

## THE SONG OF SONGS.<sup>1</sup>

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LIKE the book Koheleth (Ecclesiastes), the Song of Songs seems strangely out of place among the books of the Old Testament. For no unprejudiced observer can doubt for even a moment that love, the love of man for woman and of woman for man, is the sole and unvarying theme of the Song of Songs. And these matters are treated and depicted indeed with an unambiguous directness which comes near to shocking our sensibilities, and yet, because of its very naïveness, cannot be characterised as lascivious. One feels directly that the author of the Song of Songs is a genuine poet, to whom some god gave the faculty for saying how happy he felt; we feel especially charmed and affected by the marvellously developed appreciation of nature: the poet lives and moves in nature, which becomes to him the mirror and the witness of his joy; everything joins with him in his praise and tunes his heart to rapture. But who is then the poet?

The superscription, i. 1, the meaning of which can be only "Most excellent of the songs of Solomon," points out Solomon accordingly as the "philosopher with the wreath of myrtle and roses" who created this wonderful work. That Solomon was a poet, and a prolific poet, is testified by 1 Kings, v. 12, which refers to one thousand and five songs of Solomon. And the contents of the Song of Songs seems to agree with this: five times Solomon is mentioned, and in two of these cases expressly as *הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה* "the king"; a king is also spoken of i. 4, xii. and vii. 6, and queens in vi. 8 and 9; in i. 9 we meet the steed in Pharaoh's chariot, and in iv. 4 the tower of David. Furthermore the repeated mention of the daughters of Jerusalem, i. 5, ii. 7, iii. 5, 10, v. 8, 16, viii. 4, agrees perfectly with this assumption. If we then ask whether that passage in 1 Kings, v. 12, has any connexion with the Song of Solomon, the answer is that the passage does not refer to it: it is

<sup>1</sup>From his *Einleitung in das alte Testament*. Leipzig. 1896. Pp. 253-257.

simply inconceivable that the "one thousand and five songs of Solomon" should mean our book of one hundred and sixteen stanzas, while on the other hand verse 1, chapter i., of the Song of Songs, may very well have been composed with 1 Kings, v. 12 in view, and surely was,—in a word, the connexion is the same as between 1 Kings, v. 12, and Proverbs, i. 1. If the saying, "Thy speech betrayeth thee" applies to any book of the Bible it is to the Song of Songs, the language of which must be placed far later than that of Proverbs and close to that of Ecclesiastes. The repeated occurrence of  $\psi$ , the contraction of the relative pronoun found in the Song of Songs is met elsewhere only in Ecclesiastes and in some of the latest psalms;  $\psi$   $\text{לְמֵה}$  i. 7, occurs right beside  $\psi$   $\text{לְמֵה}$  Jonah i. 12, and especially the frequent adverbial use of  $\psi$  the same contraction, as well as  $\psi$   $\text{עַר}$  i. 12, ii. 7, 17, iii. 4-5, iv. 6, viii. 4,  $\psi$   $\text{קָמַעַש}$  iii. 4, is decidedly late, and especially phrases like  $\psi$   $\text{בְּרָמִי שְׁלִי}$  i. 6, viii. 12, and  $\psi$   $\text{מִצְרוֹ שְׁלִשְׁלֵמֵה}$  iii. 7, are unparalleled in the entire Old Testament and are purely Talmudic (of the character of the Mischna).  $\text{בְּרָמִים}$  (paradise), iv. 13, is, as a distinguished authority on Iranian languages has determined, a specifically Persian word, the presence of which refers us with mathematical precision to a date not earlier than the Persian period, being found otherwise only in Nehemiah ii. 8 and Ecclesiastes ii. 5, and the solitary instance of  $\text{אַשְׁרֵיִן}$  which can be interpreted by no Semitic etymon, is the same as the Greek *φορσιον*, hence a Greek loanword. There is good ground for doubt whether  $\text{גָּרֵד}$  (narde), i. 12, iv. 13, 14, and  $\text{בְּרָבִים}$  (saffron), iv. 14, were known, either the word or the thing, at the time of Solomon or in the pre-exilian period, and also whether at that time there was an organised police force or an established body of night watch, iii. 8, v. 7. But the linguistic evidences alone are absolutely convincing against placing the Song of Songs earlier than the Persian period. If vi. 4 is repeatedly cited, where Thirza is brought into parallelism with Jerusalem, and the inference drawn that the Song of Songs must be older than Omri, the reply is, that a post-exilian Jew would never dream of mentioning Samaria in parallelism with Jerusalem, less probably the later he lived; that Thirza was for a while the capital was known from 1 Kings, and moreover this city was especially suggested by the perfectly evident appellative meaning of its name—Belleville. Therefore even vi. 4 does not preclude the post-exilian origin.

But in any treatment of the Song of Songs especial consideration must be given to the artistic form. Since it clearly contains addresses and replies and these alternate regularly, the prevailing

tendency is to see in it a drama which after the fashion of our theatrical productions presents in monologue, dialogue, and chorus, with constant change of scene, a regularly developed dramatic action. As a consequence of this assumption the sole persons introduced by name, Solomon and "Shulammite," vii. 1, had to be called *dramatis personæ*, and a controversy arose as to whether the whole was intended to glorify Solomon or be a satire against him. But—in the first place—we have no report of the existence of any sort of drama among the Semites, notwithstanding the Alexandrine Jew Ezechiel, who worked up the Exodus from Egypt as a Greek drama; and then, how can we conceive of a stage performance with only one hundred and sixteen verses, and at least twelve changes of scene? We should be obliged to think of it as an opera or a vaudeville. Besides there is no hint of anything of the kind in the text itself. In this way the door was opened wide for the exercise of conjectural ingenuity, and the overwhelming charm of this probably accounts for the constant recurrence of the attempt to establish the dramatic character of the book. Yet there is at the bottom of even this theory one correct factor: that we cannot possibly see in the Song of Songs one single, coherent, and closely connected poem. On the contrary, it is clearly separated into several longer and shorter songs, "which have no closer connexion than a series of beautiful pearls upon one string." (Herder.)

Now if the Song of Songs consists of a collection of separate songs, if the composition by Solomon or in his time is out of the question, and if nevertheless Solomon is frequently mentioned in it, what is the original sense and significance of these songs? The modern Orient has furnished the explanation. Among the country folk of Syria the seven days' wedding celebration is named "the king's week," because during this time the young couple are called king and queen, and, sitting upon an improvised throne, are treated and served as such by their village and by the neighboring communities which have been invited as guests. In this connexion a series of formal and distinct solemnities is customary, all of which are accompanied with song, games, and dances. The credit is due to Budde for having been the first to apply consistently and to the whole book, this knowledge which we owe to J. G. Wetstein, and which had been frequently referred to by others in the interpretation of the Song of Songs. It seems as though scales were falling from our eyes as we read the treatise by Budde in which the proofs are offered of the coincidence of the individual songs with the various solemnities of "the king's week," and the

very correct conclusion drawn that the Song of Songs could never, according to Oriental views, have depicted the love of affianced, but only of wedded lovers. The "king" is the young husband, who is called also Solomon, as being the richest and happiest of all rulers. The young wife is the "Shulammit," who is praised, like Abishag the Shunammite, 1 Kings, i. 3, as "the fairest damsel throughout all the coasts of Israel." And thus the enigma of our book, the solution of which had seemed to be beyond all hope, is finally solved. For this same point of view applies to the Old Testament in general, as is shown particularly by Song of Songs iii. 11, where a crown is mentioned "with which his mother crowned him on the day of his marriage," with which compare Isaiah, lxi. 10; and among the prescribed Jewish marriage customs is, as is well known, the coronation of the groom with the *עטרת הקן* groom's crown, and of the bride with the *עטרת נקה* bride's crown, which are found in every synagogue, artistically shaped of pure gold, or of an alloy of gold and silver, and richly set with jewels.

Furthermore, it is not even probable that the individual songs, all of which have the tone of the genuine folk-song, are by one and the same poet. They may be a collection of especially beautiful songs in use at these celebrations, and the question might well be raised whether we have to do with a mere collection or with a revision. As the order is by no means the same as that of the parts of the celebration, which was certainly the same two thousand years ago, as it is to-day, and as individual portions are noticeable which are less poetical, and, judging by their language independent of the older parts misunderstood and taken literally, the assumption of the book's being a revision would seem to be the more correct. Budde is of this opinion in connexion with iv. 8, vi. 1-3, viii. 3-5, and 13-14.

The time of the origin of the book in general is absolutely fixed by linguistic evidence. But when and where the individual songs originated, when and by whom they were gathered into the present "wreath of song," cannot be established with even approximate correctness. But when the work was once in existence, it is easy to understand, in view of the repeated recurrence of the name of Solomon and his especially erotic character, how the opinion grew up that it was composed by Solomon. And then, of course, it had to be admitted to the Canon, and they got over the offensive and difficult passages by resort to allegorical interpretation. But the admission to the Canon was not accomplished without vigorous opposition.