

## ***Almost everything about the Bible***

Excerpt

### **The Library?**

What is really that Bible, that so many of us know so little about? We call it "The Book", yet though nowadays generally published in one volume, this is not at all one "book", but rather a collection of books or even a whole "library". It had grown slowly, already in its written form, for over a thousand years - from about the 10th/11th century B.C. till the end of the 1st or even the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. And it contains works representing a great variety of literary genres and forms written in no fewer than three languages: Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic - the latter, though, being used just in short insertions in only two books of the Hebrew Bible. Actually, the word bible is derived from the Greek expression *biblia* which means "books" and it is originally the plural form of the word *biblion* - "book". All this should be enough to see what an interesting phenomenon it could be also for a philologist, a literature specialist or the historian of the ancient Near East. For the last twenty centuries there has been no other literary work (or no such collection of works) that would have been read by so many people, copied by hand and later printed so many times and translated into such a number of languages. And at the same time we have to make it clear, that in our times the Bible used to be also "a forbidden book", paradoxically considered such often for quite contrary reasons. Atheism - not only the Marxist kind of it - would have seen only "Sacred Scripture" in it, so it would have done all it could to blot even the slightest traces of memory of it out of the people's consciousness. And those who call themselves "religiously indifferent" generally have also indifferent attitude towards the Bible, since they take it for granted that there is nothing that could interest them there, quite forgetting how important the Bible is in its historiographical and cultural aspects. On the other hand, for the majority of Catholics, at least in Poland, the Bible still remains strange and unfamiliar. We cannot deny it, that to some extent such situation may result from the defensive attitude the Catholic Church used to have for quite long towards the representatives of Reformation, who having rejected the Tradition founded their religion exclusively on Holy Writ. Indeed, since the very beginning, already for the early Christians, the Bible has always been "the word of God", living also in liturgy and teachings; indeed, for several dozen years, and in particular since the Second Vatican Council the Church has spared no pains to motivate her believers to read the Bible in private as often as possible; indeed, more and more Catholics, as well as other Christians, begin to understand how important this reading is - indeed... Nevertheless, many people still lack this true intimacy with the Bible. The difficulties they encounter are absolutely real after all, and they have their sources in the very character of this book - this great "collection of books" - which was originating for so long, in such distant times and in the world so very different from the one we live in.

### **Reading the Bible**

However, before we focus our attention on the Bible itself, we have to state the truth that is important, but often absolutely forgotten. It should be generally obvious that the attitude a scientist - a philologist, a historian or an archaeologist - has towards the Bible will differ significantly from the attitude of the person who is interested mainly in the religious value of the Book. This value may not be unimportant also for scientists, though this is the biblical text itself that is the subject of their research. Instead, for a believer - a Christian or a

Jew - the text is the living word of God, addressed personally to the reader. And it is the scientist that the reader has the right to expect to help him in understanding it properly. The religious value of the Bible may still also disturb many of those in doubt and even atheists, having often direct influence on their approach to the Book. For in our times it has been discovered that each case of reading is at the same time the act of creation. Thereby, the interpretation of the text depends greatly on the reader himself - on his inclinations, likes and dislikes, his prejudices and experiences. Also, everyone falls into temptation to read the text through the filter of his own feelings and ideas, although the feelings and ideas - concerning even the very same text - may vary among particular people to the extent of being simply contradictory. Nevertheless, if the one desires to grasp the authentic ideas the authors of the analyzed texts had in their mind - especially if those authors belong to the remote past - regardless of his own opinions he must first try to look at their works not as he himself sees them, but as the authors looked at them.

Beginning the study of this huge "library", in the Christian tradition called Sacred Scripture, we must honestly try to reconstruct in our minds some aspects of the mental attitude the Bible authors had. This principle applies to all the readers - believers, as well as unbelievers. We won't go far if we take it for granted that the Bible is just a collection of more or less naive myths, fables or legends, totally detached from reality. We will not get better results either if already at the start we look for the ready-made formulas of all Christian truths or, which seems even more hopeless, we treat the Book as a history text-book or an encyclopaedia of natural science. Each of us definitely has his own deeply rooted opinions and prejudices, that simply have to be somehow "given up" for the time of that study. If we are unable to do so, we will not really understand much of the Bible.

Jean Rudhard, a historian of Greek religion, a professor of the university in Geneva, writes that if we want to understand anything of any religious texts - Old Greek or other - "there is no other way than to become a disciple of the ones we desire to understand [...]. In other words, it is necessary to forget - as much as it is possible - our thinking habits in order to reconstruct in our minds the Greek mentality - if the Greek religion is considered". This statement proves true also for the Bible.

## **The world of the Bible**

It is not seldom so, that people do not even dip into the Bible, being convinced that "it simply must be boring". Well, if they could know how wrong they are! Certainly, there are also such texts there that may seem somewhat wearisome to us, particularly if we attempt to read them with no proper preparation, for instance lists, enumerations or genealogies of all sorts and kinds. At first reading they can be just left out. There are also passages worrying or even shocking to us, and such that we simply do not understand yet. And so, we should remember, that if we really want to comprehend a literary work (or works) - and this is also relevant for a work of art - we have to become at least a bit acquainted with the world, in which it was created. Once, many years ago, during one of the first International Chopin Piano Competitions in Warsaw there was a well-known English pianist in the jury. He had learnt Polish to - as he said - understand Chopin better! Let us try then to describe roughly both the environment in which the Bible originated and the slow-going process of its creation.

Let us first say a few words about two fundamental misunderstandings that often trouble us while we read the book. One of them concerns "holiness" of the Sacred Scripture, and the other is the problem of inspiration. It might seem that both things should bother only the believers. This is not so, however. We could even say, that it is the unbelievers, that are most upset here. So, I think that a historian or a philologist working on the Bible should also be concerned about these problems, all the more so as they give origin to misinterpretations that may considerably distort the original meaning of the Book.

## **Holiness**

First of all, we have to realize that the Bible is not a collection of various rules of life, that can be found in other religions and cultures. Christians sometimes seem disappointed: they look for ready clues and practical hints and what they get are numerous stories, the meaning of which is not only often quite inexplicit, but also - and this is much worse - occasionally questionable from the point of view of morality. And how easy it is for the unbelievers to triumph then: so this is what you call Holy Scripture?... However, the Hebrew adjective holy originally did not denote the moral perfection. Holy indeed was only God and the word meant more or less "separated", "absolutely different" - today we would say: transcendental. Also all that belonged to Him would become holy, being therefore somehow separated from the rest of the world - this concerned places and objects as well as people. And in this sense the Bible is holy too. This is not because it describes perfect people that we call it Holy Scripture, but simply because for Christians it is the word of God and it speaks of holy God continuously troubled by the people not holy at all and quite similar to us. In fact this is the reason why it is so interesting also for us.

### The Hebrew point of view on the holiness of people and places

When in the wilderness Moses sees a burning bush, which is not being burnt up, he is going to come nearer, to have a look at it. Then he hears the voice of God calling him out of that mysterious bush: "Come no nearer; take off your shoes; the place on which you stand is holy ground." (Ex 3:5) And it is such, because the Almighty took possession of this place. Hundreds of years went by and Saint Paul writing to Corinthians addresses them "the holy people of Jesus Christ" (1 Co1:2; literary: "the saints by the call") and in the Second Letter to them he sends his greeting to "all the saints in the whole of Achaia" (2 Co 1:1; Corinth was a capital of a Roman province of Achaia). And at the same time from the contents of both Letters it appears that Corinthians were not holy at all, at least in the contemporary sense of the word. Yet, by virtue of the holy baptism they were dedicated to God.

## **The inspired text?**

And there is another misunderstanding: much too often we tend to imagine that since for Christians the Bible is the word of God, they must believe it was dictated as a whole to the human authors by God himself. In the art of the old time it was quite characteristic to represent the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove sitting on the shoulder of the Evangelist and dictating the text he is to write - word by word right into his ear. Indeed, according to the teaching of the Catholic Church the biblical text has two authors: God and man, yet man is by no means considered just a tool. The Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council states that "In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while chosen by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that [...] they [were] true authors. [For] God speaks [...] through men in human fashion". So, if we desire to understand Him, we first have to understand what the human authors intended to tell their contemporaries. This requirement may seem at once quite impossible to comply with. How today, at the dawn of the 21st century, can we possibly follow the intentions of a man who had spoken or written more than 2000 years before we were born? But after a while we discover that we read different works in a different way and it depends on whether it is an epic, a religious hymn, a legal code or a parable. These are so-called literary genres (or forms) the wrong definition of which must lead to misunderstandings. This problem is so important, that we have to discuss it more widely further on.

## **Man in God's image and likeness**

On the sixth day animals appear on earth and finally there appears man. Yet, the latter is treated in quite a different way than all that God had created before him. Evidently, here the Creator makes a decision of great importance and possibly this is the reason why He speaks in plural: "Let us make man in our image, in the likeness of ourselves" (Gn 1:26). The most probable explanation of this unusual form is an assumption that it is a case of the so-called pluralis deliberationis - the plural expressing the process of deliberation and arriving at a decision (it happens also to me that sometimes, being quite alone, I speak to myself: let us think now what we should do). Particular significance of this final act of creation is shown maybe even more clearly by the verse 27: "God created man in the image of himself; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them".

These words have been very important for the history of our culture. They have been interpreted in various ways, becoming the starting point for the most different explanations, countless commentaries, considerations, whole theological, philosophical or anthropological systems built for nearly 2500 years. Nevertheless, despite any further conclusions it is always good to try to grasp the thought of the original author. And here both the literary and the historical context may be helpful for us. It will be easier, I think, to start with the former. To do so let us have a look at least at the verses being in the closest environment of the words speaking of creation of man in God's likeness, e.g., Gn 1:26 (partially cited above) and 1:28. They are almost identical. In 1:26 God says: "Let us make man in our image, in the likeness of ourselves and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth". And later we find the same words also in 1:28, after man was created. Thus, the very act of creation is framed on both sides by the statement, that man was created to rule the whole world, or at least the whole world of animals. There is no doubt that such was the essential thought of the original biblical author. What does it mean? After all, God does not abdicate the throne. Indeed, the true sovereign power will always be held by Him.

## **Dignity and responsibility of man**

And here we get help from the historical context. The hymn, the words of which we consider, was written most probably at the end of the 6th century B.C. (or maybe at the very beginning of the 5th century B.C.), when Judea together with Jerusalem were under the Persian rule. Of course, the king of such a great empire could not govern each part of his country personally. So, each province was under the leadership of the king's governor, who for the subjects was a living picture of their sovereign. They had to respect him. Lifting a hand against him would mean lifting a hand against the king himself. Still, the governor had under his control that part of the empire that he was put in charge of, but he did not possess it in any way. He could hardly do with it whatever he liked. If he only dared... He did govern his province, but it was the king that he governed it for. That is what his dignity and responsibility was based on.

And so, if man was created in the image of God in order to rule, he should rule as a governor of God. This is how great his dignity is. Any attempt on man's life is an attempt on God Himself (cp. Gn 9:5). This dignity, however, means also incredible responsibility for everything that he was put in charge of.

## **Equality of woman and man**

There is still one more conclusion of great significance that follows from the verse concerning the creation of man. Most clearly the full image of God is neither man nor woman alone, but man and woman together, in this primary, smallest community they both constitute. God created them together, one for the other He created them. They are equal, since each of them is a person, and at the same time they are complementary to each other. They become complete by the acts of mutual receiving and giving. John Paul II calls this relationship "a communion of persons" created in the image of the Communion of Persons in the mystery of the Triune God (*Male and female God created them*).

## **Man cannot live alone**

Man is not fully human just by the fact of having human shape and living. The relations between him and the world around are equally important for his humanity. And this world seems to lack something "Yahweh Elohim said, 'It is no good that the man should be alone. [...]' (Gn 2:18; originally in Hebrew "human being", and not "man"). Thus God decides to "make him a helpmate". Yet the way in which He acts may seem at least peculiar to us. He forms animals and birds out of the soil and later brings them all to the man. But certainly they can be no "helpmate" for him at all! And the point is, as we may suppose, that the man should feel it himself - he should experience loneliness among the living beings to better sense the need for the authentic community, for which he was created. And at the same time it is nobody else but him, who gives names to these animals. In the biblical world it means that he knows them, he rules them and thereby - that he takes responsibility for them. The same God, who planted the Garden for the man, now brings animals to him, giving him the rule over the vegetable kingdom and then over the animal kingdom. But in spite of it all "no helpmate suitable for man was found for him" (Gn 2:20)

## **Relation between woman and man**

And it is only now that woman is created (Gn 2:21-23). There are probably no other verses of the Bible that gave origin to such a number of funny stories, more or less immodest jokes and cartoons. We get stuck in the verbal layer of the text that is quite unclear to us and we cannot get any deeper to grasp the meaning of it. One could just think that God here acts as a surgeon who anaesthetizes the patient in order to excise his rib. Yet finally he does a thing that no surgeon, even the best one, could ever do: out of this one rib he "builds up" a woman.

Well, this "trance" that the man is put into (the instances of such deep dream can be found also in other parts of the Bible) first of all means that what will happen in a moment will take place absolutely beyond the limits of the man's consciousness. When he awakes, he will see a woman in front of him and he will have no slightest idea where she comes from. Yet, right from the start he knows that with her he will feel complete. So he shouts with greatest joy: "This at last is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh!". This is the statement of the closest kinship, or even equality. In a similar way the representatives of all the tribes of Israel gathered in Hebron will speak to king David: "we are your own flesh and blood" (2 S 5:1). And this very truth is comprised in the image of a woman being built up out of a bone that was taken out of the man's body. Why is it a rib? It might be a relic of the primeval tradition reaching back even to the third millennium B.C., for in the language spoken by Sumerians it could mean rib, as well as life.

The man greets the woman not only as "a helpmate suitable for him" - the one who gives him the sense of fulfillment, but also as a human being - the same as he is. It seems clear, that the biblical author thinks that man and woman are equal in the intention of God. Inequality he observes in his world is shown as a consequence of the wrong choice made by the first people and the breach of their relation with God.

The relationship between a man and a woman is neither a matter of short duration nor anything fortuitous. On the contrary, it turns out to be stronger than even the closest family bonds. "A man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body" (Gn 2:24). However, the meaning of the Hebrew word *basar* (body) is much broader - it does not stand in opposition to soul or spirit, concentrating mainly on the earthly conditioning of a person. The final part of the sentence above could be translated in the following way: "they become one human being". These words contain full affirmation of the relationship between woman and man in all its aspects: physical, as well as spiritual.

## **Paradise apple?**

In chapter 3 a new story begins, which, connected by the biblical author with the first, was in the oral tradition most probably still a separate whole. It is a drama built around "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" and the ban on eating its fruits. References to that tree in Gn 2:9, 16-17 prepare the pass from the story about the creation (this is where the "tree of life" belongs to) to the story about the trial. Both trees cause the interpreters much trouble. We are not even sure whether there were two trees, one tree or a whole group of trees - the Hebrew word used here could function also as plural. There is only one thing, that we can say with no doubt: nowhere in the text do we find a word about either an apple or an apple tree. We do not know exactly how it happened that apple found its way to our image of paradise. It is not unlikely, that it was so because of art. When the scene of the temptation of the woman started to be depicted - first of all in relief - it was necessary to decide how the fruit should be represented. And most probably the shape of an apple seemed the easiest.

If we try to look in the literature of the Near East for an analogy of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" we will not find anything of the kind. However, there is something called "the plant of life". The hero of the great epos, Gilgamesh, whom we have already mentioned before, was said to have gained that plant. Touched deeply by the death of his friend he set off for a journey in quest of immortality. Having gone through many difficult moments he finally managed to get "the plant of life". He did not eat it however, but decided to bring it to his town Uruk, to share it with others. Tired, he suddenly saw a spring with wonderfully fresh water by the road. So he left the miraculous plant on the riverside and went into the water to wash himself. And then attracted by the plant's smell the snake appeared and ate it all so quickly, that Gilgamesh could even notice how it sheds its skin afterwards - which for people in those times would stand for recovery of youth.

And again we have a story very similar to the biblical one, yet still quite different. There is neither any choice nor any fault here. Snake is just a regular snake, meaning no mischief at all. Gilgamesh did not do anything wrong either. All happened just by chance and the only conclusion we can draw is that immortality is not for man. By the way, this truth will also be confirmed by the biblical author at the end of the paradise story, where he speaks of the cherubim guarding the way to the tree of life and "the flame of the flashing sword" (Gn 3:24)

## Song of love of Yahweh and His people

Song of Songs is a title of a very remarkable book of the Bible. In Hebrew it sounds very melodious: Šir haširim (with the stress put on the last syllable) and it is a kind of the highest degree of comparison: Song of Songs, like "Holy of Hollies" - the holiest part of the temple, or "king of kings" - the greatest of the kings. Famous rabbi Akiba (he died in 135 A.D.) used to say that all books of the Scriptures are holy, yet the Song of Songs is the holiest of them all. It was also numbered among the so-called Megilloth, the Five Rolls, read on the five most important Jewish feast days. The remaining books are: Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth and Esther, serving as liturgy for the Feast of Weeks, the mourning ceremony commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Purim, respectively. The first of the Megilloth, instead, Song of Songs, was recited at Passover, the greatest feast of all, that was to remind every year of the spring of love of Yahweh and His people experienced once at the desert:

For see, winter is past,  
the rains are over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth.  
The season of glad songs has come,  
the cooing turtledove is heard  
in our land.  
The fig tree is forming its first figs  
and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.  
(Sg 2:11-13)

The complete Hebrew title of this book is Song of Songs of Solomon. However, the Hebrew preposition that shows the relation between the great king and the Song is not explicit in its meaning. It could be translated by genitive "Solomon's" just as well as by the expression "for Solomon", or even: "about Solomon". Anyhow, these words should not be regarded as containing any historical information, but rather as showing reference to the old tradition of the exceptional wisdom of Solomon, who "composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five" (1 K 5:12). The book itself, at least in the shape we know today, originated most probably not earlier than in the 4th or even the 3rd century B.C. It is enough to look at its language to see when it was written. In many passages we can observe quite obvious influences of Aramaic, the language already commonly spoken in Palestine at that time, we also find several Persian words and even one Greek word. Yet, we are still not out of the wood with our difficulties with Song of Songs.

## Love Song

If we open that book with no prior assumptions, possibly also forgetting for a while that we have found it in the Bible, we will see it simply as a magnificent love poem. There is a couple of young people here, a girl and a boy, they look for each other yearningly and passionately, meet each other and then get separated to finally unite in the sense of perfect fulfillment. God is not even mentioned here, except "a flame of Yahweh himself" (Sg 8:6), where this word probably functions only as a description of really great power of the flame. There is no moralizing, either... There is only a song, like countless love songs, that seems convincing to everyone, no matter where and when he lives.

## How did Song of Songs find its way to the Bible?

When about 90 A.D., after Jerusalem was destroyed, Pharisees were laying down the canon of the Bible, they decided to include in it Song of Songs together with the Book of Proverbs and Qoheleth. They all were connected with the name of Solomon, and also they all were considered the Writings (Ketubim), which was the last and the latest part of the Bible. This all however would not have been enough, and also Rabbi Akiba would not have thought so highly of it, if there had been no allegorical interpretation, which most clearly must have been quite popular and commonly accepted already at that time.

There is no doubt that such an interpretation is conditioned to a great extent by the very text of the poem. On the basis of the figurative and deliberately unclear style the reader may speculate already at the beginning what the author does not want to tell him outright. Thus the style of the poem also invites the reader to transfer the sense and look for the hidden meaning in everything. Both main heroes are always shown in disguise. He is most frequently portrayed as a shepherd, yet sometimes also referred to as a king (Sg 1.4,12; 7.6). She is once called a prince's daughter (Sg 7.2), more often a vineyard, and generally a garden.

She is a garden enclosed,  
my sister, my promised bride;  
a garden enclosed,  
a sealed fountain.

(Sg 4:12; cp. 5:1; 6:2)

"A garden enclosed" stands for exclusive ownership - it belongs only to that one, and maybe even not yet, maybe it is just about to open for him...

The bride for her beloved one means more than the whole king's harem:

There are sixty queens  
and eighty concubines  
(and countless maidens).  
But my dove is unique,  
mine, unique and perfect.

(Sg 6:8-9)

On the other hand, the bridegroom is richer and happier than Solomon himself:

Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon. He entrusted it to overseers[...]  
But I look after my vineyard myself.[...]

(Sg 8:11-12)

She praises her bridegroom's beauty in her song, choosing such expressions as if she wanted to praise the Temple of Jerusalem (Sg 5:11-16). He glorifies his bride multiplying geographic parallels, that would better fit the description of the land of Canaan than of a pretty girl (Sg 4:1-7 and 6:4).

### Wedding songs and love songs

Song of Songs originated in the particular place on earth, no wonder then that there are many references here either to the customs or to other love songs popular in the Near East. Here wedding songs were always considered a distinct literary genre, that was however quite diversified from within. We could find there folk songs or couplets full of bitterness, sneer or even obscenity, as well as high-class poems, skillfully elaborated to perfection.

One of the requirements of the wedding ritual was to praise the beauty of a bride and a bridegroom - also in Song of Songs such praises play a significant part. And though in course of time they often became affected and schematic, it is worthy of notice how often they involved all nature in happiness of the newly-married couple. Another necessary part of the ritual were the wishes for the couple - and the most important were the wishes of numerous descendants. And so, the wedding songs would easily turn into genuine wedding blessings, accompanied usually by all kinds of incantations that were to protect the newly-married against "evil eye" and all possible threats.

Love songs were created not only for wedding ceremonies, of course. It is a popular and centuries-old theme. Today we know many love songs and poems written both in Mesopotamia and Egypt, glorifying the power of the feeling, happiness of loving, yearning and unsatisfied desires. They were also composed by the sons of Israel. No wonder then, that Hebrew literature generated Song of Songs. However, the question is how the work of this kind, that at first glance seems to have absolutely no religious elements, found its way to the Holy Writ.

## **Allegorical interpretation**

The descriptions and parallels of that particular style have always prompted allegorical interpretation, which, leaving the poem unchanged, could make it possible for Jews, and later on also for Christians, to disregard everything that could trouble them there. Jewish thinkers very early recognized the Bridegroom as Yahweh himself, and the Bride as the people of Israel. In the so-called Fourth Book of Esdras - an apocryphal work from the 1st century A.D., which though never received into any canon, yet for a long time was treated with great respect - its author while describing Israel takes many expressions right from the Song of Songs. He calls it "lily", "turtledove" and "garden" (cp. Sg 2:2,14; 4:12). We will find this interpretation also in Talmud and in the whole later tradition of Judaism. And with only minor changes it will be adopted by the Christians.

In our times, however, we generally tend to be skeptical. On reading such poetic constructions quite instinctively we start to consider whether that meaning was a true intention of the author of the Song of Songs or rather the "wishful thinking" of the commentators. Allegorical interpretation was applied often also in the pagan world in defense of something that otherwise seemed quite indefensible. That is exactly how Homer was treated already from the end of the 6th century B.C. - for instance the quarrels and fights of gods shown in Iliad were explained as struggles of elements in nature or of passions in human heart. Fortunately, this method of interpretation did not manage either to take the shine out of the poetry of Homer or to moralize his gods effectively. Thus, wouldn't it be right also in the case of the Song of Songs to read it literary and in a more prosaic manner?

## **Literary reading?**

This is not a new idea. Already sixteen hundred years ago Theodore of Mopsuestia (350 - 429 A.D.) considered the book a thoroughly secular love poem, that was included in the Bible by mistake and was written to celebrate the wedding of Solomon with an Egyptian princess. Indeed, there is such a fragment in the Song of Songs that many researchers view as an ancient wedding song, that was inserted by the author in the text. Maybe it is just the Pharaoh's daughter, who approaches Solomon through the desert, carried in the litter, which was sent for her by the king:

What is this coming up from the desert  
like a column of smoke,  
breathing of myrrh and frankincense,

and every perfume the merchant knows?  
See, it is the litter of Solomon.  
Around it are sixty champions,  
the flower of the warriors of Israel [...]

Daughters of Zion,  
come and see  
King Solomon,  
wearing the diadem with which his mother crowned him  
on his wedding day,  
on the day of his heart's joy.

(Sg 3:6-7, 11)

## **New attempts at reading**

The idea of Theodore of Mopsuestia revived in most various forms in contemporary times. There also appeared new attempts at interpretation of the Song. On the one hand, it would be seen as a pastoral drama between a shepherd and a shepherdess, whose love is imperilled by the passion of great Solomon. On the other hand, it would be considered a Hebrew translation of a liturgical text of a pagan ritual. The above hypotheses, however pointless they both are, in fact evolved to some extent from the very text of the poem. Its heroes are most often depicted as shepherds and it is not quite unlikely that in several verses some traces of pagan liturgy might be found. Again, we can see here how the biblical authors could make use of the literature of the world around them, with no harm for their faith in the one and only God.

The call: "my beloved" uttered by a young girl does not sound strange at all. Still, in the Canaanitic cults exactly the same words were used to address Tamuz, the god of everything that grows and blooms on earth. When sun in late summer with no pity burnt down all vegetation, every year also Tamuz would die and enter the nether world. Mourned over by his lover, goddess Ishtar, each year within six months he would be brought back to life together with the vegetation. Ishtar was a goddess of love and war, which meant that she ruled over life, as well as death. Maybe that is why the bride, in the eyes of her beloved one appears as not only beautiful, but also terrible: "terrible as an army with banners", and at the same time beautiful as two great towns: Tirzach and Jerusalem (Sg 6:10 and 4). Certainly, today we would rather choose different parallels...

Even though these should really be some traces of the old myth, this myth was here quite "demythologized" and altered. Here love does not descend to the kingdom of death, but it is as powerful as death itself and it demands similar exclusiveness as death does (cp. Sg 8:6). Yet, what kind of love is concerned here?

## **Affirmation of complete love**

Today many biblists, also the Catholic ones, suppose that the Song of Songs already at the time when it was written had more than just one meaning. Probably it originated in that period of time when the question of a deeper sense of the physical dimension of the relation between a man and a woman was first raised. The author did not hesitate to incorporate in his work some old love chants and fragments of wedding or even cult rituals and songs. And in this way he created the poem, that is undoubtedly an affirmation of the whole, also the physical, reality of the union of two persons. Its central idea is that love of a woman and a

man is a great power comprised by the very act of creation, that cannot be purchased in any possible way:

Love no flood can quench,  
no torrents drown.  
Were a man to offer all the wealth of his house to buy love,  
contempt is all he would purchase.  
(Sg 8:7)

Another thing - which in the world, where a woman had absolutely no rights was quite unheard of - is the concept of the amazing equality and partnership: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (Sg 2:16), as well as the requirement of faithfulness and exclusiveness opening "a garden enclosed"(cp. Sg 4:12; 5:1; 6:9 and following verses). At the same time throughout the whole poem love is shown as a constant quest. The lover and the beloved look for each other, find each other, but soon get separated to seek each other once more and meet again. None of us, according to the author of the Song of Songs, is able to give love once and for all, and the true love must always be the quest for more and more complete gift of ourselves. So there is a place for yearning and for desire, as well as for the bliss of a perfect, also physical fulfillment:

As an apple tree among the trees of the orchard  
so is my Beloved among the young men.  
In his longed-for shade I am seated  
and his fruit is sweet to my taste. [...]  
How beautiful you are, how charming, my love, my delight![...]  
I am my Beloved's,  
and his desire is for me.  
(Sg 2:3; 7:7.11)

## **The constant love of Yahweh**

Let us now imagine for a while what the author of the Song of Songs thought of his work and how it was read by other sons of Israel, who already from their childhood had very close contact with the Law and the Prophets. We will never be able to grasp it if we treat the book separately and somehow abstractly. For them it originated from the whole of the Scripture and by the Scripture it was explained. They got much help with the interpretation of the Book from the old prophet Hosea, who already in the 8th century B.C. understood that the love of Yahweh for Israel is similar to the love Hosea himself knew from his difficult marriage (ordered by the Lord he married a woman whose occupation was prostitution, probably the sacral prostitution, connected with the cult of the pagan god Baal). Establishing the Covenant God married the chosen people, and although the bride is unfaithful, His love is greater than her unworthiness. And that love will finally overcome. Should we then be surprised, that for the Jewish theologians the Song of Songs became the hymn glorifying the mystical wedding of Yahweh and his people? After all, the spiritual meaning of it is simply hidden beneath the literal and human sense - at least for anyone who is able to find it.

## **The Song of Songs and Christianity**

That was exactly how the Song of Songs was interpreted later on by the Christians, only the Bridegroom meant Christ for them and the Bride represented the Church, the whole of the redeemed mankind, and often also an individual human soul. Sometimes Christ was

replaced by the Holy Spirit, and in that case Mary would be seen as the Bride. The Sermons on the Song of Songs by St Bernard from Clairvaux are the most beautiful example of such an approach.

We do not have to wait for so long, though. Already the authors of the New Testament speak in a similar way. As a matter of fact, they never quote the Song of Songs, but they do not hesitate to adopt for the New Covenant what the Jewish theologians read out of it about the Old. St Paul in his letter to Ephesians at first seems to refer only to a human family: "Give way to one another in obedience of Christ". Then he asks husbands to love their wives just as Christ loves the Church (Ef 5:21-25). Later though he quotes the words from Genesis (mentioned already above) about a man, who joins himself to his wife so, that "the two will become one body", and he immediately adds: "This mystery has many implications; but I am saying it applies to Christ and the Church" (Ef 5:31-32). And so the human marriage is for Paul the living picture of the marriage of Christ to the Church, of God to the saved mankind.

This image together with the formula of the Covenant will be found also in the final, triumphal vision of Revelation by St John - the last book, closing the Christian Bible:

Alleluia! The reign of the Lord our God Almighty has begun;  
let us be glad and joyful  
and give praise to God,  
because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb.  
His bride is ready... [...]  
I saw the holy city - the new Jerusalem,  
coming down from God out of heaven,  
as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband.  
Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne,  
"You see this city? Here God lives among men.  
He will make his home among them; they shall be HIS PEOPLE,  
and he will be their God; his name is GOD-WITH-THEM"  
(Rv 19:6-7; 21:2-3)