

INTRODUCTION

RATIONALE AND OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

Modern churchgoers may be surprised to learn that the Song of Songs was once one of the most preached and commented on book of the Bible.¹ Tremper Longman makes the observation that nowadays the Song is rarely taught at all² and my own experience reflects this. In over fifteen years of regular churchgoing, I have never yet heard a sermon on the Song and only once heard it taught at all, in the context of a talk on ‘Relationships,’ aimed at students. Longman is rightly concerned by this apparent ‘functional decanonization’³ of the Song. In the light of Paul’s claim that ‘*All Scripture is... profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness,*’⁴ the present situation suggests that the church is missing out.

David Carr links the disuse of the Song with the widespread rejection of allegorical interpretations from the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ There have been various methods of interpretation suggested as replacements; that which has gained most support in recent years is the so-called ‘literal’ approach.⁶ While there are reasons to reject some of the methodology involved in traditional allegorical interpretations⁷, this study will show that there are good grounds to support their instinctive reading of the Song as an exposition of the divine-human relationship rather than primarily as a reflection on human marriage.

It is not the aim of this study to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the Song. Rather, by approaching the Song through two important themes and considering these within the context of scripture

¹Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 231.

²Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 59.

³Ibid., 62.

⁴2 Timothy 3:16 (emphasis added).

⁵See Longman, op. cit., 62.

⁶The inappropriateness of this term will be discussed below (see p. 8, n. 19).

⁷See p. 7 below.

as a whole, I hope to demonstrate how such a biblical theological approach, showing proper consideration for both biblical context and literary genre, can offer an interpretation which is faithful to God's word and beneficial for God's people.

After a brief discussion of issues surrounding the date, structure and authorship of the Song, I begin with an analysis of the traditional and modern interpretations, showing the problems associated with a lack of due concern for biblical context or literary genre. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of the biblical setting of the Song in chapter two and relevant literary considerations in chapter three.

In chapters four and five, I approach the Song by means of two important themes: land and marriage. In each case, a brief sketch of the biblical development of the theme sets the context before the theme as it is treated within the Song is then considered in the light of its scriptural allusions, types and symbols, taking particular care to interpret the figurative language appropriately. The conclusion of these chapters is that the Song is structured according to an overarching metaphor which should determine its interpretation.

The interpretation of this metaphor in the context of the new covenant and some implications for the use of the Song in the church are considered in the concluding chapter.

DATE, STRUCTURE AND AUTHORSHIP

Many commentators take refuge in the apparently ahistorical nature of the Song, arguing that dating or authorship have little effect on interpretation.⁸ However, since I will argue that the Song is deliberately allusive with reference to other biblical texts, these issues take on greater significance.

The Song appears to be composed of a number of distinct poems, marked by differing form,

⁸So, for example, Longman, op. cit., 19: 'nothing is at stake in the interpretation of the Song'; and R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 5: 'very little can be said with confidence about the authorship and date or social provenance of the Song.'

setting and style.⁹ It is plausible to argue that these original poems could have been composed by different poets at different times and were only later edited into their current form. A late, possibly post-exilic, date for this final composition best accounts for a number of apparent anomalies in the vocabulary and syntax of the Song.¹⁰

Although the structure of the Song does suggest a composite nature, it also shows signs of careful and artful editing, skilfully weaving the constituent units together, so that in its final canonical form it may be considered as the literary unity its title suggests.¹¹

The identities of the author(s) and editor(s) remain unknown. The superscription may indicate that some, at least, of the Song is of Solomonic origin, but it is more likely that this attribution was not intended to signify authorship.

⁹For example, the *wasfs* in Song 4:1-5, 5:10-16 and 7:1-5 are distinguishable on the basis of their form. The dream sequences in Song 3:1-5 and Song 5:2-8 have both a distinct city setting and a more noticeably narrative style than the rest of the Song. There is, however, no consensus among those who consider the Song of Songs to be an anthology as to the number and division of these constituent units, with suggestions ranging from six to thirty-one units. See A. Brenner, *Old Testament Guides: The Song of Songs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 36. This difficulty in distinguishing clear units suggests that the whole has been carefully integrated.

¹⁰The geographical and historical references in the Song all suggest an early date, during Solomon's reign. However, a number of later Persian loanwords and characteristics of later Hebrew syntax make a post-exilic dating more probable. See M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 22–27 for a more detailed discussion of the issues surrounding the dating of the Song.

¹¹שיר השירים should be understood as indicating a superlative rather than an anthology: this is 'The *Best* Song', not 'The Song of *Many* Songs'. For a thorough defence of the literary unity of the Song, see M. Timothea Elliott, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989). Some of the clearest evidence for the unity of the Song is seen in the use of the refrains (Song 2:7, 3:5, 5:8 and 8:4; 2:16, 6:3 and 7:10) and other repeated motifs (such as searching and finding) and images (the gazelle, the vineyard etc.).

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SONG OF SONGS

Allegorical interpretations of the Song dominated Christian and Jewish understanding until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when a range of other interpretations became more widely accepted.¹ My primary concern here is not to rehearse the history of interpretation of the Song² but rather to explore the positive contributions and problems associated with each major school of interpretation, paying particular attention to the place given to literary considerations and biblical context.

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The earliest available evidence of the interpretation of the Song shows that it was understood in allegorical terms.³ Jewish commentators have generally interpreted the Song as an allegorical representation of Israel's history in which the marriage represents Yahweh's relationship with his people. In this kind of interpretation, the literal meaning has little or no significance: 'The Song of Songs is a text in code whose meaning can only be penetrated with the help of a hermeneutic key.'⁴ The goal of this kind of interpretation is to rewrite the love poetry of the Song in the literal terms which the author felt the need to disguise. There is, therefore, no need to consider the poetic features of the text, since they form

¹Earlier exceptions to the allegorical understanding include those proposed by Theodore of Mopsuestia, Hugo Grotius and William Whiston; these never gained widespread support and commonly went together with the suggestion that the Song should be removed from the canon of Scripture.

²Most recent commentaries describe this in some detail. See, for example, R.E. Murphy, *op. cit.*, 11-41.

³W.W. Fields, "Early and Medieval Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Grace Theological Journal* 1 (1980): 221-31. Fields's thorough analysis clearly indicates that the earliest interpretations for which there is available evidence are allegorical, though somewhat perversely, he uses this to argue that the Song may have been first interpreted literally.

⁴Luis Stadelmann, *Love and Politics* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990), 1.

part of the disguise. Interpreters have related the Song to different stages in Israel's history and made different identifications of the characters and situations in the Song,⁵ without any clear controls.

The church fathers, driven by their understanding that all scripture must be Christocentric, recognised that the literal level of the Song did not point to Christ and thus could not be profitable for the church. They therefore turned to an allegorical reading.⁶ This marriage song, in their view, referred to the relationship between Christ and his church, or between Christ and the individual believer and as such they found in it great spiritual comfort and blessing. These interpretations, however, were characterised by their arbitrariness in attributing spiritual meanings to the corporeal details in the text.⁷ Little, if any, attention was paid to the literary form of the Song, its poetic units and figures, and its careful and artistic use of language in communicating its meaning.

More considered allegorical interpretations are found among the Puritan commentators. The allegorical method of biblical interpretation had been generally superseded by this time, but was retained specifically with respect to the Song of Songs.⁸ James Durham, in his 'Key to the Song of Songs' considers the other possible kinds of interpretation which had been suggested and gives his reasons for -----

⁵Compare, for example the Targum which traces Israel's history from the slavery in Egypt through to the future restoration under the Messiah (Philip S. Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles* [Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003], 15) with Luis Stadelmann's commentary in which he reads the Song as a political account of the exile and restoration (Stadelmann, op. cit., 2).

⁶See R.A. Norris, ed., *The Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1 who cites Origen and Gregory the Great in support of this view. J. Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 94–99 argues that 'usefulness' of scripture was a key factor in Origen's hermeneutic.

⁷So, for example, the king's chamber into which the girl is taken in Song 1:4 is 'Christ's own secret and mysterious mind' (Origen); God's hidden purposes revealed to the church (Theodoret of Cyr); the church itself (Gregory the Great); Christ's treasures (Hippolytus); or the heavenly kingdom (Gregory of Elvira; Bede). J.R. Wright, ed., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 295.

⁸See J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 101. The view that the allegorical interpretation persisted because of a prudish distaste for sex does not bear up under examination of the Puritans attitudes to the body in general and sex in particular which was seen as a positive good. See Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic Books, 1986), 43–48.

rejecting each.⁹ He recognises the concentration of figurative language in the Song and argues that a literal interpretation of this would be grotesque and absurd. Since the Song contains much metaphorical language, he considered it probable that the whole should be interpreted figuratively. The typical and prophetic interpretations were rejected on the grounds that the Song does not describe an historical relationship and that it must have relevance to the church in every age. Though his discussion is not exhaustive nor always persuasive, it is hard to argue that Durham adopted the allegorical method unthinkingly.

Perhaps the fullest exposition of the Song following Durham's principles is that of John Gill. Gill recognises that the Song employs 'the language and behaviour of natural lovers to each other... which are observed in love poems, though here expressed more decently and beautifully.'¹⁰ He thinks the purpose of such language is solely to express 'the mutual love, union and communion, which are between Christ and the church.'¹¹ Gill understands that the Song is a love poem. In his view, however, it is not a poem describing the love between Solomon and his bride, but rather a poem expressing Christ's love for his bride, the church.

Durham also provided Gill with controls on his interpretation of the figurative language.¹² The text was treated as no mere springboard for fanciful exposition, but rather the vocabulary, syntax and style of the Song were the foundations of his interpretation.

⁹James Durham, *Song of Solomon*, reprint, 1668 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 27–35.

¹⁰John Gill, *An Exposition of the Song of Solomon*, reprint, c. 1724 (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publications, 1971), 9–10.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 10.

¹²Durham, *op. cit.*, 46–48 He suggests five 'rules' or methods of interpreting such language: its immediately obvious meaning; the common use of the phrases and expressions; their use elsewhere in Scripture; the 'scope' of the metaphor, that is, its place within the larger structuring metaphor; and the analogy of faith by which a correct interpretation may be identified.

Implicit in Gill's work are his presuppositions about the unity of Scripture and the effect of the whole on the interpretation of its parts. An important principle of Puritan exegesis was the analogy of faith by which the obscure was interpreted in the light of the plain and the peripheral or ambiguous was interpreted in harmony with the fundamental or certain.¹³ The Song of Songs is almost entirely composed of things obscure or ambiguous and so Gill sought to interpret it in the light of and in harmony with things made explicit and certain elsewhere in Scripture. Consequently, his exposition relies heavily on allusions to and comparisons with both Old and New Testament texts in order to illuminate, illustrate and impress the message of the Song on his readers.¹⁴

Gill has a sense of the need to interpret the Song in the context of biblical theology. For example, he maintains the distinction between old and new covenant believers in the application of the Song, whilst including both in his identification of the bride as the church.¹⁵

There is much that is useful in Gill's exposition of the Song but some problems associated with other forms of allegorical interpretation still remain. Though his interpretation is far from the decoded message suggested by Stadelmann, it is clear that Gill thinks the spiritual meaning is the only useful level at which to understand the Song. He does not think the Song has anything useful to teach about human marriage. This unidirectional view of metaphorical language limits its value. Although Gill recognises that the Song is love poetry, this has little impact on his interpretation. Words and phrases are

¹³Packer, op. cit., 102.

¹⁴A good example is Gill's interpretation of the phrase 'well of living waters' in Song 4:15. He links it with the 'wells of salvation' found in Isaiah 12:3. He compares it with other wells, of Isaac and Jacob, to establish it as large and deep, and contrasts it with the dry wells of 2 Peter 2:17. Gill turns to John 4 to show that it is by faith we draw water from such a well. The living water is explained with references to Ezekiel 47, Proverbs 10:11, John 4:14 and Zechariah 14:8. So then 'the saints under the Old Testament and the saints under the New, have all received from this fountain and fulness of grace in Christ... and yet it is an over-running, overflowing and inexhaustible fulness.' Gill, op. cit., 169.

¹⁵For example, his interpretation of 1:2 considers the request first as that of the Old Testament believers longing for the Christ to come, and then as that of the New Testament church longing for ongoing manifestations of Christ's love and presence. Ibid., 11-12.

considered in isolation, rather than in the context of their poetic unit and the effect of the poetic devices in the Song is hardly recognised.

The sense of arbitrariness in the interpretation of the figurative language is not entirely lacking from Gill's work, despite his best efforts to apply controls. He tells his readers that he has included every possible interpretation which seems to him consistent with the text and with the analogy of faith.¹⁶ This makes for a bewildering read at times with little sense of an overall structure to the message of the Song. Of greater concern that this is his failure to defend his identification of the overarching metaphor in which the bridegroom is Christ and his bride is the church, which is assumed rather than argued.

TYPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Typological interpretations recognise the marriage portrayed in the Song (whether an actual historical relationship or an idealised marriage representing the institution itself) as a type of the relationship between Christ and the church.¹⁷ Such interpretations have largely depended on the metaphorical depiction of this relationship in marriage terms elsewhere in Scripture and have been susceptible to the criticism that the metaphor is imposed on the text of the Song rather than found within it. Since my own interpretation depends on the recognition of biblical types and symbols in the Song to identify an overarching metaphor and is thus closest to this school of interpretation, these issues will be discussed in more depth in subsequent chapters.

CULTIC INTERPRETATIONS

Interpretations of the Song as various kinds of liturgy have largely been discredited and will not be discussed here.¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid., iii.

¹⁷As for example, B. Webb, *Five Festal Garments* (Leicester: IVP Apollos, 2000), 34–35, I.D. Campbell, "The Song of David's Son: Interpreting the Song of Solomon in the Light of the Davidic Covenant," *Westminster Theological*

LITERAL INTERPRETATIONS¹⁹

Within this broad school, two distinct views of the Song exist. Some have suggested that the Song is a drama, with either two or three main characters. In order to show a coherent plot development, this requires significant rearrangement of the Song and the addition of complex stage directions.²⁰

More commonly, the Song is recognised as love poetry, either in an anthology or in a composite unity. The sexual meaning of the Song is understood to be the primary communicative purpose of the Song and any relevance to the divine-human relationship is secondary at best. The obvious advantage of this kind of interpretation is its focus on the literary features of the text and their effects.

Tremper Longman's commentary exemplifies some of the most careful interpretation of this kind.²¹ He finds four reasons to reject the allegorical interpretation: the lack of internal literary evidence; the parallels with other ancient Near East love poetry; the similarities between parts of the Song and poems used in modern Middle Eastern wedding ceremonies; and his desire to affirm the body as an essential part of what it means to be in the image of God.²² It is striking, however, that Longman's main argument is that an allegorical piece of literature should be obviously so and that the Song is obviously

Journal 62 (2000): 17–32.

¹⁸See Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 2 (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 4–8 for a summary and critique of various cultic proposals for the Song and Pope, *op. cit.* 210–229, especially 221–224, for a defence of one such proposal.

¹⁹The term 'literal' is obviously inaccurate when applied to any interpretation of the Song, since the highly figurative language throughout must necessarily be interpreted at some level. However, proponents of this kind of interpretation resist applying any overarching metaphor or allegory to the Song, and continue to use the terms 'literal' or 'natural' in describing their own views.

²⁰See Michael S. Cole, "Song of Songs" (<http://www.westarkchurchofchrist.org/library/songofsongs.htm>, 24/01/06), for an example of the Song as a drama. Stage directions and explanations are inserted throughout in order to make sense of the narrative. Elliott, *op. cit.*, 7–14 gives a review of some dramatic suggestions and a clear critique of such analyses.

²¹Longman, *op. cit.*

²²*Ibid.*, 36–38.

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not.²³ This seems an odd statement given the long history of interpretation in which it the Song has been recognised as an allegory.

Longman seeks to read the book ‘naturally’, recognising its poetic style ‘with all the ambiguity and mystery inherent in that poetry.’²⁴ Identification of the Song as lyric love poetry, he argues, ‘triggers a reading strategy that will concentrate on unpacking metaphors, recovering ancient customs and conventions, and describing the thoughts and emotions evoked by the poet.’²⁵ There is a real concern to take the poetic features of the text seriously.

However, like most literal interpreters, Longman is cautious about allowing the biblical context of the Song to influence its interpretation. It is only after understanding the Song in itself that ‘we can begin to situate it in the context of the Bible as a whole.’²⁶ This caution is evident throughout his commentary. In particular, Longman tends to downplay the significance of biblical allusions noted by other commentators.²⁷

The significance of specific historical and geographical references is also downplayed and the characters are seen as deliberately nonspecific in their attributes, so ‘the woman is not a particular woman but stands for all women.’²⁸ This is important for Longman, since it invites readers ‘to place themselves in the position of the woman and the man.’²⁹ In Marcia Falk’s translation of the Song she deliberately replaces place names with descriptions in order to help the modern reader.³⁰ This strategy produces a strikingly different translation of the Song.

²³Ibid., 23.

²⁴Ibid., 38.

²⁵Ibid., 48.

²⁶Ibid., 63.

²⁷See for example, his comments about the allusion to Hosea 14:8 in Song 2:3 (ibid., 112) or the possession formula in Song 2:16 (ibid., 125 n.77).

²⁸Ibid., 91.

²⁹Idem.

³⁰Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 84.

Interpretation of the figurative language can seem just as arbitrary in this school of interpretation as in any allegorical reading. Without the controls of biblical context to give meaning, the interpreter can give free rein to his imagination, discovering sexual allusion in every detail.³¹ Davis draws attention to this with respect to the difficult phrase, שְׁלֵחֶיךָ פְּרָדִים רְמוֹנִים, in Song 4:13, where the plural noun, שְׁלֵחֶיךָ, has been translated ‘your channel’³² and interpreted as ‘the vaginal canal, ending in the pomegranate-shaped cervix.’³³ By contrast, she makes the striking observation that ‘there is in the entire Song no clear genital reference,’³⁴ and offers the translation ‘your limbs are a paradise of pomegranates.’³⁵

Literal interpretations must show how the Song points to Christ and how it is useful to the church. For Longman, the primary purpose of the Song is to celebrate and warn about the power of human sexuality. A second purpose depends on the links to Genesis 2 and 3 which indicate that the Song functions as a part of the story of the redemption of human sexuality.³⁶ Finally, Longman acknowledges that the significance of the marriage metaphor used frequently to describe the divine-human relationship elsewhere in the Bible may be interpreted in the light of the Song of Songs.³⁷ The links to Christ, for which Longman does acknowledge the need, are not made explicit in this introductory section, nor in the body of the commentary.

If allegorical interpretations suffer from their lack of concern for the literary genre of the Song, literal interpretations tend to have the opposite problem. The focus on the internal literary characteristics

³¹See R. Boer, “The Second Coming: Repetition and Insatiable Desire in the Song of Songs,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000): 276–301 for a particularly crude example of an uncontrolled sexual interpretation of the Song.

³²As in NRSV.

³³Davis, op. cit., 269.

³⁴Idem.

³⁵Ibid., 269–70.

³⁶Here he depends on the work of Phyllis Trible, though not entirely agreeing with her conclusions. P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

³⁷Longman, op. cit., 58–70.

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of the Song obscures the wider context in which it is found. The expectations raised by the inclusion of the Song in the canon regarding its purpose and content are given no more than secondary consideration and the historical, geographical, literary and theological contexts have little significance.

The rejection of the dominant understanding of the Song throughout church history that is associated with a literal interpretation is also cause for concern. LaCocque argues that such rejection shows an unhealthy arrogance as well as a false view of *text*, which seeks to separate its meaning from the interpretive community in which the text exists.³⁸

CONCLUSION

A number of scholars have recently admitted doubts about a solely literal interpretation of the Song, recognising the force of the allegorical interpretations without endorsing their methodology.³⁹ What seems to be required is something akin to the typological interpretation that allows the text to function at the literal level with all its poetic artistry and yet to maintain its spiritual application by means of a proper concern for its biblical context. Such an interpretation cannot, however, be arbitrarily imposed on the text but must be shown to be required by the text itself.

³⁸André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 4.

³⁹See, for example, Campbell, op. cit and David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 26–38.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND THE SONG OF SONGS

The variety of interpretations considered in chapter one illustrate (though by no means exhaust) the possible meanings to which the Song is susceptible. Two considerations which limit the potential meaning of the Song will be addressed in the next two chapters: biblical context and literary genre.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Reading the Song as biblical literature raises certain expectations with regard to its purpose, content and meaning. These expectations will be different from those associated with the use of the Song in other contexts and may result in different interpretations. The meaning of the Song when it was, for example, sung in the taverns of first-century Judea may be very different from that when it was read on the temple steps during the Passover celebrations. The meaning of the Song as Christian Scripture may be different again.

Poythress identifies three distinct (though coinherent) purposes of the Christian Bible: ‘for God to transform people, for him to teach the truth, and for God himself to be present.’¹

First, then, the Bible is God’s means of transforming his people, conforming them to the likeness of his Son.² The Song, no less than any other part of Scripture, performs this function: making wise for salvation and training in righteousness. A major problem for many literal interpretations is to show how the Song does this. Interpreters who consider the Song to be a celebration of erotic love or an exemplar of human marriage struggle to find appropriate applications for the church. In sharp contrast, the Song interpreted as a celebration of the relationship between Christ and the church has been found to be ‘full of nourishment.’³

¹Vern S. Poythress, *God Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1999), 56.

²*Ibid.*, 58.

³Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Song of Songs*, reprint, c.1135 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 29.

Second, the Bible must be internally coherent in what it affirms, since all truth coheres in the One who is the truth and whose truth is revealed in Scripture.⁴ The possible meanings of the Song are thus limited by the need for coherence with the truths found elsewhere in Scripture. This is not to say that the Song can make no unique contribution, but only that it cannot do so in contradiction with another biblical text. Thus, a biblical theological interpretation of the Song is constrained to say that it cannot be, for example, a celebration of free love, given the view of sex and marriage expressed clearly and consistently elsewhere in Scripture.⁵

Finally, a biblical theological interpretation must recognise that it is in the Bible that we encounter God. This can be no mere academic exercise. A biblical theological interpretation depends on a relationship with the living God who is its author. This is not to say that there can be no useful insights to be gleaned from the work of unbelievers, nor that every believer will necessarily interpret Scripture as God intends. Rather it is to admit that without knowledge of the God who speaks, our understanding of the words he has spoken will necessarily be limited and distorted.

Poythress observes that the implication of each of these is the same: the Bible must be interpreted Christologically. If it is through Christ that salvation and transformation are accomplished, and if 'all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found'⁶ in him, and if in him we encounter God, then a biblical theological interpretation is necessarily a Christological interpretation. For the Song, this need not require the allegorical interpretation which speaks directly of Christ, but it does eliminate some literal interpretations which resist any link to Christ. For the Song, as much as the rest of the Old Testament, it is true that 'the alternative to a Christocentric understanding of the Old Testament is not understanding it rightly - not understanding it as Christ desired.'⁷

⁴Poythress, *op. cit.*, 58.

⁵It could, of course, still be a description of sexual love outside of marriage, without being a celebration of such love.

⁶Colossians 2:3

⁷Poythress, *op. cit.*, 60.

TYPES AND SYMBOLS

A properly biblical theological interpretation must further take into consideration the modes of expression which God has used to link together the whole of the biblical revelation. The principle of interpretive maximalism defined as ‘that principle of hermeneutics by which we recognize that the Author of Scripture has invested reflections of his plan of redemption in each of the many characters, passages, themes and sections of the Bible’⁸ is a useful way of achieving this. It may be understood as applying in two distinct categories: types and symbols.

Types

Typology derives from the observation that God has acted in patterns which progress and develop through time. That is to say, events, people and institutions anticipate subsequent ones and/or recapitulate or fulfil earlier ones. History is, therefore, profoundly typological and the history of God’s dealings with his people as recorded in Scripture is constructed so as to make these types evident. Certain Old Testament events, people and institutions are described in the New Testament as types or shadows of the antitypes or realities found there.⁹ Others, while not specifically identified, are nonetheless clearly portrayed as such.

Symbols

Particular objects, places, and creatures are invested with symbolic significance by their use in Scripture. Symbolic meaning derives from some characteristic of the created nature of the object itself and is indicated by its appropriation by the biblical writers to refer to some greater reality. So, for example, white objects show every mark made on them and thus the colour white indicates some kind of unblemished purity. This natural characteristic is then exploited so that whiteness becomes symbolic of

⁸Eric D. Pyle and James E. Doerfel, “Maximalism”, <http://www.two-age.org/glossary.htm#maximalism>, 30/12/05.

⁹Such as the tabernacle, the priestly order and the sacrificial system in Hebrews 8:1-5.

sinlessness.¹⁰

Such symbolism is rarely made explicit but is implied through repeated use of objects in similar or linked situations, giving rise to a complex system of meaning acquired through association and accumulation. Mendenhall suggests that these kind of associations were typical of ancient thought which ‘tends to create the maximum of relationships between experience, language, and art, not the minimum which is so characteristic of modern over-specialization.’¹¹

Interpretation of types and symbols

A biblical theological interpretation must steer the narrow course between the twin dangers of failing to observe intended types and symbols and that of finding types and symbols where none are meant. ‘We must not run into the error of transfusing our own fancies into the divine record, but neither must we be insensible to the glorious richness of its poetry of symbol, allegory and type, in which there is not simply an expression of truth, but a transfiguration of it.’¹²

In the interpretation of types and symbols, a total transfer of meaning from antitype to type or from reality to symbol cannot be presumed. Rather, in each case there will be both a ‘like’ element and an ‘unlike’ element. The type is *not* the antitype; the symbol is *not* the reality. A careful interpretation must identify both ‘like’ and ‘unlike’.

¹⁰As for example in Isaiah 1:18, Revelation 3:4

¹¹George Mendenhall, quoted in James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 13.

¹²Charles P. Krauth, *Interpretation of Types*, 1914, quoted in “Biblical Theology and the Book of Revelation”, David Field, Oak Hill Lecture Notes, 2004.

LITERARY GENRE OF THE SONG OF SONGS

If recognition of the biblical context of the Song focusses attention on its divine author, consideration of its literary genre reminds us of its human origins. The two should not, of course, be separated, since God has chosen to communicate through the human language of the human authors. His revelation comes not merely in human vocabulary and syntax but also in the patterns of language that constitute genre, form and figures of speech.

GENRE OF THE SONG

Garrett hardly overstates the case when he claims that ‘one’s interpretation of the text will be driven from beginning to end by what position one takes with regard to the book’s genre.’¹ Perhaps the broadest genre we may attribute to the Song is that of poetry. This is a more useful categorisation than it may at first seem, distinguishing the Song from both prose narrative and from rhetoric.

Despite Kugel’s observation that there seems to be no Hebrew word corresponding to that which we call poetry, there is nevertheless general consent that the Song does fulfil the characteristics associated with poetry.² That is to say, the Song displays an intentionally artistic use of language, employing a range of tropes with greater frequency than would be expected in prose and utilising the interplay of sound and sense to produce a work which draws attention to its own art as well as to its meaning.³

We may also note that the Song has sufficient commonalities with other ancient Near Eastern poetry for us to be confident of assigning it a more specific genre, that of lyric love poetry.⁴ Of this

¹Duane Garrett, “Song of Songs,” in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Duane Garrett and Paul R. House (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 59.

²James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 69.

³Gerald Morris, *Prophecy, Poetry and Hosea* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 33.

⁴John B. White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry* (Missoula:

genre, Alter observes that ‘lyric poems do not *tell* a story but *reflect upon* and *allude* to a story. The story itself may be totally unfamiliar to the reader.’⁵ Poetry, unlike prose, rarely troubles to set the scene, to give the background or to tell the story. Rather, it assumes that the reader is *in* the story, *in* the world of the poem. So when the girl cries, ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,’⁶ she doesn’t tell us who ‘he’ is, nor his relationship to her: she writes as if we already know.

The effect of this is first to work on the affections. Lyric poetry can evoke a mood or a sensation even before it is fully understood. Such ‘poetry... is the ideal form for communicating the highly-charged but obscure world of emotions, particularly ambivalent emotions, and for expressing unfamiliar interpretations of familiar objects.’⁷

We can know what a poem makes us feel even when we cannot describe or explain the circumstances which were its occasion. Garrett observes that ‘the very reading of the poem draws the reader into the experience, and the “pleasures” of a poem, be it the intoxicated joy of a love song or the plaintive mourning of an elegy, constitute a major element of the “meaning” of a poem.’⁸ It is when the reader begins to experience the poem from within that he can begin to understand its circumstances.

A number of specific poetic forms have been observed within the Song, most notably the *wasf*.⁹ In this form, we expect a list of physical features of the beloved (male or female), in order (either top to toe or vice versa), each with an associated metaphor, extolling his/her virtues. Use of such recognisable forms inevitably raises expectations with regard to their content and function.¹⁰ *Wasfs* are usually associated with marriage ceremonies.

It is true that a creative poet may subvert such a known form for his specific purpose. This may

Scholars Press, 1978), 161–65.

⁵Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 73.

⁶Song 1:2

⁷Morris, *op. cit.*, 41.

⁸Garrett, *op. cit.*, 96.

⁹Song 4:1-5; 5:10-16; 6:4-9 and 7:1-9 are generally identified as *wasfs*.

¹⁰Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading*, 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 113.

be achieved simply by changing the context of the poem. A *wasf* used in the context of a marriage ceremony will have, and may be intended to have, a different function from a *wasf* used in a collection of edited poems. Nonetheless, one effect of the employment of such a distinctive form will inevitably be to recall its usual setting.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN READING THE SONG

Detail matters

Since poetry is heightened language employing deliberate artistry, careful attention must be paid to the detail of the poem, considering the sound and sense of each word and its interaction with its context. Freedman, considering the relationship between authorial intent and attentive reading, suggests that ‘on the whole... we have given insufficient credit to the poet for subtleties and intricacies in his artistic creation.’¹¹

Each word in the poem will not only convey meaning by what it denotes but will also carry with it a whole host of connotations. So Alter, ‘what is constantly exploited in literary expression is not merely the definable referendum of the word but also the frame of reference to which the word attaches, the related semantic field towards which it points, the level of diction that it invokes, the specialized uses to which it may be put.’¹²

Attention to detail necessarily involves awareness of the poetic devices being employed.¹³ Their effect and significance, rather than merely their identification, should be considered.

Perhaps one feature of poetry which demands particular attention to detail is repetition. Repeated use of a word, phrase or refrain does not necessarily imply repeated meaning. Rather ‘the poem...

¹¹David Noel Freedman, *Poetry, Pottery and Prophecy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 8.

¹²Alter, *Poetry*, 13.

¹³The devices most common in Hebrew poetry have been analysed at length elsewhere. See Ernest Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (London: SPCK, 2003), 67–76 for a clear summary.

delights in the variant repetition.¹⁴ This variance may be signalled by a distorted repetition or simply by the shifting context of the poem. In the Song, we should pay attention to the repeated refrain¹⁵ and to parallel passages¹⁶ as well as to repeated words.

Ambiguity and multivalence

An uncomfortable feature of poetry is its frequent, and often deliberate, ambiguity. Poems are rarely 'all about' any one thing. Poetry functions at multiple levels through its use of words with multiple referents, and metaphors with multiple interpretations. This very multiplicity may itself add to the obscurity of meaning in a poem. Reading and re-reading and meditating on a poem yields meaning at different levels as the constituent units of the poem (words, phrases, stanzas) interact and illuminate each other in a multiplicity of ways.

Poetry not rhetoric

Morris has convincingly shown that 'rhetoric and poetry are... two distinct genres: two distinct genres, moreover, which even upon casual consideration appear different to the point of being irreconcilable.'¹⁷ He distinguishes them by purpose, effect, structure and clarity.¹⁸ Rhetoric seeks to persuade its audience to understand and agree with its conclusion, using logical and empirical arguments, set forth clearly. Poetry, on the other hand calls the audience to engage with it and thus infer its meaning. Poetry may be structured in non-logical ways and, as we have seen, does not primarily aim for clarity. If, as is generally agreed, the Song is poetic in its expression, then the reader who comes to the Song expecting a rhetorical argument logically developed will either be disappointed or will fundamentally

¹⁴Morris, op. cit., 64.

¹⁵Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4

¹⁶Such as Song 3:1-5 and 5:2-8; 4:1-7, 6:4-10 and 7:1-9

¹⁷Morris, op. cit., 26.

¹⁸Ibid., 42-43.

misinterpret the poem.

We next consider two literary devices of particular, and disputed, significance in the Song.

METAPHOR

A metaphor is a way of talking about one thing as if it were another.¹⁹ This may be explicit: ‘A garden is my bride’, or implicit ‘Your lips drip nectar’ (implying the metaphor: ‘your lips are flowers’). The metaphor depends upon a point of comparison between the two concepts under consideration. A metaphor may be discerned by an incongruity in the literal meaning of a statement, by the juxtaposition of other figurative language, or by its extended development.²⁰

Determining the referent

Effective use of metaphor in communication depends upon a shared frame of reference between the author and his intended audience. This frame of reference may be geographical, botanical, zoological, political, historical or literary. Garrett, taking this last point, suggests that the ‘significance of the metaphors and symbols [in the Song]’ should be found ‘in the context of ancient Near Eastern love poetry. The images are not theological, political, ideological, or philosophical ciphers.’²¹ Though he is right that the metaphors are more than ciphers, it seems unlikely that the ancient Israelite hearers of the Song were more familiar with Egyptian or Mesopotamian love poetry than with their own Scriptures. Nor would such pagan poetry have been the most natural allusion to make in an Israelite sacred text. It seems more sensible to turn first to the Hebrew Scriptures to discover the significance of the metaphors and symbols rather than to ancient Near Eastern love poetry.

¹⁹Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 15.

²⁰G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 186ff.

²¹Garrett, op. cit., 90.

Interpreting the metaphor

The view that it is possible to reduce a metaphor into literal terms and that this constitutes interpretation has been called ‘the literalistic fallacy.’²² The communicative intent of the metaphor depends not only on the thing denoted by the vehicle but also on those things connoted,²³ and so the interpreter’s task is to expound the extra “cargo” of implied propositions, values and emotions.’²⁴ Metaphor can be a powerful tool for re-interpretation of familiar concepts. The juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated things ‘suggests new categories of interpretation and hypothesizes new entities, states of affairs, and causal relations.’²⁵ This is much more than the clarification by means of comparison to which many biblical interpreters limit themselves and may provide a clue to the interpretation of some of the more incongruous metaphors in the Song.

Powerful, or ‘resonant’ metaphors can be easily extended, showing not a single point of comparison but an entire structural relationship between two concepts. If the many metaphors in the Song do indeed belong to an overarching metaphor, we should look for signs of these structural comparisons as well as for the significance of individual metaphorical statements.

Metaphor and simile

If metaphors require discernment on the part of the reader, similes are self-proclaimed. Similes may function like metaphors, evoking a whole range of connotations. However, a simile maintains the distance between tenor and vehicle: the two concepts are ‘like’, but only in a limited way.²⁶

²²Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 101.

²³This view of metaphor approximates to the ‘Semantic Field Theory’ of Eva Kittay and Lakoff’s ‘Domain Theory’ in which the metaphor functions by transfer from the source domain (or donor field) of the vehicle into the recipient domain (or field) of the tenor. The source domain includes not merely dictionary meaning but associated connotations and, for Lakoff, corresponding structures.

²⁴Oscar Mandel, *Fundamentals of the Art of Poetry* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 270.

²⁵Soskice, op. cit., 62. This re-interpretation is similar to the structuralisation view of metaphor offered by Lakoff and Johnson.

²⁶David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 50.

In the Song, as Fisch and others have observed, the text shifts between simile and metaphor producing a complex effect which constantly pulls the reader's attention from tenor to vehicle and back again.²⁷

Direction of metaphor

This effect has caused some interpreters of the Song to question the direction of the metaphors. At times it is unclear which is tenor and which vehicle. Here we may need to consider where the information gap lies, since a metaphor is more likely to employ a well-known concept in order to illuminate a less well-known concept than vice versa. We should also note that the general direction of symbols is from the lesser to the greater and from the material to the spiritual or abstract.

ALLUSION

LaCocque's view is that 'however original its metaphors, the Song of Songs is from start to finish literarily allusive.'²⁸ For Robert Alter, allusion is 'not merely a device, like irony, understatement, ellipsis, or repetition, but an essential modality of the language of literature.'²⁹ Allusion uses a range of techniques to signal the antecedent text to the reader, ranging from direct and explicit citation through distorted citation, other verbal links including names of places or people, and situational parallels. Literary allusion refers to a text, but allusion may also be made to concepts or events.

Some allusions are sufficiently obvious and others have such power that failure to observe them or to interpret them correctly will lead to a fundamental misreading of the text. Others may be peripheral to the text or deliberately unclear in their signalling such that their recognition is not necessary for interpretation, although it can add richness and emphasis to that interpretation. Alter thinks that allusion need not be consciously observed in order to have its effect, although it must surely be the role of the

²⁷H. Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 89.

²⁸LaCocque, op. cit., 27.

²⁹Alter, *Pleasures*, 111.

interpreter to make these unconscious effects plain to the reader.³⁰

Generally speaking, literary allusions require some evidence of authorial intent. Those parts of the Song which are of late origin may include such intentional allusions to earlier biblical texts.

However, it may also be the case that parts of the Song which are of early origin were specifically included in the Song because of their incidental verbal or conceptual links to subsequent biblical texts, links which were then strengthened by the editor of the Song through judicious juxtaposition of other poems containing allusions to the same texts.

Function

Poetic allusion is not usually made in order to give evidence or confer authority, as it might in rhetorical argument. Rather, 'a poetic allusion evokes the imagery and tone of the text referred to, often to revise or reverse that tone.'³¹ Allusion may remind the reader of the context of the poem, may establish expectations of plot, mood or purpose, and may be used to suggest relationships and structures by drawing parallels with another text.

Extent of reference

The extent of the reference alluded to does not necessarily depend on the extent of the marker.³² A brief allusion such as a single name may be sufficient to allude to an extensive earlier text, whereas a long citation may make just a single point of comparison. Alter wisely argues that we should not seek to determine the extent of the allusion by 'some arcane "technique" of decoding' but rather by common sense.³³ This 'common sense' presumes an intelligent, alert and thoughtful reader who is able to consider an array of possible links and sift out those which appear both deliberate and useful.

³⁰Ibid., 121.

³¹Morris, op. cit., 135.

³²Alter, *Pleasures*, 124.

³³Ibid., 129.

LAND AND THE SONG OF SONGS

THE IDEALISED CONCEPT OF LAND AND SANCTUARY IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The land in the Song is presented in idealised terms, setting it within the biblical theology of sanctuary-land. There are five main stages in the development of this theology: the garden of Eden; the garden-sanctuaries of the tabernacle and temple; the promised land of Canaan; the redeemed Israel after the return from exile; and the Eden-like renewed creation at the end of the age. The tabernacle is explicitly referred to as a type of the true sanctuary in Hebrews 8:5 and it is clear that the temple and the land (as they were promised and as they will be when redeemed) are likewise presented as types of the true sanctuary to be revealed.

The garden of Eden was the first sanctuary, the archetype by which we recognise all others.¹ Its sanctuary status was determined by the presence of God and the intimacy of relationships enjoyed by the man and the woman with God and with each other.² Sanctuary activities included serving (שָׁמַר), guarding (שָׁמַר) and eating.³ This sanctuary was watered by a great river making it fruitful.⁴ Trees produced fruit that was good to eat,⁵ the lands were full of precious stones⁶ and all kinds of living creatures.⁷

The sanctuaries of the tabernacle and temple were designed both to look and smell like gardens.⁸ There were flowers, fruit and trees in the carvings⁹ and on the priestly garments.¹⁰ The lampstand looked

¹Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 61.

²Genesis 2:18-25

³Genesis 2:15-16

⁴Genesis 2:10

⁵Genesis 2:9

⁶Genesis 2:11-12

⁷Genesis 2:19-20

⁸Davis, op. cit., 248.

⁹1 Kings 6:18, 29, 32, 35; 7:18-19, 26

¹⁰Exodus 28:33

like an almond tree.¹¹ There were fragrant spices in the oil to perfume the sanctuary.¹² Jewels and gold were used to decorate the sanctuary¹³ and the priestly garments.¹⁴ The temple was ‘guarded’ by carved cherubim at its entrance just as the garden was guarded after Adam’s banishment.¹⁵ The priests served and guarded the sanctuaries (עֲבָדָה and שְׁמֵרָה)¹⁶ and the people feasted there when they brought their tithes.¹⁷ These sanctuaries were symbolic of God’s presence amongst his people and thus the restoration, albeit to a limited degree, of their relationship.

Canaan was also reminiscent of Eden, in promise, if not always in reality. Dumbrell, commenting on Deuteronomy 8:7-9, concludes that ‘what is being depicted through such references is Eden recaptured, paradise recovered.’¹⁸ Here the Lord would walk amongst his people¹⁹ and here was the opportunity to live in harmony with each other again. The land of Canaan, in which God’s temple was built, was in some sense, regarded as an extension of temple land,²⁰ sanctified by God’s presence. The physical characteristics of the land were similarly Edenic: it would flow with streams and rivers and produce good food from trees that someone else had planted.²¹

This picture of the promised land as a new Eden was taken up in the prophetic vision of redeemed Israel where even the deserts would become like the garden of Eden.²² For Ezekiel, the vision is focussed on the new temple, within a new city. God’s presence is indicated by the name of this city:

¹¹Exodus 25:31-35

¹²Exodus 30:22-25, 34-36

¹³1 Kings 6:21-22

¹⁴Exodus 28:9-20

¹⁵1 Kings 6:31-35, cf. Genesis 3:24

¹⁶Numbers 3:7-8

¹⁷Deuteronomy 14:23

¹⁸W.J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), 120.

¹⁹Leviticus 26:12

²⁰Jan Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 178–80.

²¹Deuteronomy 6:11

²²Ezekiel 36:35; Joel 2:3; Isaiah 51:2

‘The Lord is there.’²³ Here, priests would minister (לָבַדּוּ) and watch (לָמְדוּ)²⁴ and the people would come before the Lord for feasting.²⁵ And although this vision is of a city rather than a garden, it nevertheless retains physical characteristics associated with Eden: the flowing river, trees which continually bear ripe fruit, the cherubim at the entrance.²⁶

The book of Revelation tells us that this new city-sanctuary will be established with the return of Christ who makes all things new.²⁷ The whole creation will be renewed into an Eden-like paradise where God will walk freely among his people, wiping every tear from their eyes.²⁸ Every relationship will be restored to perfect intimacy and harmony. The inhabitants of this city will be God’s servants²⁹ and with its coming the marriage feast is celebrated.³⁰ This city is built of gold and precious stones and at its centre is the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, flanked by the tree of life which always bears ripe fruit.³¹

The tabernacle and temple sanctuaries, the promised and restored land were all types of this, the heavenly reality which will one day be made manifest here on earth.

LAND AS THE SETTING FOR LOVE

Marcia Falk has observed four main contexts in which the poems of the Song are set: ‘a) the cultivated or habitable countryside; b) the wild or remote natural landscape and its elements; c) interior environments (houses, halls, rooms); d) city streets.’³² She associates each context with a particular

²³Ezekiel 48:35

²⁴Ezekiel 44:16

²⁵Ezekiel 46:9,11

²⁶Ezekiel 47:1, 12; 41:15-20

²⁷Revelation 21:1-2, 5

²⁸Revelation 21:3-4

²⁹Revelation 22:3

³⁰Revelation 19:9

³¹Revelation 21:18-21; 22:1-2

³²Falk, op. cit., 88.

range of experiences and emotions. We will explore each of these against the background of the biblical theology previously laid out.

Cultivated countryside

The cultivated countryside, which includes gardens, fields, orchards and vineyards, is the setting for love pleurably anticipated and fulfilled.³³ Falk considers that these verdant, lush settings ‘themselves seem to invite lovemaking.’³⁴ The countryside provides the setting where the lovers are at home,³⁵ where they delight in each other, where they can acknowledge mutual love and possession.³⁶ It is here that consummation of their relationship can take place.³⁷

The garden setting in the Song also indicates a harmonious relationship between the lovers and their location. The ground gives forth flowers and fruit abundantly, unfettered by thistles or thorns. There is no hint of danger or temptation within the garden.³⁸

As has often been observed, this setting for the relationship between the lovers is strongly reminiscent of the garden of Eden.³⁹ ‘The lover’s garden is subtly but consistently represented as the garden of delight that Eden was meant to be, the place where life may be lived fully in the presence of God.’⁴⁰ In the Song, as in Eden, a man and a woman enjoy an exclusive, loving, intimate relationship without shame in a garden which freely gives forth fruit that is good to eat.⁴¹

³³See Song 1:16-2:3; 2:12-13; 2:16-17; 4:9-5:1; 6:2-3; 6:11-12; 7:11-13; 8:5; 8:13-14

³⁴Falk, op. cit., 89.

³⁵Song 1:16b-17

³⁶Song 2:16; 6:2-3; 7:11-13

³⁷Song 4:16-5:1

³⁸Though there is danger from outside, as in 2:15.

³⁹For example Tribble, op. cit., 144; Longman, op. cit., 66; F. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 205.

⁴⁰Davis, op. cit., 232.

⁴¹Dobbs-Allsopp has suggested that the garden of Eden, in contrast to that of the Song, was never intended for human habitation. This seems implausible since the garden of Eden depended on humanity for its continuing existence (Genesis 2:5) and the Lord himself put the man in it (Genesis 2:8, 15). F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “The Delight of Beauty and Song of Songs 4:1–7,” *Interpretation* 59 (2005): 276.

The allusion to the paradise experienced in Genesis 2 inevitably evokes the memory of the subsequent breakdown of relationships and loss of the garden recorded in Genesis 3. The disobedience of the man and woman in eating the forbidden fruit led to their expulsion from the garden, to the frustration of their relationship with the land and to discord in their relationship with each other. Yet in the Song, none of these consequences are apparent. A man and a woman are once again together in this garden, with no hint of discord or frustration in the relationships with their environment or each other. The desire with which the woman is cursed in Genesis 3:16,⁴² a desire linked with the controlling power of sin in Genesis 4:7, has become a positive desire of the beloved delighted in by the girl in Song 7:10. It seems that the curse on this relationship has been lifted.

There are further hints that the garden in the Song should be recognised as a sanctuary. The physical characteristics of running water, of trees bearing fruit, of flowers and fragrance are all present. The beams of the lovers' house are cedar, just as those in the temple. This garden is a place for feasting.⁴³ There are possible hints of cultic language in the references to anointing in Song 1:3 and to the fragranced smoke rising in Song 3:6. These lovers enjoy sanctuary relationships and engage in sanctuary activities in a place that looks and smells like a sanctuary.

The Song depicts a freedom of access to the sanctuary which necessarily presumes a restoration of relationship with the Lord and enables restored relationships within humanity and with the created order.

⁴²תשוקה. The word occurs only in these three verses.

⁴³Song 2:4; 5:1

Interior environments

Like the cultivated countryside, interior environments are generally conducive to love.⁴⁴ Indeed, at times, it is unclear whether the setting for a poem is an orchard described as if it were a bedroom or a bedroom described as if it were an orchard.⁴⁵ The effect of these shifting contexts is to emphasise the role of the garden as the appropriate place for love.

Uncultivated countryside

The wilderness, or uncultivated land, is not itself the setting for much of the Song,⁴⁶ but is more frequently mentioned as the place out of which the lovers come or are invited to come.⁴⁷ Falk observes that ‘intimacy is not supported by this context.’⁴⁸ The king has to come out of the wilderness for his wedding. The bridegroom must bring his bride out of the wilderness in order to enjoy their love.

For Davis, mention of the wilderness is key to interpreting the Song. It ‘exerts pressure just because it does not seem to fit the love story at all.’⁴⁹ The woman in the Song has not been pictured in the wilderness but rather in the city streets and the pastures of the flock. Davis thinks that the explanation for these passages (Song 3:6ff and 8:5) must come from Israel’s history.⁵⁰ The prophets

⁴⁴See Falk, op. cit., 90. The interior environments mentioned include the king’s private chambers (Song 1:4, 12), the house of wine (Song 2:4), the girl’s bedroom (Song 3:1; 5:2-5); her mother’s house (Song 3:4; 8:2-3). All of these are the setting for intimate encounters except the girl’s bedroom which is the initial setting for the two disturbing dream sequences which will be discussed below.

⁴⁵Song 1:12-17; Song 2:3-6

⁴⁶Possibly Song 1:5-10 (though this is really pasture land, rather than wilderness) and probably Song 4:1-8 (the animals identified in v. 8 suggest that this is indeed a wilderness area).

⁴⁷Song 3:6-11; 4:8; 8:5 and possibly 2:10-14.

⁴⁸Falk, op. cit., 89.

⁴⁹Ellen F. Davis, “Romance of the Land in the Song of Songs,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998): 543.

⁵⁰Davis considers both 3:6 and 8:5 as referring to the girl coming out of the wilderness. She translates מִי אֵלֶּיךָ as ‘Who is she?’ rather than ‘What is that?’ The problem with Davis’s translation is that the question would remain unanswered, since the occupant of the carriage is not named and there is no indication that it is the bride. The more natural way of understanding the response in v7ff is that Solomon’s litter is the object in view and Solomon himself is its occupant, as in v11. The use of מִי to refer to an object rather than a person is rare but not unique. See Joüon-Muraoka 144b. Davis, “Romance,” 543.

Jeremiah and Hosea link Israel's time in the wilderness with her marriage to Yahweh and it is possible that the Song also alludes to this idea.⁵¹

Wilderness is, by virtue of its role in the exodus-conquest story, a symbolic place for the Lord's testing and disciplining his people. Hosea is told that Israel's punishment for unfaithfulness is to be made 'like a wilderness.'⁵² Isaiah cries out for mercy because the 'holy cities have become a wilderness.'⁵³ The Lord Jesus himself underwent forty days of testing in the wilderness.⁵⁴ Wilderness is not a place for enjoying the Lord's presence and favour, and nor can it be a permanent home. It is an experience which must be come through before blessing.

City exteriors

While the wilderness is an inappropriate context for love the city streets are frankly hostile to the lovers. This setting occurs only twice, in the parallel dream sequences of chapters 3 and 5. In each, the girl dreams of being separated from her lover and goes to seek him in the streets whilst negotiating her way past the watchmen. In the second, the frustration is intensified by the initial presence of the lover outside her house and by the attack of the watchmen on the girl when she goes out to find him. Falk suggests that the hostility of the city is also indicated by the unsympathetic attitude of the city women (daughters of Jerusalem) towards the girl throughout the Song.⁵⁵

Cities carry with them a range of connotations in Scripture, though positive associations are usually reserved for the cities of Jerusalem and Zion.⁵⁶ They are often a place of human ambition⁵⁷ and a

⁵¹Jeremiah 2:2, Hosea 2:16-17 [Eng. 14-15]

⁵²Hosea 2:5 [Eng 2:3]

⁵³Isaiah 64:10 [Eng 6:11]

⁵⁴Matthew 4:1

⁵⁵Falk, op. cit., 91.

⁵⁶Though not exclusively so. See, for example, Jeremiah 49:25 where Damascus, though fallen and feeble is nonetheless described by the Lord as 'the city of my joy.'

⁵⁷For example, Babel (Genesis 11:1-4) and Babylon (Isaiah 13:19).

home for injustice and wickedness.⁵⁸ The city in the Song, where even those who are supposed to be its guardians are the harbingers of violence, certainly seems such a place. The lovers cannot be together there.

Although the eschatological vision for the sanctuary consistently pictures a city,⁵⁹ it is clear that this new city is a holy place, a new Jerusalem, redeemed from all the wickedness commonly associated with cities. Isaiah prophesies that the faithless city, the whore in whose streets are murderers, rebels and thieves,⁶⁰ will be restored and will be called ‘the city of righteousness, the faithful city.’⁶¹

And yet, even in this new city, there are characteristics of a garden-sanctuary, as we noted above. If marriage in the Song is pictured as escape from a city into a garden, marriage in Revelation is pictured as transformation of a city into something more garden-like.

The setting for love in the Song is significant in helping our understanding of the kind of relationship portrayed. The Song offers a vision of redemption out of the hostile city and through the wilderness into a garden-sanctuary where man and woman will be in harmony with each other, with the natural world and even, implicitly, with God. This is clearly more than (though certainly not less than) sexuality redeemed.

LAND SIGNALLING THE TIME FOR LOVE

The land in the Song not only provides the appropriate place for love, it also signals the appropriate time for love.

In Song 2:11, the beloved calls to his girl to come away with him because winter is gone and the rains are past. Grossberg considers that the couple rightly claim this season as their own: ‘Spring is *for* the couple and *for* their enjoyment. Spring is, furthermore, an expression of the budding and

⁵⁸For example, Nineveh (Jonah 1:2, Nahum 3:1) and Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:21-23, Psalm 55:9-11).

⁵⁹See, for example, Isaiah 4:2-6; Ezekiel 48:30-35; Joel 4:17, 20 [Eng 3:17, 20]; Zechariah 8:2-8.

⁶⁰Isaiah 1:21-23

⁶¹Isaiah 1:26

efflorescence of nature and a metaphor for the couple and their love that is now mature and ready.⁶² They know that there is an appropriate time for love to be consummated and recognise it by a variety of signs: flowers appear and vineyards blossom;⁶³ the early fruit ripens;⁶⁴ the flowers give their fragrance;⁶⁵ and there is singing.⁶⁶ These signs draw on a range of biblical symbols all of which allude to the time of Israel's redemption.

1. Flowers are most commonly used in the Bible to symbolise the transience of human life.⁶⁷ In the Song, however, the emphasis is not on their fragility but on their beauty⁶⁸ and on the timing of their appearance. Hosea 14 twice uses this imagery of flowers blooming to describe the restoration of Israel. She will 'blossom like the lily'⁶⁹ and the people will 'blossom like the vine.'⁷⁰ For Isaiah, Israel's redemption is associated with the transformation of the wilderness when, 'the desert shall... blossom like the crocus.'⁷¹

2. Associated with the blossom is the appearance of the early fruit.⁷² Once in the garden, the lovers find 'an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits.'⁷³ Ripening fruit was, from the first, associated with the promised land.⁷⁴ For Zechariah, the restoration of the remnant brings the time when

⁶²Daniel Grossberg, "Nature, Humanity, and Love in Song of Songs," *Interpretation* 59 (2005): 233.

⁶³Song 2:12-13; 6:11; 7:12

⁶⁴Song 2:13; 7:13

⁶⁵Song 2:13; 7:13

⁶⁶Song 2:12

⁶⁷As in, for example, Job 14:2; Psalm 103:15; Isaiah 28:1.

⁶⁸So the girl compares herself to the 'rose' of Sharon, and a lily of the valleys (Song 2:1). Later she describes her lover's lips as lilies (Song 5:13).

⁶⁹Hosea 14:6 [Eng. 14:5]

⁷⁰Hosea 14:8 [Eng. 14:7]

⁷¹Isaiah 35:1. The flower mentioned, תִּלְצָחַן appears only here and in Song 2:1, suggesting a possible link between the two passages.

⁷²The figs ripening in Song 2:13 are probably the first crop of figs, which come to nothing, but herald the later production of a good crop. Nonetheless, in Song 7:13 the beloved has both new and old fruits to offer his bride.

⁷³Song 4:13

⁷⁴The first contact with the promised land after the Exodus came at the season of ripe fruit (Numbers 13:10-23). See also the descriptions of the land in Deuteronomy 8:8 and Nehemiah 9:25.

‘the vine shall give its fruit and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew.’⁷⁵

In Ezekiel’s vision of the holy city, the trees will bear fruit which is always ripe.⁷⁶

3. If there are flowers and fruit, then we would expect there to be fragrance. In the Old Testament fragrance is most closely linked with the sacrificial system.⁷⁷ The fragrances of a burnt offering go up to the Lord and are pleasing to him. It is possible, therefore, that any description of a pleasant fragrance carries the connotations of an offering pleasing to the Lord. However, in the Song, the fragrance which acts as a signal for the time of love is linked with flowers and blossom, rather than burning,⁷⁸ and thus serves to strengthen the allusion to Hosea 14, where the fragrance appears to be similarly linked with the natural world and a sign of Israel’s restoration.⁷⁹

4. The fourth sign of the changing season is given in Song 2:12 as the ‘time of song.’⁸⁰ The ambiguity of this phrase suggests a generality of reference: it is the appropriate time for singing, whether by people, birds or even the land itself, as the psalmists and prophets described. In Isaiah, for example, the land is repeatedly exhorted to sing in response to God’s redemption of his people.⁸¹ Singing is an activity particularly associated with times of redemption, since it naturally expresses joy. So, the Israelites sang at the Exodus⁸² and the redeemed exiles will sing at their return to the land.⁸³ By contrast, the exiles in Babylon could not sing the Lord’s songs.⁸⁴

⁷⁵Zechariah 8:12. See also Amos 9:14; Hosea 14:9 [Eng. 14:8]

⁷⁶Ezekiel 47:12

⁷⁷Of the 50 uses of טָרֵף outside the Song, 43 appear in the context of burnt offerings (made either to the Lord or to idols).

⁷⁸The fragrant oils poured out (Song 1:3) and the spices associated with the girl (Song 1:12, 4:13-14, 16) are more reminiscent of the temple fragrance than the fragrant blossoms. See below for a discussion of their significance.

⁷⁹Hosea 14:7 [Eng. 14:6]

⁸⁰Some link זָמִיר with the blossom, describing some form of pruning, but its use elsewhere in the Old Testament is almost always connected with songs and given its context within v12 this seems appropriate here also. HALOT gives just two instances (Leviticus 25:3-4 and Isaiah 5:6) where it is used in the sense of pruning.

⁸¹Isaiah 35:2; 44:23; 49:13; 52:9; 55:12

⁸²Psalms 105:43-45

⁸³Isaiah 35:10; 51:11

⁸⁴Psalms 137:1-4

Flowers, fruit, fragrance and singing together create a picture of a land at springtime, but more than this, of a land celebrating the blessings of redemption. The repeated links to Hosea 14 and various parts of Isaiah suggest that the author of the Song was aware of these parallels and intended them to be used in the interpretation of the Song. The time the lovers are seeking for the consummation of their relationship is the time of redemption. It was when Israel was in restored relationship with her Lord that the land would blossom, bear fruit, give forth fragrance and break into song. Then it would be transformed from a desert into the garden of Eden.⁸⁵

Jesus himself alludes to this springtime of redemption through the image of the ripening fig tree and the change of season described in Song 2:11-13.⁸⁶ Just as the bridegroom in the Song comes to call away his bride, so the Son of Man will return, bringing the redemption of his people.

LAND AS THE OBJECT OF LOVE

Undeniably the female lover is the focus of attention in most of the Song. Hers is the dominant voice and her charms are described often and at length.⁸⁷ It is perhaps surprising then that it is virtually impossible to visualise this girl.⁸⁸ The descriptions of her as a girl are often vague compliments about her general loveliness. Other descriptions focus on her in relation to other people: she is captivating, blessed, and praised.⁸⁹ The only specific descriptions which do not focus on externals (such as her

⁸⁵See Ezekiel 36:35; Joel 2:3; Isaiah 51:2.

⁸⁶See Luke 21:29-31 (and parallels in Mark 13:28-29 and Matthew 24:32). Commentators generally conclude that Jesus, rather than making an allusion, merely used a physical sign that was to hand while giving this speech (as in Luke 12:54-56 for example). However, since the context of the allusion so clearly fits that which Jesus applies it to, it seems unlikely that the allusion was incidental or unconscious. That Luke calls this a parable is irrelevant, since Jesus certainly makes Old Testament allusions in other parables (e.g. the parable of the tenants in Luke 20:9-18 not only cites Ps 118 but also clearly alludes to the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5).

⁸⁷So much so that a number of commentators have posited a female author for the Song. See LaCocque, *op. cit.*, xi and Goitein, S.D. 'The Song of Songs: A Female Composition' in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 58-66.

⁸⁸Davis, "Romance," 538.

⁸⁹Song 4:9, 6:9

jewellery) tell us that she is dark, that she has lovely sandalled feet and that her thighs are rounded.⁹⁰

Indeed the girl herself warns her audience not to focus on her appearance.⁹¹

Instead, this girl who is so admired and beloved, is described in a series of similes and metaphors which are predominantly connected with the land in different ways: flora and fauna (lilies, the crocus of Sharon, a palm tree, flocks of sheep and goats, fawns of a gazelle etc.); geographical locations (Jerusalem, Tirzah, Carmel, Lebanon, Damascus, the tower of David); kinds of land (garden, vineyard, orchard); and the produce of the land (milk, honey, wheat, wine etc.). Some of the imagery is specifically linked with the sanctuary: scarlet and purple; myrrh and spices; pomegranates and lilies; and precious jewels. Davis suggests that the comparison with Solomon's curtain in Song 1:5 also refers to the sanctuary: 'Significantly, the only curtain described in the Bible is indeed Solomon's. It hung in the Temple before the Holy of Holies, woven of fine linen with blue, purple, and crimson threads, embroidered with cherubim.'⁹²

The effect of the similes is to keep in mind the girl who is being described. She has real features which bear characteristics connected with the items listed above. Even here, however, the detailed complexity of the similes and the incongruity of many of the images work to focus the reader's attention away from the girl and towards the land which she is like.

The simile in Song 4:4, for example, is extended three times beyond the initial comparison of her neck to the tower of David. First the construction of the tower in rows is observed, then the shields which hang on it, and finally these shield are further identified as those of warriors. The extension of the tower imagery ensures that it is dominant over the image of the girl's neck. Similar elaborations may be observed in Song 4:1c; 4:2; 4:5; 7:4b; 7:4c; 7:5b; 7:7-8.⁹³

⁹⁰Song 1:6; 7:1

⁹¹Song 1:6

⁹²Davis, *Proverbs*, 244.

⁹³Though in this last example the simile is more balanced with continued reminders of the girl's body throughout.

Incongruity of image has often been observed in the Song and interpreters have spilt much ink in identifying the points of comparison between, for example, hair and goats on the slopes of Gilead or eyes and doves. These images would, of course, have been much more familiar to an ancient Israelite hearer of the Song, and thus their purpose more obvious. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that all of these images were the common currency of admiration: the dreadful sight of the bannered army, for example, would be an unusual term of endearment in any culture.⁹⁴

If the similes always eventually compel us to consider the girl they describe, the metaphors make no such demand. Here, the images alone can prevail. In Song 4:12-16, no part of the girl is mentioned and only the garden is described. Even in the mind of the beloved, by 5:1, his love is first a garden and second a sister-bride. In this section, ‘from the body as landscape... the poem moves to an actual landscape with real rather than figurative promontories.’⁹⁵

Fisch observes that the constant shifting between simile and metaphor in the Song ‘has the effect sometimes of confusing the two. It is not always clear whether A is being compared to B or B to A.’ The result of this is that, ‘in the dynamic free-flow of images of which we are speaking, there is... a certain ambiguity as to what the poem is about. It is a love poem, to be sure, but it is possible to read it as a love poem addressed to a beloved land.’⁹⁶ He suggests that the focus of the poem is not on the beauty of the girl *per se*: ‘What is conspicuous here is not a great-looking man or woman, but rather a gorgeous land: a heap of wheat shaped like a belly, fawns soft and round as breasts browsing in lotus, mountain of myrrh, frankincense hill, black-haired goats winding down the mountain slopes.’⁹⁷

The poem lingers lovingly over the contours of the land, it delights in the fruitfulness of the land, it points out the landmarks of the country. It is a place, as well as a person, which the reader is invited to

⁹⁴Song 6:4, 10

⁹⁵Alter, *Poetry*, 201.

⁹⁶Fisch, *op. cit.*, 89.

⁹⁷Davis, “Romance,” 539. Davis draws on Fox’s work, pointing out that this observation undermines his parallel with the Egyptian love poems.

admire. And this is not just any place. The geographical references all point to the land of Israel. Though there is a predominance of northern places, the references do encompass the whole kingdom at its greatest extent under Solomon.⁹⁸ Davis thinks that it is not the natural images but rather the geographical references which are especially memorable, so that ‘this is not universal love poetry; the “historical geography” of Israel belongs to the poem in an essential way.’⁹⁹

The physical characteristics associated with Eden and, even more clearly, with the promised land are the characteristics of the beloved garden in the Song. She flows with living water, with streams and fountains. She produces milk and honey, wine and wheat, never lacking. Her trees bear fruit and her flowerbeds are filled with spices. She is the site of feasting and celebration, the setting for intimacy and love. This beloved girl is the beloved land of Isaiah’s prophecy: ‘You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.’¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 17.

⁹⁹Davis, “Romance,” 538; contra Grossberg, op. cit., 237, who claims that the many geographical references ‘evoke an extensive “everywhere”.’

¹⁰⁰Isaiah 62:4

MARRIAGE AND THE SONG OF SONGS

THE RELATIONSHIP IN THE SONG

In recent years it has become common for scholars to argue that the Song of Songs is unconcerned with marriage and betrothal in its portrayal of the central relationship.¹ Such a view has been proposed on the basis of parallels with ancient Egyptian love poetry and has been particularly welcomed by feminist commentators. However, there are a number of factors which suggest that the traditional reading of the Song as a description of betrothal and marriage is correct:

1. The Song of Songs reflects on a number of different stages in the development of a relationship without following an obvious chronological structure.² Fox's observation that certain parts of the Song are clearly referring to a pre-marital state of affairs is true and yet does not require that the Song as a whole celebrates a relationship unconnected with betrothal and marriage.³

2. This relationship is a cause for great celebration, not only for the lovers themselves but also for their friends and family.⁴ Given the strictness of Israelite laws against non-marital sexual

¹See, for example Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 231–32; Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 13–14; Brenner, op. cit., 27, 70; LaCocque, op. cit., et al.

John Goldingay acknowledges that 'the Song does point to their being a man and a woman whose sexual involvement belongs in the context of an exclusive one-to-one relationship so all-consuming that one would expect them to reckon it would be lifelong - in other words, a quasi-marital relationship.' (John Goldingay, "So What Might the Song of Songs Do to Them?" *Reading from Right to Left*, J. Cheryl Exum and H.G.M. Williamson [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003] 177.) He nonetheless insists that 'the Song is not concerned with marriage.' *Ibid.*, 176.

²Attempts to outline a narrative development in the Song have not been persuasive, often largely relying on dream sequences and flashbacks to account for the anachronisms, such as the searching narrative in chapter 5 which follows the apparent consummation in chapter 4. See Elliott, op. cit., 7-14 for a review of some suggestions and a clear critique of such analyses.

³Fox, op. cit., 231-232.

⁴See, for example, Song 1:1; 3:4; 5:1e; 6:1.

relationships⁵ this could hardly be the case with respect to an illegitimate relationship.

3. The parallels with Genesis 2 suggest that the relationship in the Song should be viewed in a similar light to the prototypical marriage of Adam and Eve. The features of that first marriage (intimacy, exclusivity, public acknowledgement, permanency and mutual benefit) are all evident in the Song.

4. There are strong verbal links between the Song and other celebrations of marriage in the Old Testament, such as Psalm 45. On the basis of common motifs, especially the bridal chamber, Stephen Horine has argued that the context of the Song is indeed that of a wedding celebration.⁶

5. It has been suggested that there is no wedding ritual or ceremony for the lovers in the Song, on the basis that Song 3:6-11 does not refer to the central relationship. Whatever the relation of this passage to the rest of the Song, its description of a bridegroom crowned on the day of his wedding, reminds us that the context of this relationship was a society centred around marriage. That the male lover subsequently refers to the girl as his bride (רֵעָה) indicates that they may indeed be the couple described in Song 3:6-11.

6. Since marriage was closely linked with procreation in Israelite thought, the absence of any references to hoped-for offspring might suggest that this relationship is not marriage.⁷ However, although the woman's fertility is not explicitly mentioned, the imagery of nature's fruitfulness is pervasive, not least in the metaphorical description of the girl. In addition to the obvious connotations of

⁵The punishments were death in the case of adultery with a married woman (Leviticus 20:10) or a betrothed girl (Deuteronomy 22:23-24) and enforced marriage (or the equivalent bride price) in the case of an unbetrothed girl (Deuteronomy 22:28-29).

⁶S. Horine, *Interpretive Images in the Song of Songs* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001). See especially pp 87-88; 94.

⁷Fox claims that 'the essential hopes of a new marriage - fertility, health, prosperity - are not touched upon.' Fox, op. cit., 232.

such imagery, texts such as Deuteronomy 28:4 show that the Israelites recognised explicit links between God's blessing on 'the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground'.

7. Finally, the emphasis in the Song on waiting for the right time for love is hard to explain other than in the context of a betrothal. In an extra-marital affair there is no need to wait; there is no moment which is more appropriate for love than any other.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

Having established that the relationship the lovers seek and enjoy is indeed marriage, we now turn to consider the biblical theology of marriage within which this relationship is presented.

If the garden of Eden was the prototypical sanctuary, the relationship that existed there between Adam and Eve was the prototypical marriage.⁸ It was characterised by intimacy (they were naked and not ashamed), exclusivity (implicit in the one flesh union), public acknowledgement (it formed a new family unit), permanence (the man was to hold fast to his wife) and benefit (it was not good for the man to be alone).

Adam and Eve's disobedience in Genesis 3 involved a breakdown in their relationship, indicated by the shame they felt⁹ and the blame they apportioned.¹⁰ As a consequence of the fall the marriage relationship suffered so that their mutual help and harmony was marred by a new power struggle.¹¹

Nonetheless, marriage continued to be central in human society, not least in Israelite society, where it was protected and celebrated. There were laws to safeguard the institution of marriage, limiting it to heterosexual relationships within the prescribed limits of consanguinity.¹² Further laws protected

⁸Wenham, op. cit., 69.

⁹Genesis 3:7 cf Genesis 2:25

¹⁰Genesis 3:12-13

¹¹Genesis 3:16b cf. Genesis 2:18

¹²See Leviticus 18:6-23; 20:11-21

the relationship against adultery and neglect.¹³ The blessings of a good wife and happiness in marriage were recognised as signs of God's favour.¹⁴

Marriage came to be recognised as an appropriate metaphor to describe the relationship between Yahweh and his people.¹⁵ Israel's history from the time of the exodus was structured in the prophetic literature as the history of a marriage:¹⁶

- which began with betrothal, was formalized by covenant¹⁷ and enjoyed a honeymoon period of faithfulness;¹⁸
- in which Yahweh led his bride to his home where he dwelt with her, provided for her and loved her;¹⁹
- in which Israel's infidelity amounted to adultery and prostitution;²⁰
- which ended in separation (from Judah) and divorce (from the northern kingdom);²¹
- but which Yahweh would redeem, restoring his bride's virginity, renewing their betrothal and marrying her once more.²²

The coming of Christ, the bridegroom,²³ who likened the kingdom to his wedding feast,²⁴ extended the metaphor into the New Testament era. For Paul, this was the true mystery, of which marriage was the picture: 'the betrothal of the church to Christ (2 Cor. 11:1-3), and the union of the

¹³Exodus 20:14, 17; 21:7-11; Leviticus 20:10; Numbers 5:12-31; Deuteronomy 22:13-28.

¹⁴ See, for example, Proverbs 18:22; 19:14; 31:10-29; Ecclesiastes 9:7.

¹⁵ Though, of course, it was not the only relationship used in this way: Yahweh was the king of his people, Israel; the father of his son, Israel; as well as the husband of his bride, Israel.

¹⁶This is mainly based on the work of Seock-Tae Sohn, *YHWH, the Husband of Israel* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002) and Nelly Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993).

¹⁷Jeremiah 31:32; Ezekiel 16:8

¹⁸ Jeremiah 2:2; and implicitly in Hosea 2:16-18 [Eng 2:14-16]

¹⁹Ezekiel 16:9-14. See Sohn, op. cit., 51-52 for a semantic analysis of marriage terms used to describe the Lord bringing Israel into the land.

²⁰Ezekiel 16:15-34; Jeremiah 3:6-9; Isaiah 1:21

²¹Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:8 compare Ezekiel 16:59-63.

²²Isaiah 54:4-8; 62:4-5; Jeremiah 31:4, 21; Ezekiel 16:59-63. See Stienstra, op. cit., 120-121 for an analysis of these metaphorical concepts in Hosea and Isaiah.

²³See Matthew 9:14-17 (and parallel passages in Mark 2:18-22 and Luke 5:33-38); John 3:28-30.

²⁴Matthew 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-40; 14:7-11

believer with Christ (1 Cor. 6:16-17), are not mere metaphors. They are the reality to which a Christian marriage points when it demonstrates the beauty described in Ephesians 5.²⁵

At the consummation of all history, Revelation tells us there will be a wedding feast, celebrating the marriage of the Lamb to his bride.²⁶ It is then that ‘the church shall be brought to the full enjoyment of her bridegroom, having all tears wiped away from her eyes; and there shall be no more distance or absence. She shall then be brought to the entertainments of an eternal wedding-feast, and to dwell for ever with her bridegroom; yea, to dwell eternally in his embraces.’²⁷

THE BELOVED BRIDEGROOM

In comparison with the girl, descriptions of the bridegroom are more fleeting and diverse. Even so, it is possible to see a coherent picture emerging, not of his physical appearance but of his status and characteristics.

The exalted status of the male lover is first seen in Song 1:4 where he is called the king.²⁸ The parallelism in Song 1:12-14 suggests that the king is identified with the beloved rather than distinguished from him.²⁹ His royal status is further shown in the wedding procession (Song 3:6-10) and possibly alluded to in Song 6:12, though the translation of this verse is somewhat difficult.³⁰

In Song 1:7, the girl addresses this king as if he is a shepherd or herdsman. The lack of an object for *הַרְעֶה* leaves the verb ambiguous: is it the man himself who grazes or does he have a flock which he pastures? Although there is no object supplied in the following clause either, the causative hiphil form there, *יְרַבֵּי*, implies an object. This is further confirmed by the mention of flocks in the final clause of her speech and by the references to flocks, goats and shepherds in his reply. The refrain

²⁵R.C. Ortlund, “Marriage,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Ed. T.D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: IVP, 2000) 656.

²⁶Revelation 19:6-9; 21:1-2, 9-10

²⁷Jonathan Edwards, quoted in Ortlund, op. cit., 657.

²⁸Though see below for discussion of a possible hint in 1:3.

²⁹See Hess, op. cit., 67.

³⁰See Murphy, op. cit., 176 for a discussion of the problems surrounding this verse.

בְּשׂוֹשְׁנִים בְּהִרְעָה³¹ delicately alludes to 1:7-8, keeping this aspect of the bridegroom, as the one who grazes, in mind throughout the book.

This shepherd/king is praised in the highest terms. In 1:4, a group of women, probably including the bride, exalt (גִּיל) and rejoice (שִׂמְחָה) in him, and commemorate (זָכַר in the hiphil) his love, or possibly his lovemaking.³² While שִׂמְחָה has a wide range of uses, גִּיל is almost exclusively used with respect to Yahweh. Of its 44 uses outside the Song, only the three found in Proverbs 23:24-25 approve another object of such rejoicing.³³ זָכַר is a common verb but used just 41 times in the hiphil, where it carries not only a causative sense, but also the idea of public record or announcement. The only person so commemorated, and indeed the only object positively commemorated, is the Lord.³⁴

The bride associates her lover's name with oil poured out and his love with anointing oils.³⁵ This could be a further indication of his kingship but it is possible that an additional allusion is intended to oil poured out in offerings.³⁶ A clearer allusion to the cult is found in 3:6 with use of מְקַטְרֵת, from [קטר], a verb which is only found in connection with sacrifices and offerings.³⁷ The use of this root together with references to myrrh and frankincense unmistakably evokes the imagery of the cult.³⁸ For

³¹Song 2:16; 6:2-3

³²This latter seems an unlikely subject of praise for more than one woman. Even in the Solomonic context where many wives and concubines are presumed, it is hard to imagine this as a subject for general praise, particularly in the context of a special relationship with one wife. Although דוּדִים is certainly used to refer to the act of lovemaking elsewhere (Ezekiel 16:8; 23:7 and Proverbs 7:18) its association with the more general term דוּד used throughout the Song may indicate that it does not necessarily carry that connotation.

³³These three all describe the delight which parents take in their children. There are four further uses of the verb with a prohibition: 'Do not rejoice in...', and two uses which describe the Lord's own delight in his work. The remaining 35 uses all refer to rejoicing in the Lord.

³⁴Eight of the uses refer to 'recorders', i.e. scribes. Sin and judgement are recalled by way of a warning in a further eight verses as a warning. Twice the verb is used in a prohibition. The remaining seventeen uses refer to the Lord.

³⁵Song 1:2-3

³⁶As in Genesis 28:18, 35:14 and Leviticus 2:1, 6.

³⁷קטר is associated with pagan offerings as well as the official cult. A different noun derived from the verb is used of smoke more generally. מְקַטְרֵת is found in Qumran scrolls with a specific cultic meaning of censer, as also in other cognate languages. See DCH Volume V, 466 and HALOT 627, 1094-1095.

³⁸Frankincense was frequently used in offerings (e.g. Leviticus 2:1-2, 15-16; 6:8 [Eng 6:15], 24:7) and myrrh was included in the holy anointing oil which fragrancd the tabernacle (Exodus 30:23).

the Christian reader, of course, the most obvious link is with the gifts presented to Christ at his birth.³⁹ Falk, interestingly, notes this link and deliberately substitutes other spices in place of myrrh and frankincense ‘because of their now dominant association with the Christian Nativity, an anachronistic and inappropriate association for the Song.’⁴⁰ This verse also contains an allusion to Joel 3:3 [Eng. 2:30] through the expression תִּמְרוֹת עֶשְׂנָן which suggests that the arrival of this king may be connected with the day of the Lord.

A further indication of the bridegroom’s identity may be hinted at in the references to Solomon. Iain Campbell has recently argued that these are the key to interpretation of the Song. He considers the bridegroom, whom he takes to be Solomon, as the primary symbol in the Song.⁴¹ Linking themes in the Song with the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7, he interprets the bridegroom of the Song as the heir to these promises and, thus a type of Christ.⁴² Campbell overstates his case, for it is not the bridegroom but the bride who is the prominent figure in the Song and the allusions to 2 Samuel 7 he perceives are not wholly persuasive. Nor is a straightforward identification of the bridegroom with the person of Solomon sustainable, especially in light of Song 8:11-12 where a negative comparison is made between Solomon and the lover.

Even so, the references to Solomon, especially in Song 3:9-11, do provide a link between the relationship in the Song and the covenantal history of Israel. Together with the other exalted language used of the bridegroom, they suggest that he is being portrayed as the son of David who would be the true king and shepherd over his people and who would be rightly worshipped and adored.

THE MARRIAGE

³⁹Matthew 2:11

⁴⁰Falk, op. cit., 120. Although from the strictly historical perspective Falk is certainly right that this is an anachronism, the biblical theological perspective suggests that it is an entirely appropriate link.

⁴¹Campbell, op. cit., 25.

⁴²Ibid., 27–30.

Yahweh and Israel

Just as the Song uses biblical imagery to describe its two main protagonists, so it ‘uses language and symbols that elsewhere in the Bible represent the love that obtains between God and Israel’⁴³ when describing their relationship.

Perhaps the strongest biblical allusion in the Song is the refrain לִי וְאֲנִי לוֹ which closely parallels two other expressions commonly used by Yahweh to describe his relationship with Israel and her king: וְהָיָה לִי לְאֵלֹהִים וְהָיָה לְיְהוָה לִי לְעַם⁴⁴ and אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה לּוֹ לְאֵב וְהוּא יִהְיֶה לִּי לְבָן⁴⁵ In these, a verb is always used to indicate that a future hope is being expressed, whereas the syntax in the Song indicates that the relationship is a present reality.

There are strong verbal and conceptual links between Hosea 14:6-10 [Eng. 14:5-9] and the Song of Songs.⁴⁶ Much of the natural imagery in the Hosea passage is familiar to the Song and there is a surprisingly large shared vocabulary.⁴⁷ Many of the shared words are so common as to carry little significance, but there are also more unusual words linking the two texts, such as רֵעֵנָךְ and שׁוֹשַׁן and shared expressions: יָשַׁב בְּצִלּוֹ, פָּרַח גִּפְתָּן, רִיחַ לְבָנוֹן. There are further hints that the whole of Hosea is alluded to in the Song: in the wilderness and the bride motifs linking Hosea 2:16-17 [Eng. 2:14-15] and Song 8:5; and in the vineyard and vine motifs found throughout both books.⁴⁸

The book of Hosea makes explicit the metaphorical links between human marriage and Yahweh’s relationship with his people Israel. The allusion to Hosea in the Song suggests that a similar metaphor may be in operation there. In particular, the close links to Hosea 14 suggest that the Song

⁴³Davis, *Proverbs*, 233. It is unclear whether she is referring here to the people of Israel, the land of Israel or, possibly, both.

⁴⁴Ezekiel 37:27; cf. for example, Zechariah 8:8, Jeremiah 24:7, Exodus 6:7

⁴⁵2 Samuel 7:14, cf. 1 Chronicles 22:10.

⁴⁶See, for example Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 234–35, Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000) 139, and Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986) 84.

⁴⁷Surprising given the large number of hapax legomena and other rare words in the Song, and the difference in the dating of the two books.

⁴⁸Compare Song 1:6, 7:8, 8:11-12 and Hosea 2:17 [Eng. 2:15], 9:10, 10:1

relates to the prophesied restoration of marriage between Yahweh and Israel.

The depth of feeling expressed in Song 8:6-7, while perhaps not wholly inappropriate for human marriage, would certainly in that context be an example of hyperbole. Even it would be an overtranslation to render the suffix on *שְׁלֵבֶיךָ יְיָ* as Yahweh, it nonetheless carries with it some connotation of Yahweh as the superlative lover.⁴⁹

Luther's estimate of the Song is that it 'makes God the bridegroom and his people the bride, and in this mode... sings of how much God loves that people, how many and how rich are the gifts He lavishes and heaps upon it, and finally how *He embraces and cherishes the same people with a goodness and mercy with which no bridegroom has ever embraced or cherished his bride.*'⁵⁰ The exalted and allusive language of the Song is certainly sufficient to sustain a metaphorical reading involving the divine-human relationship.

Marriage and Desire

The dominant characteristic of the relationship in the Song is desire. Carey Ellen Walsh concludes that 'the Song is essentially a book about how badly two people love and want each other.'⁵¹ From the opening words of the girl: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,' to the final plea: 'Make haste, my beloved,' the longing of the lovers to be together and to consummate their love is evident. This desire is only heightened by the obstacles which the lovers face in their search for each other.

Walsh agrees with Fox's assessment that the Song records no moment of consummation.⁵² Indeed, she suggests that 'not having this couple consummate is the point and the power of this book,'⁵³

⁴⁹See Webb, op. cit., 24.

⁵⁰Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes; Lectures on the Song of Solomon; Treatise on the Last Words of David*, Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1972) 193, 1539 Italics added.

⁵¹Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 42.

⁵²See Fox, op. cit., 313 and Walsh, op. cit., 97.

⁵³Walsh, op. cit., 35.

since ‘as delicious as consummation is, it is sweet and short-lived and inevitably changes the nature of longing.’⁵⁴ Most commentators disagree, pointing to Song 5:1 as the moment of union.⁵⁵ Even if this is correct, it hardly detracts from the prevailing sense of desire unconsummated, since it is immediately followed by the longest and most painfully experienced searching sequence in the Song.

Walsh has observed three kinds of discourse about desire in the Song:⁵⁶ simple appreciation of the other in which desire is implicit; expression of the feelings of desire for the other; and the expression of the effects of desire.

The first is seen throughout the Song in the endearments of the lovers. The *wasfs* give opportunity for lengthy enumerations of each other’s charms. That such admiration springs from desire is evident in the personalisation of these compliments: *my dove, my beloved*. The beloved is like the myrrh and the henna blossom *to the girl*.⁵⁷ There is no attempt at objectivity.

Desire is given immediate expression in the calls for love, such as those which begin and end the Song. The lover calls his bride to come away with him⁵⁸ and she calls him to her⁵⁹ as well as going out to seek him.⁶⁰ The refrain expressing mutual possession is distorted in its third appearance⁶¹ so as to draw attention to his desire for her.

Perhaps the strongest expression of desire is seen in the girl’s reflections on the effects of her desire. She describes herself as sick, or weak (אֲנִי חַלְוָה), with love.⁶² The pain of separation from her lover is illustrated in the watchmen’s assault. Though this is described within a dream sequence, it is nonetheless a powerful evocation of the pain associated with unfulfilled desire.

⁵⁴Idem.

⁵⁵See, for example, Dianne Bergant, *The Song of Songs* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001) 58; G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon* (Leicester: IVP, 1984) 128; Longman, op. cit., 158-159.

⁵⁶Walsh, op. cit., 56-57.

⁵⁷Song 1:13-14

⁵⁸Song 2:8-14, 4:8, 7:11-13

⁵⁹Song 1:2-4, 2:17, 8:14

⁶⁰Song 1:7-8, 3:1-4, 5:2-7, 6:11-12

⁶¹Compare Song 2:16 and 6:3 with Song 7:10.

⁶²Song 2:5, 5:8

There is desire for sexual intimacy (she yearns for his kisses, and to be drawn into his chamber) but this is within the context of a publicly acknowledged relationship⁶³ and in a family setting.⁶⁴ This is a relationship in which jealousy is approved⁶⁵ and mutual possession proclaimed.⁶⁶ She longs to be set as a seal on her lover's arm, as an expression of the permanent nature of their relationship.⁶⁷ The object of the lovers' desire is to enjoy each other in marriage.

⁶³Song 1:4, 5:1, 8:1

⁶⁴Song 3:4, 8:2

⁶⁵Song 8:6

⁶⁶Song 2:16, 6:3, 7:10

⁶⁷Song 8:6

CONCLUSION

A COHERENT METAPHOR

In chapter four, I showed that the consummation of the marriage in the Song is linked with the time of Israel's redemption and with their restoration to the sanctuary. The bride herself is pictured like the promised land. In the last chapter, it was seen that the bridegroom is portrayed as the Christ and the marriage relationship like the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. These distinct elements form part of a single coherent metaphor which will determine my interpretation of the Song.

The close identification between the land of Israel and its people is seen throughout the Old Testament. The fate of the land depended on the actions of its people; the holy status of the land demanded the holiness of its people; the restoration of the land was concurrent with the restoration of the people. Both land and people were thus included in the marriage between Yahweh and Israel. Isaiah makes this link explicit in the passage cited earlier, describing both land and people as married to the Lord.¹ This does not imply a bigamous relationship on the part of the Lord for, in his eyes, land and people could be viewed as one.

The restoration of this marriage relationship would be accomplished by Yahweh, in the person of the Christ. He would bring about the redemption of people and land; he would achieve sanctuary freedom for his people; and he would be their bridegroom. It is this relationship which the Song portrays by means of its overarching metaphor.

INTERPRETING THE METAPHOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW COVENANT

The bridegroom

Jesus assumes for himself the role of bridegroom in the New Testament.² As the divine king and shepherd of his people, and as the true son of David, worshipped and adored by many, he shows himself

to be the Christ, the bridegroom portrayed in the Song.

The longing for this bridegroom expressed in the Song was the longing of the old covenant people who were waiting for the promised Christ to come. They longed for the redemption he would effect and the renewed intimacy they would experience as a result. Under the new covenant, God's people are still waiting. Christ has come, he has achieved the promised redemption and brought the possibility of intimacy. And yet there is still more to come. God's new covenant people are longing for Christ's return when redemption will be full and final, and when intimacy will be perfect and unassailable.

The people

Under the new covenant, the composition of God's people is altered. Paul explains that 'not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.'³ Unfaithful Jews were broken off and faithful Gentiles grafted in.⁴ The church thus consists of all faithful believers, whether Jew or Gentile and it is this church which is the bride of Christ.⁵ Christian believers can look forward to the consummation of their marriage to the Lamb.⁶

The land

Davies argues that, in the New Testament, 'the Christian faith is, in principle, cut loose from the land.'⁷ Rather, all the blessings of intimacy with God are located in a person, that is, Christ.⁸ As our temple and our promised land, Christ deserves our love and admiration.

¹Isaiah 62:4-5

²See earlier discussion.

³Romans 9:6-7

⁴Romans 11:17, 20

⁵Ephesians 5:25-32

⁶Revelation 19:7-8

⁷W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 336.

⁸Ibid., 213.

Though the extent of God's kingdom can no longer be defined in geographical terms, that is not to say that it has no further concern with physical land in any sense. It has always been true that the whole earth belongs to God and the book of Acts in particular shows God making his claim to the whole earth as his dwelling place with his people.

God's great love for the the whole earth will be finally demonstrated when it is freed from its bondage.⁹ It will be renewed into a holy city, a garden-sanctuary where God will walk freely among his people, wiping every tear from their eyes.¹⁰ Ellen Davis suggests 'that the rich natural imagery of the Song is a powerful aid, first in feeling God's own love for the earth, and then in coming to share that love.'¹¹

WORKING WITH THE METAPHOR

Direction

Although metaphors involve a two-way interaction, there is usually a primary direction of transfer, from the vehicle to the tenor. We noted earlier two factors which may help to determine the direction of metaphor: the information gap and the usual direction of symbols from the lesser to the greater. Both of these indicate that the more likely direction of the overarching metaphor in the Song is from the human marriage and its protagonists as the vehicle to the Yahweh-land-people relationships as the tenor.

- *Information gap*

Although some elements of the Yahweh-land-people relationship (such as the geography of the land in which they lived) would have been very familiar to Israelite readers of the Song, the relationship itself needed to be revealed. Human marriage was a known entity. The passion of desire, the frustration

⁹Romans 8:21

¹⁰O. Palmer Robertson, "A New-Covenant Perspective on the Land," in *The Land of Promise*, ed. Philip Johnstone and Peter Walker (Leicester: IVP Apollos, 2000), 139.

¹¹Davis, *Proverbs*, 237.

of an unconsummated relationship, the joy of intimacy gained are comprehensible within human experience.

Relationships with Yahweh, by contrast, had to be explained and illustrated to God's people throughout Scripture. We have seen how the Song evokes the imagery of re-entering the sanctuary and freely experiencing intimacy with God. Such a relationship was never within the experience of any Israelite and could only be described by means of analogy.

- *Transfer of connotations from lesser to greater*

The connotations of an ideal marriage, such as that shown in the Song can be appropriately transferred to Yahweh's relationship with his people. The intimacy, the joy, the love, the help and comfort, the sign of God's favour, the requirements of exclusivity and permanence of human marriage are all, though in an appropriately heightened fashion, found in Yahweh's marriage with Israel.

It has been argued that the sexual connotations of the Song render it inappropriate as a metaphorical portrayal of the divine-human relationship.¹² God, as spirit, cannot be a sexual being and to think of our relationship with him in physical terms is a wholly pagan idea.

However, the divine-human relationship is described using sexual metaphors elsewhere in Scripture, most clearly in the adultery and prostitution imagery employed by the prophets. John Piper uses this as evidence for his argument that the very purpose of human sexuality is to better understand our relationship with God:

[God's] goal in creating human beings with personhood and passion was to make sure that there would be sexual language and sexual images that would point to the promises and the pleasures of God's relationship to his people and our relationship to him. In other words, the *ultimate* reason (not the only one) why we are sexual is to make God more deeply knowable. The language and imagery of sexuality are the most graphic and powerful that the Bible uses to describe the

¹² See, for example, C.J. Mahaney, "Sex, Romance and the Glory of God," in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 153.

relationship between God and his people - both positively (when we are faithful) and negatively (when we are not).¹³

Piper points to Ezekiel 16 and the book of Hosea as evidence for this view. He does not think that ‘we somehow have sexual relations with God or he with man.’¹⁴ Rather, he considers that ‘the intimacy and ecstasy of sexual relations points to what knowing God is meant to be.’¹⁵ We should not be embarrassed to use, albeit carefully and appropriately, the imagery Scripture gives us to describe our relationship with God.

If, however, we were to consider the effect of transferring the connotations of the final consummation of the divine-human relationship to human marriage and sexuality, we would surely find that these are too great to be appropriately transferred. Redemption, sanctification, ultimate fulfilment, eternal bliss and entry into the sanctuary are promises too lofty to be associated with mere human marriage. The consequences of thinking this way lead to idolatry and blasphemy. To regard one’s marriage as entering the sanctuary, bringing redemption or finding true fulfilment is tantamount to considering one’s spouse as saviour. Walsh pursues this line of argument, recognising that to extol the glories of the man in the Song just as those of Yahweh, is a ‘virtually blasphemous’ compliment, but nonetheless urges readers to imitate it, ‘stealing some religious joy and applying it for the street language of love and lust.’¹⁶ It seems unlikely that this was the intention behind the inclusion of the Song in the canon.

Metaphor not allegory

Identification of this metaphor does not require us to adopt an allegorical method of

¹³John Piper, “Sex and the Supremacy of Christ: Part One,” in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 26.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 31.

interpretation. The interpretation of this, as any metaphor, depends on the interaction between tenor and vehicle, the transfer of meaning and connotation, the tension between the like and the unlike.

Understanding the bride as a bride, the bridegroom as a bridegroom and their relationship as betrothal and marriage is essential for understanding what the Song teaches about their counterparts in the Yahweh-land-people relationships.

In addition, as we observed earlier, metaphors always allow some two-way interaction. If this relationship in the Song can be compared with the Lord's marriage to his people, inevitably this sheds light on human marriage. This 'reciprocal illumination'¹⁷ allows the dignity and significance of marriage to be clearly seen. And since the marriage shown in the Song is a redeemed, restored relationship, unmarred by the effects of sin, it is particularly valuable in teaching us what human marriage ought to be.

It follows, then, that since the proper view of the metaphor in the Song is as a depiction of the relationships between the Lord, the land and the people using the vehicle of human marriage, the primary use of the Song in the church must be to teach about the Lord-land-people relationships. This liberates the Song from its restricted use in instructing married couples and allows it to profit the whole people of God, without denying its value in teaching about marriage. Indeed, this value will be increased if it is recognised that the marriage in the Song is not only an ideal marriage but also a metaphorical counterpart to the Lord's relationship with his people.

The metaphor and the affections

An overarching metaphor such as I have identified does not require each detail of the Song to have corresponding elements in both tenor and vehicle.¹⁸ So, for example, the girl's longing to be kissed in 1:2 demonstrates her desire for her beloved to be with her and to show his love for her. It may well be

¹⁵Idem.

¹⁶Walsh, op. cit., 127.

¹⁷Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 33.

¹⁸Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 254–5.

a profitable exercise to consider when Christ will come and how he may show his love but the purpose of the verse is rather to evoke this kind of desire in the reader than to decode these symbols.

The poetic and figurative language in the Song suggest that its intention is to work primarily on the affections, and so our preaching of the Song must aim to do likewise. If we only communicate what the Song is about we will miss its point. Our churches need to feel what the Song does, to be changed not so much in their understanding but in their response to the truths it reflects on.

By showing the land in the place of the bride, a place more usually reserved for the people, the Song subtly and insistently makes the identification of land with people. The emphasis on the beauty and blessings of the land as shown in the Song remind us of its beloved status. And, as the Lord's love for his land is seen, the reader's own admiration and affection for the land is increased.

We learn to love Christ, in whom we find sanctuary and restoration; we learn to love the whole earth as the Lord's; and we learn to long for the new creation, the new Eden-sanctuary in which we will be at one with each other, with the Lord and with creation itself.

The longing of the lovers in the Song to be together in an unhindered relationship, is a powerful picture of the longing of God's people for him as their bridegroom. The Song not only illustrates this longing but by means of its poetic artistry, works on the reader's affections as to actually produce it. The strong sense of desire shown throughout the Song awakens the reader's desire for the coming bridegroom.

This desire is complemented by the confidence the lovers feel in their relationship. The refrain expressing their mutual possession is not a future hope or dream but a present reality for these two. There is no doubting each other's love, even during the times of their separation. As the reader enters into their world and appropriates their expressions of love for his own relationship with the Lord, his bridegroom, he can gain something of this assurance.

8. But the Song does not promise immediate satisfaction. There is the pain and frustration of separation from one's lover. As we patiently endure the sufferings of this broken world, we feel the pain

and anguish of the girl, longing for her bridegroom to come to her. The Song allows us to acknowledge and express our frustration at the delay and the difficulties of life in this present age while we wait for Christ's return.

The Song provokes a greater love for Christ, a deeper admiration for the land, a more passionate desire for the consummation of our marriage, a more confident assurance in our beloved status and a more patient endurance as we wait for our coming king. Perhaps if we understood this better, we might begin to see a resurgence in the pulpit popularity of this, the greatest of all songs.

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