

THE SONG OF SONGS stands out among the writings of the Old Testament; of that there can be no doubt. There is considerable doubt, however, about a number of questions which are key to its interpretation. In fact, that very issue of the interpretation of the book as a whole is itself contentious, and has been so throughout history.

There is a small number of key questions which determine how one moves forward towards an interpretation of the book. None of these questions is insurmountable, and for most there is sufficient information within the text itself to work towards an answer. Once these answers are put together, the overarching message of the book and many of its details can start to become clear. Some of these questions are:

- 1 There is one female lead, the Shulamite. But are there two main male characters (the shepherd boy and King Solomon), or only one? If one, what is to be made of the references to Solomon?
- 2 Is there, indeed, a narrative—a plot, a story line? Does the book progress from beginning to end in a linear or chronological fashion? How do we know?
- 3 Does the book have a climax, and if so, where is it? Some think there is none, some think it's at the end, others in the middle.
- 4 Do the characters consummate their relationship, and if so, where? What is their relationship (courting, engaged, married)? And how do we know?
- 5 What is the purpose behind all the nature language (spring, flowers, animals)?
- 6 To what extent is the language coy or sexually explicit? Why?
- 7 Thinking on an allegorical plane, are the individual items mentioned in the text to be understood allegorically and assigned a meaning (such that the lilies represent a specific thing, for instance), or should the language be taken in a more general manner?
- 8 What is to be made of the use of the Song in other scriptures, and in what way does the Song quote previous scripture?

Of these, it seems to me that questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7 are particularly important, and I hope to return to one or two in a later P.S.

Something one can helpfully do is to try to view the book and its interpretation on a number of different levels; to see within it several planes of meaning; or,

to use a different analogy, to view it through several different pairs of spectacles. We could consider each of the following levels or angles to the book, which may not be mutually exclusive (as many have assumed):

- 1 At a basic and literal level, the book describes the experiences of Solomon or some individual he observes, perhaps with a particular woman in mind. Personally, I am less persuaded by this, although I admit that the book is likely to draw on Solomon's own experience of having been 'in love' (it's a matter of whether it does so in a general or a specific way).
- 2 Again at a literal level, the book celebrates the wonder of the God-given pleasures of the romance of men and women (courtship and beyond). Further, it provides positive (and of course Scriptural) teaching about this amazing aspect of human experience. Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5 are fundamental doctrine on a literal level; and, given that love, a God-provided force, is one of the strongest forces known to man and woman, it should be no surprise to find a whole book of Scripture devoted to it.
- 3 The book describes in an idealised way the relationship God sought with Israel His bride. There are many Old Testament passages which use the marriage metaphor for this (though usually on a negative tack, to describe Israel's unfaithfulness). Again, the dominance of this metaphor within the Old Testament should make it relatively easy to detect this angle within the book.
- 4 Moving on from this, the book describes the relationship between Christ and his bride, the ecclesia. It is only natural, given the unfolding of God's purpose, that option three above should grow into this, and that both should be within the purview of the book. If one had to pick only one level of meaning in the book, for many (including myself) this would be the one on which to dwell.
- 5 Following on from option four, another level of meaning may be to depict the relationship between God or Christ and the *individual* believer. Usually we talk about the collective sense (Christ and the ecclesia), but the individual's finding of Christ, and the relationship they then have, ought not to be forgotten.

Once we start to put all these together we have a very special book indeed!

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