

FAIREST OF SONGS

ROLAND POTTER, O.P.

THE *Canticle of Canticles* of our Douay version very literally represents a Hebrew superlative. We could translate it 'the most lovely song' or the 'fairest of songs'. Over the centuries innumerable books have been written about this great poem. There has been, and there still is, much disagreement about its interpretation; there is no disagreement about its consummate beauty. But there is far more than beauty, for the book is part of scripture and as such is inspired or has a divine character. The more central Hebrew tradition was firm about this. Rabbi Akibah, about A.D. 130, wrote: 'No one in Israel has ever questioned the *Canticle's* divine character; indeed the whole world is not worth the day on which the *Canticle of Canticles* was bestowed upon Israel. All the books of scripture are holy, but the *Canticles* most holy.' (Yadaim 3, 5.) The Church teaches that *Canticles* is part of scripture, and that teaching can be traced to the list of scripture compiled by St Cyril of Jerusalem, when *Canticles* is explicitly mentioned.¹ *Canticles* is also comprised in 'the five books of Solomon' referred to by the Council of Laodicea (A.D. 360), as also in a letter of St Athanasius.²

Yet this sublime and divine book does not speak of God, and the only reference to the divine name is in the famous verses—

Love is as strong as death,
jealousy as unbending as sheol,
its shafts are shafts of fire,
its flame a god-like flame. (8, 6.)

—in a very dubious text where the name of God appears in a compounded form.

The *Canticle* neither speaks of God nor conjures up anything at all like itself in any other part of the Bible. Nor is there any real reference to a historic or geographic cadre or background. It is unique, and stands on its own. Its tone and expressions tell of intense love in intensely human terms, or so it would seem to

¹ P.G. 33, 497-501.

² P.G. 26, 1435-8.

the author of this new study,³ who follows in the wake of the studies of P. Dubarle, O.P., and P. Audet, O.P.⁴ This small book will do much to further the idea of a simply literal interpretation — without, we hope, necessarily eliminating either the figuratively literal or the spiritual interpretations. Let us say at once that Dom Winandy's work is a model of what such work should be. We are given a careful translation of the text, notes and footnotes, brief, but packed with ideas to be digested. Then there are the seventy pages of introduction which are really the author's conclusions about the interpretation of the Canticle.

The literal interpretation of the Canticle means the recovery, if possible, of the *mens auctoris*, as St Thomas put it. That the author should have written his poem to be read as an allegory is unthinkable to Dom Winandy. That it was so read by Hebrew and Christian tradition he does not deny. Nor of course would he deny that the poem can have many other senses intended by the divine author only, and beyond the purview of the human writer. What in fact does the poem mean in the first instance or original intent of the author? When he sings

Arise my love, my fair one,
and come away,
for see, the winter is gone,
rain-time is over and past.
Flowers appear on earth
a time for singing is come
the fig-tree puts forth figs
and vines give forth fragrance,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.
Arise my love, my fair one,
and come away.
O my dove, in clefts of the rock
in the covert of the cliff
shew me your face
let me hear your voice,
so sweet is your voice
so comely your features (2, 10-14)

³ *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, by Dom Jacques Winandy. (Casterman. Editions de Maredsous, 1960; n.p.)

⁴ Dubarle, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*. R.S.P.T. 1954, pp. 92-102. Audet, *Le Sens du Cantique des Cantiques*. R.B. 1955, pp. 197-221.

are we to think straightway of a very human song of love or straightway think of figured language telling forth God's love for Israel or the Creator's love for each individual soul?

Before deciding on this, let us first say more about the poem itself. Advisedly we say 'the poem' as the Jews did: for them it was *the* Song of Songs. Had they thought it was a collection of songs, they would have used a plural word, as with *Tehillim* or *Praises* for the Psalms. The Cantic is a unity, in the same finished language all the way through. There are glosses and additions, but substantially it is one work in several stanzas, with dialogued sections, changes of speakers, and quite a considerable yet quiet ebb and flow of situations between the lovers. There is movement, as there is not in the dialogues of Job, to the extent that many have wanted to imagine or to read the Cantic as a drama. There is nothing to suggest popular songs from or for wedding festivities. The Cantic in no way suggests 'the people': rather is it refined, *recherché*, artificial, almost erudite in its wording and descriptions. The author is a great but not a popular poet and adopts a good deal which is sophisticated, and not a little which is puzzling to our present-day tastes; cf.:

Your breasts are two young deer
twins of a gazelle.

Your neck as an ivory tower
your eyes are pools in Heshbon
by the gates of Bath-rabbin
your nose a tower of Lebanon

pointing over against Damascus . . . (7, 4-5).

Nothing in the Cantic corresponds to any known marriage ritual or betrothal usages. It can be argued that marriage was not at issue. There is no reference to a permanent union, nor to possible offspring, nor to messianic hopes. Neither is the father of either lover ever mentioned. In this respect the Cantic contrasts starkly with the rest of the old testament which teaches again and again that fecundity is a blessing of God and childlessness a curse. The Cantic is simply a beautiful, and chaste, expression of human love, abstracting from marriage and its consequences. Dom Winandy goes further and holds with P. Dubarle (*R.B.* 1954, p. 54) that this notion had a real place (all unknown to the author of the Cantic as to his readers) in the evolution of old testament revelation. Just as the value and

responsibility of the individual soul came to be realized (cf. *Jerem.* 31, 31-34), so too the notion of love as a constituent value in marriage alongside that of the procreation of children, which is the more usual emphasis of the old testament. *Canticles* would thus furnish a complementary note in the teaching of our inspired books.

Perhaps too our poet has tried to recapture something of the freshness and splendour of love before the fall of our first parents, something of the admiration and happiness of Adam when his helpmeet appeared, 'And the rib which the Lord God took from the man, he made into a woman and brought her to him. The man said,

Now indeed, bone of my bone
and flesh of my flesh!
she shall be called woman
for from man was she taken.' (*Gen.* 2, 22-23.)

Be that as it may, there remains a strong note of artificiality in our poem. For example the author of *Canticles* has a passion for plants, trees, fruits, aromatic spices: the vine, the lily, pomegranate, cedar, cyprus, date-palm, narcissus, nard, myrrh, henna, saffron, etc. Yet with all this there is no mention of the common or garden olive, so characteristic of Palestine, then as now. We have poetry, something of a bucolic idyll, but the Palestinian scene is purely imaginary. We are tempted to think that the author was a third-century B.C. Jew, a city dweller, little at home with nature but rather with books and Alexandria's gardens.

All this, and more, should be set out as necessary introduction to the Cantic. Remains now the great problem: how explain the acceptance of this work into the Jewish canon of scripture? We do not feel satisfied that our author has faced the possibility or rather the only convincing probability that the Cantic was taken into the 'Writings' precisely because it was read as an allegory of the relationship of God and Israel. It is useless to argue that nothing in the text suggests the reading of it in this manner. The important point is: how did the Jews, from the beginning, and all through the history of their exegesis, read the poem? and then hand on this mode of reading the Cantic to the Church, the new Israel of God, where it has obtained until very recent times. We can add that the very condition of *Canticles'* acceptance into the canon of scripture was that it had come to be

read figuratively and allegorically. So it can reasonably be argued that, in terms of inspiration, the text is inspired on condition of being read as it was accepted by the Hebrew adapter(s). Only an interpretation in some figurative sense will thus give the real meaning. Study of the strictly literal sense is then preliminary and introductory.

The strictly literal interpretation, if it is to remain, will have to win far more acceptance among Catholic exegetes. And surely that acceptance must be qualified: the strictly-literal way of reading the Canticle is perhaps *one* way of reading the poem. Dom Winandy would like it to be the only way, and talks of setting the interpretation of *Canticles* on its true course (p. 13)—which, to say the least, is ambitious. Are we to believe that only in the twentieth century was found a key to the true reading of *Canticles*? And if that reading gives us a message of the sanctity of human love, or of love as a value in marriage, and the like—these are definitely twentieth-century concepts, certainly not found in the Jewish world of the second and third centuries B.C. We are not yet convinced that such ideas were latent, then buried under two thousand years of figured and spiritual exegesis, only to come to the surface in 1961. We can all poke fun at ridiculous excesses in spiritualist interpretation. Yet it is better to leave such excesses to oblivion rather than perpetuate them in print, and they hardly give the reader any true idea of the interpretations of Fathers and Doctors of the Church, nor of the use of *Canticles* in our liturgy, all of which need to be much further investigated. We shall surely best understand the Canticle not by ceaselessly substituting new interpretations for old, but rather by savouring, simply and humbly, the 'new things and old' ever laid before us by the Church.