

Transcript of “Compassion”

A lecture delivered by Sarah Ruden at Pendle Hill, February 18, 2019,
as part of a three-part series of lectures, “Three Great Themes of the Bible”

I hope you’ll pardon me if I start toward the theme of compassion from way out yonder. I’m going to get where I’m going, I promise.

The Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, is one of the strangest and at the same time most beautiful books of the Bible. The first of these traditional titles is the more authoritative one. It’s an English translation of the Hebrew title in the standard original text. The title suggests phrases like “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lord,” indicating the highest, best, and most powerful. The “Song of Songs” would thus be the most beautiful, moving, powerful song. But its very inclusion in scripture has troubled a lot of people. It’s a lushly, wildly erotic poem; it’s no good trying to tame it down and claim that it’s about faithful love within a conventional marriage, or theological symbolism, because it plainly depicts a whole range of the almost out-of-body passions that go with unsupervised courtship and sex. The speakers are very young, and very deluded: they think they’re going to live forever, feeling just like this. Why is this a religious book?

I have a partial answer through my own personal experience of the Hebrew text. Before I studied Hebrew, I had always liked the Book in English, but in a rather pretentious, “literary” way, the way I like the English Metaphysical poets. But no, the

text of the Song of Songs had a solid beauty I could *learn* from. I remember mooning over the CDs that went with my teacher Vicky Hoffer's own textbook Biblical Hebrew.¹ A few clauses of the Song of Songs (from Verses 2:16 and 3:6) are set to music (by Steven Sher, arrangement and vocals by Dorothy Goldberg) on one of the CDs....

The English of the NRSV is

2:16 My beloved is mine, and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies.

3:6 What is that coming up from the wilderness..., perfumed with myrrh and frankincense?

The song goes:

Strong's	Hebrew	English	Morphology
1730 [e]	דּוֹו־דִּי dō-w-dî	My beloved [is]	N-msc 1cs
	לִי lî	mine	Prep 1cs
589 [e]	וָאֲנִי wa-'ă-nî	and I [am]	Conj-w Pro-1cs

¹ *Biblical Hebrew: Text and Workbook* (second edition), by Bonnie Pedrotti Kittel, Victoria Hoffer, and Rebecca Wright, fully revised by Victoria Hoffer, Yale Press, 2005.

	לוֹ lōw,	his	Prep 3ms
7462 [e]	הִרְעָה hā-rō-‘eh	He feeds [his flock]	Art V-Qal-Prtcpl-ms
7799 [e]	בְּשׂוֹשַׁנִּים: baš-šō-wō-šan-nîm.	among the lilies	Prep-b, Art N-cp

Strong's	Hebrew	English	Morphology
4310 [e]	מִי mî	Who [is]	Interrog
2063 [e]	זֹאת zōt,	this	Pro-fs
5927 [e]	עֹלָה ‘ō-lāh	coming	V-Qal-Prtcpl-fs
4480 [e]	מִן min-	out	Prep
4057 [e]	הַמִּדְבָּר ham-mid-bār,	of the wilderness	Art N-ms
8490 [e]	כְּתִמָּרוֹת kə-tî-mă-rō-wt	Like pillars	Prep-k N-fpc
6227 [e]	עָשָׁן ‘ā-šān;	of smoke	N-ms
6999 [e]	מְקֻטְרֵת mə-qut-te-ret	Perfumed	V-Pual-Prtcpl-fsc

4753 [e]	מֹר mō-wr	with myrrh	N-ms
3828 [e]	וּלְבוֹנָה ū-lə-bō-w-nāh	and frankincense	Conj-w N-fs

When I performed the song for my own ear, everything came together: the inherent interest of sex and romance; the beauty of the music and words; and essentially, the grammar: here was the article, here was the affix, etc. They were working, and showing me how to work to share the beauty of the original Bible with those who couldn't see or hear it otherwise. Much later, I would find myself talking to audiences around the country about what the Bible meant, and the steep challenges of its main message. That's, according to the Quaker motto displayed in my office, "LOVE THY NEIGHBOR (NO EXCEPTIONS)."

I had been seduced, sucked in, in the age-old way, through sensuality to commitment. I'd been educated, succumbing to the temptation of sweets, like the children the Roman poet Horace (*Satires* 1.1.24) cites as an analogy to his own entertainment of his readers: teachers give the kids pastries to induce them to learn their ABCs, he writes [*Quamquam ridentem dicere verum quid vetat? ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi doctores, elementa velint ut discere prima.* (Literal translation)] that's the reason he makes his own poems are suave and witty: so that he can draw

otherwise unwilling people into the moral lessons. There you have it, in less than three lines, the essence of how ancient culture used words: they were tasty, so that people would eat them and take their intellectual medicine.

As for me, two thousand years later, pretty soon the Hebrew Bible could do whatever it wanted with me. I'm a vigorous jaw grinder, which means that I have to have my teeth comprehensively rebuilt every few years. I had my mother's small-town dentist rebuild them once during the years I was learning Hebrew at Yale, because he was cheaper (though just as good as any New York or New Haven dentist). While I reclined in the chair for a whole day, immobilized for two hours at a stretch, my jaw propped open and drills busy in there, my earphones were funneling into my brain sung Hebrew lessons from Vicky Hoffer's CDs, and I was weirdly relaxed, hardly noticing a physical intrusion that many people can hardly stand. The dentist wanted to know why, and I told him. He was a Sunday School teacher himself, and his face lit up when he put on the earphones. He did not want to give them back.

Now, about the Song of Songs on an academic level: its remote history is fascinating and controversial; I find persuasive the theory that a pagan element has butted into the scripture of monotheism here, which we see in many other places in both Jewish and early Christian writings. In this case, it seems likely that we're seeing traces of an old fertility rite, celebrating the union of a god and goddess, and entailing young people's songs and dances out in the fields at planting or harvest time. Also, I don't

see how we can get around seeing some influence of the secular poetry of courtly love in the Egyptian style, for example—the comparison of the beloved to fruit, wildlife, toiletries, and accessories in this biblical Book is telling. I also recognize elements of Greek pastoral poetry, which flourished in one of the same places Judaism was flourishing during the historical period, Alexandria—the Song of Songs may be contemporary with the great Alexandrian poet Theocritus, in the third century B.C. But it has elements familiar from much older Greek choral poetry too.

But I don't think that any of this is particularly troubling, or even essential to what the poem *does*, which is teach how to belong in society. I feel in my bones, as a poet, that the composers and compilers of authorized scripture texts simply couldn't stand, and couldn't afford, to throw away gorgeous, seductive material, no matter how distracting it might be on the surface, when their teaching task was so challenging. It was in fact more challenging than any teaching task in the history of the world, a lesson pointing toward selfless love, like the love an all-powerful God shows toward us.

Just compare the way sex can help lead us through the moral life cycle. We start out our fertile years responding to the mere enticements of a relationship: somebody who is cute and funny, someone with whom we can go enjoyable places and do enjoyable things, someone who can make our body feel good—and we're drawn into responsibilities and commitments we'd never contemplate on their own—not that it's a trick; if we're maturing at the right rate, we truly want responsibilities and

commitments, even sacrifices; we love them in themselves; we love ourselves for being equal to them.

This is how the Bible, as a text, helps teach humankind, against all of our animal instincts, the lesson of compassion, even to strangers, even to people we don't like. The Bible doesn't just *tell* us to be compassionate; that wouldn't make any impression, any more than it would make an impression on a two-year-old if you told her to do the family taxes. The Bible works on us over time, drawing us in through its beauty, drama, and wit, and exercising our minds through its compelling arguments. The reason I'm so concerned with improving Bible translation is that the original languages naturally work more powerfully to carry out their seduction and, in the end, to make their case.

In inculcating compassion, that very hardest of lessons, the Bible captures the attention, then the imagination, and then the intellect. I'd like to show you by example the different levels, up through which the Bible draws us, so that we may end up accepting that weird lesson on which our civilization is built: if another person is in pain, that pain somehow belongs to all the others, so that any power they have carries some responsibility to know that pain and do something about it.

First of all, the Bible draws us in through sound- and wordplay. In talking to audiences of with all kinds of backgrounds, I find it a big challenge to convince them that the Bible in its original languages has a lot in common with children's songs,

such as the Passover song “Just One Kid” (a cousin of *Echad Mi Yodea*, “I know one thing”) or the Noah Song that’s sung in Sunday Schools (sing a few lines). But I now have extremely authoritative support in my opinion, because Robert Alter just has brought out his complete translation of the Hebrew Bible, and he emphasizes sound- and wordplay – and he has a long and lofty career as a scholar and literary critic to back him up.

Where I quibble with him is, first of all, in opining that he doesn’t go far enough. Because he himself is an accomplished modern writer, he emphasizes mere literary performance, such as you’d find in Shakespeare or James Joyce – it’s mainly about literary people admiring other literary people, and young people being trained to admire the right things; that is, it’s about aesthetics. I think that the aesthetics, while they’re of course important, drive something a lot more important, which is attachment. Yes, rhyme or a pun is going to help you remember something, so it’s got an obvious role in education. But in the right context, it attaches you to other people, to a tradition, to a whole past and future. Think about how, when you’re eight or nine, or eleven or twelve, and making lasting friendships, and your new friend, for example, shares a candy bar with you, or teaches you a dance step: that physical experience draws you in and can make you permanently sympathetic toward that person. Think of the emotion with which we remember Passover songs or Christmas carols, and the way they become about the people around us, though the meaning of the words may in itself be rather silly or even nonsensical.

And here's where I quibble again with Robert Alter. It isn't enough to explain the wordplay in footnotes to an English translation; he often does only that, throwing up his hands and calling jingles untranslatable. Being a competitive, and in fact obnoxious scholar, my comparative ignorance doesn't hold me back. Here's how I'd render lines from the prophet Zephaniah (2:4) that have a jingle Alter declares untranslatable (*The Art of Bible Translation*²):

For Gaza shall be abandoned land, and Ashkelon a town thrown
down;
Ashdod at noonday a displaced place, and Ekron torn entirely
from the ground.

The jingle doesn't have any special intellectual depth to us—I don't think that it even did to its original audience; I think it's mainly a jingle. Neither does a baby's experience of being rhythmically rocked by its mother and sung to about the purchase of mocking birds and looking glasses and other consumer goods without instructions or warranties have any striking intellectual content; but the physical experience is an excellent basis for being open to other people, and for their welfare and their suffering to eventually become real to us.

² Pp. 100-101. "Here are two lines of double word play from Zephaniah (2:4) that altogether resist transference to English. The literal sense of the line is 'For Gaza shall be abandoned / and Ashkelon a desolation. // Ashdod at noon shall be banished / and Ekron be uprooted.' The dire fate of these Philistine cities is clear enough in English, but what is not visible is how this prophecy is reinforced by a kind of fusion of words. The Hebrew for 'Gaza shall be abandoned' is 'azah 'azuvah and for 'Ekron be uprooted' is 'eqron te'aqer.... It is hard to imagine how this could possibly be conveyed in English."

One level up from this in the Bible's training of us in compassion is the use of metaphor. The most powerful metaphors declare that one sentient being *is* another. That's kind of what supreme love is between human beings: I see somebody else's suffering, even a stranger's or an enemy's, and it's as if it's happening to me. I think many of us had impulses like this during the recent government shut-down: it was as if someone had taken away *our* salary, *our* children's food, the means to pay *our* heating bill. Under this sort of stress, our attitude toward the IRS or people in MAGA hats or whoever we weren't in the habit of liking became irrelevant. One morning, after listening to the news, I just snapped. I had recently bought, through more economical sources, in NW PA, than I can find near my home in Connecticut, a year's worth of toiletries and a big load of mixed nuts and other imperishable food. I contacted the Connecticut Food Bank and went to my cupboards and started throwing things into boxes.

I could feel this unnatural, inconvenient way in part because the Bible had led me into it with metaphors assuring me that it was a normal way to feel, and that I was not going crazy. I was used to thinking that God is the eagle (e.g., Exodus 19:4) who picks you up out of danger, and flaps powerful wings and takes you to the safety of the sky. And if we reason it out, at a deeper level one seemingly incompatible thing more or less *is* another: nature contains providence, the tangible contains the unseen, mere hope contains remedies for despair—everything is connected. Jesus says to his mother and to a disciple (John 19:26-27) at the crucifixion, “Woman, this

is your mother” and “Here is your mother.” On person effectively becomes another through compassion. This is at the same time a tremendous imaginative leap *and* one that children are open to making. If a child is lonely, she might invent a second self, a friend. She can understand a parent saying, “Hey, leave that cat alone! You’re as big as a house to that cat.”

The magic show is expanded through narrative. Robert Alter has had a lot to say over the years about the powerful rhythms of Hebrew prose and the need to render them authentically in English—and he’s right, though I think his explanation is not. He stresses a rhythm called parataxis, which means that clauses are lined up in roughly equal measure and emphasis, as in “This happened, and then that happened, and then this other thing happened.” He compares this to Molly Bloom’s soliloquy at the end of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. I think it’s far more similar to ghost stories told around the campfire—but what both kinds of narrative, and many others, have in common is that the story is self-sufficient. It doesn’t add “because” or “although,” or even “when”; such explanatory subordination is rare in Hebrew and is often added needlessly in standard English translations. The lesson is actually meant to be bound up in the drama, as in the best kind of children’s stories, those that don’t preach but instead show a set of events that may be supernatural but are somehow deeply logical nevertheless, so that the mind leaps imaginatively: what if I were Miss Bianca, the aristocratic little mouse with the pearls, whose heart goes out to the innocent prisoner lying, otherwise forgotten, in rags in a dungeon, or the enslaved little orphan girl? What if I were the prisoner myself, or the orphan?”

The Bible is in fact energetic in getting us into the minds of such helpless people, and prodding to convince us that history is on our side if we help them. The first example that comes to my mind is the Joseph story in Genesis. Joseph barely escapes with his life from his jealous brothers, who sell him into slavery. After he has risen perilously and laboriously through the Egyptian regime and been falsely imprisoned and then landed on his feet as Pharaoh's right hand man; and after a famine has placed his starving family right where he wants them, in his complete power, a surprising but dramatically cogent ending ensues. Joseph, though trickery worthy of Game of Thrones, now has available as a hostage his family's youngest son Benjamin, who has replaced him as the favorite son, the apparent only son of the favorite wife. But instead of the Game of Thrones-type ending, with Benjamin, say, skinned alive in front of the criminal brothers and his tanned hide made into a colorful cloak and sent back to the self-pitying, passive father Jacob, we get this scene (and I use Alter's translation of Genesis 43:26-31):

And Joseph came into the house, and they brought him the tribute that was in their hand, into the house, and they bowed down to him to the ground. And he asked how they were, and he said, "Is all well with your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" And they said, "All is well with your servant, our father. He is still alive." And they did obeisance and bowed down. And he raised his eyes and saw Benjamin his brother, his mother's son, and he said, "Is this your youngest

brother of whom you spoke to me?” And he said, “God be gracious to you, my son.” And Joseph hurried out, for his feelings for his brother overwhelmed him and he wanted to weep, and he went into the chamber and wept there.

In the Book of Matthew (25:21-46), we have another story with a shallowly counterintuitive but deeply logical ending; this story dramatizes traditional extended metaphors, or conceits, in a rather shattering manner. The imagery of God as a herder is pushed clear into the Day of Judgment to stress the existential importance of compassion. Here’s (just for a change) the New International Version of the parable in English:

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and

you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison
and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you
hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to
drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing
clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and
go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of
the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Another step up in maturity in what the Bible offers for teaching is rhetoric, the art and science of persuasion that was at the center of ancient cultures. At times I've described biblical rhetoric in classical terms, with terms like "antimetabole" (the repetition of a phrase in reverse order). Both the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible do a lot of this kind of thing, which sometimes looks mainly decorative. But the genius of ancient rhetoric is to marry form and function. The Hebrew Bible makes pretty extensive use of analogy, for example. It commands us to treat people under our power mercifully, "because you were slaves in Egypt." This is a repeated stricture in Deuteronomy (e.g., 5:15), which is, so to speak, the constitutional Book of the Bible, with a lot about limitation of powers for the common good.

Analogies are intellectually very fertile. People are constantly objecting to them because they are too loose. But the question of how loose they are invites closer engagement with all their various terms. In this case, the sufferings and needs and aspirations of Hebrew slaves have little to do with the specific requirements of hospitality, tolerance, rule of law, and charity that the Hebrew Bible enjoins, but the actual gap is nicely suggestive. If we can't make imaginative leaps of compassion, we can't meet new situations, or even get away from our own immediate interests. And we can't inculcate in our children, or remember for ourselves, how connected things really are.

Just as a final illustration of the role of rhetoric in the teaching of compassion, I want to offer my own translation of a passage in Mark (Ch. 7:24-29):

24 From there [Jesus] set off and went out into the district of Tyre.³

He entered a house because he didn't want anyone to know of his arrival, but he wasn't successful in escaping notice. **25** On the contrary, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard about him right away, and came and groveled at his feet.

26 But the woman was part of the Greek world, and Syrophenician

³ Tyre was on the coast, a cosmopolitan port city to the west of the rustic region of Galilee. The dominant ethnic group there were the Phoenicians, whose trading and seafaring culture as well as their pagan religion put them sharply at odds with the Jews.

by ethnicity.⁴ She asked him to throw the minor demon⁵ out of her daughter. **27** And he said to her, “First allow the children to eat their fill, as it’s not fitting to take a loaf of bread from the children and toss it to the little doggies.” **28** But she answered back, telling him, “Master, even the little doggies under the table eat some of the children’s scraps!”⁶ **29** And he said to her, “What you say prompts *me*

⁴ Literally, the woman is called “Greek,” but this only labels her as pagan and a more typical inhabitant of the formerly Greek, now Roman imperial world than the Jews were. Additionally, she is called “Syrophoenician,” meaning that she was in the Syrian and Phoenician branch of the Canaanite Semitic peoples. For an observant Jew such as Jesus, the encounter holds multiple threats of pollution: from religion, ethnicity, gender, and immediate circumstance (as she invades the house where he is a guest).

⁵ This is an ordinary word for “demon,” one of the lesser evil spirits responsible for possession of individuals; I’ve specified “minor” because this is another diminutive (following “little daughter”), *daimonion*, when it could have been simply *daimon*; literally, the little girl has a little demon possessing her: the parallel is hardly strained, but it’s interesting in light of the usage described in the next footnote.

⁶ In the entire Greek Bible, only this passage and its mirror in Matthew (15:21-28) use this diminutive (*kunarion*) of the word for “dog,” a rare expression for “[cute] little dog”—not “puppy” (*kunidion*). This suggests something other than—and much more gentle than—the traditional imagery of gentiles as degraded and outside the Jewish law and covenant, given that dogs were generally considered dirty and

to say: go on, get out of here, because the lesser demon had gone out of your daughter.” **30** Then she went back to her house and found her little child⁷ sprawled onto the bed,⁸ the minor demon having gone out of her.

The main change that I’ve made here is simply to translate the diminutives as such, with special attention to a diminutive that appears nowhere else in scripture, either in the Greek Christian scriptures (except in another version of this same story in the Book of Matthew) or the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was widely used in antiquity, the Septuagint: *kunarion*, little doggie, a word that is at home in pagan uncivilized and were excluded from the home, much more from the table that symbolized God’s providential bounty. Interestingly, in pagan works the dog impinging on the table (especially when he is either indulged or thieving) is a comic motif associated with feasting.

⁷ Here’s yet another diminutive, “little child.” Like *daimonion* (and unlike *kunarion*), it’s hardly an unusual diminutive, but commentators point out that it’s a wholly different word than the “children” (*tekna*) of Verse 27; in that case, the word is linked to the idea of birth, which suits the Jewish children, as born into the covenant.

⁸ Notice the repetition of the word for throwing (though, admittedly, it was a common one): the girl needs the demon “thrown out” of her (Verse 26), and in the violence of the exorcism she has now been literally “thrown” on the bed, unconscious. Another verb for throwing is used in Verse 27 for carelessly throwing good food to dogs.

comedy. So why is it used here? I think it's because it teaches a lesson. Jesus and the pagan woman actually can't be friends or collaborators. They have wildly different cultures and visions of the world, and hers are headed into the oblivion of history. But translating this passage accurately, as a witty little debate that the woman wins, helps bring out the bigger lesson. We can encounter each other respectfully and compassionately simply as human beings, in spite of our differences. It's hard, it's partial, it's temporary. But to achieve it at all is a miracle. In this we're helped by the Bible's miraculous power to communicate.