

Canonical yet Problematic

Carnal or spiritual

We are thankful that the principle question has been decided: we receive the Song of Songs as holy and canonical. We are thankful but not yet satisfied, not yet finished. No, we are only beginning.

Even among the old Rabbis, in their dispute about what did and did not defile the hands, the canonicity of this book was never in question. Rather, they debated its *degree* of holiness. Both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs were somewhat less appreciated, because *the man* Solomon is speaking.

Let us first see why, in their day, Theodorus van Mopsuestia and Sebastian Castellio came into conflict with the church regarding this book. Theodorus' view had to do with the character of this book, rather than the canonicity. What was the problem? He resisted the allegorical interpretation of the early Christian church, that the Song of Songs represented only a spiritual side. He declared himself to be an advocate of simply reading the book and taking it literally. According to him, the author was describing the love between a man and a woman. The man was Solomon, who was criticized by his subjects for his marriage with an Egyptian princess. To refute this criticism, Solomon sang of that love in the Song of Songs. Theodorus viewed this poem as an "erotic song", as we read in an English commentary. Is it indeed an erotic book? That depends on what we understand by *erotic*. Some use this word disdainfully, thinking of sensual love, while others understand it to mean all loving feelings of a higher nature, as opposed to only sexual love. In any case, Theodorus viewed it as a song about the mutual love between a man and a woman. At the second Council of Constantinople (553), he was condemned for his view. This is unfortunate, for concerning canonicity he did not err!

One thousand years later, during the 16th century, Sebastian Castellio, a contemporary of John Calvin, taught that the Song of Songs did not allow for allegorical interpretation. He argued that the dialogue of Solomon was with Solomon's girlfriend the Shulammitte, and was unworthy of a place in the canon, because it spoke only of carnal feelings. Castellio's difficulty was his belief that a book in the Bible must have only spiritual, and not carnal, themes. In this regard, Theodorus stood diametrically opposed to Castellio, since he felt that carnal love could indeed be the subject of a Bible book. Because of his literal interpretation, he wanted to keep the book in the canon, while Castellio, with the same interpretation, wanted to take it out! The canonical character presumes a certain standard for what is proper within the covers of the Bible, and what is not. The result of the conflict between Castellio (a school rector who wished to be considered for the ministry) and Calvin is of no importance here.

The hallmark of tradition

The conflict around these two individuals brings us to what certainly could be the heart of the matter, that is, *who* determines what may and may not be included in the Bible? Who is to decide which subjects may be dealt with in the Word of God?

If we had to decide between God and man, there would be no solution, since all who prize the name Christian would hasten to ascertain that it is the LORD GOD. We would be no further ahead. But when we put it differently, for instance, deciding between God as he reveals himself in the Word, *or* God as pictured by a Christian steeped in tradition, the matter is different, though still difficult. For in the view of the Christian who is formed by tradition, the ideas of the ancients, so strongly bound up with Scripture, have become an inextricable whole. It will be impossible for him to mentally transport himself into our dilemma. Criticism of the tradition in which a person grew up can be felt as an assault on Scripture itself. The matter can be very sensitive. Yet this is the only way to begin to solve the problem of all the questions at hand.

It is our hope to be able to help solve the problem. It is therefore necessary that we determine our definite point of departure. Let us begin by taking seriously the Christians who were marked by tradition – were they not our own ancestors? Let us not scoff at their vision, thinking that these traditions have long been superseded.

Prudish

How were things about one hundred years ago? To appreciate the situation of that time we will not hide behind labels such as *Victorian*, which makes us think of an era of pious, sanctimonious people. That is a very general and superficial impression. There is more to this time period than Victorianism. It is true that, in higher circles, there was silence about matters related to love. At most, these things were discussed in whispers. Much was covered up, including sensational affairs of the more prominent members of society. The character of this period was determined, not only by Queen Victoria, but equally by others. These “others” included her son and successor, whose youthful life did not always coincide with his mother’s views.

It is not likely that the spirit of that day had much influence on our forefathers during the days of the Secession and the Doleantie. With or without Queen Victoria, they stood apart and lived their own lives, marked by a deep gravity. That gravity was caused by the great contrast between God’s heavenly majesty and holiness on the one hand, and their own deep awareness of sin on the other hand. They were fully convinced that they could be saved only through grace. The righteousness of their Saviour, the Lord Jesus, was central to their lives. That is how they read their Bible, with almost no help other than Matthew Henry’s commentary. What else did they have? That is why they looked for comfort to the beloved old writers, who analyzed the life of the soul so well. When studying the Bible they did not ask the questions: “How must we see this text?” “What is the meaning of the author here in this text?” “How must we see this in the light of that day?” It was not until the end of the 19th century that they learned to apply the Bible to their lives.

The spiritual focus

We can guess how the Song of Songs was dealt with at that time. Again, our forefathers had to work with the available commentaries. But did they realize that these writings also had their limitations, and that the final word was not spoken about that Word? I am afraid not. Most of these people simply did not think any further.

How could they? The spiritual life sought by the elders and ministers, the brothers and sisters, was just that: spiritual, i.e. dealing with the relationship between God and the soul. In those days the paramount question was: How is your soul? The church focused on the soul exclusively, so the church was dearly beloved. This is clearly seen in how readily the people suffered persecution during the difficult times of the Secession and the Doleantie. However, the function of the church was seen mainly as the place where believers could receive spiritual food in fellowship with others, who were fed with the same proclamation. It is true that the leaders of the Doleantie opened the door to other facets of life. But the social, economical and political aspects of life, as well as art and culture, were mentioned only as something extra in the preaching. This occurred mostly around special occasions, such as days of prayer and thanksgiving, or New Year's Eve. Fortunately there was also the catechism preaching, which guarded against preaching with too limited a view.

Sexual life was virtually ignored. It seemed as though this was a forbidden subject, an effect of this Victorian era. Of course, our forefathers knew of the necessity of sexuality, but it was not for God's children to dwell on this. It was dangerous territory, and thus it was better to stand aloof from those worldly affairs.

Confession of guilt

Our forefathers took sexual sin very seriously. Those who sinned against the 7th commandment were seen as great sinners.

Those who committed sexual sins were seen as the fallen, and had to confess their sins in a public worship service. They were marked for a long time afterwards. It took a long time before some consistories broke with the custom of public confession. We do not wish to judge this custom of confession. There is no reason to refute this as Christians. But the question we must ask is, why was this sin so much in the spotlight? And confessed in *public*? Members of the previous generation have criticized this practise.

Our forefathers appealed to some well known passages, such as those in Paul's letters. We think of the closing verses of Romans 13, of 1 Corinthians 6:12, and of Ephesians 5:22, where the special character of this sin is set before us. We do not want to diminish these statements of the apostle, since it is God himself who points to a source of sin in our lives. But this emphasis has perhaps unintentionally fed the curiosity of people looking for a sensation. The church did speak of edifying or non-edifying matters in its church order, that much is certain. But what happened in everyday life?

One particular difficulty with this sin, which we may not underestimate, is that we can be titillated by the rumour of its occurrence. That too is sin! To begin with, the minister dealing with Lord's Day 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism may pray for himself while he is preaching, to be spared from sin against this commandment. Therefore, should there really be public confession for those who fell into this sin? If so, the listening congregation should simultaneously do confession of its own sin against this commandment in thought, word and deed. It is unfortunate that a previous generation has looked for evil in this one area. For is it not also a sin to speak evil against one another? Lord's Day 43 of the

Heidelberg Catechism calls this sin “the devil’s own works.” Such is not said of sin against the seventh commandment. It is true that the devil likes to tempt people to commit this sin. It is a weak spot in human life: a vulnerable place where Satan can hurt people. He has indeed struck them down numerous times: politicians, directors and doctors, but also teachers, pastors and police officers, to name a few of the most esteemed among us. Sexual sin can cause a lot of problems, since the consequences can also affect others. In the effort to diminish consequences, even more damage can result, for example, an abortion: the cost of a human life.

Dangerous territory?

Our ancestors considered this subject to be dangerous territory. One century later, I can agree with them: we must indeed be very careful here. This includes boys and girls who associate together, and men and women who work together in the same office. Lord’s Day 41 is rather elaborate in its discussion of the matter. One person can intend a word or gesture to be innocent, yet the other person can misunderstand it and be tempted through it.

As one of our confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism is also subject to Scripture. But these same Scriptures contain the Song of Songs, a little book which occupies only seven or eight pages of the Bible. “Short but sweet”, we might say. This little book is special in that it approaches love from the other side, the *positive* side. There is indeed a positive side. We, who belong to another generation and are familiar with a completely different way of preaching, will say, “Of course!” Thanks to some excellent resources, we search the Bible in a different way. We realize that there is more in the Bible than the relationship between God and the soul, even though this too is valuable. Indeed, I am afraid we have lost sight of it somewhat. It is important for us to recognize that body and soul form a unity and are both the work of him who created all, and who gave man a mandate in creation. From the perspective of God’s good creation we see the Song of Songs in a different light. It takes us back to the original situation and the fragrance of Paradise.

This is also where the problems begin. This book is read by sinful people on a sinful earth, people who never smelled the fragrance of Paradise. Yet there is much in God’s creation that reminds us of the beautifully formed woman and man. That these creatures are often looked at with blurred vision does not mean we cannot catch glimpses of God’s perfect work! In its own Eastern way, the Song of Songs reminds us of this beauty.

Reading while blushing

But instead of enjoyment, many readers continue to have problems with this book. It has always been this way. But in spite of the spiritualizing we find in the marginal notes of the Bible (Dutch Authorized Version) and by so many commentators of earlier years, the Song of Songs speaks a clear language. It is obviously focused on the love relationship between man and woman, also from a physical perspective. This is immediately clear to the unbiased reader. Yes, this book is a part of the canon, but oh, how can we deal with such content and such wording?

We can keep any questionable literature about love and physical relationships out of our homes (whether we do so is another matter!), but inside the covers of the Bible, the Song of Songs enters our homes. The Bible is meant to be read. Every day again, our families read a portion of the Bible at the dinner table, without skipping a book or chapter. Then comes the day that the Song of Songs is begun. That day appears to be a difficult day, followed by more difficult days, and the problem increases. There are passages in this book which are uncomfortable for us to read; they make us blush.

That is how it was in the past, and it likely is still the same today. Nobody has to ask why – it is clear. Subjects we would rather not speak about are brought up in this book. When we read it, we cannot escape this reality; and, in order to discuss it, we have to read it. First comes the text, then the explanation. The text clearly mentions things which are taboo, according to morals codes which have governed us for a long time.

Even though it is a dialogue between two young people, God gives them the floor, as he did with the respective authors of Job, the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Human words receive the authority of God in these books. They are accepted as inspired words, being in harmony with the clear doctrine of the rest of God's Word!

Atmosphere

What are we to do, as father or mother, or whomever reads at the table? Do we read the Word, at any cost, because that is how we do it? Do we say, "It is God's Word! Period!"? Or will we skip it because the (young) listeners are not reverent?

I would like to say this: at a home visit I attended, a father of older children talked to me about it. He asked me what I would do. Being less experienced, I asked him, "How do you do it?" He said: "When they are in a giggling mood, I wait before reading. When the atmosphere is good, I read." Wise words! This is especially so because, when the mood is right, we can also talk about it together. For do we not read the Bible in order to be able to discuss it? A discussion can guide us in applying the Bible in our daily lives. This is a good rule, not only for reading at the table, but for all Bible reading. This counts also for boys and girls when they read the Bible for themselves, something they should do quietly and thoughtfully.

We do not have to be secretive about matters addressed in the Bible. Even though a great mystery is revealed here, we must deal with it reverently. The Bible does not use vulgar or obscene language. Therefore we do not have to be leery of the Song of Songs. It is clean. The Word of the Lord is pure.

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