

LOSING A FRIEND

The Loss of the Old Testament to the Church

Ellen F. Davis

The problem I wish to consider is the functional loss of the Old Testament in the church. Many Christians, both ordained and lay, view the Old Testament as an historical document that is impenetrably complex and morally problematic. Even in evangelical traditions, few pastors, teachers, or preachers feel confident in drawing upon it for theological insight and guidance for their lives. In a word, the Old Testament is ceasing to function as Scripture in the European-American mainstream church with which I am most familiar.

Two “interests” have taken its place, at least in the academies of the church. The first is an antiquarian interest in the religion, social structure, and literary practice of ancient Israel; the second, a political interest in how that society’s biases (e.g., its patriarchal character) have, through the medium of Scripture, continued to affect us—the implication being that this is a problem which can be cleared up in our own day. Both the antiquarian and the political interest are valid; yet if that is where our interest in the Old Testament stops, then the text never leaves the academy, and the preacher is rendered mute. And so it is that there is very little serious teaching or preaching from the Old Testament in the (broadly speaking) liberal Protestant, mostly Anglo church.

I do not consider this in the first instance a loss of biblical authority, although that is how the problem is most often discussed (among those who see it as a problem). More fundamentally, it is a loss of intimacy. For many Christians, profound friendship with the Old Testament is no longer a live possibility. For the metaphor of friendship as a way of conceiving our relationship to a text, I

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am indebted to Wayne Booth.¹ This is a metaphor with critical value; it enables us to assess critically the kind of influence the Old Testament might exercise on the lives of Christians. Serious friendship (including marriage) has the most far-reaching ethical consequences of any interpersonal activity in which we engage, except probably the parenting of young children. Inevitably the choices we make about friendship shape our characters for good or for ill: choices about the people with whom we spend our discretionary time and how we spend it, what we think and talk about, the attitudes we adopt in each other's presence, the confessions we make or the secrets we withhold, the things we hope and work for together. Because of the amount of time and the degree of concentration involved, Booth argues that reading books is an ethical activity analogous to time spent with friends.

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Booth offers an ethics of fiction. I wish to apply his basic insight to the subject of reading the Old Testament as an ethical activity—in other words, to the subject of befriending the text. What effort would a serious friendship with the Old Testament require of us? What might we gain from cultivating such a friendship? In the second part of this essay, I will look at specific texts to illustrate what one might call an “intimate” reading. I give special attention to the pulpit as the primary place where such friendship can be fostered in the church, and the first place where the deterioration of that friendship is widely felt. While I believe that the academy, and my own biblical guild in particular, bear grave responsibility for the deterioration, I am not confident that the fire of affection will be rekindled from within the Society of Biblical Literature. So I address these remarks chiefly to those who locate their work within the church, as preachers and teachers.

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It was a comment made to me after I climbed down from the pulpit that marked a nodal point in my own thinking about what is involved in teaching and preaching from the Old Testament. Perhaps eight or nine years ago, as a guest preacher, I preached on the image of Aaron's breastplate of judgment in Exodus 28. What I said is in this context less interesting than what the priest who regularly serves the parish said to me when I had finished: “I am so glad you preached on the Old Testament lesson! I never do—I've forgotten too much.”

That comment speaks volumes about what this woman took away from her biblical education (and she is an honors graduate of a very fine seminary). “I've forgotten too much” to preach from the Old Testament. The implication is that the prerequisite for preaching is a certain kind of knowledge *about* the Bible, the kind of knowledge you learn for an exam and then forget in the normal course of events (for instance, is this passage J, E, or P?). For the approach I propose here, it is crucial to recall that virtually all the people who have

¹ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

through centuries regularly, indeed, eagerly preached from the Old Testament have had a quite different idea of what you need to know in order to do that responsibly. In this group I include some with a very fine historical critical sense, such as George Adam Smith, Gerhard von Rad, Walter Brueggemann. Almost universally, the good and the great biblical preachers would have said that one must know the Bible directly, through slow and repeated reading, through steady work of teaching and preaching. You learn to preach the Bible truly and well by doing it. In other words, the Bible is more like a person than an academic subject. You learn about it as you learn about a person with whom you aspire to a deep and profitable relationship: by spending time, a lot of time, listening and taking in a way of being. While you know a certain number of facts about your friend, they remain in the background of your awareness most of the time. You can represent your friend responsibly to others because of what you have absorbed, through prolonged exposure, at mostly unconscious levels. You can call to mind and evoke for others a certain characteristic way of looking at the world, of thinking and speaking. And is not just this the preacher's task. to represent the Bible responsibly to the Church, to evoke its way of looking at the world in ways that engage the imagination of Christians? We need not worry about convincing anyone it is true; the Bible, if well represented, will take care of that. Our job as preachers is rather to enable people to hear the language of Scripture with comprehension and interest. We must give them a chance to fill their minds with the images of Scripture, its claims and promises and demands.

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So, if the preaching task is to represent our friend well, then what is involved in cultivating a friendship with the Old Testament? I suggest that it requires of us three kinds of willingness:

- willingness to risk being “taken in”
- willingness to change
- willingness to deal with the extreme difficulty of the text

Probably all I have to say about these three things applies to friendship with the New Testament also, but I confine my examples to the Old Testament.

Willingness to risk being taken in: by this I mean willingness to enter into a new imaginative world whose presuppositions we do not initially share, some of which are startling and offensive to us. The reason this is required is because in the Old Testament we are dealing with an imaginative construction of reality. Not a false construction— indeed, I am convinced that on all essential points the biblical construction is reliable. But we can enter into this way of seeing the world only through vigorous exercise of the imagination, which is how we must relate to all that is strange and not fully known to us. Another way of putting this is to say that the Old Testament is throughout a poetic text. It uses language to delineate realities not otherwise accessible to us. C.S. Lewis ob-

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serves, “No poem will give up its secret to the reader who enters it regarding the poet as a potential deceiver, and determined not to be taken in. We must risk being taken in, if we are to get anything.”² Lewis was pointing to an aspect of the educational climate that has only become more pronounced in the 40 years since he wrote, namely, the tendency to view every book through the lens of other books. We are educated to be critics to the degree that we lose the primary experience of reading: the risky, potentially life-changing experience of entrusting our imagination for a time to a text. “Criticism,” viewed as a style of reading, is a guarded, derivative experience of the text. The opposite disposition toward the text might be termed “generosity.” “There must be something in it for me!”—thus George Steiner characterizes the attitude of a generous reader, one who is open to receiving something new and unexpected from the text.³

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I think it is obvious that this sort of generosity toward the text is only possible where you can be pretty sure that what is in it for you is not abuse, humiliation. Here the important point for teaching and preaching is that if we are to encourage others to befriend the Old Testament, then we must treat it in such a way as to convey respect, by which I mean primarily the text’s respect for its hearers. For all its infamous harshness, I believe that the Old Testament accords its readers respect. As evidence for that, I would point first of all to the shape of the canon itself. The Old Testament presents, not a monolithic argument, but rather a multi-voiced witness to the nature of Israel’s intimacy with God. This is a witness that shows changes in perspective and strong differences in viewpoint, that utters vehement protest even against God. The Old Testament canon does not give us pat formulae for holiness—not even in the much maligned Priestly material, as we shall see. Rather, the canon, viewed as a whole, forces us to exercise discretion, to test the spirits. The best way to convey the Old Testament’s respect for its readers, and also their own obligation of discernment, is to preach and teach widely. Work with texts with which you feel comfortable and those you do not, texts that comfort and texts that hurt, texts that surface deep disagreements within Israel’s own understanding of God and the holy life—disagreements the canon does not bother to hide from us.

If the preacher succeeds in making the canon’s respect for its hearers felt, then there should follow the second form of willingness that friendship with the Old Testament requires: willingness to change, to think and act differently in response to what we hear from our friend. The New Testament term for this is, of course, *metanoia*, “repentance,” literally “a change of mind.” The word denotes the fundamental rethinking of our position that is the practical consequence of being “taken in” by the imaginative world of the Bible and further, the

2 C S Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1961, p 94)

3 George Steiner, *After Babel Aspects of Language and Translation* (London Oxford University Press, 1975)

consequence of learning to read it “against ourselves” The phrase is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s In August 1932, he addressed a church conference in this way

We come together to hear Christ Have we heard him? I can only put the question, each man must answer for himself And should some of us now have to say in all honesty we have heard nothing, and others perhaps equally honestly say we have heard no end of things, let me express to both groups a great concern which has been bearing down on me with growing heaviness throughout the whole conference, has it not become terrifyingly clear again and again, in every thing that we have said here to one another, that we are no longer obedient to the Bible? We are more fond of our own thoughts than of the thoughts of the Bible We no longer read the Bible seriously, we no longer read it against ourselves, but for ourselves If the whole of our conference here is to have any great significance, it may be perhaps that of showing us that we must read the Bible in quite a different way, until we find ourselves again ⁴

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Reading “against ourselves” happens when we become so vulnerable to the text that it overpowers our natural way of reading We naturally seek to read the Bible in our own immediate interest, to consolidate our present position, the common term for this is “proof-texting” But the witness of the Bible is that the possibility of a relationship with God depends entirely upon our acquiring the discipline of regularly subverting that first impulse to read “for ourselves” The basic text here perhaps is Joshua 24:22 “And Joshua said to the people [at Shechem], ‘You are witnesses *against your own selves*, that you yourselves have chosen for yourself the LORD, to serve him’ And they said, ‘Witnesses’” As Walter Brueggemann has recently shown in a compelling way,⁵ the covenant ceremony at Shechem is paradigmatic for how we always stand before God when we read the covenantal text We stand as potential witnesses against our own selves, as those who confess their own need and will to change, individually and (even more) as a community of faith

The implication for preaching is grave If we are preaching effectively from the Bible, then we are steadily, week by week, placing the people we serve in a position of extreme vulnerability We are helping them become alienated from ways they have learned to cope with the world, to cope with their own weaknesses and limits, and that is terrifying Obviously, inducing such alienation is a genuine service only if we can show them that “the strange new world” (to use Karl Barth’s descriptive phrase) which the Old Testament opens up to them is more spacious, ultimately more gracious and forgiving, than the world in which they have hunkered down Effective teaching and preaching should demonstrate that there are more exciting possibilities for genuinely human life on the other side of a change of mind

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⁴ *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936* (London: Collins, 1965) pp. 185-186

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997)

Preachers must make it clear that willingness to change does not preclude disagreement, questioning, protest, fierce articulations of doubt that may or may not issue directly in the embrace of new possibility.

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Preachers must make it clear—and stay with the text until they are sure themselves—that willingness to change does not preclude disagreement, questioning, protest, fierce articulations of doubt that may or may not issue directly in the embrace of new possibility. We see the range of freedom for faithful speech especially in the full-blown poetry of the Old Testament: in the Psalms, Job, Jeremiah, Isaiah, also in Ecclesiastes. In each of these books, we see that openness to God involves the confidence to dismiss pious assurances, to challenge God’s “M.O.” directly. At the same time, taking these books as a whole, we see Israel’s acceptance of a challenge coming from God’s side; and this makes possible previously unwelcome change: the embrace of new hope or responsibility, the critique of an old position now seen to be inadequate

The third kind of willingness requisite for friendship with the Old Testament is the willingness to contend with the relentless difficulty of its language. I do not mean Hebrew, at least in the first instance, but rather poetic language—the kind of language which predominates in the Old Testament, including in its narrative portions. Poetic language is necessarily difficult, as George Steiner has brilliantly argued,⁶ because it is the business of those who write poetically to traffic in obscurities and uncertainties. In contrast to discursive writers, “poets” (in the broad sense) push us into new ways of thinking by stretching language to its limits, playing with ambiguities, bringing what was hidden to the light and casting a shadow of doubt over what previously seemed obvious. One may express this in traditional theological terms: By means of language the Holy Spirit, who, as John Donne saw, is a poet, moves us to repentance, *metanoia*, to open up new mental space.

But now the question of Hebrew does come in, simply because many difficulties and ambiguities are not evident in translation. The problem here may be more acute with the Old Testament than the New. I am inclined to think that Greek translates into English with less remainder than does Hebrew, although any translation of a poetic text involves the loss of fruitful ambiguities. At any rate, the advice I give to aspiring biblical preachers is to study both languages, because that is the surest way to gain a sense of the intense excitement of biblical faith, of how the whole canon endlessly begets interpretations that are new, fresh, and good. One small example from my first-year Hebrew class. Genesis 11:1, the first line of the tower of Babel story, reads: “Now all the earth *was* one language and one set of words.” I don’t know any translation that reproduces that; they all say “*of* one language, *had* one language.” But the Hebrew is stranger than that, as one of my students noticed. “The earth *was* one language . . .”—that is a *reductio ad absurdum*, underscoring the ludicrous consolidation of human population and power in the land of Shinar, a consoli-

6 George Steiner, “On Difficulty,” in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 18–47.

ation which God first mocks, then shatters and scatters. The very first phrase tells the story of impossible human pride, if you are moving slowly enough over the text to see it. This example depends on reading the text in Hebrew, but in many cases what you might call “the productive difficulty” of the text is fully evident in English (I’ll give an example of that shortly). Yet we customarily read so quickly that we miss it. So I would advise those who do not have the opportunity to work in Greek and Hebrew to memorize some of their preaching texts—again, for the sake of slowing down. “Chew the words,” as the monastic commentators of the middle Ages advised. For the words of Scripture are like grains of spice. We must chew them until they release their full savor and sweetness.

Of course, the three categories of willingness I have set forth are not discrete. In the practice of reading the Old Testament, one leads almost imperceptibly to another. I may be struggling with a linguistic or structural problem in the text, sometimes in a highly intellectual frame of mind. Then suddenly I find that I have fallen in deep, that my way of being in the world is called radically into question, or a possibility I never imagined has opened before me. Following are three examples which have surfaced in the last few years of my own reading and have occasioned for me fairly drastic new ways of thinking.

The first example is Genesis 1:28, the first commandment to the newly minted human beings: “And God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the land [or ‘earth’] and conquer it, and exercise dominion over the fish of the sea....” I know of no published translation that does not soften that verb “conquer” (*kabash*), although the most common use of this verb is in the “conquest narrative” in the book of Joshua. The reason for softening it here is obvious: this is an offensive verse, especially to our ecologically conscious age. People are increasingly aware that this verse has in the last three centuries been used as a proof-text to underwrite wholesale human exploitation of the non-human creation—not that reading the Bible made people do that. Greed made them do it, and the verse was interpreted in a convenient way. Proof-texting is typically bad exegesis, for it ignores the literary context. Genesis One as a whole leaves us in no doubt about God’s exacting interest and delight in the whole creation.

The word “conquer” can be misinterpreted, yet is no mistake. Rather, I want to argue that the Priestly writer is taking a calculated risk. The word is meant to arrest attention and push us to another level of understanding. Consider the whole phrase, verb and noun: “conquer the land, ‘*eretz*” —the Hebrew noun can designate what we would call the planet earth, but more often it refers to a specific territory, usually the land of Israel. “Conquer the land”—that phrase instinctively locates us at the beginning of the history of the people Israel in the land. As the Deuteronomistic Historian tells it, Israel was sent into the land

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with the “book of the Torah” in hand and mouth (Josh. 1:8), to instantiate the divine kingship. Yet that historical “conquest” was no better than a qualified failure. From the second chapter of Joshua, the biblical account is an almost uninterrupted record of Israelite fear, failure, and unfaithfulness to God, told with bitter irony and sometimes just plain bitterness. Israelites in the land regularly look worse than Canaanites; it is telling that there is in fact not a single story of Canaanite wickedness executed in the land. So in Pogo’s words, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

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The echo between Genesis and the Deuteronomistic History is unmistakable, when Genesis is translated correctly; and verbal echoes are the means by which the biblical writers regularly correlate events. With the phrase “conquer the land,” the Priestly writer is deliberately recalling that sad history of Israel in the land, which had already reached its tragic climax in exile by the time the “book of the Torah” achieved its final form, with this first chapter at its head. Always we must read the Bible backwards and forwards to get an accurate perspective. So here already there is an intimation of self-serving failure at the very moment the human being is created. Like Israel in the land of Canaan, we may fail miserably to make God’s benevolent dominion visible in the world

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I suspect the irony in this verse is sharper for us than for any previous generation of Bible readers. From our present historical vantage point, we recognize that the human being created in the image of God has come to look more like a chaos monster. We are, as Rosemary Radford Ruether says, “the rogue elephants of the world,” wreaking havoc upon all creation. “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21). Maybe we need to reassess the Priestly writer, who is normally considered a humorless pedant obsessed with calendars and other cultic matters. Could it be that P stands for Prophet? For here the P source does what the prophets, including Jesus, always do, shocking us into seeing our behavior and situation as they really are, seeing ourselves as God must. In a word, then, what a difference it makes if we read the verse against ourselves, as a dire warning, rather than reading it for ourselves, as a warrant for free exercise of our greed.

A second example of an “intimate” reading of an offensive text· Genesis 22, the “sacrifice” or “binding” of Isaac. In my listening experience, the most common way that preachers and teachers attempt to subdue this text is to read it as an etiological narrative of Israel’s repudiation of the pagan practice of child sacrifice. The problem with this approach is that in the story itself, there is no repudiation of sacrifice as a grisly abomination. To the contrary, although Isaac is spared this time, God specifically commends Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his darling son. Listen: “And [the angel] said, “By myself I swear—an utterance of the LORD—just because you have done this thing and have not held back your son, your only one— I will surely bless you and greatly mul-

tiply your seed like the stars of the heavens..." (vv. 16-17). The text does not share our scruples; it refuses our offer to rescue it on those "humane" terms. I once saw a preacher, who was honest enough to recognize the problem, throw up his hands and say, "I'm glad I don't worship the God of Abraham!" Another approach is to say that this story is about Abraham's obedience only; we are not meant to read in it anything about God's character. But Genesis is a relentlessly theocentric book. To speak of Abraham here and not of God is to see only half the story, and not even the most important half.

So what might we learn about God from this story? I remember the moment when that dimension of the text opened up for me. My homiletics colleague, Richard Ward, and I were doing a teaching session together; and he recited Genesis 22 from memory. In the freshness of that new medium, I heard a verse I had always passed over before, although I do not recall his giving it any special emphasis. Again, the angel of the LORD is speaking: "Do not stretch out your hand to the lad and do not do a single thing to him, for *now I know that you are a God-fearer*, and you did not withhold your son, your only one, from me" (v. 12). If we take those words seriously—and in this narrative not a word is wasted—then we have to believe that there is something God now knows for the first time. (For all its theocentricity, the book of Genesis gives little comfort to the doctrine of divine omniscience.) What God knows now is so crucial that this most terrible "test" (v. 1) was devised, in order to show whether in fact Abraham cares for God above everything and everyone else, even above Isaac, his son and his own slender hope for fulfillment of God's promise.

I spoke earlier of generosity toward the text as a basic disposition we need to cultivate, if we are to be friends. Generosity toward the Old Testament must mean this at least: accepting the text on its own terms, literally, working seriously with the language it offers us. The advantage of this present reading is that it is directed by the words of the passage rather than by an extraneous idea—the immorality of child sacrifice, the omniscience of God—however valid that idea might be in another interpretive situation.

This reading also coheres with the larger narrative context, to which the very first words of the chapter point us: "After these things, God tested Abraham." After what things? Where are we in the history of salvation? At this point, all God's eggs are in Abraham's basket, almost literally. Recall that after the Tower of Babel, God gave up on working a blessing directly upon all humankind and adopted a new strategy: channeling the blessing through Abraham's line (Gen. 12:3). Our story takes account of that new divine strategy: "And all the nations of the earth will find blessing through your seed, because you heeded my voice" (v. 18). God, having been badly and repeatedly burned by human sin throughout the first chapters of Genesis, yet still passionately desirous of working blessing in the world, now consents to become totally vulnerable on the

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point of this one man's faithfulness. But the narrative has just cast a shadow of doubt over Abraham's total faith in God. Remember those two episodes in which Abraham has Sarah pass herself off as his sister? In Egypt and again in Canaan he lets his beautiful wife go into a king's harem, rather than trusting God to protect them on their sojourn (Gen. 12:10-17 and 20:1-18). "After these things, God tested Abraham." After all that, we can begin to understand why God must know for sure whether the single human thread upon which the blessing hangs will hold firm.

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Further confirmation of this reading comes from two sources outside the Old Testament, but ones that are helpful for the preacher and teacher to bear in mind. First, it is congruent with what we know of the lives of saints. Those upon whom God most depends for the dissemination of blessing have more difficult lives—there is a lot of evidence for that (among recent examples, Nelson Mandela comes to mind). They must always be prepared to sacrifice what is most dear to them in this world, for that which is dearer yet. A second source of confirmation is liturgical usage. The church has always seen in the Binding of Isaac an adumbration of Jesus' Passion; the passage is commonly appointed as a Good Friday reading. It is at least doubly appropriate to that occasion: first, as a story of total human faithfulness to God; second, as the story of the father's willingness to sacrifice his "only" son. But if indeed this story testifies to God's extreme vulnerability to human unfaithfulness, then it is triply appropriate. For in Christ on the cross we see the ultimate cost of total faithfulness to God, joined with God's own terrible wounding by human sin.

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A third and final example is from the Song of Songs, the ultimate "intimate read" in the Bible. Yet our notion of intimacy has changed in this matter. It is now almost universally agreed that the Song is celebrating human sexuality, intimacy and mutuality between woman and man; and traditional mystical readings are dismissed. Notions that the Song is about the love between God and Israel, as Jews have said, or the love between Christ and the church, are generally regarded as arbitrary with respect to the text and repressive with respect to the audience. Yet consider this: the Song as traditionally understood once generated more preaching, more theological commentary than perhaps any single book of the Bible. Indeed, this reading of the Song was foundational for Christian preaching and biblical interpretation altogether: the first Christian commentary ever written was Origen's *On the Song of Songs*, and his sermons on the Song are among the earliest sermons preserved. And the medieval church produced hundreds of commentaries, probably thousands of sermons inspired by the Song. Now it is virtually never preached; its general usage is to provide a few licit erotic lines at wedding ceremonies. If we have finally found the right interpretation, how is it that we have lost so much preaching ground?

I suggest that the sexual interpretation of the Song, while not wrong, accounts for only a small part of the data. And the data here are, of course, linguistic: the words of the text. One striking thing about the Song is its use of erotic language. Equally striking is the fact that the Song is in large part (erotica included) a tissue of quotes from other parts of Scripture. Phrases from the Prophets, Torah, Psalms abound—and not just scattered words, but in many cases connected phrases, vivid images and terms too specific for their other contexts to be forgotten by those familiar with biblical language. The Song is like an echo chamber, and modern commentators have not taken that seriously enough. We need a more generous interpretation of the Song, one which takes full account of this remarkable resonance. Accordingly, we need a style of interpretation that allows the text to say more than one thing—a truism to the medieval preachers, but strangely lost to us.

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I have tried to offer that kind of reading of the Song in a commentary.⁷ Here I sketch the basis for the kind of multi-leveled reading to which I believe the Song is directing us. Of particular note is the fact that much of the Song's memorable imagery, especially that of the blooming garden, is drawn in language that elsewhere in the Bible describes Jerusalem and the Temple. Although this initially seems odd, it is not hard to make the connection when you think about the symbolizing habits of the biblical writers. For the Jerusalem Temple is itself designed as a garden. Its ornamentation—cherubim, lilies, pomegranates, flowers—show that this is the stylized garden of God. Moreover, the language of the Psalms (e.g., Ps.36:7) confirms that the Temple is Eden revisited, and pilgrimage to the Temple is a return to the garden from which we were first exiled. In all of the Old Testament, there are only these three prominent gardens: Eden, the Temple, and the garden where the lovers take joy. And through the medium of language, the lovers' garden enfolds the other two. The last garden—the Song is a late entrant into the Hebrew Bible—reclaims the others, and thus imaginatively reverses untold damage, both primeval and historical. When the poet of the Song evokes the mythos and symbolism of the Jerusalem Temple, the Babylonian destruction and the exile are undone. Reaching much further back, when lovers have joy in the garden, all the ruptures that occurred in Eden are healed. Remember, the first disobedience in Eden disrupted the created order at several levels. It made hostile divisions between man and woman, between humanity and non-human creation, between God and humanity. Following the path laid down by the language of the Song, we experience each of those ruptures as healed. Man and woman now meet in full mutuality. Most obviously, there is a reversal of the primeval curse: "Toward your husband will be your desire, but it is he who will

⁷ *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion (Westminster John Knox Press, forthcoming May 2000)

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God as Lover.*

rule over you” (Gen.3:17). Now we hear the Shulammit (Song 7:1) exult in almost identical terms: “I am for my darling, and toward *me* is *his* desire!” (7:11). At another level of healing, the soil which once sprouted “briars and thorns” (Gen.3:18) now brings forth flowers and fruit with a lack of inhibition that mirrors the lovers’ own. As for the rupture between God and humanity: I believe the Song testifies strongly, albeit obliquely, that God is present when lovers meet in full intimacy.⁸ And more than this, through the medium of the Song, as the mystics have always known, we may meet God as Lover. This is finally how we must understand such extensive use of language that normally attaches to Zion and its Temple. We are meant to see here the healing of the rupture between God and humanity, for the Temple is above all the place where heaven and earth meet and are reconciled, where Paradise is restored. When the lovers, having overcome external opposition and also their own ambivalence, meet in the garden, then every terrible exile, from Eden and Jerusalem, is reversed.

I have some hope—flickering hope perhaps—that preaching may yet prove to be the vehicle whereby the fuller sense of the Song is restored to the church. This is why I have hope: a colleague of mine, a very fine Old Testament scholar, recently took on the task of preaching the Song of Songs—at a wedding, I believe. He began with the standard critical assumption about the meaning of the Song. Yet to his surprise, he discovered that he could not help speaking, not only about human love, but also about the love between God and Israel. How are we to account for that? In my view, the simplest and best explanation is the traditional one: This is the work of the Holy Spirit inspiring the preacher, opening to him the *sensus plenior* (“fuller sense”) of the text in response to his generosity, his own openness and desire to be “taken in” to its imaginative world. May his tribe increase. □

8 Contra Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978, pp. 145f)



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