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COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

Song of Solomon

by Matthew Henry

To the Students of the Words, Works and Ways of God:

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AN EXPOSITION, WITH PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS,

OF THE

SONG OF SOLOMON

All scripture, we are sure, is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for the support and advancement of the interests of his kingdom among men, and it is never the less so for there being found in it some things *dark and hard to be understood, which those that are unlearned and unstable wrest to their own destruction*. In our belief both of the divine extraction and of the spiritual exposition of this book we are confirmed by the ancient, constant, and concurring testimony both of the church of the Jews, to whom were *committed the oracles of God*, and who never made any doubt of the authority of this book, and of the Christian church, which happily succeeds them in that trust and honour.

I. It must be confessed, on the one hand, that if he who barely reads this book be asked, as the eunuch was *Understandest thou what thou readest?* he will have more reason than he had to say, *How can I, except some man shall guide me?* The books of scripture-history and prophecy are very much like one another, but this *Song of Solomon's* is very much unlike the songs of his father David; here is not the name of God in it; it is never quoted in the New Testament; we find not in it any expressions of natural religion or pious devotion, no, nor is it introduced by vision, or any of the marks of immediate revelation. It seems as hard as any part of scripture to be made a *savour of life unto life*, nay, and to those who come to the reading of it with carnal minds and corrupt affections, it is in danger of being made a *savour of death unto death*; it is a flower out of which they extract poison; and therefore the Jewish doctors advised their young people not to read it till they were thirty years old, lest by the abuse of that which is most pure and sacred (*horrendum dictu — horrible to say!*) the flames of lust should be kindled with fire from heaven, which is intended for the altar only. But,

II. It must be confessed, on the other hand, that with the help of the many faithful guides we have for the understanding of this book it appears to be

a very bright and powerful ray of heavenly light, admirable fitted to excite pious and devout affections in holy souls, to draw out their desires towards God, to increase their delight in him, and improve their acquaintance and communion with him. It is an allegory, the letter of which kills those who rest in that and look no further, but the spirit of which gives life, ^{<406>}2 Corinthians 3:6; ^{<406>}John 6:63. It is a parable, which makes divine things more difficult to those who do not love them, but more plain and pleasant to those who do, ^{<404>}Matthew 13:14, 16. Experienced Christians here find a counterpart of their experiences, and to them it is intelligible, while *those* neither understand it nor relish it who have no part nor lot in the matter. It is a son, an *Epithalamium*, or nuptial song, wherein, by the expressions of love between a bridegroom and his bride, are set forth and illustrated the mutual affections that pass between God and a distinguished remnant of mankind. It is a pastoral; the bride and bridegroom, for the more lively representation of humility and innocence, are brought in as a shepherd and his shepherdess. Now,

1. This song might easily be taken in a spiritual sense by the Jewish church, for whose use it was first composed, and was so taken, as appears by the Chaldee-Paraphrase and the most ancient Jewish expositors. God betrothed the people of Israel to himself; he entered into covenant with them, and it was a marriage-covenant. He had given abundant proofs of his love to them, and required of them that they should love him with all their heart and soul. Idolatry was often spoken of as spiritual adultery, and doting upon idols, to prevent which this song was penned, representing the complacency which God took in Israel and which Israel ought to take in God, and encouraging them to continue faithful to him, though he might seem sometimes to withdraw and hide himself from them, and to wait for the further manifestation of himself in the promised Messiah.

2. It may more easily be taken in a spiritual sense by the Christian church, because the condescensions and communications of divine love appear more rich and free under the gospel than they did under the law, and the communion between heaven and earth more familiar. God sometimes spoke of himself as the husband of the Jewish church (^{<265>}Isaiah 64:5, ^{<306>}Hosea 2:16, 19), and rejoiced in it as his bride, ^{<234>}Isaiah 62:4, 5. But more frequently is Christ represented as the bridegroom of his church (^{<421>}Matthew 25:1; ^{<404>}Romans 7:4; ^{<412>}2 Corinthians 11:2; ^{<402>}Ephesians 5:32), and the church as the bride, the Lamb's wife, ^{<607>}Revelation 19:7; 21:2, 9. Pursuant to this metaphor Christ and the church in general, Christ

and particular believers, are here discoursing with abundance of mutual esteem and endearment. The best key to this book is the 45th Psalm, which we find applied to Christ in the New Testament, and therefore this ought to be so too. It requires some pains to find out what may, probably, be the meaning of the Holy Spirit in the several parts of this book; as David's songs are many of them level to the capacity of the meanest, and there are shallows in them learned, and there are depths in it in which an elephant may swim. But, when the meaning is found out, it will be of admirable use to excite pious and devout affections in us; and the same truths which are plainly laid down in other scriptures when they are extracted out of this come to the soul with a more pleasing power. When we apply ourselves to the study of this book we must not only, with Moses and Joshua, *put off our shoe from off our foot*, and even forget that we have bodies, because *the place where we stand is holy ground*, but we must, with John, *come up hither*, must spread our wings, take a noble flight, and soar upwards, till by faith and holy love we *enter into the holiest*, for *this is no other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven*.