizing from her description of her husband her love, and seeing her looks of longing for him, they are concerned—these daughters of Jerusalem—and they desire to comfort her, to go with her, and to help find him. We notice that they continue to call her **fairest among women** for they recognize her extraordinary beauty.

- 2 My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies.

The wed maiden now speaks of where her beloved has gone, and why. In I Kings 21:1–2 King Ahab desired Naboth’s vineyard to make a vegetable garden for himself. Solomon was deeply interested in all flora as well as fauna, and was fascinated by parks and gardens—things of beauty in an Eastern land (Eccl. 2:5). Our first ancestor was a gardener, and God Himself is *the* Husbandman (John 15:1). His gardens—the palace gardens—would have been his delight. The Shulammitte takes up this rustic aspect of her lover and dwells upon it. Again there are references to spices, a flock and lilies.

- 3 I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; he pastures his flock among the lilies.

No matter what has happened—either in dream or reality—the maiden knows she belongs to her beloved and he belongs to her. If she had seemed tardy at opening the door, nothing has really altered. A rustic maiden, she delights in his love of the flock and his care for the sheep, feeding them in the most luxuriant of all places. We cannot but help being reminded of the true Davidic Shepherd who leads his sheep to ‘springs of living waters’ and removes from them all sorrow (Rev. 7:17; cf. Ezek. ch. 34 and John ch. 10).

Solomon, who has been absent from the narrative for some time now, addresses his beloved bride. It seems that his coming has given her confidence, restored her joy and radiance and made her quite regal.

- 4 You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners.

Tirzah was a famous northern city whose name meant ‘pleasure’ or ‘beauty’. Perhaps she was a maiden of that northern region and so the name pertained to her, but she is as comely, also, as Jerusalem—which would have been regarded as the most beautiful of all cities—it being the royal city. Something about this chaste person gives her immense power. She is **terrible as an army with banners**; that is she is inviolable, strong, resolute and imperious. A vast army going forward has all its banners flying, telling out to its enemies the message of their defeat by this army in glorious battle array. So is this lovely lady. She is not any more a shy, half-hidden rustic maid.

5 Turn away your eyes from me, for they disturb me—Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. 6 Your teeth are like a flock of ewes, that have come up from the washing, all of them bear twins, not one among them is bereaved. 7 Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.

The clear keen look of purity, the moving power of femininity, the deep understanding of her lover is almost unbearable to him: he is gripped by her power of love, he who himself has always been regal and imperious. He speaks of her hair, teeth, and cheeks as he did in 4:1–3, probably because these are statements not to be transcended, and because the repeating of them is a mutual delight to him and her.

8 There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number.

This shows the event of the king and his Shulammitte maiden must have been early on in his reign. We have seen that he is quite a young man. Later in his reign, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. These must not all be thought to have had a life of intimacy with Solomon. They were part of the court, the royal entourage, and their work must have been essential to the life of an Eastern monarch. The next verse gives the reason for their being mentioned.

9 My dove, my perfect one, is only one, the darling of her mother, flawless to her that bore her. The maidens saw her and called her happy; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her.

Solomon does not denigrate the queens and concubines, but says his Shulammitte maiden is only one of all to him. Just as she was the only one to her mother, so also the queens and concubines show no jealousy, but acknowledge the rightness of her happiness and they praise her for what she is—all that the king pronounces her to be.

10 ‘Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?’

Verse 10 seems to be like some chorus. Does the king utter it, as a sort of summary of what he has said, or are the ladies of the royal court moved spontaneously to utter a panegyric concerning her extraordinary beauty? We do not know, but the words are strong and lovely. Delitzsch translates them,

Who is this that looketh forth like the morning-red,
Beautiful as the moon, pure as the sun,
Terrible as a battle host.

We do not know who speaks, but the country-girl has been received with honour and dignity. It seems that the maiden is speaking here, telling of her visit to the royal garden, and of suddenly being swept up by the prince into his royal chariot.

11 I went down to the nut orchard, to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom.

Like Solomon¹ she has her rural fancy, and finds peace and solace in the nut orchard, the

¹ Josephus has a marvellous passage regarding the reign of Solomon and his lovely gardens at a place called Etham, some sixty stadia from Jerusalem, and this place with its pools, gardens and orchards is appropriate to the place where the Shulammitte went.

blossoms in the valley, looking to see whether the grape-vines were at the budding stage, and whether the pomegranates were in bloom.

12 Before I was aware, my fancy set me in a chariot beside my prince.

It could have been that she was taken to Etham in Solomon's chariot since it was his custom, often, to go there with his bodyguard. He may even have taken her there and let her wander and take her fill of the beauties, after which he caught her up into his chariot. She says **my fancy set me in a chariot**² which others have translated as 'unawares' or 'I knew it not', meaning that it was neither dreamed nor calculated.

Who is it that now addresses her, pleading with her to return? Is it those who have sighted her in the garden and looked on her loveliness, or is it the daughters of Jerusalem or the queens and concubines? Certainly there is a passionate plea by those who love to look on beauty.³

13 Return, return⁴, O Shulammitte, return, return, that we may look upon you. Why should you look upon the Shulammitte, as upon a dance before two armies?

In the first half of the verse there is the plea for Shulammitte to return. The second half is a question asked either by Solomon or the maiden. **as upon a dance before two armies** can be translated 'dancing between two rows of dancers' (*JB*) or 'the Dance of the Two Camps' (Pope) or 'As the dance of Mahanaim' (Delitzsch). Mahanaim was the place where Jacob was met by God's angels, and Jacob gave it that name at that time, the name meaning 'two armies'. Out of this grew the idea of two sets of angels dancing.⁵ So the Shulammitte was to dance such a dance—an *angelic* dance.

² The *JB* has the translation 'Before I knew . . . my desire had hurled me on the chariots of my people, as their prince'.

³ Most translations have placed 6:13 ahead of verse 1 in the seventh chapter, because it is related to the dancing Bride.

⁴ Pope translates 'Leap, leap, O Shulammitte! Leap, leap, and let us gaze upon you. How will you gaze on Shulammitte in the dance of the two Camps?'

⁵ It was thought that these two armies of angels went before and behind Jacob and his family and saved them from any harm Esau might bring to them.

Chapter Seven

Some see 7:1—8:4 as a series of songs, the wedding couple singing to one another, almost certainly as they danced.¹ It has been entitled ‘The Dancing Bride and the Rapture of Love’ (W. G. Jordan)², ‘The Dance of the Bride’ (Abingdon, p. 626), and simply ‘Expressions of Praise’ (NRSV).

Some would see Solomon as the one who praises the Shulammitte, while others think such praise was more appropriate for the daughters of Jerusalem to give. Delitzsch (p. 122) thinks that primarily the women wanted this dance to assess the Shulammitte—her joy and her womanliness.

- 1 *How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.*

The Shulammitte is accorded royal stature. She is not an entertainer, a belly-dancer, or someone sensuous. Her dance is with dignity. She has evidently thrown off clothing that would impede and is in a light garment which allows the form and shape of her body to be seen. She is a thing of beauty. Her thighs are perfect. Delitzsch translates, ‘The vibrations of thy thighs like ornamental chains, the work of an artist’s hands’. We need to add here the richness of pulchritude—the appreciation of beauty—is not to be seen as evil or lustful in any sense. Beauty is present to be appreciated, for ‘To the pure all things are pure’ (Titus 1:15).

- 2 *Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies.*

Such descriptions are not to be taken literally but poetically, and in this way the general sense of them comes through. **never lacks mixed wine** has a subjunctive sense about it—may it never lack wine. The belly is like a mound of wheat hedged around with lilies.

- 3 *Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.*

For this see former comments on 4:5.

- 4 *Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus.*

There must have been an ivory tower which was known, and in the eastern sun it must have been dazzling white as was her neck (cf. 4:4). Heshbon—a town to the east of the northern

¹ Dancing was part of the life of Israel, and would require a full monograph to cover it. Miriam and her women danced at the victory over the Egyptians. The women of Israel danced to celebrate David’s victory over Goliath (I Sam. 18:6). David danced before the ark of the covenant (II Sam. 6:16). Joy and dancing go together (Eccl. 3:4) and have spiritual meaning (Ps. 87:7).

² ‘Song of Songs’ in Peake’s *Commentary on the Bible* (Nelson, London, 1952, p. 422).

point of the Dead Sea—had formerly belonged to the Amorites, but in Solomon’s time to Israel. There must have been two notable pools by the main gate—a lovely figure for the maiden’s eyes, for soft water—even rippling—is highly prized among the Arabs. Her nose must have been regal, though without haughtiness. Some have felt **like a tower of Lebanon**, to be inappropriate as a figure of beauty, but those with Semitic features would appreciate that kind of beauty.

5 Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses.

Carmel—an outstanding mountain promontory—was known as ‘nose of the mountain range’, and perhaps after the shapely nose of the maiden prompted the thought of the noble head of the young woman. Her dark locks had a purple sheen to them, and the statement of fact was that the king was fettered by them. There is something deeply womanly in long flowing hair.

Whoever was the speaker in the former song, the one who utters his feelings in this one is Solomon. It has been said that ‘love is the joy of two hearts’, and it has to be this way. So Solomon speaks out of this relationship.

6 How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden!

This commences another song of the beauty of the wife of his youth. She has come to him as ‘fair and pleasant’ and not—as is often the case—spoiled by life, complicated and secretive—but as one who shares mutual love and is a ‘delectable maiden’, or ‘daughter of delights’.

7 You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters.

She stands before him, fresh and young and upright and with stately poise. The clusters are first those of the palm flowers which then ripen into fruit, so that they are somewhat breast-like.

8 I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches. Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples,

He desires to embrace the stately palm, to reach up and experience her as his beloved woman. Another poetic figure is **clusters of the vine** and these may well look like the breasts of a woman. Her fast breathing through love will be to him like the scent of apples.

9 and your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth.

She was the one who longed fervently for his kisses (1:2) and had said his kisses were better than wine. Now he says they are like wine that goes down smoothly³, that is acceptable to lips and palate.

The speaker changes. This time it is the maiden and she responds, asserting her love for him, and inviting him to be one with her, outdoors and indoors.

³ One translation has ‘down for my lover’, i.e. they are kisses *he* gives. Perhaps there is mutuality intended here.

10 I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me.

2:16 has 'My beloved is mine and I am his'. 6:3 has 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine'. Here she is content in the fact that she belongs to him and that he greatly desires her.

11 Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields, and lodge in the villages;

She wants him for herself in the rustic scene she has always known. This is 'the vacation of love' if they will, a pleasant honeymoon as we would say today. Her heart is in the country: these are the scenes she knows and loves. He is one with her in her desires. He will surely come. They will not be as gypsies for they will find lodgings.

12 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. There I will give you my love.

Her love will come most naturally in her home environment, and there will withhold nothing from him. Just as he had gone down into his garden (6:2f.), so they will go to hers—the whole countryside—and they will be delighted in their rustic pursuits.

13 The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and over our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

Mandrakes were known as aphrodisiacs (Gen. 30:14), and were called 'love flowers', although in this case there is no hint that the fruit stored up from them would be used as an aphrodisiac. They are found growing wild in Galilee but are rare in Jerusalem. Their flowers and fruits both give off a pleasant odour. Over the doors, but inside, was a shelf on which ripe and fresh fruits had been laid up by the Shulammite, who now wants her husband to join her in her home rural setting. She believes their love will flourish in such a setting. She must have dreamed and planned for such a time: now she anticipates it with joy.

Chapter Eight

The Shulammitte continues to speak, and impetuously she wishes they could have continued intimacy to which no one could object when they saw them kissing.

¹ O that you were like a brother to me, that nursed at my mother's breast! If I met you outside, I would kiss you, and none would despise me.

It is not an Eastern custom for men to kiss women in public—not unless they are harlots (cf. Prov. 7:13). If he were her brother, if they had both fed at the same breast, then such intimacy would be acceptable.

² I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her that conceived me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranates.

We have no way of knowing that her mother lives in the house or is even alive¹. The house belongs to her—the Shulammitte—and is not even her brothers', so it would be proper to take him there. Wine—spiced wine—was made from pomegranates, among other things. She would give him this love potion, as part of her warm hospitality. She has obviously dreamed of bringing him back to her home, even from the lavish royal court, that they might be together in all simplicity.

³ O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!

For commentary on this see 2:6. She is yearning for his sustaining left hand, his embracing right one, and the deep rich mood of love to be upon her—the mood she has known previously.

At this point some see that the maiden, yearning for love-fulfilment, rests in the embrace of her lover, and so what follows in the next verse is not spoken by her but by him. If we go back to 2:6 we see it is surely spoken by Solomon's bride.

⁴ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please.

Again, for this see 2:7 and 3:5. The essence of the adjuration is, 'Let love take its right and full course'.

Here is interposed a beautiful chorus, though by whom we do not know. Was it sung by the daughters of Jerusalem?

¹ From the AV it would seem that the mother was present to teach. The Greek-Syriac Version includes the same clause, but JB translates it 'and you would teach me'. If this is part of the original text then probably it means 'my mother would teach me how to be a good bride and wife'.

5a Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?

Of course it is the maiden, leaning upon her husband. She is now wholly dependent on him, and perhaps she is faint from her deep love—the love that brings her nigh to swooning. The scene is intimate and very beautiful.

5b Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in travail with you, there she who bore you was in travail.

Who awakened who? It depends on whom is the speaker. The result is well-known—one stirred the other to love under this very apple tree, the tree where perhaps she was conceived, or even suddenly born. It is difficult to tell from the text. What matters is that the apple tree is one of great memory—a memorial to love. It has established a tradition for itself.

6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame².

What does this beautiful and powerful verse mean? The signet ring was important in days when many were unable to read or write. Genesis 38:18, 25 show the special significance of it. See also Genesis 41:42 and Esther 3:10; 8:2. The Shulammitte wishes to be a signet ring around his neck, i.e. on his heart, and also on his arm, i.e. a signet bracelet—another way of saying, ‘Press me close to your breast, and embrace me with your arms—always!’ She wants to be one with him.

Love, gentle as it is, changes to strong passion when there is danger in the relationship³. It is as strong as death—nothing can prevent its motions. It becomes jealousy in certain situations and is as relentless as is the grave. i.e Sheol demanding its own.

7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

Love is unquenchable: that is the wonderful and terrible thing about it. Once given it cannot be withdrawn. If a person sought—with all he had—to buy love, he would be refused and scorned. Who would do such a thing? When love is given it is free, but it obligates the beloved, forever.

Do the maiden’s brothers now come on to the scene? If so then this is not stated or explained. Who is ‘the little sister’?⁴ She is the sister of the Shulammitte, but this maiden is speaking for her to Solomon, her husband. He now has part in this family.

8 We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister, on the day when she is spoken for?

The little sister is immature but will grow and then ‘be spoken for’, i.e. attract a suitor. What then shall be done?

² Some translations have ‘a flame of Jah himself’, but probably this is not the original text since in all this book God is not mentioned. Pope translates it, ‘Its darts are darts of fire, Its flames — — —’, meaning ‘We cannot be sure of the initial text’.

³ In one sense love is never purely rational. Rather it is supra-rational, but let danger come and it will be irrational, even though under all it has its own reasons for what it does. Love does not fit into regulations. Its passion is so strong that it will move into strange actions.

⁴ From 6:9 we might think that the maiden was the only daughter of her mother, but this need not be the case, for ‘only one’ may mean ‘at that time the only one in her eyes’ (cf. Prov. 4:3).

- 9 If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar.

We will make sure she is inviolate, by whatever means possible. This may mean, ‘We will teach her not to surrender to any suitor the precious gift of her chastity. If she is a wall we will see she is protected by special battlements. If she is a cedar door we will board her up with cedar timbers.’

- 10 I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace.

The maiden is saying, ‘That is what happened to me. I was protected and taught until I was ready for marriage. When I was ready then, in his eyes, I was mature’—**my breasts were like towers**—i.e. my beauty was my fortification and when we wedded I brought peace to him—Solomon, which means ‘prince of peace’. Shulammitte means, roughly, ‘princess of peace’, i.e. the female counterpart of Solomon.

Who is speaking? A spectator or a commentator, or the Shulammitte herself? It seems to be she who is speaking.

- 11 Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he let out the vineyard to keepers; each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver.

In Israel every possession of land was an inheritance, as is shown in I Kings 21:1ff., and so each loved his possession-inheritance. Solomon had a grand vineyard, one which could be leased out—probably to a number of lessees—for a thousand pieces of silver.

- 12 My vineyard, my very own, is for myself; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.

In Proverbs 31:10–31 the ideal wife is concerned with business and real estate. The new wife is speaking to her husband concerning the vineyard she has within the family—the one that is not her brothers’ (1:6). Surely she is saying, ‘You have a great vineyard in Baal-Hamon, you get 1000 shekels plus 200 interest levy (tax), and I have a little one here and I want to keep it as mine.’

Who is now speaking and to whom? Is Solomon attesting to his bride’s possession of the garden for all who will hear—those who dwell there—or is he asking his wife to give a closing song for those who are wishing it? It is difficult to say.

- 13 O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it.

The *JB* changes the sentence structure addressing ‘You who dwell in the garden’, i.e. the Shulammitte, asking on behalf of the king’s companion for a song. This seems closest to the case.

- 14 Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices.

This is the final song of the bride, and indeed is a repetition of 2:9, 17. Is she drawing his memory to former fragrant times?

Postscript to the Song of Songs

This small commentary has been written from what we have called ‘The Human-Love View’, meaning that it is a song or collection of songs written to express the mutual love of a man and a woman. We have presented it as the love of King Solomon for a country maiden called ‘the Shulammitte woman’. The maiden is guileless and ingenuous, i.e. she is noble in nature, honourable, open, frank and candid, and yet innocent and artless. The king, for his part, is a young man, has risen to be king following the death of his great father, David. His name means ‘prince of peace’, as indeed the name ‘Shulammitte’ can be roughly translated ‘princess of peace’. Solomon had achieved greatness in his own right before meeting the rural maiden, and yet he learns to bend towards her and her country ways.

The two live between palace-magnificence and pastoral simplicity, and it seems that Solomon would have his maiden to be a queen without wishing to spoil her rustic simplicity. That simplicity is very disarming and brings the king to share the sheer joy of country living, especially in the hills where vineyards and orchards form the way of life of the country folk. There is something idyllic, something Arcadian about the song, but one gradually gathers there is great strength in the womanhood of the Shulammitte—strength of character, strength of purpose, and above all the strength which lies in human love.

The Book itself is simple enough to read, especially when one is familiar with some of the Eastern customs of the day. Unless one reads into simple statements some special hidden meaning, the Song as a collection of songs is not at all bold and is not embarrassing. It certainly is not necessarily stimulating for those who are versed in pulchritude—admirers of beauty for its sake. Doubtless our minds can be contaminated by desires which become lustful, and we can be on the look-out for that kind of stimulation, but it is not inherently within this Book. In some ways the writing is mild, yet in its mildness is great purity and strength.

In our Introduction I said that we were taking the view which we called ‘human-literal, lyrical and typical’, meaning that the Book was accepted as an account of man–woman love, but that at the same time it was an analogue—or even an allegory—of Divine love, especially the love of God for Israel His wife, of Christ the Bridegroom for his church, and as such was an analogue of this ‘great mystery’ spoken of by St Paul. Some scholars think of the archetype or original reality of Divine love and see human love as an ectype of this. Thus human marriage reflects the Divine marriage between God and His people, Christ and his church. The difficulty of an analogue is that in working upwards from the human to the Divine it is not possible to fully understand the Divine. Time and again the Scriptures warn us against trying to liken God to anything He has created. Rather, we must see what He has revealed of Himself, and through such revelations understand what He has created—especially Man in His own image. Knowing God’s love to Man, and Christ’s love to the church, we have a richer view of the mutual love of the man and the woman.

In reading the commentaries which take the allegorical point of view I was taken by the rich devotion these works contained. At the same time it also seemed that the allegorical view was not natural—that the Book did not give indications along this line. The Song may well be typological of the love of Christ and His Bride, but one has the feeling that it is not intentionally so. It is just that the human is typical of the Divine, since God gives humanity—especially faithful covenantal humanity—the gift of *agape*. In taking this view it does seem that one bypasses a great treasury of devotion which the people of God have accumulated over many centuries. I am convinced that once the Book is read in its simplicity and human reality, and is understood as such, then that treasury can well be used. If, however, the allegorical view is set out as the intention of the Song, then human, mutual love really becomes a peg on which to hang the allegory. Perhaps some may have a little guilt at enjoying the Song for its own beauty, its clear humanness, and feel it cannot be in the canon unless it is ‘highly spiritual’. In fact it is highly spiritual in the sense that all God has created is this way, and the Song underlines this by recalling us to love that is as pure as can be found in fallen humans. It is surprisingly pure—free from a romanticism which is delusive and from a sensuality which is ultimately a deceit.

Having read the Song as a highly lyrical work, and having been gripped by the kind of poetry that transcends prose both in beauty and power, and having received the revelation of true human man–woman love, the Book should prove to be a treasure—a paradigm and inspiration for genuine man–woman love. It should act as a counter-attraction from destructive sensuality and current sexual fantasy, and bring us back to the healthy reality of love. Thus ‘the pure in heart’ can have great joy from this gift of God.

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Note: The following articles and volumes represent the various views of the Song of Solomon, and the reader must sort them out to his or her own satisfaction.

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