

## Major Essay

Alphacrucis College: Baulkham Hills Campus

BIB311

Assignment

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**I hereby declare that the following work in this assessment is my own, except where indicated through due referencing. This assessment has not, in full or part, been submitted for another class or course at AC or any other institution.**

**Signed:**

**Date:**

## Describe two different readings of the Song of Songs. How might these be expressed in the use of the Song of Songs in your local church?

Over the years, the biblical text of the Song of Songs has been read, understood, interpreted and taught in a number of different ways – all of which revolving around the question of genre and intended message. What kind of book is the Song of Songs and how should we read it? This essay aims to help better understand that question, by exploring two of the main ways of understanding the book – the allegorical reading and the literal reading. The application of what is unearthed will then be examined as a conclusion.

### The Allegorical Reading

Although the dating of when the Song of Songs was composed is still disputed and therefore the understanding of the *original* audience cannot be certain, allegorical readings of the text can be dated as far back as 100CE in writings such as that of Rabbi Aqiba.<sup>1</sup> This continued on as the “dominant and almost exclusive” way of interpreting the text until around the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and still remains as a (latently) common way to approach the book today.<sup>2</sup> So what does it mean to read a text allegorically? Longman makes a clear distinction between texts that are intentionally allegorical and using an “allegorical interpretative strategy” – stating that although there are scriptures in the Hebrew Bible that seem to be written with an allegorical reading in mind, Song of Songs is not observably on this side of the spectrum.<sup>3</sup> Rather, this type of reading has been a later addition and speculation across the years and cannot be attributed to the book’s original context – one which sees a ‘spiritual’ and deeper hidden meaning within the imagery and symbolism used and one which finds greater application in the detail of the scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary*, 1st Fortress Press ed, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 7.

Due to the fact that the Christian allegorical understanding came out from the Jewish interpretation of the text,<sup>5</sup> the latter will first be explored quickly, as to further inform the history and background of the Church's reading of Song of Songs. On a general whole, the Jewish interpretation usually denotes some kind of reflection of the loving relationship between Yahweh and his people Israel (with the man in the poetry as God and the woman as the Hebrew chosen, beloved people). However, there are some additional and more detailed Jewish allegorisations of the text – such as the Targum understanding of the book as a five-part salvation history retelling – or the medieval characterisation of the text as speaking of the union of one's soul and body.<sup>6</sup> The list continues, as does the debate among those who still subscribe to this kind of reading as to which is most accurate, however the Christian interpretation then takes its own stance.

Claiming to be a New-Testament-inspired reading of the text, the most prevalent Christian allegorical interpretation centres around the relationship between Christ and the Church.<sup>7</sup> In the same way that the Jewish method reads a longing, intimate bond between God and His people – so it is said to be between Our Saviour and His 'body' on the earth. As mentioned, this understanding of the book does not solely come from its predecessor, nor out of thin air, but rather takes its inspiration from New Testament scriptures that describe and discuss the loving relationship between Christ and the Church – for example, that of Ephesians 5:22-23.<sup>8</sup> Many of the early Church leaders are recorded to have contributed various allegorical interpretations to the faith community, especially between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and medieval years – including Origen and also one of the most remarkable examples found very early on with Hippolytus understanding the breasts of the woman in 4:5 to be symbolising the Old and New Testaments.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Iain W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: From Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2001), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Longman, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines For Understanding and Utilizing the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 156 (1999): 401.

<sup>9</sup> Longman, 28.

With all this said, it becomes more obvious that a core problem with this kind of reading of the text is that there is no set method or structure for interpretation of images – meaning that anyone at any time can take a certain metaphor to represent whatever they feel or decide and it essentially comes down to the authority of the Church to determine which version and explanation of the text seems to make the best fit; which thereby becomes the ‘message’ of the scripture.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the only time any continuity can be seen is when one scholar or writer essentially copies the allegorical interpretation of another.<sup>11</sup> The more specific and detailed the analysis, the more varying and even conflicting the message of each chapter and verse becomes. On top of this, no New Testament writer has taken the liberty of interpreting or using the Song of Songs in this way<sup>12</sup> and allegory is often rejected for use in any other circumstance of biblical interpretation,<sup>13</sup> so why has it been so prevalent here?

The most apparent issue with this reading of the *specific* Old Testament writing is the explicit and obvious sexual nature of the text.<sup>14</sup> Though the language of love and intimacy is core to relationship between God and humans – the erotic side of the described relationship can never cross over into our Christian relationship with Christ (or of course any of the trinity).<sup>15</sup> It has been suggested that the favouring of the allegorical, spiritual reading (and avoidance of the natural, sexual reading) has developed out of the Greek Philosophical influence within Christianity – where the unseen and spiritual aspects of life such as the mind and character are far higher in value and ‘holiness’ so to speak than that of the seen, natural and ‘fleshly’.<sup>16</sup> Seen outworking in monastic lifestyles and/or lifelong celibacy, the sexuality of creation and humanity can often be rejected by

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>11</sup> Parsons, 401.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England : Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 33.

<sup>13</sup> Tremper Longman and Peter Enns, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England: IVP Academic ; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 456.

<sup>14</sup> Gledhill, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gledhill, 34; Longman, 36.

leaders and people of the faith as immoral and ungodly.<sup>17</sup> This would then explain the complete avoidance of a sexual reading of a text contained within the Holy Scriptures. Clines goes one step further as to attribute this kind of reading to the “male fear of female sexuality”<sup>18</sup> and that the allegorical way has given the (historically) predominantly male presence in leadership and scholarship a way to ignore and repress the reality of this content within Scripture.<sup>19</sup> Could it be that not only is the ‘spiritual reading’ seen as higher and more commendable but that some of audience cannot come to terms with their own (earthly) reaction to such writing? Clines writes that “they could not handle its sexual candour and its challenge to patriarchal norms of female submission.”<sup>20</sup> So what is another way to read the text that solves some of these critiques?

### **The Natural/Literal Reading**

In the wake of the mid-nineteenth century Enlightenment, a major shift occurred in both Jewish and Christian scholarship surround the Song of Songs.<sup>21</sup> Due to a number of contributions, including new archaeological discoveries and ancient writings found, an increasing acceptance of the unity of soul and body, and even a closer study of modern Middle Eastern practices, a transition towards reading the book in its natural form has become increasingly inevitable.<sup>22</sup> Even the acknowledgement that the Septuagint translates the book as literally as possible – leaving out words that were not understood and choosing the more specifically sexual use of the Hebrew language rather than the abstract or allegorical – continues to strengthen the lean towards a natural, literal reading.<sup>23</sup> But if not the love of Christ for the Church, what then is Song of Songs about?

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<sup>17</sup> Gledhill, 34.

<sup>18</sup> David J. A Clines, “Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?,” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 104.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Longman, 36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Keel, 6.

Despite there being less opportunity for individual interpretation within the literal reading of the book, there are still a number of different suggestions as to how Song of Songs outworks naturally; due to its seemingly disjointed plotline and set of ambiguous characters.<sup>24</sup> Two main questions arise when looking at the text from this position: Is this one continuous story or a poetry collection? And if yes to the former, does the story contain two or three main characters? Starting with the first question, some writers and scholars postulate that the text speaks of a specific, real-life narrative and love story that (usually) involves King Solomon.<sup>25</sup> Either this manifests as a story between two lovers – most commonly Solomon and a Shulamite Woman – or as a kind of love-triangle between the King, the woman and the one referred to as the ‘shepherd’.<sup>26</sup> The latter hints at the slightly less idealistic love life of Solomon, which will be discussed shortly. In both of these cases the poetry is seen to jump around but to still be concerning the specific story of the characters at hand. In opposition to this view, other authors suggest that the book is rather an anthology or collection of love letters, at most dedicated to the great King Solomon or at least looking to contain a royal (perhaps endearing) theme.<sup>27</sup> This view recognises that there is certainly an “overall coherence” to the book, but not indeed an underlying plot.<sup>28</sup> There is strength to this final suggestion, as it aligns with much of the literature found from the surrounding regions and cultures of the time.<sup>29</sup>

A number of Scholars have brought forward as part of the natural, literal reading of the text, a link to the beginning of Genesis (particularly chapters 2 & 3) in that the language, metaphors and particularly the garden imagery allude back to what God ordained as ‘good’.<sup>30</sup> These scholars explain that the intimate, reciprocal and passionate love demonstrated between two equals in the Song of

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<sup>24</sup> Parsons, 404.

<sup>25</sup> Longman, 40.

<sup>26</sup> J. Paul Tanner, “The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 154 (1997): 34.

<sup>27</sup> Parsons, 405.

<sup>28</sup> Longman, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Parsons, 404.

<sup>30</sup> Francis Landy, “The Song of Songs and The Garden of Eden,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 4, no. 98 (1979): 513–28; Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Parsons, 421.

Songs reflects a type of “redeemed sexuality” from the *original* Garden of Eden.<sup>31</sup> Although this could risk still being seen as stretching the text beyond itself, Landy speaks of the clear connection between the two portions of text in themes, motifs and imagery.<sup>32</sup> Tribble summarises the concept beautifully: “Testifying to the goodness of creation, then, eroticism becomes worship in the context of grace.”<sup>33</sup>

Although there seem to be far less hermeneutical issues with this overall literal approach than that of the Allegorical, Tanner picks up on the issue of the interpretation if it involves Solomon. Whilst the natural reading seems to encourage and discuss fidelity and monogamous sexual relations, it is clear from numerous places elsewhere in Scripture that Solomon himself was not a one-wife-only man and therefore cannot be held as the ideal Christian example in this way.<sup>34</sup> Also, despite the “sitz im leben” of the book being usually assigned to a wedding ceremony, Keel suggests that the poetry found within the pages of Song of Songs barely contains any wedding-specific terms and connotations and therefore brings forward that the work is to be seen as simply a collection of love songs that can be used during other festivals and occasions than just the celebration of a wedding.<sup>35</sup> In connection with this, Gledhill addresses the morality of the poetry read literally by suggesting the cultural phenomena of Betrothal<sup>36</sup> – two families within the context of a larger community coming together to arrange a union that is bound with agreement and payment. It was an irrevocable bond that would therefore ‘seal the fate’ of the lovers; they are already ‘one’ in a sense and purely waiting for the ceremony of the wedding to fully consummate the agreement. And so we can read the text as lovers *growing* in intimacy and love for each other leading up to a full union (in chapter 5) and watch it unfold in this way, even if it is not one flowing narrative, understanding that with time, experience and commitment comes deeper value for one another

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Landy, 513.

<sup>33</sup> Tribble, 161.

<sup>34</sup> Tanner, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Keel, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Gledhill, 27-28.

and the expression of such is shown in the literal reading of what takes place. But how does this apply to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians?

### **Church Application**

To conclude, I personally find the evidence and argumentation for the natural/literal reading of the Song of Songs to be more historically sound and persuasive overall and therefore would use it within the local church setting as such. Arnold and Beyer sub-title their chapter on the book (paired with Ecclesiastes) with the line “Israelite Faith in Everyday Life”<sup>37</sup> and I think this mindset gives a good insight into how the text can be used for us today – as an indication of the potential and outworking of one particular aspect of our everyday lives as followers of Yahweh. We are not to try and over-spiritualise or deny the obvious sexual nature of the text, but rather celebrate it! It is more than likely that the majority of any said congregation will be married or in some form or level of sexual relationship and, as such a vital feature of everyday life, we the Church should be front and centre on bringing healthy, educated teaching on all things sex and intimacy from a perspective of all that it can be when done the way God has shown through His scriptures. In a world that *still* gets lost in patriarchal values and caught up in an obsession with lust, Song of Songs demonstrates redeemed sexuality – the generous, reciprocal, passionate intimacy of two equals in love and selfless union.

However, Provan brings forward the thought that in fact the two readings of the text don’t necessarily have to be completely separated or pitted as one against the other, “for the Bible as a whole holds in closest analogical connection the love that exists between God and humans and between humans and humans.”<sup>38</sup>

Although I wouldn’t teach the text primarily as allegorical within the church setting, we can always point to the beauty and joy found in human relationship to reflect that which originally came from God and works to imitate the sacrificial

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<sup>37</sup> Bill T. Arnold and Bryan Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, 2nd ed, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008), 325.

<sup>38</sup> Provan, 248.

love found between Christ and the Church – not in *practicality* but in spirit and motive. Peterson also suggests that to stop the exposition of love found in the Song of Songs at simply a natural reading and nothing else would be “breezy arrogance.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, the passionate descriptions of love, response and *intimacy*, when applied to God, keep our faith and prayer-life alive, dynamic and far from the comatose of pure academia and formal religion.<sup>40</sup> Despite all discussion and no matter how one reads or interprets the Song of Songs, it cannot be denied that the book is abundant in inspiring, exquisite words that compel us towards deep, selfless and intimate relationship – whether that is rejoicing in the love we share with the God of all creation or with the person we hold closest in this life.

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<sup>39</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, “The Pastoral Work of Prayer-Directing: Song of Songs,” in *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Leominster, Eng: W.B. Eerdmans ; Gracewing, 1992), 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

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