

SONG OF SONGS

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SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS in the First Book of the *Summa Contra Gentes* notes that “. . . it affords us the greatest pleasure to be able to look into those things which are the most lofty, even though our view of them is limited and weak.”¹ Now one of the most precious and lofty gifts of God to man is His inspired word which “holy men of God spoke inspired by the Holy Ghost” (II *Peter* 1:21), and which “is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice.” (II *Tim.* 3:16) The analysis of a divinely inspired book is never without its reward, and that reward is all the greater according as the book under consideration is the more sublime in its doctrine.

Of all the books in the Old Testament, certainly the *Canticle of Canticles* is one of the most sublime. It served as the basis for Saint Bernard's magnificent exposition of Mystical Theology and the love of Christ for His Blessed Mother and the Church. It is often cited as a sermon text at ceremonies for the reception and profession of religious. Bossuet wrote a book on the *Canticle* first in Latin, then in French for nuns.² One of Saint Thomas' last acts as he lay dying in the Abbey at Fossa Nuova was to dictate a commentary on the *Canticle* to the Benedictine monks who were caring for him. Unfortunately, however, this work of Aquinas has not come down to us.

It is assuredly an understatement to say that a Catholic reading the *Canticle* for the first time is somewhat baffled. Perhaps, with Theodore of Mopsuestia, he has been tempted to see in the *Canticle* nothing but the very ardent outpourings of a love that is completely natural. Renan saw in it a story of abduction: a young woman, espoused to a young peasant, is kidnapped and forcibly brought to the harem of King Solomon. Despite the advances of the monarch she remains faithful to her lover, and the latter finally wins her back. Both these theories, of course, the Catholic must reject. A naturalistic

¹ “. . . de rebus altissimis, etiam parva et debili consideratione aliquid posse inspicere jucundissimum est.” Bk. I, ch. 8

² Bossuet, *Oeuvres completes* (Paris, Vives, 1882), vol. I.

interpretation of an inspired book can hardly be reconciled with the truth of the divine word.³

The interpretation which will be presented here is not a new one, but one which has been touched upon and explained by Pouget-Guitton⁴ and especially O'Beirne.⁵

First of all, we shall consider an historical conspectus of the book, viz., the author, date of composition, etc. Then we shall devote considerable space to an analysis of the senses of Sacred Scripture, since a thorough grasp on noematics is required for the understanding of the *Canticle*.

THE AUTHOR

Anyone who has any degree of familiarity with the books of the Old Testament knows that the books of the prophets are the only ones that bear the names of their authors. The books take their names from the subject which they treat, as *Wisdom*, *Lamentations*, *Psalms*, or from the principal character of the book, as *Job* or *Josue*. After the exile, however, when the Israelites had been stripped of all political power and prestige, they had nothing save their glorious past in which to glory. At that time, many authors, profane as well as sacred, took delight in ascribing their works to their ancient forbears who were known universally for their sanctity and wisdom. As Pouget-Guitton note:

The noninspired literature which developed in such great abundance between 150 B.C. and A.D. 150 had unlimited audacity in this regard. It did not hesitate to seek its authors during the time prior to the Deluge or even in the terrestrial paradise. If we would believe these apocrypha, Adam was not only the first man and the first sinner, he was also the first author.⁶

We do not accuse the sacred writers who followed this practice of lying; they were merely following a custom much in the same manner as we might ascribe to a government official everything that was accomplished during his tenure of office. Such a literary artifice

³ cfr. *Spiritus Paraclitus*, encyc. of Pope Benedict XV, *Enchiridion Bibliicum*, n. 474.

⁴ *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, Paris, 1934. English trans. by Jos. Lilly, C. M. Declan X. McMullen Co., Inc. 1946. All references will be to the Lilly translation.

⁵ *The Parabolical Interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles*, an unpublished dissertation written for the degree of Lector in Sacred Theology by W. M. O'Beirne, O.P. Washington, 1939.

⁶ *op. cit.* p. 74.

would not deceive the Israelite who had some degree of culture, and as a matter of fact, the nation was probably edified by such a practice.

The title of the *Canticle* as we have it today reads: *The Song of Songs which is Solomon's*. Although this title is missing in the Latin Vulgate, and probably was not affixed by the inspired author, and though the presence of the relative pronoun "which" is unique in Hebrew titles, still it predates the Septuagint in which it is also found. As we have noticed previously, however, the title as found here might also mean that the book treats of Solomon.

Proponents of Solomonic authorship point out that the contents of the book seem to show that it was written before the disruption of the kingdom, which occurred upon the death of Solomon. For example, the author speaks indiscriminately of Jerusalem, Engaddi, Carmel, and Thersa as though all these belonged to the same kingdom. They likewise call our attention to the fact that the Hebrew used in the *Canticle* is excellent, indicating an early period before the decadence set in.

The opponents of this position, however, have shown that the text abounds in Persian words and Aramaisms. If we ascribe the *Canticle* to Solomon who lived in the ninth century B.C., then we must explain why it contains so many of these Aramaisms when contemporary works do not contain them in such great numbers. Again, if the *Canticle* is a drama—and it is to this literary species that we are eventually to assign it—then we must place a more recent date than that of Solomon. Again, Pouget-Guitton:

It would be necessary, it seems, that royalty should be sufficiently far away in the past that one could speak of Solomon with such independence; and one could more easily explain the choice of the dramatic genre if the date of composition were brought down to the epoch of Greek influence on Judaea.⁷

The same authors point out that even if we admit for the sake of argument that the *Canticle* was written by Solomon, still it seems highly unlikely that he would have given himself such a bad role. It would be like, they say, Louis XIV writing a play in which he is held in contempt by a simple peasant girl. They conclude by noting that it is not at all difficult to understand how an author, writing several centuries after Solomon and at a time when appreciation of literary proprietorship was non-existent, might convey the impression that his *Canticle* came from the pen of the glorious king.

⁷ *op. cit.* p. 78.

SENSES OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

In order to communicate our knowledge we must employ some sensible sign, since in the present state the human mind exhibits an objective dependency on sense, in that the data of sense furnish it with the data of intellection.

A sign, says Saint Thomas, connotes something that is manifest to us by which we are brought to the knowledge of something that is hidden.⁸ In other words, the sign is an entity which represents something other than itself to a cognitive power. Some signs are natural and represent from the institution of nature; it pertains to their very nature to represent something other than themselves. Others are merely arbitrary, representing something other than themselves, not from their nature, but rather from the institution of man. Thus, words are arbitrary signs of ideas.

Considered in the abstract a word can be a sign of many ideas and hence at the very beginning of our discussion of the senses of Scripture, we must distinguish between the sense and signification of a word. The signification of a word is the idea or ideas which a word considered in itself and independently of its context may represent. For example, the word 'trunk' may signify a part of the human body, a kind of luggage, or a part of the elephant's anatomy. The sense of a word, on the other hand, is the idea which the person speaking or writing wishes this word to signify here and now. It is the word taken in its context, and not merely in itself.

The senses of Sacred Scripture are adequately divided into the literal and spiritual. St. Thomas explains this division for us.⁹

The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words alone (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore, that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense: the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it.¹⁰

⁸ *Signum quantum est in se, importat aliquid manifestum quoad nos, quo manducimur in cognitionem alicujus occulti. (In IV Sent., dist. 1, 1 a. 1 sol. 1, ad 5)*

⁹ *S. Theol.* I, q. 1, a. 10; cf. also *Quodl.* VII, a. 14.

¹⁰ When Saint Thomas speaks in *Quodlibet* VII, q. 6, a. 15 of a four-fold sense of Sacred Scripture, viz., the historical or literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical, he is including in his division aspects of the typical

The literal sense is that sense which is primarily intended by the author of the sacred book. It has a more extensive meaning biblically than it has ordinarily in our language, as will be seen in the divisions to follow. By reason of the use of words, the literal sense is divided into the proper and improper. The former is found when the words are to be taken in their ordinary and grammatical signification, e.g., "Everyone who acknowledges me before men, him will the Son of Man also acknowledge before the angels of God." (*Luke* 12:8) The improper literal sense, on the other hand, is present when the words are to be taken in a transferred or figurative signification, e. g., ". . . behold the lion of the tribe of Juda." (*Apoc.* 5:5) St. Thomas speaks of this division thus:

Something can be signified by the literal sense in two ways: according to the proper meaning of speech, as when I say: A man smiles; or, according to similitude, as when we say: A meadow smiles. We use each mode in Sacred Scripture, as when we say, as regards the first, that 'Jesus ascended', and when we say, as regards the second, that 'he sits at the right hand of God.' And therefore under the literal sense is contained the parabolical or (seu) metaphorical.¹¹

We have seen that St. Thomas defines the spiritual sense as that sense which is present when the things or actions expressed by the sacred words signify at the same time, from the intention of God, some higher hidden truth. For example, when we read (*Numbers*, 21:9) that Moses set up a brazen serpent in the desert, the literal sense is exactly that which the words signify in their proper context. The spiritual sense refers to the raising of Christ on the cross, as is evident from *John* 3:14.

When we find a spiritual sense in Scripture, the figure is called the *type*; that which it prefigures, the *entitype*. Not every passage in Holy Writ necessarily has a spiritual sense, although they all have a very definite literal sense. Since the foundation of this sense is based on the likeness between the thing signifying and the thing signified, the spiritual sense depends on a correct understanding of the literal sense. Whatever is not expressed by the literal sense cannot be sought out in the spiritual sense, nor can the latter ever be opposed to the literal sense.

Since we have seen that a naturalistic interpretation of the *Canticle* cannot be sustained by the Catholic, we must seek in the inspired

(moral and anagogical) and improper literal (allegorical) senses. In the passage we have cited from the *Summa*, Aquinas is speaking more formally, and hence gives us the adequate division of the scriptural senses.

¹¹ *Ad Galatas*, c. 4, lect. 7; cf. also *S. Theol.* I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3.

book some sort of comparison. First, however, we must examine how comparisons are made in Scripture.

The proper and improper literal senses are the two media used in Holy Writ to express comparisons. Those made by the proper literal sense are made by an explicit or implicit affirmation of similitude between two entities. For example, we read in *Matthew* 13:45 "The kingdom of heaven is like to a merchant seeking good pearls." This is an explicit affirmation of a similitude. In other cases however, the affirmation of similitude and at least one of the terms of the comparison are only implicit as is the case, to a limited extent at least, in the parable of the prodigal son. (*Luke* 15:11-32)

This sort of comparison has three species:

- 1) the *example* whereby a person, thing or circumstance of the real order is said to be like some thing, person or circumstance which is likewise of the real order. We have an example of this in *Matthew* 17:2 where Christ's garments at the time of His transfiguration are said to have become as "white as snow."
- 2) the *fable* which is an affirmation of likeness between some person, thing, or circumstance, that is fictitious rather than real, and moreover, altogether impossible. The story of the trees that sought a king in *Judges* 9:8-15 is an example of the biblical fable.
- 3) the *parable* where an affirmation of likeness between some person, thing, or circumstance of the real order and some person, thing, or circumstance that is fictitious but possible.

Other comparisons are made in Scripture by means of the improper literal sense. The term of comparison is entirely suppressed and the word or words though expressing one thing are to be understood as meaning something else. We have an example of this in *John* 15:2. "Every *branch* in me that beareth not *fruit*, he will take away; and every one that beareth *fruit* he will purge it that it may bring forth more fruit."

This kind of comparison also has three species:

- 1) the simple *metaphor* which illustrates a particular fact or facts by means of a word taken in its improper or transferred literal sense.
- 2) the *allegory* which clearly illustrates a collection of facts by means of coordinated metaphors, e. g., *Ecclesiastes* 12:1-7.¹²

¹² *Allegoria enim est tropus seu modus loquendi quo aliquid dicitur et aliud intelligitur.* S. Thomas, *In Galatas*, c. 4, lect. 7.

SUMMARY

The parable is a complete and unified narrative in which we find two different states compared. The clearer of the two is used to illustrate, to throw light on some obscure and analogous aspect of the other. The elements of the parable are to be taken in their proper literal sense. For example, when Christ says He is the good shepherd, He is comparing Himself to some quality in a good shepherd. In order to do this, He must be really talking about a shepherd! The figures of speech are denominated as such precisely because the proper literal sense is used in a transformed sense. This is basic in English grammar. The use of the literal sense for this transfer demands that the resulting sense be called improper, but that is the *name for the figure itself*. To put it differently: when we derive the notion that Christ is a good shepherd with another kind of flock, we have an improper literal sense. The elements which go to make up that figure, however, (Christ and a good shepherd, etc.) must be taken in their proper literal sense before any transfer can be made to the improper.

In like manner, the allegory is not just a group of metaphors strung together in a haphazard manner, but rather a coordinated series of metaphors, e. g., the account of the vine and vine dresser. (*John* 15:1) "The essential difference between the parable and allegory," says Father O'Beirne, "consists in the difference of proper and improper or transferred literal sense. Whereas in the parable A illustrates B by means of an explicit comparison, in the allegory on the contrary the affirmation of similitude is suppressed and A is said for B, A is B."

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CANTICLE

A brief sketch of the various interpretations that the *Canticle* has received from non-Catholics as well as Catholics exegetes will not be out of place here. We may divide these interpretations into four general classes.

First, there are those who see in the *Canticle* nothing but the very ardent outpourings of a purely natural love. As we previously noted, this was taught by Theodore of Mopsuestia and is held by most modern non-Catholics.

Under the next heading come those who interpret the *Canticle* allegorically or in the transferred literal sense. This was the prevalent Hebrew interpretation and has always found supporters among Christian interpreters. The Jews were of the opinion that the *sponsus*

signified Yahweh and the *sponsa*, Israel. Most Christian interpreters hold that the *sponsus* signified Christ, but they differ as to whom is signified by the *sponsa*. Origen, St. Augustine, and St. Bede say that it is the Church. St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil, St. Ambrose, St. Bernard, St. Francis de Sales, St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross say it is the chosen soul, while Denis the Carthusian and Cornelius a Lapide would have it to be the Blessed Mother.

Thirdly, there are those who hold for a mixed or typical interpretation. This typical or spiritual sense, they say, may or may not have been intended by the sacred writer. For Bossuet, the proper literal sense would be the relation of Solomon's love for and marriage with the daughter of Pharaoh (III *Kings*, 3:1). Pouget-Guitton, on the other hand, say that the literal sense is illustrative of a moral doctrine (the indissolubility of marriage, conjugal fidelity, monogamy), and this literal sense subsequently received an appropriate spiritual sense, viz. the union of God and Israel.

Finally, we have those who interpret the *Canticle* in a parabolic sense. Thus, Dhorme, Lagrange, and Prado interpret the *Canticle* in its proper literal sense but as illustrative of something else under one formal aspect.

CRITICISM OF THESE VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

We have already noted that the naturalistic interpretation of the *Canticle* cannot be held. Such an opinion is against inspiration, which implies sanctity in an inspired work. Moreover, Theodore of Mopsuestia, one of the first to propose this teaching, was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 553.

As Father O'Beirne notes, there are three things that militate against the second interpretation, i. e., the allegorical. First of all, in the different allegorical interpretations, not all the principal component elements are given the transferred senses that are necessary for a true allegory. Secondly, all attempts to provide transferred senses for the principal elements are doomed to failure, at least by reason of obscurity. Finally, there is no unanimity among this group of interpreters as to whom is signified by the *sponsus* and the *sponsa*.

To render this difficulty more precise: It is of the very nature of the allegory that all its principal component elements have transferred senses. Hence, if the *Canticle* is an allegory then the *sponsus* and *sponsa* must have very precise transferred senses. Following the teaching that holds for the unicity of the literal sense, we can say that these transferred senses are also probably unique, and hence

cannot signify at one and the same time Yahweh and Christ, Israel and the Church. Lest this objection avail against the parabolical interpretation also, we must here make a distinction between the implicit and explicit parable. If the *Canticle* were an explicit parable we would find in it such phrases as "The mutual love of Yahweh and Israel is like unto a Shulamite maiden, etc." Such is obviously not the case, and therefore we relegate the *Canticle* to the category of the implicit parable "in which the affirmation of similitude and the other object of comparison are stated neither in the text nor context, but are gleaned, as it were, from tradition, which assures us that the *Canticle* is a sacred book, and, consequently, that profane love figures in it only as a point of comparison with divine love."¹³

What, then, are we to assign as the other term of the comparison? Again following Father O'Beirne, it seems to us that this other object may vary, so long as it stays within the pale of divine love. This in no way does violence to the literal sense of the parable.

In explanation of this, it should be pointed out that the parable, as we have stated before, is a complete narrative. It makes perfect sense in itself—taken in its proper literal sense—and in independence from whatever object it is intended to illustrate. Since the parable is a comparison, it implies some term of comparison. The term intended to be illustrated, however, in no way affects the literal sense of the illustrating term. "The other term in the mind of the author of the *Canticle* would seem to have been the mutual love of Yahweh and Israel. But since he did not expressly affirm as such, and since the literal sense of the words in a parable in no way depends on the other term of comparison, as is the case in the allegory, there does not seem to be any reason why the other object of the comparison may not vary, so long as we stay within the pale of divine love. In other words, there does not seem to be any reason why the *Canticle* may not have been inspired to illustrate equally directly and equally expressly the mutual love of Yahweh and Israel in Old Testament times, and the mutual love of Christ and the Church (the chosen soul, the Blessed Virgin Mary) in the present covenant."¹⁴

It is unfortunate that the Douay version of the *Canticle* is so inaccurate and misleading as we have it today. The Harper and Lilly translations are much more accurate and make for entrancing reading. The great saints saw even in the Vulgate a work of everlasting

¹³ O'Beirne, *op. cit.* p. 15.

¹⁴ O'Beirne, *op. cit.* p. 16.

magnificence, and never ceased to rhapsodize over its beauty. Of all these encomia perhaps St. Bernard's is the most profound:

This is a canticle which by its own incomparable dignity excels all which we have recalled, and others if there are any; it is also quite fitting that I call this the Canticle of Canticles, because it is the fruit of all others. Only an anointing teaches such a canticle; it is learned solely by experience. Advance souls recognize, while those not so far advanced burn with the desire not only of knowing, but of experiencing also. For it is not a clattering of the mouth, but an exultation of the heart; not an utterance of the lips, but a movement of joy; a harmony of wills, not of sounds."¹⁵

¹⁵ *Sermones in Canticum Canticorum*, Sermo I, ML, 183, 789.