

## THE ALLEGORY OF THE CANTICLE OF CANTICLES

Around the lilies of the Canticle of Canticles there clusters a veritable thorn-bush of enigmas and problems. It is a rare and brave theologian who will risk scratching himself by plucking a flower, and even spiritual writers in modern times seem to have misgivings in the matter, preferring to graze their sheep on safer, less elevated pastures. It was not always so. In former days the Canticle served not only as a book of points for meditation, but also as an *enchiridion* of proof-texts, and St John of the Cross on his death-bed preferred its music to that of the prayers for the dying.

Perhaps the very diversity and extravagance of uses for which the words of the Canticle have been enlisted give the modern theologian pause before he quotes from it. But undoubtedly the chief source of our present-day hesitation springs from an uncertainty about the immediate literal sense of the work. As long as there remains a suspicion that it is first and foremost a human love song, we do well to be cautious in drawing out spiritual meanings from the text, which may be nothing more than pious accommodations.

But there is little genuine reason for suspicion. Recent exegesis of the Canticle by both Catholic and Protestant scholars, while raising many new problems and possibilities, has made it increasingly difficult to cast doubt upon the immediate spiritual sense of the work. The barrage of naturalist criticism which opened up in the middle of the nineteenth century has subsided, and as the smoke clears the frail lilies and cooing turtle-doves remain much as they did before, signs of God's jealous love for His people. If any new chinks have appeared in the wall, it is only so that the face of the divine lover may show through even more clearly.

### *Literary unity*

It is possible from a mere examination of the text of the Canticle to come to some preliminary judgments about its unity and literary form. Without prejudging the disputed questions of its origin, its inclusion in the canon of Scripture, its purpose, and the identity and number of its protagonists, it can be asserted with confidence that it is love-poetry, and that (in its present form at any rate) it originates from the people of the Bible. This assertion already establishes a degree of literary unity in the book ; at the very least it is a collection of Hebrew love-poems.

But the repetition and interweaving of imagery combined with the recurrence of refrains suggest that the Canticle is more than just an anthology of Hebrew love-poetry. Twice in the first three chapters there is the refrain adjuring the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken the beloved until she herself wills it (2:7 ; 3:5) and it occurs again near the end of the book (8:4). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this refrain marks the end of a section, and this supposition will mark off at least two sections (1:1-2:7 ; 2:8-3:5). These two sections, even if they are regarded as separate poems, are closely analogous, not only in the repose of their conclusion, but also in the excitement which runs through them, and which is only resolved in the final lines. It is a theme of search and discovery, separation and union, tension and repose. The first poem begins with separation : ' O that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth . . . Draw me after you, let us make haste . . . Tell me, whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock ' (1:2.4.7) ; but ends with the calm of satisfied love : ' His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the field, that you stir not up, nor awaken my beloved until she herself pleases ' (2:6-7). Similarly the second poem begins with separation and search : ' The voice of my beloved . . . behold there he stands behind our wall . . . upon my bed by night, I sought him whom my soul loves ; I sought him but found him not ; I called him but he gave no answer ' (2:8.9 ; 3:1) ; and ends with union and contentment : ' I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go . . . I adjure you . . . ' etc. (3:4.5).

The same pattern is repeated in what follows, but it is less easy to fix divisions between separate poems until the refrain is taken up again in 8:4. Both Robert and Bea make two divisions, but they differ as to where they should be made and also as to their significance. Both these editors seem to have been moved more by a desire for regularity and pattern than by the demands of the text. Of the two Bea's is the more consistent. He sees in the Canticle six stages of the love-story :<sup>1</sup>

1:2 -2:7	The beginning of love
2:8 -3:5	The growth of love
3:6 -5:1	Bride led to the Bridegroom
5:2 -6:10	Test and proof of love
6:11-8:4	Excellence and joys of the Bride
8:5 -8:14	Union and perpetual stability.

This seems very satisfactory at first sight, but it is difficult to see how Bea can reconcile the many recurring themes and refrains with so

<sup>1</sup> Bea, *Canticum Canticorum* (Rome 1953), pp. 9-10

ordered a pattern of progress. For instance the embrace ('His left hand is under my head' etc.) must be considered to be the beginning of love in 2:6, but its consummation in 8:3. The search for the lover in 5:6f. is accounted as a test and proof of the beloved, but the very similar situation in 3:1-3 has to be labelled as the bride being led to the bridegroom. Such difficulties could be multiplied almost indefinitely.

Robert seems to be nearer to truth when he sees the Canticle as a series of songs, each with the same basic theme of tension and repose.<sup>1</sup> But he is betrayed into inconsistency when he divides the book into five fairly equal parts. This does violence to the text. It should be noticed that throughout the book there are moments of relative repose and peace, but (at least in the first two sections which we have marked off) this peace is only definitive in the adjuration-refrain. Robert makes the third poem end with the image of the feast of love (5:1), and there is no doubt that this is a restful passage; but it is not evidently more so than many of the verses which precede it (notably 4:1-7; 4:10), and yet which are interspersed with 'tension' images (4:8.16). Even if this difficulty is explained there can be no excuse for the utterly divergent meanings that Robert's division gives the other great refrain of the Canticle: 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.' In 2:16, when it first occurs, it is firmly embedded in a 'tension' passage, immediately preceding the search in 3:1sq. In 6:3, however, Robert understands it to be a concluding refrain, the very expression of complete repose.

Other editors divide the text differently. Some of their conclusions will necessarily have to be touched on later. But for this preliminary survey of the shape of the Canticle it is sufficient to observe that no division of the book into separate poems is entirely satisfactory. On the other hand it is quite certain that the Canticle has a marked literary unity. It is a love-poem around the theme of separation and union. Although it has many passages of lyrical description of the lovers and their love, it is really narrative in form; it tells the story of how the lovers found each other again after being separated. The development of the story is cyclic. Themes hinted at in early verses are taken up again and made more explicit in later ones; phrases and refrains that are repeated take on richer meanings at each repetition. Three main divisions emerge, each ending with the adjuration-refrain. It is possible and easy to subdivide these separate 'poems' into smaller and smaller sections, but it does not seem particularly profitable to do so. For the Canticle is not an elaborate literary construction built up according to a logical pattern out of so many closely articulated,

<sup>1</sup> *Bible de Jérusalem* in loco. Cf. also *Initiation Biblique* (Paris 1954), p. 197

interdependent parts. It is something much simpler and more subtle than that. Its progress is a progress not in plot but in depth. It states and restates its theme through innumerable interweaving images ; it tells and retells its story in various ways. Its artistry is that the repetitions and re-echoings do not cheapen, but rather increase and deepen the haunting and harmonious charm of its song.

*Some naturalistic interpretations*

Origen was perhaps the first to call the Canticle of Canticles a drama, and he has been followed by many others, including John Milton and Cornelius a Lapide.<sup>1</sup> But the suggestion seems never to have been strictly and consistently applied in a naturalistic sense until the last century.

The interpretation has taken many forms. Some have seen the Canticle as a love-drama with only two characters, Solomon and a Shulamite shepherdess. But this theory labours under a host of obvious difficulties. Solomon has to play the unlikely part of a shepherd-lad, and the story ends not in the royal palace, but in the girl's country village. A protestation of unique and undying love sounds particularly hollow on the lips of one to whom popular tradition ascribed 700 wives and 300 concubines. A more plausible suggestion is that there are at least three main characters: Solomon, the Shulamite shepherdess, and the rustic lover. Renan elaborated this eternal triangle theme with a supporting cast of seven minor characters and two separate choruses,<sup>2</sup> but most followers of the dramatic interpretation prefer a greater economy of cast. This is, after all, only a production in eight short chapters ; it can hardly support the apparatus of a Hollywood extravaganza. Almost all who propound the drama theory agree on the essentials of the plot : Solomon carries away the shepherd-girl to his harem and flatters her with his blandishments, but she remains faithful to her shepherd lover and eventually Solomon lets her return home to him.

Though this view has been quite commonly held, there is little evidence for it in the text, and still less in the tradition from which the Canticle springs. Granted that there are clear signs of dialogue, there is no hint of the vast superstructure of stage-directions, asides, cross-purposes and off-stage explanations which a consistent reconstruction requires. The Pouget-Guitton edition is typical. The first few verses in their version run as follows :

<sup>1</sup> References in H. H. Rowley ; ' The Interpretation of the Song of Songs,' *Essays on the Old Testament* (London 1952), pp. 189-234

<sup>2</sup> E. Renan, *Le Cantique des Cantiques traduit de l'hébreu avec une étude sur le plan, l'âge et le caractère du poème* (Paris 1860).

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Scene I

(The Shulamite, the Daughters of Jerusalem)

THE SHULAMITE (*dreaming of her lover*)

Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth !

(*speaking to her lover as if he were present*)

For your love is better than wine.

Your perfumes are exquisitely fragrant ;

Your name is like oil poured out.

That is why the maidens love you.

Take me to you !

THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM (*rapt with enthusiasm*)

We hasten after you.

THE SHULAMITE (*coming back to reality*)

The king has brought me into his chambers.

THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM

We shall exult and rejoice on your account,

We shall extol your love which is better than wine.

How right it is that you should be loved !<sup>1</sup>

But even such a proliferation of stage-directions is not sufficient to explain what is happening, and a footnote has to be appended to indicate that while the Shulamite is in fact addressing her lover, her companions imagine that she is recounting her love for the king.<sup>2</sup>

In the next scene the following dialogue takes place between Solomon and the Shulamite :

SOLOMON

How beautiful you are, my beloved, how beautiful you are !

Your eyes are like doves.

THE SHULAMITE

How beautiful you are, my love, how lovely you are !

Our couch is green.

SOLOMON

The beams of our house are cedar-wood

Our panelling is of cypress.

(I : 15-17)<sup>3</sup>

These short and apparently simple lines of endearment require yet another word of explanation from the editors to show that beneath even the most unaffected protestations of love there are deep cross-currents and hidden meanings. 'The Shulamite is letting the king know that she loves a countryman.' It is somewhat disconcerting

<sup>1</sup> Pouget-Guitton, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris 1934), p. 151

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, 152

<sup>3</sup> *op. cit.*, 155

when a man declares his love that the lady should echo his protestations so faithfully, except that when she says 'you' she is in fact speaking to some unnamed, absent third person. Even the wisdom of Solomon, apparently, is not equal to the task of unravelling her meaning, for the editors add: 'Solomon does not understand or want to trouble. He imagines that the Shulamite is telling him of her taste for rustic furniture. In his palace also she will find cedar and cypress.'<sup>1</sup>

With a little ingenuity in reading between the lines and by the liberal insertion of directions, explanations and comments the text of the Canticle can be made to yield a plot that would interest a quick-witted Victorian audience, thirsty for romance and melodrama. But this is to go far beyond the text as we have it and to depart completely from the world in which and for which the Canticle was written. Is it likely that the sole surviving example of Israelite drama should make such subtle and baffling use of irony, and should depend so entirely on a complex and paradoxical web of cross-purposes and misunderstanding? Any dramatic reconstruction of the Canticle must frequently make speeches mean the exact reverse of what they seem to mean; and this requires not only the insertion of numerous stage-directions for which there is not a scrap of textual or other evidence, but also an audience which was capable of sorting out an almost surrealist kaleidoscope of allusion and irony. What a contrast between the candid protestations of love and the oblique hints of an eternal-triangle theme! Furthermore, it is not at all evident that this theme held such fascination for the people of Israel as it does for the modern novelist and playwright. What is certain, however, is that Israel had a horror of drama as a gentile perversion akin to, if not directly involving, idolatry.<sup>2</sup> It is no use appealing to the so-called drama of the Book of Job for proof that the Israelites could accept the dramatic form without religious scruple. For in Job there is a static situation in which the characters hold a theological discussion; all the action and development of the story is conveyed through straightforward narrative. But the Canticle in any dramatic reconstruction is necessarily a drama of action. There is human activity, the interplay of motive and character, a chain of events and a dénouement. Jewish religious sentiment is unlikely to have favoured and preserved a production so reeking of hellenism, even if it had been written for private perusal only. Against the opinion of many reputable commentators it must be concluded that the three-character drama of the Canticle is a flimsy web of improbable and unsupported conjecture.

A more commonly held interpretation of the Canticle is that it is

<sup>1</sup> op. cit., *ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.8.1

an Epithalamium or collection of marriage odes. Striking parallels in style and phraseology can be found in Egyptian contemporary literature, and even love-songs heard in twentieth-century Palestine bear an obvious resemblance to the Canticle. A common feature of all this love-poetry, both ancient and modern, is its candour and boldness. There is a sensuous dwelling on the physical beauty of the loved one, especially on those erotic parts about which Western poetry is more discreet. For instance, in a collection of love-songs popular in Palestine (apparently among all races and religions) in the first quarter of this century the breasts of the beloved are constantly compared to pomegranates, clusters of grapes and hills, the thighs to columns of marble, and the navel is said to resemble a tiny coffee-cup, able to hold an ounce of oil.<sup>1</sup> Müller, de Martino, Dalman and Stephan have done much painstaking research which clearly shows that the Canticle's sensuousness can be paralleled in the love-poetry of the whole of the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

But it is false to conclude from resemblances and parallels to identity of genre. The vocabulary of the Canticle is extremely refined. There are many biblical *hapax legomena*, seven of which have no reference to love, and therefore are not simply words which are demanded by the uniqueness of the subject-matter.<sup>3</sup> The luxurious language, the subtlety and evocativeness of allusion, the almost academic knowledge of foreign plants which is revealed, all suggest that the Canticle is not a product of the people. Rather it is an elaborate and highly polished poetical gem.

Above all, however, it is the omissions which make the Canticle impossible to interpret as a naturalistic epithalamium. At no point is any marriage celebrated or even suggested. There is no mention of the partners' fathers, though it is certain that their consent would have been required for a valid marriage.<sup>4</sup> Sexual union between the partners is evoked throughout, but there is no mention of the procreation of children—a feature that could hardly have been omitted from any marriage song in Israel where the fecundity of marriage was considered so especial a blessing.

Perhaps the most outlandish naturalist interpretation of the Canticle is the theory, proposed in 1925 by L. Waterman, that it is a political pamphlet originating in the Northern Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Waterman suggests

<sup>1</sup> St H. Stephen, 'Modern Palestinian Parallels to the Song of Songs,' *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* (1922), pp. 199-278

<sup>2</sup> The findings of Müller, de Martino and Dalman are summarised by V. Zapletal O.P., *Das Hohe Lied* (Freiburg 1907), pp. 7-15

<sup>3</sup> A. Feuillet, 'La formule d'appartenance mutuelle,' *Revue biblique* (1961), pp. 5-38

<sup>4</sup> de Vaux, *Institutions*, I, pp. 52-4

<sup>5</sup> L. Waterman, 'The Role of Solomon in the Song of Songs,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 44 (1925), pp. 171-87

that a Babylonian fertility myth has been adapted as a piece of anti-Solomon propaganda, representing Solomon as Nergal, king of the underworld. In the original myth Nergal imprisons the goddess Ishtar who pines for her true love, Tammuz, the shepherd, and is eventually reunited with him. The Israelite adaptation of this story is therefore not unlike the eternal-triangle theme already discussed: a maiden is taken to Solomon's harem, but despite all his blandishments she remains true to her lover. According to Waterman Solomon is represented as offering the girl riches and trinkets, but is unable to offer her love. This apparently is conveyed by the grotesque and ludicrous way in which he addresses her. Passages which have always been considered as the expression of ardent desire are understood by Waterman so woodenly and unsympathetically that they become sheer slander, and turn King Solomon into a figure of fun. This is Waterman's commentary of the opening verses of Chapter Four: <sup>1</sup>

He compares separate items of her features and form to various objects in a manner that is often decidedly or manifestly grotesque, e.g., her hair is likened to the dingy, shaggy and multicolored effect of a flock of goats, with the figure drawn in such a fashion as to give the impression that she was also partially bald (4:1b). She is complimented for having all her teeth, but by a figure that shows them to be horribly uneven (2:2 [*sic*. Presumably 4:2]), while in the very next breath he uses a figure which pictures her mouth as that of an old woman who has lost all her teeth. He likens her eyes to doves but admits that he can't see them because her hair hangs down so as to cover them (4:1). In the same manner he likens her temple to the cross section of a pomegranate but also admits that he can't really see them [*sic*] because her locks obscure them (4:3b). Her neck is described in a manner to suggest the earliest recorded case of goitre.

Once these descriptive passages have been read in this ludicrous way it is easy to see how they fit into Waterman's theory that the Canticle was originally part of the Tammuz mythology. 'The king's description of the maiden,' he writes, 'as "terrible" in aspect and with unkempt head, with graying, falling hair may have served some other purpose originally than the mere gargoyle effect that now appears. It reminds us of the plague with which Ishtar was smitten upon her arrival before the ruler of the underworld.'<sup>2</sup>

This interpretation need not delay us long. It runs into all the difficulties of the simple naturalistic love-drama, besides a great many additional ones. It would be easy to interpret passages which Waterman would put into the mouth of the bride or the shepherd-hero in the same grotesque way in which Solomon's words are understood. Not every dashing lover would like to be told that his body is as stiff and cold as ivory, and pock-marked as though it were encrusted with

<sup>1</sup> op. cit., 179-80

<sup>2</sup> op. cit., 181



sapphires! (5:14b). But this variation of the love-drama theme deserves mention here, despite its inconsistencies and absurdities, because it takes account of those cultic overtones which have now to be considered.

### *The cultic interpretation*

H. H. Rowley, writing in 1937, considered that 'there is nothing on all fours with the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs.' According to him the Canticle could 'be read through without of itself suggesting any of the various meanings the allegorists have read into it.'<sup>1</sup> The opinion has a curiously dated ring now. Recent Protestant commentators have increasingly stressed the use of the Canticle in the cult and in doing so have drawn closer and closer to the traditional allegorical interpretation. For them the Canticle can be explained most adequately, if not completely, in terms of the love-story between Yahweh and His people. Helmer Ringgren is typical when he concludes that though snatches of profane songs have been included in the Canticle and have been imperfectly assimilated into its allegorical pattern, nevertheless the bulk of the work is a self-conscious literary development of the prophetic bride-theme.<sup>2</sup>

This conclusion is unexceptionable and satisfying, even though it is possible to find fault with the reasoning which has led to it.

Already in the first quarter of the twentieth century it was observed that the Canticle had many echoes in style and content of Sumerian songs on the marriage between Tammuz and Ishtar. Ringgren, in common with others, traces a direct line of descent from these Sumerian cult-songs to the Canticle.<sup>3</sup> There is evidence that Sumerian cult and mythology was applied to the Canaanite Baal religion. It has been conjectured that the divine marriage-theme was introduced into Israel when the Baal-religion was given royal approval under Ahab in the North and again by Manasseh in the South, and that the Canaanite hymns were taken into orthodox Israelite worship by the transposition of Yahweh for Baal and Israel for Astarte.

This line of conjecture depends on a great many problematical assumptions. The transposition of themes from one religion to another occurs easily enough in a syncretist atmosphere, and it can possibly occur even in a period of peaceful co-existence; but it is almost unthinkable during the bitter crises brought about by the apostasy of Ahab and Manasseh. Even if this difficulty is dismissed it should be

<sup>1</sup> Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-9

<sup>2</sup> *Das Alte Testament Deutsch* (Göttingen 1958), pp. 1-4

<sup>3</sup> Ringgren, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30. Max Haller, *Handbuch zum Alte Testament* [18] (Tübingen 1940) 21-4

noticed that the Canticle, however closely it may resemble the Tammuz cult-songs, is not a parallel with them. The Tammuz legend is one of abduction and restoration, something on the pattern of the Roman Ceres myth. If the Canticle really is some part of an Israelite adaptation of it, it is inexplicable that it bears no sign of the main theme of the original legend.

Furthermore it is certain that dramatisation, particularly of such a theme, could never have been admitted into orthodox Israelite worship. The Jews had a horror of the obscene rites of neighbouring religions, and were almost exaggeratedly careful to avoid the least hint of them in their own ritual (cf. Ex. 20:26). According to some commentators, for instance, the description of the beloved in 6:13-7:5 was originally a ritual dance in which a girl danced naked.<sup>1</sup> It is not only impossible that such a rite should have been actually practised in orthodox Israelite worship, but also psychologically unintelligible that a song connected with it should have been taken over and blessed by later generations.

Quite apart from these considerations the very style of the Canticle makes it extremely unlikely that it was composed during the monarchical period. Late Hebrew forms abound; there are frequent aramaisms; two words are apparently of Persian origin. The natural conclusion is that it is post-exilic, and in that case there is no chance of its being an adaptation of pagan mythology. What affinities there are with the Tammuz texts (and they are certainly not compulsive; *tenuissimae*, Bea calls them<sup>2</sup>) can probably be explained better in terms of verbal echo than of thematic dependence. The author of the Canticle, whether he knew of Canaanite cult-language or not, could hardly help but speak in much the same idiom when applying himself to an analogous subject.

Once it is conceded that the Canticle is an allegory of divine love it may seem unimportant whether it was derived from pagan sources or not. But the question is not trivial. What is at stake is much more than a momentary theological embarrassment that an inspired and canonical work should be derived directly from an obscene pagan rite. Rather the whole meaning and purpose of the allegory is affected. If it is a strange comet from an alien, gentile constellation then it must be observed in isolation from the rest of the Scriptures. If on the other hand it is a planet in a system of authentic Israelite traditions then it can and must be understood and interpreted in conjunction with them.

<sup>1</sup> Ringgren, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-1. Haller, *op. cit.*, 41

<sup>2</sup> Bea, *op. cit.*, p. 6

*Allegorical interpretation*

At first sight it might seem that allegorical interpretation of the Canticle has been as haphazard and various as the literal. For some it is a poem of the love of Yahweh for His people, whether shown in history or promised in prophecy; for others it tells of Christ's love for His Church, or for Our Lady or for the soul in grace. Another less common line of allegory is that of the love between Solomon and Wisdom (Abраванд, Rosenmüller, Kuhn) or between Solomon and the Israelite people (Luther).<sup>1</sup>

But the diversity is more apparent than real. The last two explanations are relatively modern attempts to account for the name of Solomon in the title, while all the others can be really resolved to a single principle of interpretation. Even when it does not explicitly mention it, the Christian interpretation is simply the transposition into interrelated Christian keys of an acknowledged Old Testament theme. The constant and continuous tradition of the official custodians of Scripture from the very first until the present day has been that the Canticle tells of the love of God for His people.

Rowley does indeed try to cast doubt on the validity of the allegorical interpretation from the very Synod which established its place in the Jewish canon.<sup>2</sup> The schools of Hillel and Shammai had long disputed the canonicity of the work, but at the Synod of Jabne (c. 100 A.D.) the school of Hillel won the day under the leadership of the Rabbi 'Aquila, who stoutly defended the Canticle against its opponents. 'The other Writings are holy,' he said, 'but this is most holy.' But it should be noticed that even the school of Shammai did not question the holiness of the book. They simply disputed whether it was properly one of the Writings or merely one of the 'outside' (i.e. deuterocanonical) books.

The same Synod of Jabne deprecated that the Canticle was being sung in taverns.<sup>3</sup> This tends to strengthen rather than weaken the case for an allegorical interpretation. If there had been a continuous tradition of profane use it is unlikely that even the most scrupulous Jew could find fault with this practice. The whole force of the Synod's displeasure arose from the profaning of something whose sole and immemorial use had been sacred.

During the first centuries of the Christian era there was a spate of rabbinic commentary on the text of the Canticle. It was not considered a peripheral book, but one which stood at the very heart of the Jewish religion. A later liturgical use was to have it read at the most solemn

<sup>1</sup> References in Rowley, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> Rowley, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Rowley, *op. cit.*

feast of the year, the Pasch. Sometimes the comments are almost as lyrical as the text itself :

R. Johanan said, ' He feeds among the lilies ; God's rod comes only upon those whose heart is soft like the lily.' <sup>1</sup>

or

I am sick with love : The congregation of Israel says, ' Lord of the world, all the sicknesses which thou bringest upon me are only for the purpose of making me love thee . . . all the sicknesses which the nations bring upon me are only because I love thee.' <sup>2</sup>

Sometimes they are fanciful in the extreme :

My beloved is like a gazelle : As the gazelle leaps from place to place, and from fence to fence, and from tree to tree, so God jumps from synagogue to synagogue to bless the children of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

or

My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh : This refers to Isaac who was tied up like a bundle upon the altar. Myrrh (*kofer*—myrrh/atonement) because he atoned for the sins of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, however, the theme of the love between God and his people is sustained :

My beloved is mine and I am his : Israel says, ' He is my God and I am his people : he is my Father and I am his son : he is my Shepherd and I am his flock : he is my Guardian and I am his vineyard.' <sup>5</sup>

One of the most significant lessons which the rabbis draw from the Canticle is that of exclusive fidelity. Even when they are not commenting *ex professo* on the text of the Canticle they quote naturally and almost inevitably from it when this theme is touched. Nowhere else in the Scriptures do they find greater evidence of Yahweh's unique love for them. This love is such that Yahweh cannot love or reveal Himself to any other people in the way he does to Israel ; and conversely it is impossible for Israel to follow the gentiles, or even to explain to them the beauty and goodness of Yahweh :

R. 'Aquila said : I will speak of the beauty and praise of God before all the nations. They ask Israel and say, 'What is your beloved more than any other beloved that you " so adjure us " (Ct. 5.9), that you die for him, that you are slain for him ' as it is written, ' Therefore till death do they love thee (cf Ct. 1.3—a play on words), and ' for thy sake we are slain all the day ' (Ps. 44.22) ? ' Behold,' they say, ' you are

<sup>1</sup> Montefiore-Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (London 1938), [1542].

<sup>2</sup> op. cit. [247]

<sup>3</sup> op. cit. [37]

<sup>4</sup> op. cit. [587]

<sup>5</sup> op. cit. [182]

beautiful, you are mighty, come and mingle with us.' But the Israelites reply, 'Do you know him? We will tell you a part of his renown; my beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand' (Ct. 5.10). When they hear Israel praise him thus, they say to the Israelites, 'We will go with you', as it is said, 'Whither has your beloved turned that we may seek him with you?' (Ct. 6.1). But the Israelites say, 'You have no part or lot in him', as it is said, 'My beloved is mine, and I am his' (Ct. 2.16).<sup>1</sup>

In the context of this rabbinic commentary on the Canticle it should be possible to overcome the difficulties felt by the modern mind against its being an allegory of the love between God and His people. When we read the text we see the sensuousness of the comparisons, the frank dwelling on physical beauty, the vivid evocation of sexual union. Most Catholic commentators have felt compelled to include a chapter *De honestate morali* in their introductions to the text. It is perhaps more a question of feeling than of reason, but it is nevertheless difficult to see how the allegory can possibly, or at least naturally, be applied to so spiritual a thing as God's love for a whole people. But the objection is invalid. The people for whom and about whom it was written did in fact understand it in that light; they did in fact, naturally and without apparent effort, apply its details to their position. They did not find anything incongruous or unworthy in it, and since it was written in the first place for them, *our* difficulties are irrelevant to the issue.

For the rabbis, as also in the Christian tradition, for Origen, for St Bernard, for St John of the Cross, for the liturgy, the plain, literal and direct meaning of the text of the Canticle is the love between God and man. It is not a question of mere accommodation, merely reading a devout spiritual meaning into a ready-made love-story. It is the belief of this whole tradition that the author of the Canticle was describing a supernatural relationship in allegorical terms. Possibly, if pressed, R. 'Aquila and St John of the Cross would have admitted that their comments were occasionally extravagant and beyond the letter of the text, but they would have stoutly affirmed that in general terms they were truer to the intentions of the author than any literalist interpreter. To conclude from Nathan's parable that Bathsheba had fair hair like a ewe lamb is an unwarranted application of the text, but it is better exegesis than the supposed discovery of the lamb's pasture and the name of its owner.

The overwhelming weight of external evidence compels the conclusion, suggested by the inconsistency of any naturalistic interpretation, that the Canticle is meant to be read as an allegory of divine love. But to specify the allegory more exactly, to lay down precise

<sup>1</sup> op. cit. [263]

principles of interpretation, to prevent gross and unsupported extravagances beyond the plain meaning of the text, and to guide legitimate and useful developments of that meaning, it will be necessary to consider the internal evidence of the text itself.

*The allegory*

There is only one Lover in the Canticle. There is no hint of a rivalry between two suitors for the hand of the bride, no suggestion that she must make a choice, or that she abandons one for the love of the other. This one lover is a king (1:4.12 ; 7:5). In a general way he is associated with Solomon. The song is attributed to him (1:1), the bride's complexion is compared with his curtains (1:5). There is even a hint that the uniqueness of the king's love for his bride is compatible with his having a vast harem (6:8-9). Solomon is said to have rights over (but not full possession of) the vineyard [=beloved?] (8:11-12). There is a vivid picture of Solomon's own marriage procession (3:6-11). Even so, at no point is the king identified with Solomon. He is a kingly figure somehow modelled on that of Solomon.

The lover is also the possessor, or at least the enjoyer, of a vineyard (1:14 ; 2:13,15 ; 6:11 ; 7:12 ; 8:11-12). The bride herself has also been charged with care of a vineyard and failed in her duty (1:6) ; but more characteristically she is compared to the lover's vinestock (cf. 7:8b), and her lips and her love to the wine (4:10 ; 7:2 ; 7:9. Cf. 5:1 ; 8:2) ; and she in her turn is inebriated with his love (1:2.4).

The most sustained and pervasive theme is that of the shepherd. In the rapturous declaration of mutual possession the lover is pictured as pasturing his flock among the lilies (2:16 ; 6:2-3), but first the bride must seek him by following in the tracks of his flock (1:7-8). There are lyrical descriptions of the countryside in springtime through which the search is carried on and rewarded (2:8-17 ; 7:10-13). There are innumerable metaphors connected with pastoral life (e.g. 1:14-16 ; 2:1-3 etc.).

King, husbandman and shepherd : it is a futile and insensitive operation to separate these three aspects of the lover, for, particularly in metaphorical reference, they are inextricably intertwined. Metaphors suitable to the city, to court life, to the royal palace, press upon others taken from the threshing-floor, the wine-press and the sheep-fold :

I adjure you, O daughters of *Jerusalem*:  
by the gazelles or the hinds of the *fields* (2:7)

You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love,  
comely as *Jerusalem*  
terrible as an army with banners . . .

Your hair is like a flock of goats,  
moving down the slopes of Gilead (6:4-5).

David was pre-eminently the shepherd-king in Jewish tradition, but there is no hint of the David-figure in the Canticle. The lover has not been taken away from his shepherding to be a leader and to earn himself a kingdom, but he is at one and the same time both a shepherd with his flock and a royal personage surrounded with splendour. There is something very static and stylised about him. As king he does not govern a nation, judge its causes or lead it in battle. As shepherd he is more picturesque than practical; he pastures his flock, not among rich meadows, but in gardens among lilies or upon the rugged mountains (6:2-3; 2:16-17).

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the titles of shepherd and king are both metaphorical. They denote one who is in reality neither shepherd nor king, but who can be compared to either. This is very reminiscent of post-exilic prophetic literature in which the image of Yahweh the shepherd-king features so largely. According to the prophets, Yahweh's fond care for His people (Is. 40:11) will bring it together again into one flock (Jer. 31:10-14), saving it from straying (Jer. 50:6), protecting it from the ravages of false shepherds (Jer. 23:1-4. Cf. Zech. 11; Ez. 34:1-4) and ravening beasts of prey (Jer. 50:44-6). Whether Yahweh Himself searches out His sheep (Ez. 34:11f.) or raises up a Messiah through whom He will act (Ez. 37:24-8; 34:23-4) He will perform kingly miracles for them (Is. 43:14-21). A new covenant relationship will be sealed, a covenant of peace (Jer. 31:33) with paradisaical blessings of prodigious fertility (Ez. 34:25f. Cf. Is. 60:19-22; 65:17-25) in the pastures to which He Himself will lead them (Ps. 23 [22]). It is noticeable throughout these texts, and in many others that could be cited, that the image of the king, as in the Canticle, is static and stylised; it is used only to describe majesty and regal splendour, to inculcate awe. Other royal properties and duties, care of the people, the administration of justice, guidance and protection, are more normally attributed to Yahweh under the image of the shepherd. No doubt the memory of the monarchy as it had existed in pre-exilic days was responsible for this.

Already in the terms of these prophetic writings it is clear that the new covenant is one of the tenderest love. It is not surprising to find it described by comparison to the love between man and woman.<sup>1</sup> As early as the third quarter of the eighth century Hosea had used his own unhappy marriage as the pattern by which to describe Yahweh's

<sup>1</sup> There is a detailed philological survey in Ziegler, *Die Liebe Gottes bei den Propheten* (Münster 1930).

love for Israel (Hos. 2) and the same theme was taken up and developed by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. All the sad history of Israel from the time of the espousals in the Sinai desert (Jer. 2:2) to the adulterous following of false gods (Jer. 2:19-20 ; Ez. 16) and the shameful exile which was its consequence could be interpreted to the people in these terms. But hope was never excluded from the shame which the tale was meant to inculcate, for Yahweh was a faithful and long-suffering husband (Jer. 2:14) who would restore His bride to her former dignity after her period of punishment. The promise is proclaimed in the ecstatic words of the prophecy :

Fear not, for you will not be ashamed ;  
 be not confounded for you will not be put to shame ;  
 for you will forget the shame of your youth,  
 and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.  
 For your Maker is your husband,  
 Yahweh of hosts is his name ;  
 and the Holy One of Israel is your redeemer,  
 the God of the whole earth he is called.  
 For Yahweh has called you  
 like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,  
 like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.  
 For a brief moment I forsook you,  
 but with great compassion I will gather you.  
 In overflowing wrath for a moment  
 I hid my face from you,  
 But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
 says Yahweh, your redeemer.

(Is. 54:4-8. Cf. 50:1 ; 60:19-20 ; 62:4-5)

It is natural that in such metaphorical writing images should become blurred and similes become intertwined and even misapplied. Here for instance the wife is said to be gathered (like a flock of sheep). An image which is especially and intimately connected with the love relationship is that of the vine and the vineyard. The adulterous wife is said to have been planted like a choice vine and then turned degenerate (the wife-image) and become a wild vine (Jer. 2:21) while Isaiah tells the parable of the Yahweh's vineyard in a love song :

Let me sing for my beloved  
 a love song concerning his vineyard.  
 My beloved had a vineyard  
 on a very fertile hill

(Is. 5:1-7)

The vineyard metaphor is in its turn occasionally mingled with that of the shepherd and his flock :



Many [false] shepherds have destroyed my vineyard  
(Jer. 12:10. Cf. v. 7—the love-image. Cf. also Ps. 79:1. 9-15)

All this imagery is employed in the context of a renewed and more wonderful covenant, more wonderful because it will rely even more than the old covenant on the free and gracious initiative of Yahweh. Père Feuillet points out that the older Deuteronomic formula was based on the implicit condition of Israel's fidelity: 'If you keep my law, you will be my people and [consequently] I will be your God.' In some sense the initiative rests with the people. In later writings the initiative is all from God; it is all grace. He Himself will write the law on their hearts. 'I will be your God and [consequently] you will be my people' (cf. especially Jer. 31:31-5. N.B. again the love image—v. 32).<sup>1</sup>

Against the background of this established prophetic tradition the Canticle yields its meaning quite naturally. Images which, interpreted naturalistically, are confusing and even mutually incompatible, merge harmoniously together. The refrain, 'My beloved is mine and I am his' (2:16), for example, is unintelligible if taken to refer to human love; what conceivable logical or imaginative connection can there be between this expression of self-donation and the beloved pasturing his flock among the lilies in the second half of the verse? The difficulty is so inexplicable that some naturalistic interpreters, against all the textual evidence, have emended the second half of the verse to read: 'he grazes [intransitive] among the lilies.' Thus the lover, who so far has been compared to (or identified with) a shepherd, is suddenly likened to one of his own sheep grazing [i.e. taking his pleasure] among the lilies [i.e. kisses? embraces?]. Quite apart from the textual difficulty involved in this interpretation, the abrupt change of image, the extravagant and unparalleled simile, and the unexplained lack of realism in the pastoral metaphor make it poetically unacceptable.

On the other hand, in the prophetic idiom which has been briefly sketched, this refrain is simply a bold and lyrical expression of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. They belong to each other as man and wife, or, to say almost the same thing under another and generally accepted image, He lavishes His care upon them like a shepherd. The impracticality of pasturing sheep on the poor grazing land where lilies grow in abundance is not unexpected or inexplicable. In prophetic usage metaphors are forever overlapping and intertwining. The lilies here and elsewhere (e.g. 4:5) have the same poetic meaning as the description of the spring flowers and blossoms which

<sup>1</sup> Feuillet, op. cit.

crowd round the lover as he comes to his beloved (2:8-13). They are examples of beauty (2:1-2), proofs that the time of trial is over (2:11). They are signs that the new paradise has come with all its lavish and exuberant fertility.

A similar harmony can be traced throughout the poem. Here perhaps it will be sufficient to recall the significance of the vine-imagery, and the way in which metaphors taken from the geography and country life of the whole of Palestine (both north and south) cluster round the figure of the bride (e.g. 4:1-5.1 ; 7:1-9) while the lover is often described in terms redolent of the Temple and its cult (e.g. 3:6-11 ; 5:10-16). The lover remains a shadowy figure wooing his bride in a kind of hide-and-seek by which she is drawn to follow him and to suffer for him. It is of no importance to the allegory (and therefore it is not mentioned) that a happy marriage issues in children, for Yahweh's covenant love for Israel is its own end and justification. Similarly it would be improper to apply the metaphor of the parents' consent (which would be required for a valid human marriage) to the marriage of God and the people.

The Canticle is not an anecdote, it has no dénouement, it draws no moral. Therefore it seems incorrect to call it a parable. It is rather a drawn-out simile. The author has dwelt lovingly and in depth upon an image which the prophetic tradition had handed on to him, and has expressed, by means of what little action there is in the poem, the hopes which post-exilic prophets had instilled into the people. This kind of prolonged simile is best described as an allegory, though it would be wrong to conclude from this fact that every detail of the poem has a clear-cut and distinct symbolic reference. It is enough that the main movements of tension and repose, of seeking and finding, are verified in the story which is being allegorised, and that incidental imagery should never contradict, but normally assist and enhance, the allegorical meaning. This is certainly true of the Canticle understood as an allegory of the new prophetic covenant.

The Canticle of Canticles has always been something of an enigma ; it is unlikely, and probably undesirable, that it should ever cease to be so. But it is certainly not desirable that false difficulties and false solutions should bar access to the real problems, and it has been the aim of this article to eliminate some of them. The mystery of the Canticle is part of the mystery of Old Testament theology as a whole. It yields some part of its meaning only in that wider context while its elucidation can in its turn throw light upon its surroundings.

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