

## Brethren perspectives on the Song of Solomon

I feel in somewhat awe presenting this paper, given you are clearly knowledgeable and all the papers presented up to now have been of such a high quality. Some of my thunder has already been taken away by sessions such as that by Berthold Shwartz on dispensationalism, arguing as he did that not only is this a serious approach to understanding scriptures but there are within that framework several different systems of interpretation, although I would argue that the system adopted by some of the early Brethren was more rigid than most. Paul Wilkinson's paper on Darby and the Holocaust showed the important place Israel and the Jews had on Brethren thinking, no doubt linked to dispensational notions, for example their going to great lengths to support Jewish people in perilous times. My own paper arose out of my interest as a Bible teacher trying to expound in a balance way this remarkable book of the Bible. Ironically, but not surprisingly, all the learned surveys on how the Song has been viewed down the ages, have been silent on the Brethren perspectives, even though some of these were unique and significant.

The Song of Solomon has attracted down the ages the attention of numerous commentators from all sections of the Church, as well as from Judaism. There have been huge differences in understandings, manifested in the thousands of commentaries since the Song was written.

Having been converted to the Christian faith, when I was 15, and receiving my early and also later grounding largely through Brethren influences, coupled with a personal fascination with history, it became a preoccupation of mine in later years to find out more about my own Christian heritage and be able to counter misrepresentations about Brethrenism, of which I perceived there were many, as well as to understand the weaknesses, which also existed. I wanted to enlighten others as well as myself as to what went on in the past as well as find meaning for the way things were. I especially wanted to understand why people like myself who have been influenced by the Brethren are the way we are. Having looked at the how and why the Brethren movement began and some of its influential figures as well as explore specifically what went on in my own area of South East Essex, I turned my attention to those doctrines and scriptures which attracted a particularly Brethren interpretive slant. I recall in my younger years many teaching sessions being devoted to subjects like prophecy (invariably linked to a dispensational pre-millennialist view on eschatology), the Tabernacle, feasts and offerings and various events in Jewish history, such as the wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness. I suspect that there is far less of such pre-occupations these days. One of my greatest fascinations has been listening to and being enthralled by one or other brother expounding on some text from Song of Solomon, often taking place in the Sunday morning Breaking of Bread meeting, and in doing so deriving some profound sublime thought, more often or not to do with the glory of Christ. Given that background and a desire to understand the sorts of insights my Brethren forefathers found helpful, I have undertaken to write a two part commentary, part 1 having just been published.

As I came to look at how the Song of Solomon was perceived in the history of the church, I realised that in almost all sections there were strongly held views as to its meaning and significance, often with widely differing understandings of specific texts and aspects such as the identities of the lover and the beloved and in disentangling the plot. The main approach to interpreting the Song that predominated, at least in pre-enlightenment times, was allegorical: the Song represented the relationship between the individual soul or the Church or Israel (and even

Mary) with Jehovah or Christ. The predominant Jewish view was also allegorical, likening the relationship of the lover and his beloved with God and His historical dealings with Israel, although even here there are widely differing interpretations including ones to do with sexual love. The much revered first century Rabbi Akiba wrote: *“Heaven forbid that any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs is holy. For the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy and the Song of Songs is holy of holies”*. He thereby expressed sentiments which many Brethren would readily identify with.

The increasingly popular post-enlightenment view has been that the Song depicts the love (often physical) relationship, described in highly sensual language and poetic imagery, between two lovers and the main lessons to be derived are to do with sexual ethics. This was in part a reaction to the church’s reluctance to recognise the import value of sexual relationships. Two modern commentaries I have found particularly helpful are “The Song of Solomon” by G.Lloyd Carr (part of the Tyndale series) and “Song of Songs” by Marvin Pope. While both refer to the various allegorical interpretations of the Song, both clearly write about and understand the Song from a literal, physical love perspective. Pope is quite lucid in where he stands when he writes about the allegorical charade and intimates that one reason this was persisted with for so long was propagators did not want to be seen as enemies of truth and decency. As an aside, I am mindful of a booklet given to me by a local vicar friend of mind, aimed at married and engaged couples, to do with sexual relations and based on a literal interpretation of the Song. Perhaps before leaving this allegorical versus physical debate we should consider the words of the present Pope Benedict XVI’s (encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love) of 2006) which refers to the Song of Songs in both its literal and allegorical meaning, stating that erotic love (eros) and self-donating love (agape) is shown there as the two halves of true love, which is both giving and receiving.

Brethren interpretations, as one might expect, usually followed the allegorical tradition, with many parallels in understanding to that of Origen and other Church Fathers and with Bernard of Clairvaux and other medieval mystics, rather than the physical interpretations prevalent among many modern evangelical writers, even though Brethren have tended not to give much credence to church tradition. When looking at Brethren exegesis of scripture in general, much is frequently made of places and objects in attempting to derive lessons. Undoubtedly, the Song of Solomon abounds in place references and a plethora of natural objects, which Brethren expositors go to great lengths to derive significance when interpreting the passages where such references are included. The popular modern Brethren classic: “Rise up my Love” by C.E.Hocking provides an example of this approach. Yet among Brethren writers, there are nevertheless wide differences in interpretation. While many preachers I have heard talking about the Song have derived from it lessons to do with Christ’s relationship with His church, others have seen in it the relationship between Christ and the individual believer, as for example in Watchman Nee’s “Song of Songs”, and, closer to home, in a small devotional with the same title by W.W.Vellacott.

There are, of course, other Brethren writings on this Song which should be taken into consideration when trying to formulate a Brethren “view”, although these are no longer available and can only be found in archives, personal libraries and second hand bookshops. I am not aware though of the Song being particularly subject to a wide and rigorous exposition other than the devotional snippets referred to earlier. Given that some of the modern Brethren are more aligned to wider evangelical trends in their understanding, it would come as no surprise that some would

adopt a more literal interpretation. The likely account, however (and sadly), is that most modern Brethren have not given the subject much thought at all.

But there is one particular interpretation, which when one realises who provided it is of particular significance, and is out of line with other historical interpretations. Indeed, in my first survey of the way the Song had been perceived by different sections of the Church I had missed it altogether. It is the notion that the Song is about Christ the lover wooing Israel after the secret rapture of the Church and Israel eventually turning to the Messiah they had previously rejected. This view is more than intimated at in "Rise up my Love" by C.E.Hocking. I want to devote most of the remainder of this paper to how the Song of Solomon was perceived by the most notable Plymouth Brother of them all, J.N.Darby and, give most consideration to the views of one often seen as his natural successor, William Kelly.

Both Darby and Kelly were greatly influenced by a dispensational understanding of how scripture is to be interpreted. The dispensationalism shared by many (but not all) of the early Brethren and many today comprises an interpretive framework for understanding the overall flow of the Bible and contrasts with the widely held teaching that the Church has been established for the salvation of "the Jews first, and also to the Gentiles", and that there is one people of God joined in unity through Jesus Christ. It often followed that since the Jews have largely refused to accept Christ as "the Messiah of Israel" and as their means to salvation, those individual Jews that reject him, in effect rejecting the only provision God has offered for divine forgiveness, are therefore no longer in the true Israel. Christians have often been seen to be the "New Jews", thus replacing the "Old Jews". Many of the yet to be fulfilled prophecies concerning Israel are often applied to the Church. There are some, of course, while recognising the special place of Jews in end time events and in God's often still to be revealed plans, yet do not embrace many dispensationalist notions.

In contrast, dispensationalism, in trying to terms with the many as yet to be fulfilled scriptures to do with the Jewish people, and particularly how God is going to bless them, teaches that the Christian Church is more a "parenthesis" in God's dealings with the Jews, when the Gospel began to go to the Gentiles instead of the Jews, but God's continued care for the Jews will be revealed after the rapture of the Church. This has had a major impact in the way scripture, specifically this Song, has been interpreted. It should be said though that while seeing the Song as specifically for the Jews, the lessons that Darby and Kelly were able to draw from the Song were often not so very different from many of the more traditional allegorical interpretations. From my own associations with Brethren assemblies, especially in my younger years, I have been led to believe that a dispensational framework, albeit one less rigid than that of Darby and Kelly, was seen as the right way to approach understanding the Bible and to question or depart from that orthodoxy could have caused one to be branded as unsound, and it often did.

Darby writes (notes and comments, vol 3): *"It is clear to me that this Book (Song of Solomon) applies to the Jewish Remnant, or Bride - Christ's receiving it again, or, properly, to Himself, and its discovery of Him, and His excellency, in that latter day of universal blessing. His progressive revelation of Himself to it, and its fuller acquaintance with Him - and so it becomes instructive and clear. It is not, at once, His full assumption of it in His glory, but the making Himself known to it on the Remnant's search after, and growing apprehension and knowledge of Him, till the certainty of His full acceptance of them, as those whom He cares for. I should rather think it meant Ephraim than the Gentiles, but I am not the least satisfied as to this. It is ever more*

*evident to me that this Book is the restoration of the relationship of Israel with God. She had passed through fiery tribulations, and, set as guardian of fruit in the world, had not kept her own. Now, looking to Messiah and valuing His love, she is being brought back. Then, as the Psalms in sorrow, so this in delight, furnishes the right expressions of feeling as to her connection with Messiah. It begins with the sense of His moral perfections - Himself - and then His love.” He further writes: “But the Song of Solomon seems to me to shew us something further - the drawing out, where the soul is taught of God (an effect realised in some hidden ones, while revealed and open for all), of the soul of the waiting few, into affections here figuratively presented, and the revelation of Messiah's devoted love for the people; for Jerusalem, if you please, as the centre of it, over which He wept, when in its folly it rejected Him, so that the humble and instructed heart should have the consciousness of it, and confide in it, though not yet revealed.”*

Both Darby and Kelly believed there to be two brides: the heavenly bride (the Church) and the earthly bride (Israel), both equally precious in God's eyes with both readily accounted for in the unravelling of God's plan and in scripture. In considering the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew's gospel, Kelly goes to some considerable length to point out that nowhere in that parable is the bride mentioned. He saw the ten virgins as representing Christendom, both the good and the bad (wise and the foolish). In contrast, the (unseen) Bride represented presently unbelieving Israel, whose day to meet and fall in love with the bridegroom is yet to come and it is only Israel's heart has been turned is she ready to meet the bridegroom. And that bride is the same bride that is revealed in the Song of Solomon. While the church bride is destined for heaven, the Israel bride has her place on earth, with Jerusalem at the centre. Not only in the Song of Songs but in many other parts of the Old Testament is this bride spoken off or alluded to.

Kelly beginning his Song of Solomon commentary goes straight to the point regarding the nature of the bride of the Song: *“Many have applied this wonderful book of scripture to the church, many more to the soul, in relation to the Lord Jesus. Nor is it denied for a moment that there is a principle common to all born of God, the love to Him ... The N.T. treats Christ and the church as a secret kept hid in God till the apostle Paul was employed to make it known; so that the bearing is naturally on the mutual love of Messiah and His earthly bride, the daughter of Zion, and other such figurative terms. It seems difficult to men who look only at the past to realise what divine mercy is yet to effect in Jerusalem; when, instead of her old rebellion and treachery, the city of the Great King shall be the object of Jehovah's delight, called by a new name, a crown of beauty and a royal diadem in His hand, and shall stand at His right hand as the queen in gold of Ophir, a praise in the earth.”* While obviously aware of the more traditional allegorical interpretations, which he by no means dismisses, he is somewhat more critical in his comments concerning the literalists who *“deprive the book of a worthy object and divine character”*.

While Kelly makes the point that he wants to give his readers the big picture rather than attend to fine details, it is quite clear when one is trying to interpret the detailed text these will be necessarily be dependant on sharing his understanding of the big picture. For example, while reading his “Lectures” I found myself at odds with Kelly given the way I interpret the Song, on a number of occasions. For example in the passage where the Beloved of the Song did not respond right away to the Lover and as a result he left her and she was left in a wretched state, Kelly could never have seen this being the individual believer or Church as that is not the way, so he considered, that the Lord deals with the Church, but it is the way he believed that God deals with Israel. Toward the end of the Song concern is expressed over the little sister with under-

developed breasts. Kelly is convinced this refers to Ephraim and sees this somehow showing how the ten (lost) tribes coming once again into the main fold, even though he rejected the wider speculation which sought to identify the ten lost tribes.

Yet while these differences exist, Kelly's insights are nevertheless helpful insofar he reinforces, in my view, the main themes of the Song such as passion for and intimacy with Christ, and the exaltedness of his perfect and wondrous character, and thus aligns himself to more traditional allegorical interpretations. Examples of this alignment of thought include:

1. *"Let Him kiss me with kisses of His mouth"* (SofS 1v2): which is as an expression of the Brides tenderest affection toward her Messiah?
2. *"What is thy beloved more than another beloved"* (SofS 5v9) which brings out the Brides response where she speaks so highly of the Bridegroom and her readiness and lack of shame in speaking out about the wonderful attributes of his character.
3. *"My beloved is mine and I am His"* (SofS 6v3) which when contrasted with *"My beloved is mine and I am his"* (SofS 2v16) shows spiritual progress given that her preoccupation is now Christ himself rather than what she has gained from that relationship.

I conclude by posing some practical questions that could (and in my view should) arise as a result of a consideration of these Brethren perspectives and could also invite further study:

1. Should not the emphasis on Christ's character and our own response to His call, which our Brethren forefathers gave particular attention to when it came to expounding scriptures such as the Song of Songs, be a needed corrective in our preaching today?
2. Are the almost unique insights some of our Brethren forefathers had into the Song of Solomon helpful or not in formulating our own understanding of the Song? Is it helpful or not to seek deeper meaning from the names of places and objects mentioned in the Song?
3. Should there not be a better realisation of the practical ramifications of dispensational thought (positive or negative, liberating or stifling, true or false) on the Brethren understanding of scripture and the life and ministry of the church? Is there, for example, a middle way between replacement and dispensational theology?
4. How significant is the Brethren understanding of the important role of Israel in the working out of Gods purposes, especially in the light of the pivotal place Israel plays in current world events and the likely scenarios of what might happen in the years to come when considering the international stage? To what extent has Brethren (teaching and membership) contributed to pro-Israel support and sentiments and is that a positive thing?
5. If early Brethren were near unique among Christians in holding the views they did on the Song of Solomon, in what other ways were they distinct in what they believed? Does this distinctiveness hold true today and to what extent does it really matter?
6. Given that the Brethren were more than most other sections of the church literalist in there approach to interpreting scripture, what can we make out from their being more resistant than most in literally interpreting this Song? How dominant in Brethren thinking was the interpretative framework provided by the likes of Darby and Kelly?

**John Barber 07/07/2007**