

unpleasant that unbelievers feel that it cannot come from God.

THE real conclusion one might draw from the feeling is that it cannot come from man. And this is a thought continually forced on the minds of those who regularly read their Bible. The people of Israel were condemned by their prophets in such language as cannot be found in the treasured writings of any other nation, and they were condemned by their Law in a host of irksome details such as cannot be found in any other law. The Apostle Peter truthfully described the Law as “a yoke . . . which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15:10).

We can hardly suppose that such condemnation had no meaning. Indeed, one would be inclined to think that even those who regard the Mosaic Law as of merely human origin would still feel impelled to recognise an object in the elaborate rules regarding uncleanness. This object is clearly revealed in the books of the Law. God is represented as saying, “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). This idea of separation is closely linked with the promises made to the fathers of Israel and with

the symbol of circumcision, the very significant figure of the cutting off of sinful flesh.

Although the books of the Law make no reference to that popular belief of the ancient world, the doctrine of natural immortality, and although there is very little mention of anything to suggest a life beyond the grave, the promises certainly presented a hope which the fathers never realised in this life. Was the elaborate insistence on cleansing in any way related to this hope—a preparation for something higher than mortal life involving the repudiation of all defilements connected with the flesh?

A man of sceptical tendency may suggest that even the recognition of such ideas as this does not necessarily involve a belief in the Divine inspiration of the Law. We may concede this point quite cheerfully. If students are willing to perceive a meaning in the elaborate ceremonial and can be sufficiently interested to follow where reason leads, the picture will become clearer and more compelling as knowledge increases. Finally they may be led quite naturally to meanings which “[enter] into that within the veil”, and far beyond the ken of men who lived in ancient Israel.



## Correspondence

*Comments on articles appearing in the magazine are always welcome, and should be addressed to the editor in whose section the article appears.*

### “Return, return, O Shulamite”

Sister Elizabeth Evans demonstrates well in her article ([Dec. 2002, p. 439](#)) the spiritual insight of the Queen of Sheba in travelling from far to prove for herself the wisdom of the son of David who reigned on the throne of the Lord (2 Chron. 9:8). In this she surely becomes a type of the Gentile nations who will undertake a similar journey to Jerusalem in the Kingdom age (Ps. 72:10). Nevertheless, there are numerous clues within the Song of Solomon to suggest that the female character in this book is not of royal birth at all.

It is possible, as Sister Evans points out, and as has been expounded further by other writers within the Brotherhood, that the events portrayed poetically in the Song of Songs have a basis in King Solomon’s own experiences. He would not be the only one in Scripture whose life we are meant to see as a parable of greater things. How-

ever, it is not essential that we approach the book in this way, as its exhortations come largely from what is symbolised by the relationship between the bride and bridegroom, not merely literal events which may have befallen two individuals. Similarly, there can be little doubt that a marriage takes place, and is consummated, in the Song of Solomon, whereas there is no firm evidence from Scripture that this happened between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

So what clues are there as to the origins of the Shulamite? It will help us in the search if we remember that the plot in the Song of Songs does not unfold in strict chronological order. In chapter 1, for example, the bride-to-be is already in Solomon’s palace keenly anticipating their wedding, and it is only in subsequent chapters that we learn about some of the events which have led to that exciting day. First, then, a few details from the bride herself:

- “my mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards” (1:6). Surely this could never have been true of the Queen of Sheba; it is speaking to us of a country girl under the authority of her brothers (whoever we think they were; I do not propose to try and interpret all the details referred to)
- “The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice. My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away” (2:8-10). Their rendezvous during the period of courtship had taken place mainly out of doors, not in a palace
- “I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock. I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone . . . The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me” (5:5-7). Having been brought into the city (Jerusalem?), the bride is for a while deserted by the bridegroom and subsequently mistreated. Can we imagine such behaviour towards a foreign monarch on a state visit?

And so on. Then there are similar pointers from the lips of other characters in the book:

- “Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon: look from the top of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon” (4:8). The bridegroom invites the bride to leave her home, clearly in the *north* of the land. (Of all the place-names mentioned in the book, only Jerusalem is within the southern kingdom of Judah; every other one is from territory belonging to the ten tribes of Israel.) Later, the bridegroom again likens her to northern locations (7:4,5)<sup>1</sup>
- “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes” (2:15). This is from the bride’s fellow-workers in the vineyard, probably her brothers ([see above on 1:6](#)). This would be no way to speak to a queen. What would she be doing tending a vineyard anyway?

From the many agricultural allusions within the Song of Songs it seems plain that the lady in

question is from a humble, rural background; and yet, as sister Evans says, King Solomon himself addresses her as “prince’s daughter” (7:1). How can this be? Surely the royal dignity to which the lowly country girl has risen is due solely to her association with the king. In this she typifies beautifully some of the other ‘brides’ in Scripture, whether we are thinking of natural Israel, raised from obscurity and helplessness to be loved by God (Ezek. 16:1-14), or the ecclesia of Christ, spiritual Israel, betrothed to the husband who has sanctified and cleansed her “with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:26).

There is one final clue regarding the identity of the Shulamite. As was pointed out in the article, this word is the feminine form of Solomon, so she is his perfect counterpart, truly “an help meet [suitable] for him” (Gen. 2:18). However, in their book *Song of Songs—A New Translation*, Ariel and Chana Bloch point out that since medieval times the word has also been understood to signify a female inhabitant of *Salem*, Jerusalem—she is a *Salemite*. In other words, although she comes (as we have seen) from the north of the land, away from the natural home of God’s dealings with His people, her association with the king qualifies her for citizenship in Zion. The types leap off the page at us:

- “And of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her: and the Highest Himself shall establish her. The LORD shall count, when He writeth up the people, that this man was born there” (Ps. 87:5,6)
- “But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:26)
- “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2).

Whatever we make of the Song of Songs—and I believe it is one of the hardest books of Scripture to understand in any depth—there is one wonderfully practical exhortation for us which we can all get to grips with. Go through the book carefully (once you have worked out who is speaking when!) and note what the bride and groom say about each other. You will not

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1. There are a number of parallels with this in the work of King Hezekiah who also sent to the northern ten tribes (outside his jurisdiction) to seek a faithful ‘bride’, suggesting that he understood his role as the shepherd, king and husband (as God’s representative) of his people.

find one harsh word or criticism; they have nothing but praise for one another. Would that this were always the pattern for our earthly marriages, as our families and ecclesias would be the stronger for it.

But of course the real force of this exhortation is for us collectively, as the bride of Christ. What an amazing thought that this is truly how the Lord Jesus, the heavenly bridegroom, sees his espoused: utterly faultless in his eyes, despite all the reservations she has about herself! And when he comes to solemnise his union with her and share the marriage supper of the Lamb, do we think his opinion of his bride will be any less? “You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you” (Song 4:7, ESV; cf. Eph. 5:27).

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