

LITERATURE AND RELIGION, A SYMBIOTIC EXPLORATION: THE POETRY OF *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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Abstract

Literature and religion spring through the strength of human emotions of love, focus, curiosity, and reverence. Both pressure the categorical imperative of the conscience, freedom, and force of the will of God. The comparative approach brings to bear the objective and functions of literature and other spheres of knowledge in human society (Literature and Religion). This study, therefore, centers on poetry and the Holy Bible, exploring The Song of Solomon as a unique poem that appeals to the ears of the intellect. It exemplifies the eroticism in the text and its compelling way of expressing the relationship between God and humanity. The study, literarily through the lens of realism, explores the sensual element of the principle and purpose of The Song of Solomon as emphasized in the scripture. It aesthetically explores the imagery and archetypal in the poem creating a mirroring action of masculinity and feminity within the soul of man. The study recommends that The Song of Solomon could be understood literally as a depiction of marriage, this is made visible through the literary elements that foreshadowed the church and the relationship with her king which is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction

Literature and religion emanate from the same fundamental sources. Formed by the same forces as the recognition of the gods in human affairs. Religion is the relation that man bears to the ultimate being. While, literature seeks to explain, justify, reconcile, interpret, and console the affairs of man, his neighbor, nature, and his society. The textuality of this study is not just comparing literature and religion but in the literary context of comparative literature. Pichois and Rousseau think that “the art of comparative literature is necessary because there is the need to highlight their common objectives in the human society” (174). In the same vein, Omale Austen-Peters is of the view that “the basis for comparing them (Literature and religion) is located at the level of their functions and objectives in the society” (54).

Literature and religion are tools for moral regeneration in society. They accept the strength of human emotions of love, fear, curiosity, and reference and both presume and accept the categorical imperative of the conscience and the freedom and forces of the will of man. Both are useful and more intimately related to life in dominance and prestige.

Both aspects of art adopt similar methods, this stands for the value of the imagination they represent. That is, the artistic rather than the scientific methods of interpreting life and phenomena. Theology is the science of religion and the product of imagination. Imagination makes it appeal especially in poetry. Both literature and religion possess general beliefs and assurance, respecting the divine and external forces.

Religion enriches literature with vast and rich materials. Its sacred books constitute great literature and materials for great scholarship. It should also be remembered that the institutions of religion, e.g. ministries and cathedrals, chapel houses, and archives were for a thousand years the custodians of the most prestigious treasures of literature. The medieval era was dark and damaging to humanity's highest interest. In this time of wars, not only were laws silent, but also literature. "It was the monks who preserved the manuscripts of ancient Greece and Rome, copying and recopying and correcting from the year 500 till the invention of printing. For example, *Caedmon of Whinty*, *Beowulf*, and the *Seafarer* (25). Although, the translation of the Holy Bible into Gothic by UPHILAS helped to preserve the Holy Bible; above all, it is obvious that literature is indebted to religion.

Realism is a literary movement championed by Henrik Ibsen who in a dramatic circle is referred to as the father of realism (260). It is a move against Romanticism that stressed truthful and realistic subject matter. It is a literary theory that prefers arts or literary works of art in a more realistic representation of life. In other words, "it prefers discoverable facts over dreams" (95). As a theory for this study, it is obvious that a critical realistic representation of textual analysis will be germane. Essentially, the poem for this study deals with King Solomon and it is not out of place for one to imagine that this kind of erotic and powerful song of love is coming from a man that eventually had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Meanwhile, it has been observed in the song that King Solomon already has 60 queens, 80 concubines, and countless unmarried maidens in waiting. Of all these, why a country maiden with this clout of magnificent, royalty and pageantry? In the language and context of today's parlance, it might be said to be for political reasons.

Textual Analysis

The Synopsis of the Poem *Song of Solomon*

The song is a story of a young woman who is to be married to the king of Israel, King Solomon. The text starts from the time of the bride's arrival in Jerusalem, her engagement, wedding, their first night together, their first quarrel, and their formative mature years together. The structure of the poem also creatively presents the song as a love triangle between the maiden, the king of Israel, and at the same time a young shepherd from her hometown. She has a problem choosing out of the two lovers of hers for marriage.

Love is the keyword of this poem. Love appears as a passionate desire between a man and a woman. King Solomon and the Shulamitte celebrate the potential for the joy that matrimony uncovers in light of the principles of the covenant with

God. The basis of all human love should be the love that inspires the divine covenant. This constitutes the foundation of the relationship between God and man. Thus, the text mirrors as much marriage as the history of the divine covenant. The Shulamite personifies the wife in an ideal marriage. Therefore, the text exalts the joys of love in courtship and marriage.

Let him kiss me
 With the kisses of his mouth
 For thy love is better than wine
 Your oils have a pleasant fragrance
 ...Draw me after you

And let us run together (The Song of Solomon 1vs 2-4).

The text also emphasizes that physical beauty and sexuality in marriage should not be despised or tagged as unspiritual. Content-wise, the text offers a significant standpoint of human love and condemns the extremes of lust on one hand and celibacy on the other.

The real message about the nature of true love is much more than a surface relationship. It extends to the very core of one's being, in which such love cannot be bought or sold. The beauty of the joy of love between a man and a woman as experienced in the relationship of marriage is the thrust of this text.

Come, my beloved
 Let us lodge in the village
 Let us get up early
 To the vineyards
 Let us see
 If the wine was budded,
 Whether the grape blossoms are open,
 And the pomegranates are in bloom
 There I will give you my love.

(*Song of Solomon 7:9-12*)

The sexual and physical side of marriage is a proper part of God's plan reflecting His purpose and desire for the human race. This is evidenced in the Book of Creation where God created man and woman and brought them together to serve as companions and share their lives:

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh (Genesis 2Vs24)

Just like the above extract from the book of Genesis, the *Song of Solomon* portrays the beauty and sanctity of love in marriage.

Importantly, human sexuality is part of God's creation with its desires and pleasures. It should be noted that for God to do this, He would provide man with a guide to the

pure and divine sexual relationship between husband and wife. Therefore, it is obvious that the *Song of Solomon* is a magnificent positive endorsement by God of marital love in all its physical and emotional beauty. The most prevalent approach to the understanding of the poem is its praxis as a celebration of the physical expression of human love. Originally, this is the literal sense of the poem, i.e. focus on human love, a reflective of divine-human love.

The *Song of Solomon* is a poetry of devotion. It consists of the great value of lovers' commentary. It glorifies perfect love that remains constant and steadfast amid all allurements and seductive influences. The devotional study of the *Song of Solomon* places the readers spiritually in the realm of God's overwhelming love for humans in a very personal way. Thus, man is drawn into a more intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Fundamentally, devotion in this poem is the love for God that expresses itself in joyful and emotional outpourings of praise and worship and constant longing for God's sweet presence.

Literary Aesthetic in *Song of Solomon*

The *Song of Solomon* is replete with images of ideas and emotions in the readers' minds. These images are from a culture (background of the author) with which most readers of the text are not familiar. To tell a lady that her "hair looks like a flock of goats coming down the mountain", sounds like an insult to modern ears, meanwhile, to the background of the poet, goats were plentiful and generally were dark-haired.

Turn away thine eyes from me,
For they have overcome me: thy hair
It is a flock of goats that appear
From Gilead. (Song of Solomon 6 vs 5)

Looking or imagining goats coming down the mountain in the distance where it would be hard to distinguish one goat from the other invokes a picture of dark flowing hair that bounces and moves.

The text is a genre of poetry called dramatic poetry. It engrosses in dramatic elements known as dialogue. The poem is arranged like scenes in a drama with three main characters:

- King Solomon
- Shulamite girl
- Daughters of Jerusalem

These characters are presented with the following roles:- Solomon is the king, the Shulamite girl is the bride, and the daughters of Jerusalem are the chorus. The text is a love poem that plays with similes, metaphors, and oriented imagery. It is a metaphor of the wooing and wedding of a shepherd by King Solomon and it also depicts the joys and heartaches of wedded love.

Allegorically, the poem pictures Israel as God's espoused bride and the church as the bride of Christ. As human life finds its highest fulfillment in the love of man and woman, so, does spiritual life find its highest fulfillment in the love of God for His

people and Christ for His church. Similarly, Christian's allegory holds that the bride-groom represents "Christ" and the bride represents the "church". With the above, one may be tempted to assume that through this allegorical approach, the author intended to write an allegory and that a none allegorical reading of this text may not reveal the deeper thrust meaning of the poem. However, in Judaism, there were echoes of opposition to the inclusion of the *Song of Solomon* in the scripture. That is why in Christianity, the *Song of Solomon* was considered an allegory expressing Christ's love for the church.

In conclusion, the idea that literature possesses aesthetic or pleasing qualities and that it has useful things to teach humanity is what gives literature its enduring value. The *Song of Solomon* is a poetic record of Solomon's actual romance with a Shulamite woman. One of the fundamental purposes of poetry is to create emotion. "Different life experiences give rise to different emotions" (22). The poem explores various erotic and emotional verses. The song in the *Song of Solomon* evokes a lot of emotions or feelings that culminate into the music of poetry. The various verses in the poem exalt the joys of love in courtship and marriage. Allegorically, the primary purpose of the *Song of Solomon* is to illustrate the truth of God's love for His people, whether, the contents are fictional or not, irrespective of its conformity with the literary convention of ancient Hebrew verses, particularly if one accepts the view that the song was in its earliest stages popular oral literature. Finally, the poem points beyond human love to the greatest author of love (God). Thus, in this study, it is observed that authentic love (Agape) is possible in the world because God brought love into being and planted that emotion in the hearts of his people. Husbands and wives should remember that the love they have for one another is not a product of their human goodness or kindness. The message is that we can love because the love of God is working in our lives not that we love God, but that He loves us (Unconditional love).

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