

How Should We Read the Song of Solomon?

There are three basic approaches to the Song of Solomon.

Literal (or Physical) Interpretation

Introduced by Theodore of Mopsuestia (circa 350-428), who denied that the author was speaking of the spiritual relationship between Christ and the Church. He suggested that the Song of Solomon is instructional rather than devotional. Many who hold this view today see the Song of Solomon merely as a “sex manual.”

Spiritual (or allegorical) Interpretation

This interpretation sees everything in the story as representing some spiritual meaning. The most influential Christian commentator on the book was Origen, from Alexandria (about 184-254 AD). Origen was influenced by Jewish allegorical interpretation, and his contribution to our understanding of the book has had a significant impact.

First, he agreed with the Jews about the danger of giving this book to a young or an unsanctified reader. Second, his chief concern was for theological and spiritual relevance, not historical reality. Third, Origen saw a more personal relationship than between the Church and Christ, or, as the Jews held, between Yahweh and Israel, and identified the Shulamite bride with the individual soul and its relationship to Christ. The Reformed Church has held to the allegorical method and rejected the literal approach.

Typical Interpretation

The typical interpretation maintains the historical accuracy of the book and its characters, but sees the Song of Solomon, just the same as the stories of David and Goliath or of Noah and the ark, as real stories that point to Christ.

Summary

The literal interpretation should be rejected because it does not see Christ in the text. Jesus said that the Scriptures testify of him (John 5:39). The allegorical interpretation gets to the application

of Christ much more quickly, but it can give too much scope to the individual imagination. The typical interpretation, just like the allegorical interpretation, gets to Christ, but it ensures the consistent use of the Wisdom literature and the intent of Scripture. It recognises the historical setting of the marriage relationship, keeps the preacher grounded in Scripture, and focuses on Christ.