

A PARABOLIC VIEW OF THE SONG OF SOLOMON

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No book in the Old Testament, and perhaps in the entire Bible, has been interpreted in so many different ways as the Song of Solomon. More than two hundred commentaries or extensive treatments of it have been published during the long history of its interpretation. For all the ingenious attention it has received, the book has never been widely accepted for public or private reading, or for detailed exposition in the pulpit.

The most obvious reason for this studied inattention is its apparent emphasis on the physical aspects of human love. Expositors have always found it difficult or awkward to explain to a mixed audience that many of its expressions did not mean what they seemed to say. Mere reference to such texts as "he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts," or "our bed is green," or mention of the Shulammité's breasts or navel, was not permissible out of respect for the dignity of public sacred discourse.

A no less important reason for ignoring the Song is its genuine obscurity in many places. Simple reading of the book does not yield any obvious meaning, and accepted commentaries present widely differing views even within the broad limits of the accepted allegorical approach. Insight gained by some of the naturalistic interpreters might have gained wider acceptance except for their frequent disregard for its claim to canonicity and inspiration, and their irreverent handling of the text.

From the beginning the allegorical view of the book has easily dominated the field of interpretation. First among the Jews, and occasionally until the nineteenth century, there were those who asserted that the book was to be understood as a song or songs of merely human love. But as early as the Synod of Jamnia in A.D. 90 the Jews condemned the literal view of the Song. In the Reformation period Castellio's literal view met with similar rejection among both Protestants and Catholics, and Luis de Leon's commentary with its tendency in the same direction, earned him a place in the Inquisition prison for nearly five years.

Reaction took place in nineteenth-century Germany among the literary critics of the Tübingen school, and Gratz in particular declared that the Song was that of human, physical love and had no rightful place in the Scriptures. Critics claimed that it had been received into the canon on the false supposition that it was an allegory. In the same era (1853) the conservative scholar Hengstenberg wrote his allegorical commentary on the Song and thereby provided the basis for the treatment given it in the popular Jamieson, Fausset and Brown commentary on the whole Bible. In 1850 Soltz had advanced the typical approach to the Song, but reverted in his commentary to allegorism. In 1875 Delitzsch prepared a more satisfactory commentary and largely established the typical ap-

proach to the Song for years to come. However, his view did not completely replace the allegorical approach.

In the present century a considerable number of conservative interpreters have espoused the literal view, finding no rational objection to understanding physical love as the main idea of the Song. These men rarely refer it in any sense to the redemption theme found throughout the rest of Scripture.

Other approaches to the Song have had varying degrees of acceptance. They include the dramatic and the cult-mythological views. The parabolic approach, barely hinted by Schaff, Godet and Terry in the last century, and advanced in one way or another by E. Tobac, Luis Macchi, E. J. Young, F. Spadafora and Johannes G. Vos, has apparently never been defined, and much less expanded into a commentary by its advocates.

In agreement with the definition of an allegory, the Song interpreted in this manner must yield spiritual meaning in all of its details. The allegorical principle stumbles as it attempts to press for meaning in its details, a fact which allowed Delitzsch to reject this method with vigorous language. The typical method expounded by him has its own drawbacks: it requires a genuine historical basis in order to yield a typical meaning, but is unable to establish its historicity. Furthermore, all of its rich, suggestive detail must be reluctantly discarded in the interest of establishing one central truth, such as the fact that human love is a type of the divine.

The parabolic treatment of the Song stands approximately midway between the allegorical and the typical, and regards the various sections of the book as illustrative of spiritual truth without calling undue attention to its details, much after the manner of interpreting the New Testament parables. The question of the historicity of the Song has no bearing on its interpretation, any more than in the case of the parables of Christ.

To assert that the parabolic method should be applied to the Song is not to say that the Song is a parable. Whereas both the Old and the New Testaments have blocks of teaching described as parables, the Song is not a parable in this exact literary sense. It is parabolic much as the major part of Jesus' teaching was parabolic. That teaching was marked by a variety of literary forms whose chief characteristic was that of one or another kind of similitude, both implied and expressly stated, and used to set forth spiritual truth.

Better definition of the parabolic method as applied to the Song is to be found through examination of the Old Testament term *mashal*, translated in the New by the word *parabole*. As applied to the parables of Jesus *parabole* came to describe the specific literary form of the parables as Jesus used them, rather than to represent the breadth of the Hebrew term *mashal*. This term embraces a wide variety of meanings, each of which may be translated into English by more exact terminology according to the precise literary characteristics of each. The Brown, Driver and Briggs lexicon gives the following meanings: proverb, parable, by-word,

popular wisdom, prophetic figurative discourse, similitude, poem, ode, didactic psalm, sentences of ethical wisdom, and the 3000 pieces ascribed to Solomon. In the Hebrew text the term is also applied to a number of passages like Ezekiel 17:2ff, which have a clear allegorical character.

The inclusion of all these ideas under the single term *mashal* leads readily to the conclusion that the separate concepts as we know them today had no well-defined limits in Hebrew usage. It therefore does injustice to any passage of the Old Testament described as a *mashal*, to insist on interpreting it according to our modern definitions of allegory, type, parable, or other literary form. It would be hard to find a better term than *mashal* to describe any such passage, once we have decided that it does indeed fall into this broad category.

But are we helped or hindered in interpreting the Song as a *mashal*? Does the breadth of the term introduce even wilder confusion than we have by using the allegorical method? Or does it set us at liberty from the artificial limitations imposed by our current definitions? I am persuaded that the latter is the case.

The various ideas of allegory, type, parable, etc., are all embraced by the term. Thus we are at liberty to consider that any of these forms may appear within the Song wherever the immediate language or context points in this direction. Clearly, great care must be exercised in order to produce satisfactory exegesis; but no longer is the interpreter under any kind of constraint to find spiritual meaning where none seems to be present, nor is he restrained from finding spiritual significance merely because his anti-allegorical predisposition forbids him to do so. He is free to see spiritual intent wherever it appears and to refrain from exaggerated interpretation where his better judgment so dictates.

When the parabolic method is applied to the Song it produces many striking differences of interpretation, especially when compared to the older allegorical method.

In 1:5, 6, the bride of the Song asserts her own comeliness in spite of her dark color, and then explains that she is black because she was made to care for her brothers' vineyards. Allegorists most frequently explain the blackness as sin, and understand the keeping of her brothers' vineyards as the result of the anger of the Jews against Christ. At the same time, neglect of the bride's own vineyard is taken to mean neglect of one's private spiritual life.

This type of detailed interpretation depends on the accidental similarity of the language to other portions of Scripture. In this particular case the resulting interpretation is lacking in unity of thought.

The parabolic view sees in the passage a natural story first of all, which must necessarily have literary unity. The story is of a young woman who was obliged by her half-brothers' anger, and by her position in the rural Hebrew family to care for the vineyards while they did the masculine work of tending the flocks. Reason for their anger has no direct bearing on the event being described. Constant exposure to the tropical sun burned her skin to deep swarthinness, contrary to the normal desires

of young women of most every age and climate. Desiring to protect her skin in the interest of her appearance, she is nevertheless obliged to neglect all cosmetic considerations because of the nature of her duties. Her own "vineyard" is not a literal one like those she labored in, but is that which is her most natural concern, her personal appearance.

At the same time, beauty shines through her swarthy complexion. But her beauty is not altogether physical; rather it is the beauty of her character as revealed by the faithful execution of her duties. This beauty had not gone unnoticed by the wise king Solomon, and had commended her, at least in part, to the attention of the king.

The allegorical method often produces a variety of meanings within a single context, according to the external form of the language, but yielding no genuine unity. There is no clear relation here between the sin of the bride as supposed by the idea of blackness, the persecution of Christ by the Jews as indicated by the incensed "mother's sons," and the spiritual neglect apparently indicated by the expression "mine own vineyard have I not kept."

The parabolic method sees the subject under discussion as an event which the bride has related by way of illustrating a spiritual truth similar to the real life situation in which she portrays herself. That message says in effect that the beauty of character as demonstrated by the discharge of normal duties may be observed by wise men such as Solomon, or by God Himself, who is in some sense represented in the person of Solomon. In this view, sin is not a part of the picture, nor is the perverse activity of the natural brothers of Christ.

Another case in point is found in 2:14, where the bride is said to be a dove "in the clefts of the rock." This expression has been most often referred to the wounds of Christ, and has found almost permanent interpretation in the words of the hymn, "He hideth my soul in the clefts of the rock. . . ." The rock is understood to be Christ, and the clefts as His wounds: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee."

The parabolic method handles the passage differently. Here is the young lover come to his promised one in the springtime. He calls to her in the attempt to woo her away from her home to join him in matrimony. When she hesitates and refuses to show herself from within her home, the young lover increases the passion of his plea. He likens her to a bird that is inaccessible to him. She hides from him like a dove in the crevasses of a high rocky wall, "in the covert of the steep place." The picture is that of one hiding *from* her lover, not *in* him. It is not the picture of one who has fled for refuge to the wounds of Christ. The lover now pleads with her to let him see her face to hear her voice. The parabolic message is that of God seeking men to come to Him, or of Christ calling His people to full consecration.

Allegorical interpreters invariably have difficulty finding satisfactory spiritual significance in the details of those lengthy eulogies of the bride's physical charms (4:1-6; 6:4-7; 7:1-9) and of the beloved (5:10-16).

Individual verses or expressions are sometimes easily spiritualized, but interpreters are hardly in agreement when it comes to the meaning of hair, teeth, eyes, lips, neck, breasts, cheeks, hands, temples, thighs, etc.

The parabolic view obviates this type of difficulty by seeing mainly the idea of appreciation or praise for the person of the loved one, without finding specific parallels between physical features and moral or spiritual qualities. At the same time, expressions such as "the fairest of ten thousand," and "he is altogether lovely" need not be limited in their application because of the parabolic concept: the *mashal* idea allows for wider variation in the manner of presenting spiritual truth than any of the more limited ideas which it embraces.

While the application of the *mashal* concept to the Song does not automatically rid the poem of all its difficulties, the major barrier to its interpretation and practical use appears to be removed. Lesser problems of interpretation yield more readily to the application of pertinent hermeneutical principles.

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