

intimate acquaintance with the sacred text itself, which acquaintance can in turn only be made through a careful elucidation of the literal sense of the words, made possible by the resources of modern biblical scholarship. At the same time, in accordance with the instruction of Pius XII's encyclical, special attention is being paid to the doctrinal and theological content of the Scriptures, in the science still awaiting its maturity, known as 'Biblical Theology'. To this both the historical and the symbolic techniques contribute.

Even within the province of biblical scholarship, when a sound theological training is presupposed, there will be specialists: the philologists and textual critics, the symbolists and the theologians; and each has his specialised training. But all contribute to the present day need of expounding the word of God.

And the faithful, the general reader, the Christian lover of the Bible, should no longer feel bewilderment or mistrust when approaching the Scriptures. Good translations are being provided and adequate commentaries composed. It is possible now, and it is the trend, to return to the traditional attitude towards the 'Good Book' and allow it to mould our minds and raise our hearts to God.



THE SONG OF SONGS

BY RICHARD KEHOE, O.P.

MAKING a very valuable and attractive addition to the rapidly growing series called *La Sainte Bible* the Cantic of Canticles has now appeared, translated and introduced and provided with brief notes by Père A. Robert, Professor of the Institut Catholique of Paris.¹ It makes also a suitably delightful little book for the reading of such lovely poetry; and it is a pleasant and skilful translation. But with all its magic beauty everyone knows how difficult a book this is to interpret—'without parallel in the history of biblical exegesis' is how the difficulty of it appears to Père Robert. Yet after reviewing some of the principal theories of interpretation he chooses and develops his own with a masterful assurance.

Clearly he had to reject the theory that finds in the Cantic the

¹ *Le Cantic des Cantiques*. (Les Editions du Cerf, Paris; n.p.)

expression simply of what the Bible would call 'carnal' love. No Catholic can subscribe to that. But when considering possible influences affecting the form and structure of the book or its poetic character it is, of course, legitimate to search in the field of what some might take to be merely 'carnal' love poetry; and two such possible sources are here referred to. First there is that of the sequences of love songs pertaining to marriage celebrations found to have been still quite recently practised among certain Arab tribes in or near Palestine. In these poems, in which the influence of the ancient Fertility cults seems obvious enough, the married couple are acclaimed as king and queen, honoured almost as gods, identified with all the forces and beauties of nature. No less suggestive are certain ancient Egyptian love poems, of which a useful account may be found in P. Gilbert's *La poesie égyptienne*; and it seems to Père Robert that, both in detail and as to literary form, very close similarities to the Canticum are to be recognised. And yet he finds nothing here, it would seem, nor in the Arab songs, that might help towards an understanding of the essential meaning of the Canticum. Here, in the end, one will find oneself in disagreement with him. There is another source theory according to which, in its extreme form, the Canticum was originally a liturgical sequence of hymns belonging to a Fertility cult, modelled on the Babylonian liturgical hymns to Ishtar and Tammuz, the mother goddess and the dying god who is both her son and her husband. For this theory Père Robert shows no sympathy at all; for what relationship, he asks, can there possibly be between the Canticum and this expression of polytheistic superstition? So nothing relevant to the substantial meaning of the Canticum is discovered either in the exalted human love poems or in these poems of the love of gods. One begins to feel a little restless and unhappy. What one is, however, grateful to our author for rejecting is that widely accepted interpretation of the Canticum that finds in it the plot of a country maiden and her shepherd swain whose love triumphs over all the efforts at abduction of the villain of the piece, King Solomon. He recognises, in accordance with biblical (and not only biblical) symbolism, that the shepherd and the king are identical.

The interpretation of the Canticum offered to us here is the ancient and established one of Jewish tradition, which takes the lovers to represent Yahweh and his people. The poems then tell of

their relationship, of the infidelity of Israel and her exile, and then of her gradual conversion and glorious reunion with her divine husband. This is a classic biblical theme, certainly, and something of its great meaning, as it appears in Osee, Isaias, Jeremias, etc., is very well indicated. But Père Robert would show how in the *Canticle* it is given a new doctrinal significance and a new historical application. He sees in the love story as here presented a special eschatological character. The return of the bride to her divine lover is only realised after many partial conversions. There is a continual return to what would seem to be a true married love, and yet always the full mystery of marriage is denied, until the very end, until the repeated agonies of separation have been gone through. A marriage is presented, then, of which the consummation belongs not to the beginning but to the end. A mystical marriage, one might simply say. But for Père Robert a very definite sacred historical drama is indicated. It begins, as he sees it, with the return of Israel from the exile in Babylon, and continues through the subsequent period of alternating hope and bitter disappointment. And the *Canticle* is seen as containing a kind of apocalyptic message of reassurance and comfort. So references may be found, he considers, to the exile itself—'I am black but beautiful . . .'—to the longing for release—'The voice of my beloved. Behold he cometh leaping upon the mountains. . . '—and to the occupation of the holy land by the foreign conquerors—'The watchmen who keep the city found me'. 'Who is she that goeth up by the desert, etc.' (3, 6 ff.) is understood of the return of the exiles, and the Solomon of this poem would be the Zorobabel of historic fact. Reference is found also to the labour and perils accompanying the rebuilding of the temple, and in the description of the lover in terms of the temple it is the accomplishment of this task, the return of the Glory to the temple, that is thought to be signified, as the description of the bride is taken to include a reference to the rebuilding and fortification of the holy city.

There is nothing in this historical interpretation that could fairly be treated as fantastic; although it may well be thought that the historical allusions, supposing they really are there, are too incidental to provide anything like a framework for the meaning of the whole book. In fact one would say of this work of Père Robert that although one may not find either the general or many

of the particular interpretations it offers to be satisfactory, yet it does make a brilliant contribution towards the understanding of the essential meaning of the Canticle. It supplies the background and presuppositions of its specific theme. However, speaking with all the diffidence imposed by the complexity of the subject, one may perhaps be allowed to express the conviction—though it cannot be critically justified here—that the main principle of Père Robert's interpretation of the Canticle is inadequate. The marriage that is the specific theme of the Canticle is not the marriage of God and Israel but a messianic marriage, a marriage of the King's son—though this marriage does not, of course, preclude the former, but answers to it as a sacramental expression. The main traditional Christian interpretation is exegetically right. The marriage that is presented in the Canticle does not tell of a sheer relationship to God, but of a corresponding relationship established within the created order by which are joined together the principle (as one might say) of reason, of spiritual capacity, with the principle as of matter, of body, of the potentialities of nature; so that the disorder in the world which sin introduced in principle overcome. Throughout the Bible that disorder and the sin that embodied it are represented as the denial of a mystery of marriage, and part of the messianic hope is for the coming of the royal bridegroom whose marriage would be the source of the whole world's renewal.

The grounds for such an interpretation would be largely established by the study of the great Fertility pattern to which the biblical theme of marriage belongs and of the way in which the Canticle draws on that pattern. The theme of marriage as the Canticle presents it would then call up for one the theme of the king and the temple, of the king and the holy land or garden, of the king and Wisdom; and the theme of the great deep and the fountain of life, etc. And it would not be easy to exclude all hint of Adam and Eve and paradise, as it would be impossible not to recall Psalm 44, '*Eructavit cor meum . . .*', or on the other hand Zacharias 9, 9; and 12, 10 and 11; and so on.

The Christological interpretation of the Canticle contained in the liturgy and in the main tradition of Catholic doctrine, from the New Testament onwards, does not then do any sort of violence to it, but only justice. It is by its essence prophetic of the marriage of the Lamb, of Christ and the Blessed Virgin, of Christ

and the Church. What would be fantastic, in its anthropomorphic detail, if referred allegorically to Yahweh and Israel, is lovely poetry if capable of being directly referred, say to Cana, or to Calvary.

And if such a meaning is accepted it becomes impossible to dismiss as being substantially quite irrelevant to it any parallels it might seem to offer, on the one hand, to Babylonian liturgical hymns celebrating the love of the mother goddess and the dying god;² how she must seek after him in the place of death, and how upon their reunion and marriage when death has been overcome the whole fertility of the world depends. 'For love is strong as death . . . many waters cannot quench love.'—'Woman, what is that to me and to thee?'; 'Son, behold thy mother.' And on the other hand in those Arab and Egyptian love songs referred to above something more than stylistic affinities may very well be discovered. For the love set forth in the Canticle does not simply transcend ordinary human married love; rather it represents a Mystery of love in which ordinary married love is to participate—as it did at Cana, where songs not unlike those of these Egyptians, or still more of these Arabs, might very well have been sung!

To find in the Canticle a poetic prophecy pointing indifferently, as it were, to the marriage with human nature implied in the Incarnation as such, or to the marriage of Christ and the Blessed Virgin, or of Christ and the Church, or of Christ and any soul in a state of grace, or to human marriage as raised in Christ to its full measure of glory, is no straining of the biblical sense. A mystery is of its nature far-reaching; and it is the mystery of marriage that is celebrated in the Canticle—that same mystery of which St Paul speaks in Ephesians. No less indeterminate, because no less mysterious, is the image of Wisdom, for example, to be found in the sapiential books. Without violence it can be verified in Christ, in the Blessed Virgin, or in the action of the Holy Spirit.

The mystery of marriage is verified first in Christ himself, in his own life, in which what had been torn asunder through sin is united again. But then, when Christ imparts his own life to others he gives of this same marriage, of his own marriedness, his wholeness; so that being married to Christ means becoming whole through union with his wholeness; to be a 'partner' to him does

² A useful introduction to this subject is to be found in *The Song of Songs, a Symposium* (Philadelphia; 1924) in the contribution by J. J. Meek.

not mean being a part related to a part, although to one's 'better part'. This is essential to the mystery of marriage, that it means the union of persons in their wholeness; so that if they are one it is with the oneness of a mystical body. It is only through sacrificial love that this can be arrived at, only by a dying to the partial self, the possessive or devouring, or clinging, parasitic self.

Such a union of whole persons is first realised between Christ and the Blessed Virgin. The gospel reveals them to us as the new Adam and the new Eve, the (Son of) Man and the Woman between whom is enacted, not the bodily letter, but the spirit or mystery of marriage which the first man and woman violated. Snatching at happiness, refusing to die to themselves, the bond between *them* became one purely of *concupiscentia*, of the longing of one part for another. Between the new Adam and the new Eve the Gospel reveals a love that endures all the pain of that losing and finding or parting and reuniting that is so wonderful a feature of the love story of the Canticle. The famous 'seeking' (*zetesis*) of the pagan myth may be said to be reflected here. Christ must be ever found again across the waters of death, must be sought for in the sheepfolds of the underworld; the garden of triumphant reunion rises out of the deep. From that other Mary stretching out to him in the garden of the Resurrection he withholds himself, since she has not yet gone through the Passion which would have made of that garden for her a meeting-place with Christ in God. She is as it were tempting him, as the Blessed Virgin at Cana is so wonderfully represented *as though* she were a temptress. Of the divine love that is between her and Christ the Passion is the secret: from that depth is drawn the water that waters the garden of their love, or the wine with which they are refreshed—'he brought me to the house of wine . . .'.

It is in the scene of Cana above all, in the Gospel, that one catches the echo of the Canticle: at this marriage feast of the Lamb, the dying king of Israel, the dying son, the new Adam, with the new Eve his mother. "There was a marriage in Cana(an)": 'I am come into my garden, O my sister, my spouse . . . I have drunk my wine. . . . Eat, O friends, and drink and be inebriated, my beloved ones. . . .' The two who invited them to the celebration of their marriage are in turn invited to participate in *their* marriage. It might be thought merely playful to say that human marriage is here again being ritually conjoined to the marriage

of the gods, the mother goddess and the dying god. It could not be thought playful to say that this scene anticipates the mystery of a Nuptial Mass.

GOD SPOKE THROUGH THE PROPHETS

BY ROLAND POTTER, O.P.

AT every creed in the Mass we profess belief in God who spoke through the prophets. This in itself should spur us to reflection on the totality of the prophets' teachings, reflection too, in a spirit of great faith—*fides quaerens intellectum*—on the phenomenon of prophecy in general, and the mysterious facts relating to God's action in the world, the penetration of the divine and eternal into the world of sense and time. But our theology of prophecy must not be arbitrarily *a priori*; nor need we be tempted to think that it is so in St Thomas's systematic treatises *De Prophetia (de Veritate, I2; II-II, 171-174; Qdlt 7, 14 ad 5, and 16)*. St Thomas was profoundly grounded in the Scriptures and more especially in the one thing necessary in Scriptural investigation, that grasp of the doctrinal content of every book as of every word. We should strive to grasp a living, objective, reality: the utterance of God through the prophets, at a point in the history of the world, in and through contingent realities of flesh and blood. A sound theology of prophecy supposes a thorough grasp of the various prophet's teachings, thoughts, background, circumstances. They were all manner of men, crude and cultured: they had a common experience, they heard God and felt the imperious need to utter God's message: 'Thus says Jahweh. . . .'

Israel's religion was not as others, and so her 'men of God' had religious ideas and principles not as others. The 'men of God' were playthings in the hands of God, favoured by a blinding gift of faith into whose light they penetrated more and more. We have, happily, some narratives of what they experienced, individual, concrete, experiences, each serving to shed a little light on the Truth which is God. The prophets had a standpoint which is not ours; their was a Messianism to come, ours is accomplished, though not wholly. In this too they are distinct, and our task is the more difficult. A straightforward history of Israel is more easily written.