

Part of the Canon

The divine author

As we think about the Song of Songs, we must first ask why and how this book received a place in the Biblical canon. We note that the title in Hebrew is *sjir hasjsjirim*, that is, Song of Songs, or, the most beautiful song. We could think that this alone opened the gate to the canon. After all, the Song of Songs should not be absent from the Book of books!

A name does not necessarily mean everything. Some Bible books were given names long after they were written. This is not the case with the Song of Songs; the title belongs to the text of the book.

Inspiration of the Holy Spirit is the decisive factor. "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21) We discuss later the human author, from whose pen this book flowed.

Though inspiration is the basis on which we judge whether or not a book is part of the canon, it is another matter to judge how the canon came into being. The Lord guided the collection of the 66 books which make up the canon. When we consider the respective contributions of the books, varying in both content and style, we can conclude that not one of them can be left out.

Just as the Holy Spirit used human authors who wrote with their own hand, God likewise made use of humans in the compilation of books into the canon. These people were Jews who lived during the last centuries before Christ's birth. In the *Misjna*, the Jewish interpretation of the laws of Moses, it is written: "All Holy Scriptures make the hands unclean, and the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes also make the hands unclean." From this it has been concluded that it was only after much debate that these two books were acknowledged as part of the canon. However, this was a misunderstanding of the true meaning of this Jewish expression "defiling the hands." In reality, this expression is equivalent to seeing the book as canonical. Prof. G. Ch. Aalders explains why this is so in the introduction to his commentary, and J. Van Bruggen does the same in his book *Wie maakte de Bijbel?*¹. The Misjna contains the following words of the well-known Rabbi Akiba:

No man in Israel has ever denied that the Song of Songs defiles the hands. Nothing in the world equals the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel. All Kerubim [that is, Writings: the third part of the Hebrew canon] are holy, but the Song of Songs is most holy. If ever there was a difference of opinion about something, it was about Ecclesiastes only.

We have taken over the canon as it was delivered to us by the faithful service of the Jews.

¹ *Ed. Note:* literally the title means "Who Made the Bible"

We may have many objections against the Jews of those times, but we must acknowledge that the LORD God was pleased to use these sons of the ancient nation of Israel for this purpose, and that they conscientiously fulfilled this task. Concerning the care given to the canon of the Old Testament, we are indebted to the Jewish scribes and the *masoretes* (who confirmed the Hebrew text of the Old Testament).

The Christian church has kept this same canon. This does not mean that the Christian church has not had further difficulties concerning it. Best known are the names of Theodorus van Mopsuestia of the 5th century, and Sebastian Castellio of the 16th century, who are both noteworthy because they were condemned by the church for their views concerning the Song of Songs.

This concludes our discussion regarding divine authorship.

The human author

But who was the human author? The RSV calls this book “The Song of Solomon”, and verse one of the NIV reads “Solomon’s Song of Songs”. But it may be unclear that the translators of the basic Hebrew text hinted they were dealing with a problem here.

In his *Korte Verklaring*², G. Ch. Aalders writes that two words were originally added to the name “Song of Songs”. In Hebrew, the first additional word is used to lead in a subordinated clause. The second additional word is the name of Solomon, and is preceded by a preposition. Normally, this first word can be translated as “of”, which would indicate that Solomon was the author. The Psalms also use this preposition repeatedly, as in “A Psalm of David.” However, it is very strange that in this case the first word introduces a relative subordinated clause, which is *never* done otherwise. Therefore, there is much reason to believe this preposition means “to” or “about.” The wording seems to warn us that what follows is not the author’s name. Rather, it is a Song that *concerns* Solomon and deals *with* him.

This sums up Aalders’ view, with which we can agree. He rightly makes us attentive to the fact that “in the Song itself, Solomon is named several times, and in a manner which would make it very unlikely to see him as the poet.” He points to 1:5, 3:6-11, and 8:11-12. In this last verse Solomon is addressed, but from a great distance. For that matter, the tone in the passages where Solomon is named seems somewhat cold and distant. It is certainly no poem of Solomon’s. It is not even primarily a song *to* him or *about* him. At times there is a reference to the great king, in the sense of: “That is how things are at King Solomon’s court, but with us things are also well and there is much to be enjoyed.”

Aalders writes further,

The poet remains unknown to us. We could likely place him somewhere in the time of Solomon or shortly thereafter, in the period that Tirzah (capital city of the ten tribes) and Jerusalem (capital city of the two tribes) received their names, since both are named in one breath in 6:4. It was certainly a time when the famous king was still fresh in the memory of the reader.

² *Ed. Note:* Sections of this series by G. Ch. Aalders has been translated in English as *Bible Student’s Commentary*.

The principle characters

The reader is also reminded of the splendour with which King Solomon surrounded himself, and the luxury he allowed himself regarding love. It appeared all so beautiful, but for the author of the Song of Songs it was certainly not the choicest lifestyle. That is why he wanted to bring two ordinary young people into the spotlight. We do not know who this young man and woman were, and we will never know. Perhaps the author had a specific couple in mind, or they may have been fictional characters. By fictional we do not mean their characters are not realistic. On the contrary. In musical terms, the author creates a fantasia (or fantasy) – a musical improvisation on an exiting motif or theme. The author found such themes by tens and hundreds during that time and in all times: a young man and a young woman in love and delighted with each other, saying and doing things of which they would be ashamed in other circumstances. For this happens only between two people in love. Love is natural but it does change one, so much so that the natural seems to turn into something supernatural that yet can be enjoyed here on earth. Here lies the essence of mutual love between boy and girl, man and woman.

The use of language

Here lies both the basis of the joy *and* the difficulty we have in expressing ourselves regarding love, when it is (rather, must) be discussed. This can stem from the way parents advise their children, as well as from our discussions of what is decent and what is not. Should we, therefore, not thank God that this book was included in the canon of Holy Scripture to assist us? In this book of poetry which welled up from the heart of the unknown author, the great Author of the Book has put into words what he judged necessary for his children to know regarding the mutual love between husband and wife. In love and in sexuality he entrusts to us a treasure that must be kept and used with care. It is beautiful as long as the couple respects each other, but it can become tragic when they step out of the boundaries. In his Word, the Lord has often had to warn and condemn sin in this area. Therefore, it is fitting to also include a book which shows us the other, sunny side of this good gift of God. For that we can only thank the Author, the Creator of this wonder.

Heinrich M Ohmann