

# TESTING TRADITION:

Three Books that don't conform to conventional expectations about what "should" be in the Bible: Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs).

In my view, each of these books is, in different ways, profoundly liberating.

## CHALLENGING ORTHODOXY: JOB & ECCLESIASTES (THE TEACHER)

According to the Prophetic/Deuteronomic tradition, G\*d rewards faithful obedience (= goodness) & punishes evil (= disobedience).

Both Job & Ecclesiastes question & ultimately reject that proposition. G\*d may, indeed, be passionate—even suffering with human beings, or at least feeling their pain—but the relationship of the Holy One to human morality is complex. G\*d does not endorse or support self-righteousness, not even Job's.

As we saw on Monday, Job is REWARDED, not for his righteousness, but for repudiating the simplistic logic that affirms G\*d's "goodness" by denying human reality. Job's friends "comfort" him by clobbering him with self-serving clichés; G\*d answers Job and repudiates his false friends, who have not spoken about him "that which was right."

Ecclesiastes, the Sage or Teacher of Wisdom, tackles the same issues from a slightly different direction, in terms of Proverbial Wisdom rather than deuterio-Prophetic moralizing.

The biblical collection of Proverbs (many of which are represented in Ecclesiastes' anthology) generally presumes that virtuous (i.e., sexually chaste), obedient, lawful, prudent, moderately self-interested behavior will be rewarded with worldly prosperity: A penny saved is a penny earned.

Ecclesiastes trashes this assumption by exploiting the paradoxes inherent in proverbial lore, which always functions contextually.

Consider the proverb above. Can you think of any contradictory proverbs?

Ecclesiastes encourages to *think* by juxtaposing contrary propositions. For example:

I saw that wisdom excels folly  
as light excels darkness.

The wise have eyes in their head,  
but fools walk in darkness.

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of  
them. (2:13-14)

Moreover,

In much wisdom is much vexation,  
and those who increase knowledge  
increase sorrow. (1:18)

Abandoning the pursuit of Wisdom, the Sage goes in search of Folly, or Pleasure. He decides that

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? . . . [Ultimately, however,] This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

(2:24, 26)

Like the Greek philosopher Socrates, the Sage concludes that he is “wise” only because he knows that nobody can be wise:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: . . . [G\*d] has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

(3:1, 11)

So, let us turn from Wisdom to Folly, in pursuit of the Pleasure Principle. Call it Eros, Desire—Passion that ultimately consumes & transforms.

## SUBVERTING ORTHODOXY: THE SONG OF SONGS

**What is the difference between  
CHALLENGING and SUBVERTING?**

The Song of Songs is unique among the Books of the Bible. At heart, it is a Celebration of human sexual desire, the paradisaal love of woman and man for each other. As Chana & Ariel Bloch have noted in the Introduction to their wonderful translation of the poem (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), the Song is “the only example of secular love poetry from ancient Israel that has survived” (29). It is older than Solomon and as new as every sunrise, like the first morning. It is a celebration of mutual desire and mutual fulfillment:

My beloved is mine and I am his;  
    he pastures his flock among the lilies. . . .  
A garden [enclosed] is my sister my bride, . . .  
A garden fountain, a well of living water.

(2:16, 3:12, 15)

On one “level” of meaning, the Song subverts the whole Wisdom tradition: Virtue is potency & passion rather than abstinence. The pleasures of the flesh are a source of transcendent JOY rather than dangerous evils to be shunned. Rather than abstain, the lovers feast, even upon each other; they drink the fruit of the vine and are merry *because LOVE is stronger than DEATH* (8:6—my translation).

In much the same way, the Song subverts the basic premise of the Prophetic/Deuteronomic tradition. Many prophets suggest that the sexuality of women is repugnant to Yahweh. Faithless Israel/Gomer is a whore. Idolatry is an expression of unrestrained female libido: Faithless Israel is

a restive young camel interlacing her tracks,  
a wild ass at home in the wilderness,  
in her heat sniffing the wind!

Who can restrain her lust? (Jeremiah 2:23-24)

In the Song, however, the natural expression of the woman’s desire, and of the man’s, is a source of deep joy rather than revulsion: “We will exult and rejoice in you” (1:4).

So, given the anti-sexual and misogynistic outlook of the godly men who determined the canon of Scripture, how did the Song of Songs ever make it in to the Bible?

The easy answer is that the Book was ALLEGORIZED. On the spiritual (rather than the earthly) level, the Song of Songs speaks, not about human sexual love, but about the love between God and God's people" (OSB 853). In Jewish tradition, the Song is read at the Passover as an expression of G\*d's compassion for the Chosen People. In Christian tradition (deriving especially from Origen and Bernard of Clairvaux), this allegorized text became a central focus for and source of language to express mystical encounters with G\*d. (Like sex, mystical experience—an unmediated, spiritual encounter with the Holy One—has always been problematic for orthodoxy.)

Now on the face of it, this way of reading the Song may seem simply absurd. We know what it's *really* about, and it's certainly not about G\*d. But that either/or way of thinking, however deeply ingrained in many of us, needs to be resisted. Sexual desire—real passion, at least, rather than casual or “recreational” sex— is, or can be, profoundly transforming and transcendent. That's why we use the word ECSTASY to describe it. And perhaps such ecstasy is (or can be) a path to the Love of G\*d—if we imagine that sexual love and the love for/of G\*d are not opposites but rather different dimensions of the same profound desire for creative life. It is surely not an accident that most mystics, especially female mystics, seem to encounter G\*d in a sexual way, as a lover who fills them with deep spiritual & even physical pleasure.