

THE
NEW KING JAMES VERSION
AND THE
Song of Solomon

*An evaluation of the modern approach to
the Song of Solomon in the New King James Version*

by the Rev. G. Hamstra

A Vice-President of the Society

The Song of Solomon is a most excellent song; it is superior to and excels all other songs. This is clearly expressed in the title of the song contained in its first verse: ‘The song of songs, which is Solomon’s’. The phrase ‘song of songs’ is a Hebrew way of stating that the Song has been compared to and preferred above every other composition similar in nature. The human author, Solomon, was not only a wise king and ruler, he also excelled as a judge and counsellor, as an architect and builder, as a botanist and zoologist, and especially as an author and poet. The secret of his wisdom was a life in close communion with the Lord. The Song is highly figurative and poetical; the linguistic beauty of its original Hebrew is unsurpassed.

This book, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is an eminent portrayal of the most precious heavenly love and the unending, constant care of Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, for His Church, His earthly bride, and likewise, of the responsive and ardent love of the Church for Christ. This latter love is a fruit of the former. The fountain of all love to Christ is His love to His people. The blessed fruit of His compassionate love is a humble and fervent love for Him. ‘We love him, because he first loved us’ (1 John 4.19).

In the past, the majority of Christian expositors have regarded the Song of Solomon as a symbolic exhibition of the special and intimate relationship between Christ and His people. In the 17th century, the Godly Scottish minister James Durham (1622–1658) prayerfully composed a most valuable and edifying exposition on the Song of Solomon. This commentary betrays the unusual Godliness and great learning of its author. It is written in simple and attractive English and it soon became a classic. Dr. John Owen highly recommended this exposition. Samuel Rutherford and John Flavel, who were contemporaries of Durham, also often portrayed the beauty of Christ by means of sermons on and quotations from the Song of Songs.

In the 18th century, Thomas Boston and Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, who preached a rich Christ for poor sinners, followed in the same footsteps. Their attractive sermons on the Song encouraged the needy and helpless to flee to the all-sufficient Saviour for refuge. In 1724, the Godly and learned Dr. John Gill preached a series of sermons which were published on a later date (1728) with the title ‘An Exposition of the Song of Solomon’. This book ‘presents us also, with rich and charming displays of the glory of Christ’s person, the freeness of his grace to sinners, and the tenderness of his love to the church.’¹ In 1971, The Sovereign Grace Publishers produced a new edition of this valuable commentary.²

In the 19th century, the famous German preacher F.W. Krummacher (1796–1868), a faithful defender of the Truth as it is in Jesus, wrote a series of sixteen sermons entitled ‘Solomon and Shulamite’. These well-written, Christ-centred sermons were translated into various other languages. A recent English edition (1994) with an excellent translation was published by Pietan Publications³ and is highly recommended. Of the Scottish ministers of the same century, whose views on the Song were similar to those of Durham, we want to mention only for brevity’s sake two of their most outstanding men: Dr. Hugh Martin and Dr. John Kennedy.

Until the 19th century, very few have ever opposed the view held by the above-mentioned authors. In various ways, the ‘higher’ critics advanced the opinion that the Song is merely a human love song. At first, this approach met with widespread disapproval. However, gradually this viewpoint found more acceptance among the Biblical scholars. The results of this modern

interpretation have been rather negative. On the one hand, some have written in such a manner that this Bible book, so rich in contents, has been considered as having little or no attraction and significance. On the other hand, others, who are of the opinion that the poem provides Divine insight and instruction regarding sexuality, have explained the Song in a rather degrading and distasteful fashion. Such an approach dishonours God and makes a sincere believer weep with indignation.

It is quite apparent that the translators of the New King James Version have followed the path of those who are of the opinion that the bridegroom and the bride in the Song of Solomon are not Christ and the Church or the believer, but they are two human lovers.

In the first place, this is evident in the changes made in regards to the headings above the various chapters. Now it must be said that these chapter headings are not found in the original Hebrew; they are added by the translators or publishers. Their function is to help the Bible reader in understanding the subject matter of the chapter under consideration. Thus these headings are not part of the inspired Word of God. They are often an indication of the theological viewpoints of the translators or publishers. In the NKJV, the chapter headings of the Song of Solomon do not contain the name of Christ. For instance, the heading of chapter two in the Authorised (King James) Version is 'The mutual love of Christ and his church'. This heading is replaced in the NKJV by 'The Beloved's Request'.

An additional new feature in the NKJV is that the translators are indicating who the speakers are of the various sections of the Song. What is so surprising and disturbing is the manner in which this has been done. For instance, the fourth verse of chapter one has been divided into four parts!

- The Shulamite is the speaker of 'Lead me away!'
- The Daughters of Jerusalem are the speakers of 'We will run after you.'
- The Shulamite is the speaker of 'The king has brought me into his chambers.'
- And again, the Daughters of Jerusalem of 'We will be glad and rejoice in you. We will remember your love more than wine.'

The NKJV is the first and only English Bible translation that has thus separated ‘Draw me’ from ‘we will run after thee’.

This unnatural and forced approach to the text gives clear evidence that the translators of the New King James Version wish to make it known to the readers of the Song of Solomon that the Song is a mere human love song and without room for Christ and His Church. This gives us another reason to conclude that the NKJV is a new translation and not as its publishers have stated, a new and updated edition of the Authorised (King James) Version.⁴ Moreover, we are confirmed in our opinion that the NKJV is not a worthy replacement of the Authorised Version.

We firmly believe that the Song of Solomon points us to Christ and His Church. All of Scripture reveals Christ and the Song forms no exception to this truth. The explanation of a divinely-inspired Old Testament book such as the Song of Solomon does never come to its own until it has been considered in the light of the fuller Divine revelation of the New Testament.

With the Song in mind we may turn to the latter part of the fifth chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians. The Apostle Paul makes there a comparison between the intimate marriage tie, to which he alludes as a great mystery, and the mystical union between Christ and His Church. So does the Song of Solomon point us to the rich relationship of love between Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, and the Church, His earthly Bride. This conclusion is plainly confirmed by indications offered in the Song itself.

The highly figurative language, the sudden changes in the scenes, the rapid transitions and the various striking situations, render a literal exposition truly dubious. The sudden changes in the pronouns also support our view. For example, in chapter one verse four we read, ‘Draw me, we will run after thee; the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee’ (emphasis added).

The names of the two principal characters, Solomon and the Shulamite, have their origin in two Hebrew words that are closely related. The way in which these two words are related is significant and by design. In the case of the name Solomon, the root word is the noun *shalom*, meaning ‘peace’.

Shalom points to a life of peace and friendship with God and our neighbour; its essential characteristic is wholeness. The name Solomon (*Shelomo* in the Hebrew) means the peaceful one or the peace-provider. It should be observed that the feminine equivalent of Solomon is not Shulamite, but Shelomith. The name Shelomith occurs among others in Leviticus 24.11, ‘and his mother’s name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan’. The word Shulamite (*Shulammith* in the Hebrew) is derived from the word *shulam*, a passive form of the verb *shalam*, and means reconciled one, one restored to peace and happiness. The Shulamite is one that is reconciled or restored to peace and favour. Solomon is the prince of peace and the Shulamite the daughter of peace.

Although the names do not frequently occur, the thought of peace is present throughout the entire Song. Moreover, there is progression in the Song. In the beginning of the Book the bride has a deep desire and longing for peace. When the Song closes she has found peace. ‘Then was I in his eyes as one that found favour’ (Song of Solomon 8.10). The word translated here as favour is *shalom* in the original. Therefore the translation of the Geneva Bible of 1560 is perhaps here to be preferred as it reads, ‘then was I in his eyes as one that findeth peace’. How appropriate is then the Song’s representation of Christ as the peaceful one, the peace-bringer, and His children as the partakers of His peace.

Endnotes

1. James Hervey, *Theron and Aspasio, or a series of Letters upon the most important and interesting Subjects*, 3.145; taken from *A Summary of the Life, Writings and Character of the Late Reverend and Learned John Gill, D. D.* www.pbministries.org/books/gill/Sermons&Tracts/summary.htm, 16 November 2006.
2. These publishers, originally in Grand Rapids, MI, USA, have moved to Indiana and no longer appear to publish this commentary, but it is available in a reprint from The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., Number One Iron Oaks Drive, Paris, Arkansas 72855, USA.
3. Pietan Publications, 26 Green Farm Road, New Ipswich, NH 03071, USA.
4. *Holy Bible: NKJV* (Nashville, TN, USA: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1990), p. vii.