
ON THE
SONG OF SOLOMON,

FROM DER EVANGELISCHEN KIRCHEN ZEITUNG.

TRANSLATED BY

MR. REZEAU BROWN.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON.

THERE is scarcely a book in the Bible, which has been so variously interpreted as the Song of Solomon. The different interpretations may be divided into three classes. One of these explains the whole book, from the relation of God to the Jewish nation, and finds in every figure a reference to some particular event in their history. According to them, the whole is an allegorical and figurative narration of the government of God over the Jews. This mode of interpretation we meet with among the Jews, almost as soon as we find the book mentioned. Jesus, the son of Sirach, who lived about 200 years before Christ, seems to have explained it thus. In the Book of Wisdom, chap. 47, v. 13—17, he praises Solomon on account of his composition of dark parables. This cannot be referred to the Proverbs, for these are separately mentioned. Another common method of interpretation, and one which has been received in all ages by the Christian Church, is, that Christ is the subject of the Song of Solomon. This general opinion has two varieties: Christ is generally admitted to be represented by the “*Lover*,” while the “*Beloved*” is made to refer to either the Church of the New Testament, taken as a body, or to each individual Christian soul. Some have endeavoured to unite both these. A third class, finally, supports the opinion, that mere human love is the subject of the Poem. This interpretation was very little received, until the latter half of the eighteenth century. From that time forward, it became quite general, and was defended under various

modifications. Some sought to maintain the honour of the Book, by supposing it a description of a happy marriage, or a defence of monogamy ; others asserted its claim to a place among the sacred writings, on the ground of its being a description of a chaste affection, while others found passages in it which were grossly immoral. The one placed this, the other that historical fact in connection, in order to explain the Book ; and when this did not suffice, they had recourse to dreams ! One interpreted it as a collection of unconnected songs ; another sought to discover a plan which pervaded the whole. The charge of *arbitrary interpretation*, which this third class make against their opponents, appealing, as a proof, to their differences from one another, applies in its fullest force to themselves ; for no two of them coincide in their views on this subject.

The first two classes unite in the opinion, that in the Song of Solomon, spiritual relations are represented under sensible figures, and are, as defenders of a spiritual or allegorical interpretation, together opposed to those who interpret it literally. The arguments which have been used, with some correctness, against the *allegorical* method of interpretation, cannot be made successfully against a *spiritual* ; for we must be careful to distinguish writings which the author wished to be understood historically, from those in which it is his intention to exhibit spiritual relations under the figure of sensible. In the former case, an allegorical explanation does not deserve the name of an *interpretation*. If the latter design be made apparent, the allegorical interpretation is accordant with the purpose of the author, and is, therefore, the only correct one.

In attempting then, to establish the correctness of such an exposition of the Song of Solomon, we must, I. Show

that it is not unworthy the Divine Being, and not inconsistent with the genius of the Sacred writings, to present a spiritual relation under such figures. In this way we shall prove that a spiritual interpretation is possible ; and in order to show that it must here be adopted, we will, 2. Give the reasons which authorize us to conclude, that in this book, the figures used are appropriate only to the purpose of making such relations manifest.

We come now to the consideration of the first point. The Christian, in determining what is consistent with the divine character, does not follow mere abstract philosophical speculations, but considers those things which the Living God, who reveals himself historically, has said and done. Now, he has not, in his revelation, kept in view so much his own nature, as the wants of fallen man. In order to elevate men to himself, he has veiled his eternal majesty, and condescended to them. Since man can only understand and love what is kindred with his own nature, the Godhead appears to him as righteous and good, as full of wrath, and full of mercy. And to present these various attributes in such a manner, that men might be feelingly sensible of them, when he spoke to them by his Son, by his prophets, and servants, he used such figures as were taken from their situation and relations. Thus, he calls himself a Father, and a Shepherd, in order to show the tenderness of his love to them. He represents it under the figure of *marriage love*. He speaks of longing, of distress on account of their faithlessness, and of jealousy. We can best judge of the propriety of the strongly figurative language of Solomon's Song, when we have shown that in various passages of both the old and new Testament, where any other interpretation is impossible, (which is not the case here,) the representation of the relations

of God or Christ to his people, under these same figures, is not uncommon.

In many passages of the Old Testament, the relation of God to the Israelites is presented under figures taken from that of a lover to the object of his affection. On leaving Egypt, Israel is found in the condition of a betrothed maiden : they are married to Jehovah, when at Sinai they enter into a covenant with him : every subsequent apostacy is represented as adultery, and every return as the renewed reception of one who had been divorced. The following passages deserve attention here. Isaiah (chap. 54, 5,) speaks thus : “For thy Maker is thy Husband, the Lord of Hosts is his name, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, the God of the whole earth shall he be called.” Also, (62, 5,) “For, as a young man marries a wife, so shall thy Creator marry thee.” And, (50, 1,) the decree of rejection which God had declared against Israel, is called a writing of divorcement. Jeremiah, chap. 3, 1, uses the same comparison ; and Hosea employs the whole former part of his prophecy in carrying out these representations. The Jews are there exhibited under the figure of a woman who has been unfaithful to her lawful husband, and has fixed her affection on another ; on which account her husband has rejected her, but afterwards forgives the offence, and reinstates her in his favour. Ezekiel has made use of this comparison with the greatest boldness, in two descriptions, (chap. 16 and 23,) in which the chaste will find nothing to offend, but which, to the licentious, may be cause of offence. But the Jehovah, who, under the Old Testament economy, loved his people so tenderly, is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, who, in the New, shed his blood for them ; and since no other figure seems more appropriate to represent the love of God to his children than that

of conjugal affection, we have reason to expect that the same figure will be found in the New Testament; and in this expectation we are not disappointed. John the Baptist calls himself the friend of the bridegroom, (John, 3, 29,) and refers to Christ as the bridegroom, who will conduct home the bride. Our Lord calls himself the bridegroom, (Matt. 9, 15.) Paul speaks of marriage as representing the connection of Christ with believers, Rom. 7, Eph. 5, and in 2 Corinth., chap. 1, he compares the Church, when it is purified through the blood of Christ, and sanctified through his spirit, to a Bride without spot or wrinkle. We see now, why this figure is so appropriate to represent the relation of Christ or God to his church. As the husband, in marriage, is connected to the wife by the ties of love and faithfulness, so God has entered into the same with his people; as the most sincere affection exists between the man and wife, so the most tender ties unite God's people to him; as the woman is subject to the man, and he, in return, affords her protection, so God is, with his gracious assistance, ever nigh those who distrust their own strength, and seek protection and help from him. As activity is the part of the man, and as, from her character, the woman has a right to receive protection and support, so, in relation to God, all are recipients. As the woman must leave father and mother, and must depend entirely upon her husband, so, every one who would belong to Christ, must break through the dearest ties which bind them to the world. They must die to the world, that they may live to Christ.

It remains for us now to show that, in the Song of Solomon, under such figures, this spiritual relation is delineated; and that, consequently, the allegorical interpretation of the same is the only correct one. There is one important external argument for this. It is taken from tra-

dition, which, among a people who believed so firmly its authority as the Jews, is not to be disregarded, though its voice may not be altogether decisive. Now, the Jewish literati, so far as we are acquainted with their writings, with great unanimity explain this Book allegorically. They themselves appeal to a tradition, of which the old Chaldaic translator is the principal witness. But we can trace this interpretation even farther. There can be no doubt that those who made the collection of the books of the Old Testament, explained it thus. Even a slight inspection of these writings will teach any one, that it was not their object to collect all the remains of the national literature. They had constantly in view, the displaying of the divine government, and they selected for this purpose, every thing that would cast light upon the relation subsisting between God and the Jewish people; that would, as history, prophecy, devotional writings, or doctrinal, tend to enliven their sense of their duty to God and to promote a godly life. When, therefore, they received this book into such a collection, they must have had a strong conviction that it did not celebrate mere human love, but the love of Jehovah to his people. All that recent commentators say in praise of human love, and in proof of the opinion that a book, whose object it was to exalt the same, is worthy of a reception into the Sacred Canon, is nothing to the purpose. The only question here, is, by what principles were they who arranged the sacred writings, governed? and this question is an historical one, and is to be answered from the nature of the books received. If, then, it be proved, that these Collectors interpreted the Song of Solomon allegorically, it would be exceedingly arbitrary to affirm that the true interpretation was lost at that time, when the allegorical had been universally received down previously to that period.

and especially as the time when the book was written was not very distant.

But in addition to this external proof, there is a stronger internal argument, taken from passages in the Poem itself, which impel us to the opinion that, under the figure of human love, a higher affection is represented. We will not, here, urge the consideration, that those who would interpret the Song of Solomon literally, must conjecture a multitude of historical circumstances, in order to give their interpretation even the appearance of probability. It may be replied indeed to this, that this obscurity arises only from ignorance of the place where the lovers dwelt. We will only give a collection of passages which, according to the literal interpretation, are either entirely without meaning, or require an exceedingly forced explanation; but which, *allegorically*, give a sense at once elegant and easy.

It is evident from chap. I, v. 4, that the "Beloved" has a collective signification. "Draw me, says she, and *we* will run after thee. *We* will remember thy love more than wine." It is entirely contrary to oriental customs, and quite unmeaning according to the literal interpretation, when the Beloved says "I am black but lovely. Oh! ye daughters of Jerusalem, look not on me, for I am black: the sun hath looked upon me, and my mother's children were angry with me. They made me keeper of the vineyards, but mine own vineyard have I not kept." But when figuratively interpreted, the sense is beautiful and plain. "Do not despise me, oh! my friends, for though I have, through a sinful desertion of my God, polluted myself and separated myself from him, yet he has not forever cast me off. His love will purify me again from all my sins. My blackness is not natural, and can be removed. I have suffered myself to be seduced

by my neighbours to the service of their gods, and have neglected the keeping of my vineyard." The parables of Isaiah, chap. 5, and our Lord are similar, in which the Jews are represented as the vineyard of the Lord. The passages, chap. 3, 4, and 8, 2, are entirely opposed to the customs of the East, where the women live in the closest seclusion, in which the Beloved is represented as bringing her Beloved into the house and chamber of her mother. And the passage, chap. 5, 3—7, is clearly against all historical probability, according to which she, in order to seek her lover, wanders by night through the city, and is wounded by the watchmen, without there being any conceivable occasion for such conduct. If interpreted figuratively, the sense is elegant. The lover comes to her house—she refuses him admission—her severity relents—she determines to go and seek him—she is wounded by the watchmen—she, however, finds him—he becomes reconciled to her, and sings her praises, chap. 6, 4, &c. Jehovah came to the Israelites with love and favour—they despised him—he takes away his assistance, and suffers them to be oppressed by the surrounding nations—notwithstanding, as soon as they seek him again, he suffers himself to be found. The same things are told here figuratively, which in the historical books and prophets, are matter of history. There are, not unfrequently, figures used in this poem, which would appear ridiculous if applied to any single beloved object; particularly to a country maiden, as some suppose the "Beloved" to have been. Thus, chap. 1, 9, she is compared to the horses in Pharaoh's chariots. It is said of her, chap. 3, 6, "Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like a pillar of smoke?" a figure entirely applicable to the progress of the immense host of Israel through the desert. In like manner, chap. 8, 5, "Who is this coming up from the de-

sert, leaning on her beloved?" Chap. 6, 4. The lover speaks: "Thou art beautiful, my love, as Tirza, (a royal residence,) comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army;" and, 6, 10, 12, compares her with the blushing red of the morning, with the sun, moon, and says again, "thou art terrible as an army with banners." Very appropriate figures to be applied to a country maiden! He invites her, chap. 4, 8, to come with him from Lebanon, from the high Amama, from Senir and Hermon, the dwelling-places of lions and leopards; and also in many other places. In other passages the possibility of a merely literal exposition cannot be denied; yet the allegorical deserves the preference, and in none is there any thing which will forbid it. This will appear manifest on explaining some of the principal passages of the Poem. The Book begins: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." This verse, together with the 4th, "Draw me and we will run after thee," is expressive of a strong desire for a reconciliation; for the restoration of the former relation, by which Jehovah manifested his love to his people. "How lovely smell thine ointments," says the Beloved, "thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore the young women love thee." The Chaldaic translator interprets this correctly: "Thy holy name is heard through all the earth; it is precious as the holy oil with which kings and priests were anointed." "Show me, chap. I, 7, my love, where thou feedest, for why should I be as one that turneth aside, as a dishonoured maiden by the flocks of thy companions?" Comp. Gen. 38, 14. The sense is: "Tell me, oh! my God, how I may return to Thee, for wherefore should I any longer injure myself by uniting with other people who serve not thee, the true God, but useless idols?" In many places, God is represented as a shepherd, and Israel as his flock. Comp.

Jerem. 23, 3, 4. Ezek. 34, 11. The apostacy of the Israelites is also frequently compared to adultery. The Lover replies in v. 8, "Knowest thou not, oh! fairest among women, where, &c., follow in the footsteps of my flocks?" i. e. Wouldst thou know by what means thou mightest be reconciled to me, look at the example of thy pious fathers, and follow in their footsteps. The reunion of God to his people is represented by the reconciliation of lovers, who afterwards express their joy in each other.

The time in which God had withdrawn himself from his people, chap. 2, 11, is presented under the figure of a rainy season, and winter; the time of his return, by spring.

Here follows in v. 15, an exhortation to drive away the foxes which destroy the vineyard. This means that the people returning to the Lord, should expel the seducers, i. e. the false prophets who would overthrow the government of God. Chap. 3, The Beloved has lost her Lover, but she seeks and finds him. Taking away the figure: The people return unto the Lord, who receives them, and this restoration is represented by a royal festival. Chap. 4, 12, The faithfulness of the people to their God, is *drawn out* under the figure of the chastity of the Beloved. The Lover says, chap. 6, 8, "There are threescore queens and fourscore concubines, but this is the one that I love," which signifies that God had chosen the small and despised nation of the Jews as his own, before all the powerful kingdoms of the earth.

In addition to these, there is a collateral argument for the allegorical interpretation, drawn from the names of the lovers. The Lover is called Solomon, i. e. the Peaceful, the Prince of Peace; the Beloved, Salamite, the Peaceful or the Happy. This can hardly be a mere ac-

cidental coincidence The Book* takes its name from the spiritual sense: The Song of Songs, i. e. The most sublime song.

It appears, then, from sufficient proof, that the spiritual interpretation of the Song of Solomon is the correct one. The common objection, that those who explain it allegorically differ so much from one another, is not to be charged to the Book itself, but to its interpreters. This difference has arisen from the fact that these persons misapprehending the figurative character of the Old Testament, and destitute of practical feeling, without any fixed principle, have explained every figure as if they had found in it an allusion to some event in history, or to the state of experimental religion among God's people. This mode of interpretation is inconsistent with the character of the Song of Solomon, in which there is so much ornament. We cannot find for every individual figure, a correspondent reality, but we must collect them into one grand picture, and then we may easily discover what is referred to. Thus, in the representation of the beauty and loveliness of the Beloved, we need go no farther for an explanation, than to an expression of the love of God to his people. A comparison of other oriental poets, who in like manner represent the love of God by human affection, would be instructive. If any one will interpret this Poem, upon such principles as we have advanced, he will avoid the arbitrary manner in which both early and late critics have, so improperly, explained it; and the difference of interpretations, so often urged as an argument against the allegorical method, will disappear entirely.

If, then, the spiritual interpretation of the Song of Solomon be the correct one, it is certainly worthy of a place

* In the German Bible, the name of the Song of Solomon is *The High Song*.

in the Sacred Canon, from which some would, on various accounts, reject it. While, however, some thus seek to degrade this Book, others, in early times, went so far in praise of it, as to place it before every other one in the Old Testament. If this preference be proper, why is it that it is never expressly quoted either by our Saviour or his apostles? Although we are far from questioning the inspiration of the Song of Solomon, we cannot but rank it beneath the prophetic writings. It may *possibly* appear that the *figurative* is too abundant in this Poem. The Prophets make use of the same comparisons, but the object, to wit, the moral relation of Jehovah to the Jews, is ever obvious; in the Song of Solomon, the figures may, on the contrary, be too far-fetched for perspicuity.

Finally, it is a disputed point among those who interpret this Book allegorically, whether it is the object, to represent the relation which the Almighty sustained to the Jewish nation, or that of Christ to the whole church, or his relation to every soul. It may be gathered from our defence of the allegorical interpretation, on which side the truth is found. Most of the arguments which favour such an explanation, go to show that the *relation of Jehovah to the Jewish nation* is the subject of the allegory. The question, whether the relation of Christ to his Church is represented, must be answered negatively, if it be asserted that the Poem has no reference whatever to the Old Testament times; negatively too, when it is taken entirely out of its historical connection, and made to refer *prophetically* to the love of Christ for his New Testament Church. It may, on the other hand, be answered affirmatively, inasmuch as the God, of whose love to his people in the ancient church we have a representation, is the same as Christ who, in all ages, has revealed the glory of the Godhead to men. and who. to lay the foun-

dation of the new covenant, shed his own blood for them. Affirmatively too, inasmuch as the church of the Old and New Testament stands in the same relation to Christ; and as sin, and grace, backslidings, and returns, the subjects represented by the figurative language of the Song of Solomon, are constantly repeated in both. This Poem may represent the relation of Christ to every Christian, only so far as the history of the Children of Israel is the history of every believing soul. It can *thus* be accommodated to the relation of an individual soul to Christ, and in no other way. Great care is here necessary: a false interpretation of the Song of Solomon may lead to the invention of a mysticism, or may be applied to the adorning of one already existing, which has more affinity with the doctrines of the Persian Soofies than with the gospel; thus degrading holy things, while it perverts the moral relation of Christ to the soul into something romantic, creating thus a kind of spiritual intoxication, destructive to Christian humility and self-denial. It is *certainly, not without design, that in the Holy Scriptures, the relation of God or Christ to the individual soul, is never represented under the figure of a marriage.* For although the relation to His church and to the individual members may be substantially the same, in the former case, there would be much less room for abuse than in the latter.