

# The Song of Songs and Its Interpretation

## Allegory

Between the text and the message we find the interpretation, the explanation. There has always been much difference of opinion about the interpretation. It was always about the question: can the mutual admiration and love between a young man and his girlfriend be the subject of a book from the Bible? Could it not be that higher truths are hidden behind it all?

Jewish exegetes were the first to go the route of allegorical interpretation. What is an allegory? To make this clear we must also say something about figurative language, and to make that clear, we had best begin by comparisons, such as we make them everyday.

In a comparison, someone or something is compared to something else. For example, Psalm 1 compares the man who is blessed to a *tree*, planted by the rivers of water. The wife of a God-fearing man is compared to a *fruitful vine*, and the children to *olive plants*. Three times we read the little word “as.” The righteous man, his wife, and his children remain as they are. The tree, the vine, and the olive plants remain as they are. It is a matter of finding a point of similarity between the two qualities.

The parables of the LORD are short or longer stories about daily events or imaginable situations, which are compared with deciding moments in the kingdom of heaven.

It is different with figurative or metaphorical language. The little word “as” is left out. The hero is not compared with a lion, but is called a lion. Mythology takes things one step further. Not love, but Venus is mentioned; not wine or drunkenness, but Bacchus is mentioned; not war, but Mars, the god of war, is mentioned. We must know this to understand mythology.

The allegory is distinct from the parable, but it is not always easy to distinguish these two. The boundaries are fluid. Abstract entities (e.g. virtues) are introduced in a personified form, or historical persons are introduced in disguise. We could say that with an allegory we become further removed from a visible, tangible reality. Another situation or world is being discussed, which is indicated in a very veiled manner. Those not taught how to interpret this will not be able to understand. One must know how to interpret allegories. When one knows, he must be believed at his own authority, for he cannot give an account according to modern concepts. He permits himself liberties, which cannot be allowed by one who tells parables.

For in a parable two elements are known. Only certain features of the comparison are meant to be symbolic. But with the allegory the door is open wide to all kinds of misunderstandings. To read a parable like an allegory means to compare all the points to something else. For instance, if we were to read the parable of the prodigal son like an allegory, it would mean spiritualizing the shoes on his feet, the ring on his hand, and the clothes on his back.

## **Jewish allegorical explanation**

Returning to the Song of Songs, the Jews were first with allegorizing. They went so far as to find all the history from the Old Testament back in the Song of Songs. Take, for instance, 1:2: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine.” The Song of Songs in the Jewish *Targum* reads,

Solomon, the prophet, spoke the Shekina of the LORD of the world.

Praised be the name of the Lord, who gave us the law through Moses, the great scribe, written on two tables of stone, and the six parts of the *Misjna* and the *Talmud* by mouth.

At the same time he spoke with us face to face, as someone embraces the one he truly loves, because he loved us above seventy nations.

Explanation: Solomon is the prophet, Moses the great scribe. This *Targum* connects the plural form “the kisses of his mouth” to the twofold form of the *Torah*, the Jewish law, both the written and the oral. They arrive at the number of seventy by way of the Hebrew word *yayin* (wine), of which the consonants have the number value of 70. Another example is the following: concerning 1:4 the *Targum* says: “When the children of Israel left Egypt, the Shekina led them by a cloud by day and a fire by night. The righteous of that generation spoke to the Master of all the world, ‘We are gone behind thee and hasten after thee on the right path.’” In verse 13, “a sachel of myrrh, resting between my breasts” is the glory of the LORD, who dwells between the two cherubim.

## **Christian allegorical explanation**

After the Jews, Origen and Hippolytus led Christians to allegorical interpretation as well, and explained the whole book as the relationship of a bride (the church) to her Groom (Christ), involving also individual souls within the church. In verse five, for instance, the dark skin was seen as sin, and the lovely appearance was seen as faith and repentance. In 1:2, the bride asks her groom to kiss her, that is, to be taught not by angels, the law, or the prophets, but by the physical Christ. The wine refers then to the doctrine of the law and prophets, and love to the doctrine proclaimed by Christ himself in the gospel. In 2:12, the season of singing refers to the preaching of the gospel. In 5:1, eating and drinking refers to the Lord’s Supper. In 6:8, the eighty concubines refer to the eighty heresies compiled by the diligent Epiphanius in his book *Concerning Heresies*.

## **Biblical examples**

This allegorical interpretation was defended with the argument that if no spiritual significance could be given to the content of a Bible book, such a book would not have been included in the canon of Holy Scripture. For the Bible is a spiritual and religious book!

Moreover, it was argued that other Scripture passages do see marriage as a representation of the relationship between Christ and the congregation, between God and his people, as in Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This is true, but then it is the Bible itself which emphatically makes this parallel. If we would look and see how or to what extent the comparison is worked out in a certain Bible book, then we would see the difference!

Take Hosea, for instance. In the first chapters, the prophet is seen in his relationship with Gomer, the girl “off the streets” whom he had to marry at the Lord’s command. This was meant to depict what JAWHEH had experienced (chapter two) in his relationship to the people of Israel: a people of whom the Lord said, “I will not show my love to her children.” He could no longer acknowledge them as his people. Also in chapter two, JAHWEH restored his people, comparing this to mending a relationship with a girl: “I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.” But this is as far as the Bible goes. The image did what it was supposed to do.

We find the same picture in Jeremiah 2: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me...” But when Israel’s relationship with the Baals is fittingly expressed in sexual terms (Jeremiah 23ff.), this does not imply that these terms may serve in her relationship with the LORD. The marriage relationship between God and his people bears absolutely no sexual connotation. JAHWEH is no Baal, no god of nature.

In this respect we can think of Ezekiel 16 and 23, where Jerusalem is depicted as a girl from the time she was born and growing into adulthood. It is a real – maybe someone would say “realistic” – portrait. For instance, 16:7 allows us to picture a real girl. In her appearance the Creator is honoured as the great Artist: “Your breasts were formed and your hair grew.” But “naked” is unquestionably a negative matter in this context. It indicates her poverty and want, not anything at which we can rejoice. When her Maker, who would become her husband, came to her, he first covered her nakedness. It does not play a role in her relationship to JAHWEH. It is indeed a relationship of love, but not a sexual relationship.

Under oath he made a covenant with her. That is how it goes in the relationship between God and his people: “and you became mine”. God claimed her for himself. He then bathed and anointed her, dressed her nicely, adorned her with ornaments, and fed her, so that she was “very beautiful.” The LORD looked after all these things. And further? The LORD did not go any further. The image is not further elaborated upon, in the sense of two lovers who make love to each other, like a man and a woman in intercourse. We can see that each image in the Bible – also that of marriage – has its limits. JAHWEH, who acted as her husband, appeared in the first place as her Maker. He made his creation in such a way that it was worthy of being seen, and her name was mentioned among the nations. The LORD did his share. When the girl as an adult prostituted herself, it does not mean that she had to give herself to JAHWEH as she did to the Baals.

Then there is the story of the sisters Oholah and Oholibah, in Ezekiel 23. It begins by conceding their prostitution. We will not say more about it. It is our contention that the proponents of allegorical exegesis always appeal to the relationship between God and his church, which is represented as a marriage.

Who will deny it? We will not. Whenever the Bible does so in so many words, we will reverently trace *how far God, who reveals himself, will go with his people on that road.* Then, when the Bible is silent and makes no suggestions which can stimulate our sinful desires – because the image served its purpose! – we must reverently remain silent.

You see, that is the great difference between, on the one hand, Hosea 1 and 2, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 16 and 23, and Ephesians 5, and, on the other hand, the Song of Songs. In the latter book we share in the joy that two loved ones know in their relationship. The allegorical interpretation, which seeks instead the relationship between God (Christ) and the church, forces an explanation which does violence to the essence and intent of the story and is clearly at odds with the truth. This is not appropriate when we consider the LORD and his Son, our Saviour, who showed his love for the church on the cross, and not as a man having sexual intercourse with his wife and being totally wrapped up in her. Seen in this light, the twisted path of allegory is an insult to the LORD.

Are there no allegories in the Bible? Certainly, and very beautiful ones too. We think of Ecclesiastes 12, although these metaphors are close to being parables. We find a genuine allegory in Galatians 4:21-31. That is also how Paul announces it: "These things may be taken figuratively" (Greek: *hatina estin allegoroumena*). In this exceptional case, Paul's pen and hand are guided by the Holy Spirit. Who will deny the Holy Spirit the right to use an allegory in his own book, especially when he fixes our attention on it (Galatians 4:24) and gives the explanation with it? But there is nothing like this in the Song. If there were, we would not argue this point.

### **The Song of Songs as drama**

There are yet other interpretations of our book. Some see the Song of Songs as *drama*. Just as in a drama, the author has some people play a role on stage. Opinions differ considerably regarding the meaning of the number of players. According to some there are two players: Solomon and the Shulammitte. The two are in love with one another and he carries her off to Jerusalem, where the two are married. Once they know each other better, the relationship loses its sensual, natural character and is purified into a higher, spiritual love.

Our objection to this view is that it is difficult to imagine Solomon as a shepherd. Prof. Aalders, who holds this view, writes:

There remains one matter for discussion. The song shows how King Solomon, rich in wives whom he married for political as well as economic reasons, has fallen in love with a young Shulammitte (Song of Songs 6:13), and has found that love returned.

Aalders continues,

At the same time this interpretation, which is based on sound exegesis, leaves one question unanswered: we find a number of places that are incompatible with King Solomon as bridegroom, and rather call to mind a shepherd or a country boy, as in 1:7,8, 6:2,11, and 7:11-14. It is these texts, as well as the orientation toward Syrian marriage customs, which lead us to consider the dramatic viewpoint. How then must we understand these texts? The most obvious conclusion is to think of metaphorical language. This figurative language is partly grounded in prophetic parlance where a "shepherd" serves as a description of kings and government authorities, for instance. (Jeremiah 2:8; 25:34, 36)

With all due respect to Prof. Aalders as exegete, we cannot follow him in his statement in the last lines of this quotation. He argues that the description of higher authorities as shepherds – seeing them as regents and so focusing on the *official* character of this position – would lead to the metaphorical language in the Song of Songs, which is related to the king in his *private life*, that is, as lover, beloved, husband of his wife. This argument seems out of place here.

Even if we were dealing here with a real king, we would still need to separate the official life from the private life of the king. In view of the passage at hand, we would have to distinguish between his vocation as caring for his flock *and* the living conditions of the shepherd. Only in his *vocation* can he be an image of divine providence and royal rule. In that case even the proud kings of Assyria or Babylon felt flattered by the title *pastor bonus* or *good shepherd*.

In this manner, the Bible also speaks of the LORD as “my shepherd” (Psalm 23) or “Shepherd of Israel” (Psalm 80). However, we never hear about kings in the Ancient East showing much ambition for the way of life and the heavy labour of the shepherd. The daily work of the shepherd was not easy, being risky and requiring much patience. Just think of defending the flock against robbers and predators. As a rule, the shepherd was not the owner of the sheep. His position was one of subordination, but with great responsibility. Lost sheep had to be reimbursed. Ancient texts about shepherds show little regard for the nomadic life in general, and for the shepherd in particular.

Therefore we may ask: would a king like Solomon, who grew up in the king’s court, have a longing to be like the shepherd and live like a shepherd? This could perhaps be said of David, since he looked after his father’s sheep. But I doubt that David ever had a desire to return to the sheep after becoming king.

*If* a king of Israel could speak like that, or, as in the Song of Songs, the author could put such words in his mouth and longings in his heart, Israel would have to have been familiar with the literary character of the pastorate. This is a poem, a piece of music, or a dance, in which the life of the shepherd is made famous, described and idealized; or it could be a song for shepherds, of a mostly simple, rural, tender character. That is where shepherds and shepherdesses performed. Examples are: Hooft’s *Granida* and Vondel’s *Leeuwendalers*. During the 17th century, and even more so in the 18th century, our people were fond of this archaic poetry.

The Song of Songs does have points of contact with the rural life of the shepherd. It is not the daily life of the herdsman, but rather the love relationship of the two people, which is the connecting thread. Yet it is clearly a love relationship as those experienced and enjoyed in rural areas, villages, and small cities. But in everything, we can see that it is not about Solomon, the man of the big city, but about two ordinary young people who know rural life and are conversant with nature.

We see that the male figure does and says a number of things, which would be unimaginable for a king, for example, “where you graze your flock” (1:7). Beyond this, if

we were speaking of a king, could the imagery picture him as “leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills” (2:8), or “[standing] behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice,” like a peeping Tom? In present day society, he might have been reported to the police! Can we imagine a king meeting his girl by night in the street (3:4)? What about a king knocking on the door at night, pleading to be let in, to be told he is not wanted, and then disappearing (5:2)? Think of it! The king! You would open the door for the king! Also, would a king permit his sister, his beloved, his dove, to be beaten up by the night-watchman and robbed of her cloak (5:6)?

If Solomon were intended here, would the daughters of Jerusalem ask the question, “How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women?” (5:9) and “Where has your lover gone... that we may look for him with you?” (6:1) It is clear that these words make no sense regarding a king.

But we are not ready yet to discard the drama hypothesis. There are exegetes who say that we are dealing not with two, but with three people who play leading roles: the Shulammite, her shepherd friend, whom she has always known and loved, and thirdly, King Solomon, who plays the part of tempter and attempts in vain to kidnap her and to add her to his harem. The king plays here a less noble part. Some picture here a choir performance, as was done in ancient Greece. Greece knew great dramatists and playwrights at one time. The same held true for ancient India. But, as far as we know, drama never found its way into the life of Semite peoples.

## **Wedding songs**

A fourth interpretation sees in this book a collection of love songs: wedding songs. This explanation goes back to a certain Wetzstein, who was consul at Damascus during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in that position witnessed several rural weddings in Syria. On the day of the wedding the bride performed a sword dance, accompanied by music and song, and her beauty was admired in a way that reminded Wetzstein of the biblical Song of Songs. During the week of the wedding, the bride and groom were admired and highly praised, as though they were king and queen. He soon drew the conclusion that it must have been in ancient Israel as it is now in Syria. The Song of Songs is a collection of love songs, applicable to all couples who are to be married.

We do not agree with this. In the first place, the Song of Songs does not focus on marriage as its subject. It is not a song fit for a wedding. In their thoughts, the two lovers do live toward their wedding day. But that is different. In high poetic style they share with each other their feelings for each other, in a time of being in love. In this way, the book can contain a message for young people today, boys and girls who have lost their hearts to each other in the springtime of life. Their head is in the clouds. Is that all right? Or does the Bible disapprove of it? The Song of Songs is their guide.

In the second place, we do not see the book as a collection of individual songs, but rather as a unified composition. From beginning to end, the same two young people allow us to witness their time of love with its joys and difficulties, its ups and downs. At the end of the book, it seems as though they – and we – are no further than at the beginning. No, they

are not yet married! As far as mutual love is concerned, they experience it. The strength of their love is solidly laid down in 8:6 and 7, and belongs to the treasure of knowledge which the church may have in this area.

### **The cultic interpretation**

Finally, there is also a less known interpretation. It is the religious-liturgical or cultic interpretation. This is its meaning: the bride and groom are not humans, but god and goddess. The influence of certain religious studies, based on the science of religions, can be perceived here: they look for a particular pattern in the Song of Songs which can also be found in heathen religions. This interpretation concerns the image of a nature god, a vegetative or fertility god, his death and resurrection. When plants wilt and die from the summer heat, the godhead embodied in those plants also dies, and descends into the realm of the dead. His love, the goddess, who mourns and looks for him, follows him into the realm of the dead. Upon finding each other, they ascend from the realm of the dead and the union is ceremonially celebrated by holy wedlock. Through this rite, nature comes to life once more. This notion is supported by many Old Testament critics.

Those who adhere to it believe that there is sufficient evidence in the book to support this theory. However, this interpretation seems far-fetched. If this is the approach we must take to the book, it would be impossible to include Song of Songs in the canon. It is possible that mythical concepts and characters could play a certain role in a portion of Scripture – think of names like Rahab, Leviathan and Behemoth. But in these cases this element serves to glorify the greatness and power of JAHWEH when he defeats these monsters. We cannot find a trace of that in the Song of Songs.

### **Bride and bridegroom speaking**

How then must we explain the Song of Songs? From the previous outlines it is clear what approach should be taken.

Before returning to the text and contents of the book, it is important to come to a good understanding of a number of points.

However glorious and poetic this book may be, it is based on reality. There are raw and hard aspects to its existence, which we may not downplay or be silent about. The young man, a shepherd boy, and the young woman, a keeper of the vineyard, are down-to-earth common people. According to city etiquette, dark skin was not nice – and a shepherd boy would not soon be asked to come for a social visit. At least this was the thought of the higher circles, represented by the “daughters of Jerusalem” and their ideal: King Solomon. The little foxes and the night watchmen do not give the impression that everything was bright and cheerful, even though the young woman herself is compared to a fragrant rose and the shining moon. It is love which adds colour to life.

Another point to consider is the “wedding”. One Bible translation includes the following heading above 1:2, “The bride longing for the bridegroom”. From beginning to end the reader is made aware that this book deals with a betrothed couple speaking; many agree

that this is true. Yet there are questions: is it about a wedding, where a great multitude of invited guests are joyfully feasting together? We cannot derive this from the text. The lovers, whose conversations indicate that they are a betrothed couple, do not yet appear to be bride and groom. In 4:8-12 and 5:1 the word *kalla* appears five times. This word means “bride.”

But there is more. Three out of five times, the young woman is addressed by her boyfriend as “my sister”. If we interpret one word literally, we must do the same for the other. In the same way, in the last chapter she says, “If only you were to me like a brother.” This is meant in the sense of a boy born from the same parents, one who has grown up in the same family, one who is near like one’s own brother. That she longs for this in the last chapter shows that these two do not live under one roof like a married couple.

“Sister” in the literal sense of the word and “bride” in the literal sense do not exclude each other. To interpret “sister” here as “sister in the faith” or “member of the same church,” as is done in the present use of these words, is to work with an anachronism, a notion which does not fit that time period. Some people have concluded that the young woman had to be a “sister” in the ecclesiastical sense of the word, in order to be considered a suitable marriage partner.

Interesting though this may be, such a conclusion must be based upon other texts of Scripture, such as Deuteronomy 7:3 and following, but not upon texts from the Song of Songs. People easily understand as metaphoric, figurative language such expressions as “my dove, my perfect one”. This cannot be taken literally as a beaked, winged animal with a body covered with feathers.

Furthermore, it can be asked, what aspect of the book reminds us of a wedding day with its festivities? The following texts do not: 1:7,8 and 2:8,9. That is not how a bridegroom visits his bride. A scene such as is described in 3:1-5 cannot be explained concerning either the night before or after the wedding day. The escort in 3:6-11 is from Solomon, who is mentioned quite distantly in the third person. The song of 4:1 is more likely to be sung by a young man for his girlfriend. In 4:8 and 9, the young woman is far away, all the way in the foreign country of Lebanon, on the tops of Senir and Hermon. Nothing is known of honeymoons to foreign countries during that time. In 5:1-7 the two are still apart from each other. What about the last chapter? Even then they are not yet together. They call out to each other from a distance!

## **Just two young people**

So nothing remains but two young people, not yet married, who take turns singing their songs in the Song of Songs. The text of that lovely song has been kept in Scripture. That is the best evidence of the golden value of the book.

It is possible that these songs were also sung at some other occasion or recited at a wedding, but that is another matter. Were they written for these occasions in the first place? No.



Having considered everything, the Song of Songs is an example of the popular literature of the ancient east, Arabia, Iran, and India. An abundance of similar love poetry has been saved from these countries, describing the growing relationship between two lovers. The Song of Songs shows us a love relationship with its ups and downs, having moments of closeness followed by times of reserve or even of growing apart. That is life. That is how it is in the true-to-life book of the Song of Songs. It keeps us in suspense. That is all right. It is in the days of engagement that a couple must learn to know each other, and mutual assessment is part of this process – she especially is very good at that. When things are well between the two people, which is a matter of the heart, the end result will be good. That is how it is in the Song of Songs. For it is no game these two young people are playing. Through the tensions, our book leads up to holy matrimony.

The Song of Songs is a book in the Bible, but that does not exclude a relationship with extra-biblical literature, a fact that is also true for the wisdom literature (Proverbs, the Psalms, legislative texts in the Old Testament). But when we come face to face with this material in the Canon, we know for sure that it is the Holy Spirit who has marked his choice in these thoughts and words. In this way, the content and spirit of this book is unique among all love literature.

God the Holy Spirit, the instigator of “natural love” – it is no work of the devil! – upholds the marvelous work of his creation. That is something to marvel at in a world fallen in sin, that the natural, more than ever before, appears to be from supernatural origin.

That is what we learn from the Song of Songs, a manual for those engaged and on their way to full unity.

Heinrich M Ohmann