

SESSION FOURTEEN

THE SONG OF SONGS:

History of Interpretation

NOTE: The following is an article that was originally published by *BibSac* in 1997 [See J. Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:613 (Jan–Mar 1997): 23–46]. The material presented here is the same as in the original article, with only slight formatting changes to conform to the style of these notes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Probably no other book in all the Bible has given rise to such a plethora of interpretations as the Song of Songs. Saadia, a medieval Jewish commentator said the Song of Songs is like a book for which the key has been lost. Over one hundred years ago, the noted Old Testament scholar Franz Delitzsch remarked,

The Song is the most obscure book of the Old Testament. Whatever principle of interpretation one may adopt, there always remains a number of inexplicable passages, and just such as, if we understood them, would help to solve the mystery. And yet the interpretation of a book presupposes from the beginning that the interpreter has mastered the idea of the whole. It has thus become an ungrateful task; for however successful the interpreter may be in the separate parts, yet he will be thanked for his work only when the conception as a whole which he has decided upon is approved of.¹

Delitzsch correctly pointed out that the challenge lies in conceptualizing the idea of the whole, and yet it is precisely the unique features of this book that make this such a formidable task. More recently Harrison addressed this very issue.

Few books of the Old Testament have experienced as wide a variety of interpretations as the Song of Songs. The absence of specifically religious themes has combined with the erotic lyrics and the vagueness of any plot for the work to furnish for scholars an almost limitless ground for speculation.²

Understandably these problems led to the allegorical treatment of the book by Jewish as well as Christian scholars. This particular method, which held sway up through the nineteenth century, is now losing its following. Yet despite the multitude of alternative suggestions, no other interpretive scheme has gained a consensus among Old Testament exegetes.

The interpretive perplexity of the book is even reflected by its original placement in the Hebrew canon, though this matter is obscured by English translations. The Song of Songs (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים) appears in the sacred “writings” of the Jewish canon as one of the five Megilloth (along with Ruth,

¹ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, vol. 6 of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, by Franz Delitzsch and C. F. Keil, trans. M. E. Easton (n.p., 1875; reprint [in 10 vols.], Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 6:1 (italics his).

² Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 1052.

Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther).³ In fact the Song appears first in this section, and it is read at the first Jewish festival of the year, namely, Passover. The connection with Passover, however, is not accidental. The Jewish Targum interpreted the Song as a picture of the history of the Hebrew nation beginning with the Exodus, an event most naturally associated with the Feast of Passover (Exod 12). So Passover was an appropriate time for the reading of the Song of Songs, and it was read on the eighth day of that festival. In the Septuagint, however, the Song was placed after Ecclesiastes, a decision which in turn influenced its place in modern translations.

Any solution to understanding the Song of Songs must first be settled at the hermeneutical level. What hermeneutical principles are valid for dealing with this literary genre of ancient love poetry? Is there sufficient warrant for departing from a grammatical-historical-contextual hermeneutic?

The goal of this article is to survey the primary interpretive schemes that have been set forth throughout the book's history and to evaluate the hermeneutical foundations on which they rest.⁴ This will serve as an appropriate foundational study for an interpretation of the book that is most consistent with a grammatical-historical-contextual hermeneutic. A second article ("The Message of the Song of Songs") will set forth an interpretation of the Song that follows the "literal-didactic" approach and yet which offers a unique interpretation of the whole.

II. THE UNITY OF THE SONG OF SONGS

In this article a discussion of the date and authorship of the book will not be pursued, but the matter of the book's unity is a more relevant issue.⁵ A number of scholars have denied any essential unity in the book and have concluded that the Song is simply a collection of love poems (with multiple authors).⁶ However, in light of the abundant repetition of words and phrases,⁷ the repeated refrains

³ The alternative title "Canticles" is derived from the Latin Vulgate translation *Canticum Canticorum* ("Song of Songs").

⁴ Some helpful surveys of the history of interpretation are included in these writings: Robert B. Dempsey, "The Interpretation and Use of the Song of Songs" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University School of Theology, 1963); G. Fohrer and E. Sellin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. D. E. Green (New York: Abingdon, 1968); Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (London, 1857; reprint, New York: KTAV, 1970); Richard Frederick Littledale, *A Commentary on the Song of Songs: From Ancient and Mediaeval Sources* (New York: Pott and Amery, 1869); Robert Pfeiffer, *An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 714–16; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977); H. H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," in *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1952), 187–234; George Louis Scheper, "The Spiritual Marriage: The Exegetic History and Literary Impact of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1971); and Otto Zöckler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, ed. John Peter Lange (1868; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.).

⁵ Conservative scholars have tended to ascribe the authorship to Solomon (see, e.g., E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 332–33; and Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1974], 489–92). The Talmud assigned the composition of the Song to Hezekiah and his scribes (see *B. Bat. 15a*). Critical scholars usually give the Song a late dating because of certain linguistic phenomena (e.g., the use of ψ rather than $\alpha\psi\tau$ as a relative pronoun, and the appearance of certain Greek and Persian loan words).

⁶ W. O. E. Oesterley, for example, divided the book into some thirty different poems (*The Song of Songs*,

and themes, and the intricate structuring of the book,⁸ it is more likely that a single author or editor is responsible for the present work.⁹ “The repetitions that occur leave the impression of a single hand, and there is greater unity of theme and style than would be expected in a collection of poems from several hands and from widely separated sources.”¹⁰ Deere provides a helpful summary of the arguments in favor of the book’s unity.

(1) The same characters are seen throughout the book (the beloved maiden, the lover, and the daughters of Jerusalem). (2) Similar expressions and figures of speech are used throughout the book. Examples are: love more delightful than wine (1:2 ; 4:10), fragrant perfumes (1:3,12 ; 3:6 ; 4:10), the beloved’s cheeks (1:10 ; 5:13), her eyes like doves (1:15 ; 4:1), her teeth like sheep (4:2 ; 6:6), her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7 ; 3:5 ; 8:4), the lover like a gazelle (2:9,17 ; 8:14), Lebanon (3:9 ; 4:8,11,15 ; 7:4), and numerous references to nature. (3) Hebrew grammatical peculiarities found only in this book suggest a single author. (4) The progression in the subject matter points to a single work, not an anthology.¹¹

In addition the bride is styled “most beautiful among women” (1:8 ; 5:9 ; 6:1) and the bridegroom is said to feed his flock “among the lilies” (2:16 ; 4:5 ; 6:2–3). In light of these observations the evidence does point toward a unified composition from the hand of a single author or editor.

III. THE ALLEGORICAL VIEW

The notion that the Song of Songs should be understood in its plain normal sense has been firmly resisted throughout most of history. Advocates of the allegorical view have been adamant that there must be some “spiritual” message to the book that exceeds the supposed earthly theme of human sexuality.¹² As a result, the allegorists have stressed a spiritual meaning that goes beneath the surface reading. The outcome of this method, however, has been a host of interpretations as numerous as those who follow this approach. Jewish interpreters understood the text as an allegory of the love

1936).

⁷ For a study of repetitions in the book, see R. Kessler, *Some Poetical and Structural Features of the Song of Songs*, ed. John Macdonald (Leeds: Leeds University Press, 1957); and Roland E. Murphy, “The Unity of the Song of Songs,” *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (October 1979): 436–43.

⁸ See, for example, J. C. Exum, “A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1973): 47–79. On the idea that each succeeding poem stems from a word, phrase, or thought in the previous section, see F. Landsberger, “Poetic Units within the Song of Songs,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954): 203–16. Cf. F. Landy, “Beauty and the Enigma: An Inquiry into Some Interrelated Episodes of the Song of Songs,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980): 55–106.

⁹ For a helpful study of the Song of Solomon as a single collection, see G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 44–49.

¹⁰ Rowley, “The Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” 212. Despite this admission, Rowley concludes that the book is a collection of disconnected love songs.

¹¹ Jack S. Deere, “Song of Songs,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 1010. By progression in subject matter, Deere means the movement from courtship to wedding to maturation of marriage.

¹² For a good sketch of the meaning and historical development of allegory as a literary technique, see Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, 21–24.

between God and the nation of Israel, and Christian interpreters have suggested that the book depicts love between Christ and His bride, the church. The interpretation of the details, however, became quite varied and fanciful.

A. Jewish Allegorical View

Traces of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs are found as early as the Jewish Mishnah (*Ta'anith* 4.8).¹³ This approach was also followed in the Targum, the Midrash Rabbah, and by the medieval Jewish commentators Saadia, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra. The Targum on the Song interpreted the book as expressing the gracious love of God toward His people manifested in periods of Hebrew history from the Exodus until the coming of the Messiah (these historical periods were supposedly discernible in the Song of Songs).¹⁴

B. Christian Allegorical View (Primary Model)

Christian commentators applied a similar allegorical method in their interpretation of the Song, viewing the bridegroom as Jesus Christ and the bride as His church. This has been the dominant Christian view for most of church history, although it has lost support in the last century or two.¹⁵ Exactly when this view was first embraced by Christians is not known. All one can say is that evidence of it exists as early as Hippolytus (ca. A.D. 200), though only fragments of his commentary have survived.¹⁶ Interpretations of the details of the Song have been quite varied, but the following examples suffice to give the general sense of how the text was treated. The one who is brought into the king's chambers (1:4) is said to be those whom Christ had wedded and brought into His church. The breasts in 4:5 are taken to be the Old and New Covenants, and the "hill of frankincense" in 4:6 is said to speak of the eminence to which those who crucify fleshly desires are exalted.

Not surprisingly, Origen became the grand champion of the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs. In addition to a series of homilies, he produced a ten-volume commentary on the book.¹⁷ Origen was influenced by the Jewish interpretation and by his elder contemporary Hippolytus, but he was also a product of several philosophical forces at work in his day,

¹³ Though the Mishnah was set to writing around A.D. 200, the opinions expressed within it often date back for several centuries.

¹⁴ For further information see R. H. Melamed, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 12 (1921–1922): 57–117; and Weston W. Fields, "Early and Medieval Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Grace Theological Journal* 1 (Fall 1980): 221–31. For a translation of the Targum, see Hermann Gollancz, "The Targum to the Song of Songs," *Translations from Hebrew and Aramaic*, 15–90.

¹⁵ For a helpful survey of interpretation during the patristic and medieval period, see Roland E. Murphy, "Patristic and Medieval Exegesis—Help or Hindrance?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (October 1981): 505–16.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Migne, *Fragmenta in Canticum Canticorum*, *Patrologia graeca*, 23, 767; and Gottlieb Nathanael Bonwetsch and H. Achellis, eds., *Hippolytus Werke*, vol. 1: *Hippolytus Kommentar zum Buche Daniel und die Fragmente des Kommentars zum Hohenliede* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897), 341–74.

¹⁷ Unfortunately most of the Greek manuscripts of Origen's massive work on the Song of Songs have been lost or destroyed. Four books were translated into Latin by Rufinus (up to 2:15), and two homilies were translated by Jerome. For a helpful summary of Origen's work and approach, see Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 16–21. Cf. Fikry Meleka, "A Review of Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs," *Coptic Church Review* 1 (Summer 1980): 73–77 and 1 (Fall 1980): 125–29.

namely, asceticism and Gnostic tendencies that viewed the material world as evil. “Origen combined the Platonic and Gnostic attitudes toward sexuality to denature the Canticle and transform it into a spiritual drama free from all carnality. The reader was admonished to mortify the flesh and to take nothing predicated of the Song with reference to bodily functions, but rather to apply everything toward the apprehension of the divine senses of the inner man.”¹⁸

Undoubtedly this diminished view of human sexuality, so prevalent in that day, fanned the flames of the allegorical interpretation of the Song. There were few dissenting voices over the years,¹⁹ and even the greatest Christian leaders succumbed to this approach. As Glickman points out, “No less a theologian than Augustine fell into this error, genuinely espousing the view that the only purpose for intercourse is the bearing of children and that before the fall of Adam it was not necessary even for that.”²⁰

Jerome (331–420), who produced the Latin Vulgate, praised Origen and embraced most of his views. As a result, he was instrumental in introducing the allegorical interpretation into the Western churches. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) preached eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs, covering only the first two chapters. He was given to obsessive allegorical interpretation in an attempt to purge it of any suggestion of “carnal lust.” Many others throughout church history approached the book allegorically, including John Wesley, Matthew Henry, E. W. Hengstenberg, C. F. Keil, and H. A. Ironside.²¹

C. Alternative Christian Allegorical Views

Other types of allegorical interpretations over the years differ from the predominant view in which the main characters represent Christ and the church.

1. The bride as Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Within the Mariology movement of Roman Catholicism, the bride of the Song of Songs has sometimes been allegorically interpreted as Mary, the mother of Jesus. For instance, “you are altogether beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you” (4:7), is used to support the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary. While this is an ancient view, it has been given fresh impetus in recent years through the studies of Rivera, who seems to have linked the allegorical view of the church with Mary. He says that what is true of the church is true in a very special way of her who had such a privileged relationship to the church.²²

¹⁸ Pope, *Song of Songs*, 115.

¹⁹ Theodore of Mopsuestia was one noteworthy exception, but his case will be discussed under the literal views.

²⁰ S. Craig Glickman, *A Song for Lovers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 176.

²¹ For a helpful summary of the allegorical interpretation that flourished in the Middle Ages, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). Murphy notes, “More ‘commentaries’ were written about the Song in the Middle Ages than about any other book in the OT; from the 12th century alone we have some thirty works” (“Patristic and Medieval Exegesis,” 514).

²² P. Alfonso Rivera, “Sentido mariologica del Cantar de los Cantares,” *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 1 (1951): 437–68 and 2 (1952): 25–42. Cf. F. X. Curley, “The Lady of the Canticle,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* 133 (1955): 289–99. According to Murphy, Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129) “developed an approach already suggested in the writings of Ambrose and became the first medieval scholar to apply a thoroughgoing Marian

2. The bride as the state under Solomon's rule.

While rejecting the normal allegorical interpretation, Martin Luther was still not able to embrace the literal erotic sense of the book. So he "propounded the theory that the bride of the Song is the happy and peaceful State under Solomon's rule and that the Song is a hymn in which Solomon thanks God for the divine gift of obedience."²³

3. The prophetic narrative of church history.

Johannes Cocceius (1603–1609), who originally expounded the "federal view" of the imputation of sin for Reformed theology, held a rather novel interpretation of the Song of Songs. He presented the Song as a prophetic narrative of the transactions and events that are to happen in the Church. The divisions of the book correspond to the periods of the history of the Church and to the seven trumpets and the seven seals of the Apocalypse of John. . . . The exposition becomes particularly full and detailed with the Reformation and culminates with the future triumph of Protestantism.²⁴

4. The mystical marriage view.

In addition to the Mariology treatment, another view surfaced within Roman Catholic mystical theology. In this view the Song teaches the "mystical marriage" of the union of the soul with God when the loving awareness of God becomes most transcendent and permanent.²⁵ Supposedly, as the Christian soul passes through a series of mystical states in comprehending this "loving awareness of God," it eventually culminates in a "mystical marriage" in which one is dissolved into the love of God and purified of any self-love.

5. The eucharistic view.

A variation of the preceding view is that the Song refers to the mystical union that takes place between the soul and Christ during Holy Communion.

D. Evaluation of the Allegorical Method

Despite the popularity of the allegorical method, it suffers most from the novelty of suggestion and lack of consensus of meaning. The fanciful interpretations lack objectivity as well as any means of validation. Archer points out that the eighty concubines referred to in Song of Songs 6:8 have been interpreted as eighty heresies destined to plague the church, but there is no validation of this suggestion anywhere outside the Song.²⁶ The bride's two breasts in 4:5 and 7:8 have been variously interpreted as "the church from which we feed; the two testaments, Old and New; the twin precepts of love of God and neighbor; and the Blood and the Water. Gregory of Nyssa found in them the outer and the inner man, united in one sentient being."²⁷

exegesis to the Song" (*The Song of Songs*, 29).

²³ Pope, *Song of Songs*, 126. Cf. Javoslav J. Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), vol. 15; and Endel Kallas, "Martin Luther as Expositor of the Song of Songs [contrasted with Origen]," *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (Autumn 1988): 323–41.

²⁴ Pope, *Song of Songs*, 128–29. Cf. Johannes Cocceius, *Cogitationes de Cantico Canticorum Salomonis ut Icone regni Christi* (Lugduni Batavorum, 1665).

²⁵ For further details see Pope, *Song of Songs*, 183–88.

²⁶ Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 492.

²⁷ Dennis F. Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

Proponents of the allegorical method claim that Scripture elsewhere uses an allegorical method (e.g., Ps 45 and Isa 51:1–17 are said to have allegorical overtones). Also they say Scripture elsewhere uses the marriage relationship to depict a greater spiritual truth, as in the prophets where the marriage relationship bears an analogy to Yahweh's position toward Israel (Isa 54:6; 61:10). Bullock points out that because the book is profuse with symbolism and figures of speech, it lends itself readily to a nonliteral interpretation. This can be illustrated from the perceptive analysis of Gordis on 2:4–5: "When, for example, the maiden, in 2:4f, announces that she is faint with love and asks to be sustained with raisins and apples, she is calling for concrete food, to be sure, but *at the same time*, by her choice of fruits that are symbolic of love, she is indicating that only the satisfaction of her desires will bring her healing."²⁸ Bullock concludes, "Such extravagant symbolism tends to push the interpreter in the direction of allegory or typology, because the richness of the symbols seems difficult to exhaust by means of a literal interpretation."²⁹

However, the Song of Songs makes no suggestion that it should be interpreted allegorically. The presence of figures of speech does not permit interpreters to veer into unrestrained allegorical treatment of the text. Kinlaw notes that this little book does not have a clear progressive story line one usually expects in allegory.³⁰ Rather, the book seems to speak of a historical episode in Solomon's life that should be understood literally. As for symbolic use of the husband-bride picture elsewhere in Scripture, one should observe the uniqueness of such instances. "A fundamental objection to allegorical method, based upon other Old Testament Scriptures . . . is that when the male-female relationship is employed allegorically it is clearly indicated as such, whereas in Canticles there is no hint of an allegorical approach."³¹

As Archer wisely noted, Solomon with his enormous harem presents a poor analogy of the Lord Jesus Christ.³² As appealing as the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs may be to many interpreters' imaginations, such an approach does not hold up to the grammatical-historical-contextual hermeneutic.

IV. THE TYPICAL VIEW

Similar to the allegorical view is the typical view.³³ This approach also sees a connection of the Song with a higher level of fulfillment in Christ and the church (or Christ and the believer), but in a

1991), 5:1203.

²⁸ Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, rev. ed. (New York: KTAV, 1974), 38 (italics his).

²⁹ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 210.

³⁰ Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," 1203.

³¹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1053. See, for example, Ezekiel 16:3 and Hosea 1–3.

³² Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 492.

³³ Proponents of this view include Bishop Robert Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum Praelectiones* (1753); Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 4–6; John Howard Raven, *Old Testament Introduction: General and Special* (New York: Revell, 1910); Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 494; and Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 1:1107.

different way. In the typical view there is a definite affirmation of the historical setting of the Song, even though it ultimately transpires to a higher level of meaning. Hence the poem is based on an actual historical incident in Solomon's life with the Shulammitte country girl.

Whereas allegory denies or ignores the historicity or factualness of the Old Testament account and imposes a deeper, hidden or spiritual meaning on the text, typology recognizes the validity of the Old Testament account in its own right, but then finds in that account a clear, parallel link with some event or teaching in the New Testament which the Old Testament account foreshadows.³⁴

In the typical view the historical setting is given due credit and the correspondence between the story and its ultimate fulfillment need not be as "tight" as in the allegorical approach.

The typical interpretation proceeds on the idea that the type and the antitype do not exactly coincide; . . . the heavenly stamps itself in the earthly, but is yet at the same time immeasurably different from it. Besides, the historico-ethical interpretation is to be regarded as the proper business of the interpreter. But because Solomon is a type (*vaticinium reale*) of the spiritual David in his glory, and earthly love a shadow of the heavenly, and the Song a part of sacred history and of canonical Scripture, we will not omit here and there to indicate that the love subsisting between Christ and His church shadows itself forth in it.³⁵

Unger defends this approach by noting that typological interpretation is found elsewhere in Scripture, particularly in connection with marriage.

The typical view is given abundant scriptural support. Both in the Old Testament and the New Testament the relationship of the Lord's people to the Lord is illustrated under the figure of marriage. Israel is the wife of Jehovah (Hos 2:19–23), in her sin and unbelief now divorced, but yet to be restored (Isa 54:5; Jer 3:1; Hos 1–3) in most wonderful grace and glory, which we believe is the aspect of the mutual love that is highlighted in the book. On the other hand, the Christian church is presented as a virgin espoused to Christ (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:23–32; Rev 19:6–8) and is also typically reflected as a part of the redeemed.³⁶

Admittedly Scripture does at times utilize typical fulfillment, and certain verses or passages may be typico-prophetic (e.g., Ps 22). In fact Solomon is used as a type of Christ elsewhere (2 Sam 7:12–17; 23:1–7; Ps 72; cf. Matt 12:42). The typical view then does have some claim to legitimacy and is certainly more viable than the allegorical method by the mere fact that it is much more restrained. The question, however, is not whether typical interpretation is valid but whether the Song should be so interpreted. The text itself gives no indication that it is intended as typology, nor is there any indication from the New Testament that the Song is to be interpreted or applied Christologically. Thus to interpret the Song of Songs by the typical view is to do so at the interpreter's suggestion, not that of Scripture itself.

³⁴ Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, 24.

³⁵ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 6.

³⁶ Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:1107. For Unger, the fact that the book has a deeper meaning not readily apparent to the natural man is confirmation that his interpretation must be on track. He quotes approvingly Matthew Henry, who said, "It is a parable, which makes divine things more difficult to those who do not love them, but more plain and pleasant to those who do (Matt 13:14,16). Experienced Christians here find a counterpart of their experiences, and to them it is intelligible, while those neither understood it nor relish it who have no part or lot in the matter" (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. [New York: Revell, 1935], 3:1053).

V. THE DRAMA VIEW

In the past two hundred years some interpreters have looked on the Song of Songs as a drama. Some see two main characters to the drama and others see three main characters.

A. The Three-Character Shepherd Hypothesis

In the early nineteenth century Ewald, a German critical scholar, popularized the view that the key to understanding the Song was to recognize three main characters in the book: Solomon, a Shulammite maiden, and a common shepherd.³⁷ Ewald said the Shulammite maiden was in love with her shepherd companion, and tension in the book stems from Solomon's attempt to take her for himself. Ewald "suggested that the king had carried off the maiden by force to his *harim*, but that when she resisted his advances he permitted her to return to the locale of her rustic lover."³⁸ Jacobi suggested that the purpose of the Song was to celebrate the fidelity of true love and that the Shulammite maiden is the heroine of the book for remaining true to her humble shepherd husband. Pope explains the position of Jacobi: "King Solomon was smitten with her beauty and tried to persuade her to forsake her husband and enter the royal harem, tempting her with all the luxuries and splendors of his court. She, however, resisted every temptation and remained true to her humble husband."³⁹

One of the most noteworthy commentaries on the Song of Songs from the nineteenth century was written by Christian D. Ginsburg. Strongly influenced by Jacobi, Ginsburg concluded, "Thus this Song records the real history of a humble but virtuous woman, who, after having been espoused to a man of like humble circumstances, had been tempted in a most alluring manner to abandon him, and to transfer her affections to one of the wisest, and richest of men, but who successfully resisted all temptations, remained faithful to her espousals, and was ultimately rewarded for her virtue."⁴⁰ The adoption of this view in 1891 by S. R. Driver gave even further popularity to this interpretation.⁴¹

One of the difficulties of this view is in seeking to determine when the bride is addressing Solomon and when she is addressing her shepherd-lover. Some have suggested that the "warm sentiments" represent her addresses to her shepherd-lover, and the formal speeches are to the king. Furthermore the admirations for the bride in chapter 4 are said to be from the king in 4:1–7 and from the shepherd in 4:8–15.

The "shepherd hypothesis" helps explain why the lover was depicted in a pastoral role, as well as why the poem terminates in a northern setting. Nevertheless several additional criticisms of this view cast doubt on its validity. First, it presents a picture of attempted seduction by the

³⁷ Georg Heinrich von Ewald, *Das Hohe Lied Salomos übersetzt mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen und linem Anhang über den Prediger* (1826). This view had previously been suggested by J. F. Jacobi (*Das durch eine leichte und ungekünstelte Erklärung von seinen Vorwürfen gerettete Hohe Lied* [Celle, 1772]) and endorsed by F. W. K. Umreit (*Lied der Liebe, das älteste und schönste aus dem Morgenlande*). The earliest proponent of three characters was the Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra in the twelfth century A.D. (though he still interpreted the song allegorically).

³⁸ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1054.

³⁹ Pope, *Song of Songs*, 136.

⁴⁰ Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 11.

⁴¹ S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Scribners' Sons, 1891).

king, who is thus portrayed as the villain of the story. Second, it is difficult to trace any convincing development of the plot. Third, there is nothing definite in the text to indicate the change of male characters. Fourth, it is unlikely that an Israelite shepherd would have the means to provide the luxuries mentioned in some of the passages assigned to the shepherd. Fifth, there is no problem with Solomon also being a shepherd, since he owned many flocks (Eccl 2:7).⁴²

B. The Two-Character Drama

Over a hundred years ago Delitzsch proposed that the Song of Songs was in the form of a drama depicting Solomon falling in love with a Shulammitte girl (i.e., the Song is a dramatic “script” that was originally intended to be acted and/or sung). According to Delitzsch the drama consisted of six acts having two scenes each.⁴³ In this drama Solomon took her to his harem in Jerusalem, where he was purified in his affection from a sensual lust to pure love. Thus Delitzsch rejected the suggestion of those who adopted the “shepherd hypothesis,” as well as those who thought the bride was Pharaoh’s daughter. For Delitzsch, she was a rustic maiden from a remote part of Galilee who was a stranger among the daughters of Jerusalem. Though she was a humble maiden, she was the heroine of the story.

She is a pattern of simple devotedness, naive simplicity, unaffected modesty, moral purity, and frank prudence—a lily of the field, more beautifully adorned than he could claim to be in all his glory. We cannot understand the Song of Songs unless we perceive that it presents before us not only Shulamith’s external attractions, but also all the virtues which make her the ideal of all that is gentlest and noblest in woman. Her words and her silence, her doing and suffering, her enjoyment and self-denial, her conduct as betrothed, as a bride, and as a wife, her behavior towards her mother, her younger sister, and her brothers—all this gives the impression of a beautiful soul in a body formed as it were from the dust of flowers.⁴⁴

Delitzsch is correct in his observation and esteem for the Shulammitte bride. Her virtuous inner beauty does indeed shine so elegantly that Solomon is brought closer to a pure love. What seems paradoxical, however, is that Delitzsch also followed the typical view of the book, that is, he says the book portrays the mystery of the love of Christ and His church. Yet if the bride is the one who showed the king the greater standard of love, how is it that the book could be typical of Christ and His church, for the reality is that Christ knows the greater way of love? Aside from this glaring contradiction, others have rejected Delitzsch’s argument that the Song is really a drama. Kinlaw, for instance, replies that “absence of stage directions, lack of agreement on how many characters or who said what, the lack of any clear signs of division into ‘acts’ or ‘scenes,’ and the fact that dramatic form never really caught on in the East have prevented this approach from gaining any extensive support.”⁴⁵

Carr points out that there is scarcely any of the development or progression in the story line that would be expected of a drama though there are elements of conflict and resolution

⁴² For a helpful summary of the arguments for the shepherd hypothesis and a refutation of this view, see Glickman, *A Song for Lovers*, 178–82.

⁴³ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁵ Kinlaw, “Song of Songs,” 1204–5. Harrison adds, “Whatever dramatic interpretation is adduced faces the insuperable difficulty mentioned by Oesterley, namely, that among the Semites generally, and the Hebrews in particular, drama as such was unknown” (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1054).

(e.g., 3:1–4; 5:2–7). “The long speeches, the lack of character development and of a plot developing to dramatic climax and resolution, all militate against the Song being considered ‘drama.’”⁴⁶

VI. THE MYTHOLOGICAL-CULTIC VIEW

In the early part of the twentieth century a few scholars suggested that the Song of Songs was derived from pagan fertility worship.

According to this view the poem does not really speak of human love at all; rather, it is either the celebration of the sacred marriage of a goddess in the person of a priestess with the king, or else it is the celebration of the victory of the divine king over death and drought. The origins of the Song are thus seen in Canaanite mythology and ritual where the sexual union of the goddess and her once-lost lover were seen as restoring fertility and well-being to the land.⁴⁷

As early as 1906, Wilhelm Erbt suggested that the Song was a collection of poems of Canaanitish origin. These poems, he said, described the love of the sun-god Tammuz⁴⁸ (also called Dod or Shelem) and the moon-goddess Ishtar (under the name of Shalmith).⁴⁹ The idea of similarities between the Song of Songs and Tammuz liturgies was then developed by Theophile J. Meek, who suggested that the Song had been derived from the liturgical rites of the Adonis-Tammuz cult.⁵⁰ In support of this thesis, appeal was made to certain references in the prophets to the Tammuz cult (e.g., Ezek 8:14; Zech 12:11). Shortly thereafter, Wilhelm Wittekindt “envisaged the composition in terms of a Jerusalem liturgy celebrating the union of Ishtar and Tammuz at the spring lunar festival.”⁵¹ Of course the Song was no longer in its original (and more offensive) form, but had been revised so as to render it innocuous and to harmonize it with the worship of Yahweh. Other scholars, such as W. O. E. Oesterley and N. H. Snaith, adopted this view, though with certain variations.

⁴⁶ Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, 34.

⁴⁷ Kinlaw, “Song of Songs,” 1205.

⁴⁸ Tammuz was a Sumerian and Babylonian god of fertility (the Akkadian name is Tammuz and the Sumerian name is Dumuzi). P. W. Gaebelin Jr. states, “Principal rites associated with the god were the annual sacred marriage of the king or governor to a chief priestess insuring the fertility of crops and livestock, and an annual mourning by women of Tammuz’s departure to the underworld when vegetation died in the scorching summer heat” (“Tammuz,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 [1979]: 726).

⁴⁹ Wilhelm Erbt, *Die Hebräer: Kanaan im Zeitalter der hebräischer Walderung und hebräischer Staatengründungen* (1906).

⁵⁰ Theophile J. Meek, “Canticles and the Tammuz Cult,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 39 (1922–23): 1–14; and idem, “The Song of Songs and the Fertility Cult,” in *The Song of Songs: A Symposium*, ed. Wilfred H. Schoff (Philadelphia: Commercial Museum, 1924), 48–79. Meek saw a connection between “my beloved” and the pagan gods, as Bullock explains, “Meek proposed that *dôdî* (usually translated ‘my beloved’) was a proper noun and was none other than the god Addu, or Adad, who in Syria-Palestinian texts was called Addu and Dad, or Dadu, the Syrian counterpart to the Sumerian-Akkadian Tammuz. He cited 5:9 as definitely being attached to the god Dod—‘who but Dod is thy Beloved!’” (Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 213).

⁵¹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1056. Cf. Wilhelm Wittekindt, *Das Hohelied und seine Beziehungen zum Ištar-kult* (1926).

The most difficult problem for this view is the doubt that heathen cultic songs would be admitted into Israel's canon, especially one of a generally immoral character.⁵² Those who have adopted some form of this view are critical scholars who generally date the Song of Songs rather late on linguistic grounds. Yet this period (with its anti-idolatry tendencies), would be the least likely time for such an assimilation to have taken place.

This view would deserve no more mention, if it were not for the fact that Pope in his Anchor Bible commentary takes a view of the Song based on a mythological-cultic foundation. In light of the statement "Love is as strong as death, jealousy is as severe as Sheol" (8:6), Pope connected the Song to ancient Near Eastern funeral feasts. Bullock summarizes Pope's view as follows: "Observing the prominence given the power of love over death in 8:6, he proposes that it may have been associated with an ancient cultic funeral feast at which life was reaffirmed in the most basic ways, involving lavish feasts and sexual orgies."⁵³

Supposedly in these funeral feasts, a cultic reaffirmation of love was made in the face of the power of death, that is, love is the only power capable to cope with death. As Pope explains, "The connection of the Canticle with the funeral feast as expressive of the deepest and most constant human concern for Life and Love in the ever present face of Death adds new insight and appreciation of our pagan predecessors who responded to Death with affirmations and even gross demonstrations of the power and persistence of Life and Love."⁵⁴ Nevertheless Pope's "funeral feast" view suffers from the same criticism as the other cultic views. The strong anti-idolatry mood of the postexilic era makes such an inclusion in the Hebrew canon most doubtful.

VII. THE DREAM VIEW

Some scholars have made the claim that a large portion of the Song of Songs is simply a dream rather than a reflection of actual experience. This is based on certain references within the Song to the bed, to sleep, and to "awakening." One such section is 3:1–5, where verse 1 reads, "On my bed night after night I sought him," and verse 5 states, "That you will not arouse or awaken my love." A similar situation can be found in 5:2–8, with verse 2 including the statement, "I was asleep, but my heart was awake." In addition to these dream sequences, there are said to be reminiscences in 2:3–7 and 8:5, or 2:16–17 and 7:11. In these dreams and reminiscences the protagonists recall the days of their early married life together.

The dream theory was suggested as early as 1813 by a Roman Catholic priest, Johann Leonhard von Hug.⁵⁵ Yet he took the dream theory a step further to suggest that it also contained a political plot. "The dreaming shepherdess represented the people of the ten Northern tribes, the people of Israel, and

⁵² Furthermore it is not even conclusive that Tammuz returned to life from the netherworld. See Samuel Noah Kramer, "Mythology of Sumer and Akkad," in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. Samuel Noah Kramer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 93–137; and idem, "The Sacred Marriage and Solomon's Song of Songs," in *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1969), 85–106.

⁵³ Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 213.

⁵⁴ Pope, *Song of Songs*, 229.

⁵⁵ Johann Leonhard von Hug, *Das Hohe Lied in einer noch unversuchten Deutung* (Freyburg, 1813); and idem, *Schutzschrift für seine Deutung des Hohen Liedes, und derselben weitere Erläuterungen* (Freyburg, 1816).

the burden of the dream is her longing to be reunited with the King of Judah in the formation of a new Solomonic state.”⁵⁶

In 1948 Freehof picked up on the suggestion that the Song reflected a dream, although he did not accept von Hug’s theory of a political plot.⁵⁷

In a more recent exposition of the dream theory, Song of Songs 2:8–8:4 is viewed as a dream.⁵⁸ The book begins with the married state of Solomon and the Shulammitte, but she is fearful and insecure in her new environment. The dream section serves to purge the love relationship as it recounts crucial moments in the relationship (including the wedding). The final section of the book, 8:5–14 (after the dream), is a dialogue on love and trust.

The statements of her love (2:16; 6:3; 7:10) supposedly show a development in the character and growth of her love. According to this view the Song points the blame at the bride, that is, she is the one with the problem of jealousy, and this needs to be overcome by the unifying and purifying effect of Solomon’s love.

The dream theory suffers not only from its novelty (few others have taken this position, though it is not necessarily recent), but from other problems as well. First, there is no clear indication that the bulk of the book is a dream. Second, the purpose of the book must be seen in light of the lesson and conclusion in chapter 8. In that section the bride appears as the “lesson-bearer” and heroine of the book (which suggests that Solomon had the greater problem). Having said this, however, it is probable that 3:1–5 and 5:2–8 do indeed represent dreams, and any analysis of the Song should take this into account. Previous suggestions as to their contribution to the book need further refinement.

VIII. THE LITERAL VIEW

One of the basic principles of hermeneutics is that for any passage the plain, normal meaning should be chosen unless there is clear evidence to the contrary. That the Song of Songs should be understood literally of the romantic and sexual relationship between two lovers has traditionally been the least popular view. However, more attention has been given to this option over the past two hundred years.

In the early church Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428) took a stand for a literal understanding of the Song of Songs, suggesting that it should be read in its plain sense as an erotic

⁵⁶ Pope, *Song of Songs*, 132. In this view the groom is thought to be Hezekiah and the bride is supposedly the ten tribes.

⁵⁷ S. B. Freehof, “The Song of Songs. A General Suggestion,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 39 (1948–49): 397–402. Freehof took 5:2 as the key to the book. Summarizing Freehof’s view, Pope writes, “Further the dream characteristics we allegedly found not only in ch. 5 but throughout the book. The classic dream experience of running through the city and over the field appears constantly, 1:4, 6:1, 7:1 [6:13E], 8:5. The book is full of strange flights and sudden movements, the characteristic activities in dreams” (Pope, *Song of Songs*, 510).

⁵⁸ This section is chosen as the content of the dream because of the refrain in 2:7 and 8:4: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you will not arouse or awaken my love, until she pleases” (2:7), and “I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not arouse or awaken my love, until she pleases” (8:4). These two refrains seem to “bracket” the dream and thereby identify it as such. The same refrain is found in 3:5, but this one differs slightly from the other two. An expression of desire precedes each of the refrains in 2:7 and 8:4: “Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me” (2:6 and 8:3), whereas this expression does not precede the refrain in 3:5.

song.⁵⁹ The popularity of the allegorical approach was so strong, however, that his view was rejected as heresy by the Second Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553.⁶⁰ Consequently the literal view was virtually ignored through the centuries. In the more modern era the literal trend can be traced back to Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786),⁶¹ but it was Christian D. Ginsburg who gave impetus to this view. Although Ginsburg took the three-character shepherd hypothesis, he based his conclusions on a literal understanding of the book. His view is summarized by Bullock: “Thus Ginsburg concluded that the purpose of the book is not to celebrate love, even though that be worthy of canonicity, but *to record an example of virtue*, which is still more worthy of a place in the sacred canon.”⁶²

Following Ginsburg, there has been significantly more interest in a literal approach to the Song of Songs. Several variations of the literal approach have been set forth.

A. A Lyric Expression of Human Love

A few interpreters hold that the Song of Songs is quite simply a celebration in poetic fashion of the bliss of romantic and sexual love between a man and a woman. Carr, for instance, sees the Song as a celebration of the nature of humanity in which male and female express and enjoy their sexuality within an established marital relationship.⁶³ This position has also been followed by Craig Glickman⁶⁴ and Jack S. Deere.⁶⁵

Deere sees the structure and unity of the book in reference to stages in the relationship between Solomon and his bride. “The major sections of the Song deal with courtship (1:2–3:5), a wedding (3:6–5:1), and maturation in marriage (5:2–8:4). The Song concludes with a climactic statement about the nature of love (8:5–7) and an epilogue explaining how the love of the couple in the Song began (8:8–14).”⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Theodore was educated along with the eminent John Chrysostom and in 392 was made bishop of Mopsuestia in Cilicia. He was a prolific writer and renowned interpreter of the Bible, though his image was somewhat tarnished by his pupil Nestorius. In a day when the allegorical method of interpretation was flourishing, Theodore wrote *Against the Allegorists* (though the work was eventually lost). See Rowan A. Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Exegete and Theologian* (Westminster: Faith, 1961), 86–131.

⁶⁰ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1055.

⁶¹ Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 214.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 216 (italics his).

⁶³ Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, 52–54.

⁶⁴ Glickman, *A Song for Lovers*.

⁶⁵ “Song of Songs,” 1009–25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1009. Carr, though holding essentially the same purpose of the book as Deere, disagrees that the book presents stages in the relationship of the couple. In Carr’s opinion certain details from the first section suggest that more than mere courtship is in view. “Several commentators consider the poem to be the description of the wooing, betrothal, marriage, emergence of problems in the marriage, and ultimate reconciliation of the wedded couple. The song then becomes an apologia for pure monogamous love, or a description of the stages in the lovers’ relationship. Attractive as these options are, they run into difficulty with the overt sexuality in the first three chapters” (*The Song of Solomon*, 45–46).

The question to be resolved, then, is whether the “overt sexuality” of the opening chapters represents actual experience or longings for the sexual experience (i.e., longings that do not find fulfillment until after the marriage).

The purpose of the book is to extol human love and marriage. Though at first this seems strange, on reflection it is not surprising for God to have included in the biblical canon a book endorsing the beauty and purity of marital love. . . . since the world views sex so sordidly and perverts and exploits it so persistently and since so many marriages are crumbling because of lack of love, commitment, and devotion, it is advantageous to have a book in the Bible that gives God's endorsement of marital love as wholesome and pure.⁶⁷

The difficulty faced by this view (when Solomon and his bride are held up as a model of romantic love as God intended it), is that Solomon hardly seems a fitting example from what is known elsewhere of his love affairs (1 Kings 11).⁶⁸ Solomon is hardly a model of faithfulness in marriage! Deere at least recognizes the problem and attempts a response: "Perhaps the answer is that the 'beloved' in the Song . . . was his first wife. If so, then the book may have been written soon after his marriage, before he fell into the sin of polygamy."⁶⁹

This is a brave attempt to save his view of the book, but it is doubtful that this suggestion can hold up to the details in the Song itself. Song of Songs 6:8 reads, "There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number."⁷⁰ The most likely conclusion in light of this verse is that the Shulammitte bride was not Solomon's first wife.

B. Seeking and Finding Fulfillment in Love

Closely related to the previous view is that of Meredith Kline, who suggests that the purpose of the Song of Songs is to celebrate the seeking and finding of fulfillment in love.⁷¹ The distinction of this view is the emphasis he puts on the cyclical structure of the book. According to Kline, the book is laid out in a series of cycles that are parallel in structure. These cycles are identified by their opening and closing refrains, and each cycle begins with a longing and concludes with a fulfillment.

Even though these are pertinent observations on the book's structure, the purpose is more precisely found in the moralistic lesson of the final chapter. What the bride says in chapter 8 would suggest that the book's purpose extends beyond merely seeking and finding fulfillment in love.

C. The Anthology View

Several commentators have taken the position that the Song of Songs should be understood in reference to literal human sexual/romantic expression, but not as a unified document with a single theme and purpose. They suggest that the Song of Songs represents instead a collection or anthology of love poems. Those who take this view can be distinguished by whether they see these in connection with Syrian wedding feasts.

1. A collection of disconnected love poems.

⁶⁷ Deere, "Song of Songs," 1009–10.

⁶⁸ "It is difficult to see how this poem taken as an expression of mere human love can be said to furnish a very high standard of marital devotion and affection" (Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 493).

⁶⁹ Deere, "Song of Songs," 1010.

⁷⁰ In his commentary, Deere makes no interpretive suggestion as to the identity of these women (ibid.).

⁷¹ Meredith Kline, "Bible Book of the Month: The Song of Songs," *Christianity Today*, April 27, 1959, 22–23, 39.

A popular view, held by a number of modern scholars, is that the Song does indeed celebrate human romance and sexuality but that it has no unifying thematic organization since the book is a collection of poems rather than a single composition.⁷² This was suggested by J. G. von Herder, a German poet and critic, as early as 1778.⁷³ After a careful survey of the history of the exegesis of the Song from which he concluded that there was as yet no generally accepted interpretation of it, Rowley stated, “The view I adopt finds in it nothing but what it appears to be, lovers’ songs, expressing their delight in one another and the warm emotions of their hearts. All of the other views find in the Song what they bring to it.”⁷⁴

This view does well to give credence to a more literal understanding of the book, but the contention that the Song is a mere collection of disconnected love poems faces a problem in that there is abundant evidence of structuring, repeated refrains, and common literary devices throughout the book that would suggest a single hand behind the composition. Carr, for instance, offers an extended discussion that the Song is a single composition.⁷⁵ Mention should also be made of Kessler’s study of repetitions within the Song that evidence a common hand.⁷⁶ Harrison appropriately remarks, “There is a greater unity of style and theme than would be the case in a diverse collection of lyrics from several authors in widely separated ages.”⁷⁷

2. A collection of wedding songs of the Syrian “wasf” type.

In 1873 Wetzstein, a German consul in Damascus, published a study of contemporary marriage customs in Syria in which he described the seven-day festivities that honored the bride and groom.⁷⁸ In this report “the bride and bridegroom were honored by being

⁷² Proponents of this view include J. G. von Herder, *Lieder der Liebe* (1778); Oesterley, *The Song of Songs*; Rowley, “The Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” 189–234; Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*; F. Brent Knutson, “Canticles,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1 (1979): 606–9; and George A. F. Knight, *The Song of Songs*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

⁷³ Actually von Herder saw some thematic organization to the book, while at the same time taking it as a collection of detached songs. He saw the theme as true and chaste love in its various stages (cf. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 132).

⁷⁴ Rowley, “The Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” 232.

⁷⁵ Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, 44–49. Several rhetorical studies of the Song also argue for a carefully composed unified composition. These will be presented in the forthcoming article by J. Paul Tanner, “The Message of the Song of Songs,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (April–June 1997).

⁷⁶ Kessler, *Some Poetical and Structural Features of the Song of Songs*.

⁷⁷ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1051. For possible evidence of literary unity based on comparative studies with other ancient Near Eastern love songs (especially of ancient Egypt), see John B. White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978); and Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). In his study of Egyptian love songs and their importance for the Song of Songs, Fox has concluded that the Song has literary unity though it lacks a narrative or schematic design. A summary of parallels between the Song and ancient Middle Eastern love lyrics is given in Murphy, *The Song of Songs*.

⁷⁸ J. G. Wetzstein, “Die syrische Dreschtafel,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 5 (1873): 270–302. In an earlier work Ernest Renan noted that there was a certain degree of correspondence between the Song of Songs and

elevated upon the threshing sledge and designated ‘king’ and ‘queen.’ During the festive dancing that followed the declaration that the wedding had been consummated, a song called a *wasf*, referring to the bodily perfection and beauty of the two, was sung.⁷⁹ Then in 1898 Karl Budde developed the theory of Canticles as folk wedding songs,⁸⁰ and this view has since been favored by Otto Eissfeldt.⁸¹

This view suffers from several weaknesses. First, this involves an enormous assumption of similarity of Syrian wedding songs of the 1860s to ancient Judah. Second, the bride of Canticles is never called “queen” as would be expected according to this theory. Third, as Waterman has pointed out, this theory involves too many deletions, transpositions, and modifications of the text.⁸² Fourth, the closely connected structure of the whole poem argues against it being an anthology of originally independent lyrics.

D. The Literal-Didactic View

Several people have taken a position that while the Song should be taken literally with its expressions of romantic and sexual bliss in marriage, at the same time the Song seems to communicate a lesson on marital love that goes even deeper. Hence the Song is didactic as well as literal. There are several slight variations, however, on the exact nature of the moral lesson.

1. Marriage points to a greater love.

Young took the position that the Song not only celebrates the dignity and purity of human love but that it also points to the greater love of Christ.

The Song does celebrate the dignity and purity of human love. This is a fact which has not always been sufficiently stressed. The Song, therefore, is didactic and moral in its purpose. It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is. This, however, does not exhaust the purpose of the book. Not only does it speak of the purity of human love; but, by its very inclusion in the Canon, it reminds us of a love that is purer than our own.⁸³

One should observe that Young’s view is different from both the allegorical and typical view (the Song is not a type but can remind its readers of the love of Christ). In a similar vein Kinlaw has exclaimed that the Song “speaks of marriage as it ought to be,”

Syrian wedding poetry (*Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 1860).

⁷⁹ Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 216. Note should be made of 7:2–7 as well as 4:1–7 and 5:10–16 .

⁸⁰ Karl Budde, *Das Hohelied erklärt in Karl Marti’s kürzer Handkommentar zum Alten Testament*, XVII (1898).

⁸¹ Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

⁸² Leroy Waterman, “*Dôdî* in the Song of Songs,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 35 (1919): 101–10.

⁸³ Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 336.

but there seems to be something more: “there must be something pedagogical and eschatological about marriage.”⁸⁴

A weakness in this view is that it does not seriously take into account the moral lesson at the climax of the book in chapter 8, particularly the “jealousy” motif. Much truth is in this view, but it seems to fall a bit short of the fully intended purpose of the author by not focusing on the moral lesson the author himself provides.

2. The affirmation of God-ordained sex while elevating exclusiveness and fidelity.

In this view the Song celebrates the God-ordained wholesomeness of sex, but also indicates that love is more than sex, as attested by the elements of exclusiveness and fidelity in the Song.⁸⁵ Laurin’s explanation is insightful.

The contemporary world has popularized infidelity to the marriage bond, has televised comedies on the theme of adultery, and has left the impression that love is where you find it in the satisfaction of lust. Not so the Song of Songs. It speaks of the exclusive love of two people, each wrapped up in the other, each pure, each faithful to the other, each innocent of any involvement with others. So the maiden tells her lover that she has reserved the fruits of love exclusively for him (7:13).⁸⁶

This view is refreshing in that it not only takes a literal view of the book in the affirmation of marital love and sexual union, but it also emphasizes a key ingredient lacking in the other interpretations, namely, the subject of fidelity and devotion in marriage. This is the topic that comes out of the moral lesson in the climactic chapter of the book, and Laurin is correct in highlighting this.⁸⁷

However, this interpretation needs some moderate correction. The problem is that it is hardly believable that the two are “each wrapped up in the other, each pure, each faithful to the other, each innocent of any involvement with others.” That may be true of the bride, but it seems far from true of Solomon. If the book addresses the subject of marital fidelity and devotion, it does not do so through Solomon as a model.

⁸⁴ Kinlaw, “Song of Songs,” 1207–8 (italics his).

⁸⁵ Proponents here include Dempsey, “The Interpretation and Use of the Song of Songs”; Robert B. Laurin, “The Life of True Love: The Song of Songs and Its Modern Message,” *Christianity Today*, August 3, 1962, 10–11; and Roland E. Murphy, “The Canticum of Canticles in the Confraternity Version,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* 133 (1955): 87–98; also see idem, “The Structure of the Canticum of Canticles,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 11 (1949): 381–91; and idem, “Review of A. Bea, *Canticum Cantorum Salomonis*,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 15 (1953): 501–5.

⁸⁶ Laurin, “The Life of True Love,” 11. Murphy takes a similar position, “In the literal sense the poem describes human love. Accordingly, the divine purpose in inspiring such a work would be to inculcate that the love He has created in mankind is a sacred thing, and fidelity its prime characteristic” (“The Canticum of Canticles in the Confraternity Version,” 98).

⁸⁷ Pope objects to the suggestion of Laurin that exclusiveness and fidelity are in view. He replies, “The element of exclusiveness, be it noted, is nowhere explicit in the Canticles, in this verse or elsewhere, but is a presumption generally read into the text” (*Song of Songs*, 194). He also objects to Laurin’s interpretation of the “neck like a tower” in 4:4 and 7:4–5 as a symbol of inaccessibility, purity, and virginity. Whatever may be said of that particular interpretation, Pope’s argument against the element of exclusiveness does not seem valid. One only need reflect carefully on the topics of “seal,” “jealousy,” and “wall” in chapter 8 to see that the author is clearly saying something about exclusiveness and fidelity.

IX. CONCLUSION

In this survey of the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs, a number of views on the book were seen to have weaknesses. Certainly the allegorical method is not the route to take, nor are some of the novel interpretations such as the mythological-cultic view and the Syrian wedding feast view. These interpretive schemes are guilty of reading too much into the meaning, rather than allowing the text to speak for itself. With no further guideline from the New Testament, the best approach to take—the one most consistent with a grammatical-historical-contextual hermeneutic—is the literal one in which Solomon and his bride are used to address the topic of the romantic and sexual experience within God-ordained marriage. The book, however, seems to be saying something more in light of the “hints” and moralistic lesson found in chapter 8, the climax of the book. Hence the literal-didactic view seems to be the best approach to take. Though there are a few who approach the book with the literal-didactic view, those surveyed in this article seem to lack precision as to what this “lesson” is. Laurin comes close in his highlighting of marital fidelity and devotion, but his particular construction of this model needs refinement (Solomon is certainly not a man innocent of any involvement with others).

An accurate understanding of the book is to be found along the lines of the literal-didactic view, while stressing the elements of fidelity and devotion. However, one needs to account for the historical portrait of Solomon as a man of many lovers. Also there is validity in viewing sections 3:1–5 and 5:2–8 as dream interludes, possibly serving to witness to the fears and apprehensions the bride had about their relationship. Actually the bride is the real heroine of the book, a fact attested by the role she has in the final chapter of delivering a lesson on love and its jealousy.