

Commentary on the Song of Songs^{*}

St Bernard of Clairvaux

SERMON I ON THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

The instructions that I address to you, my brothers, will differ from those I should deliver to people in the world, at least the manner will be different. The preacher who desires to follow St Paul's method of teaching will give them milk to drink rather than solid food, and will serve a more nourishing diet to those who are spiritually enlightened: "We teach," he said, "not in the way philosophy is taught, but in

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the way that the Spirit teaches us: we teach spiritual things spiritually.” And again: “We have a wisdom to offer those who have reached maturity,” in whose company, I feel assured, you are to be found, unless in vain have you prolonged your study of divine teaching, mortified your senses, and meditated day and night on God’s law. Be ready then to feed on bread rather than milk. Solomon has bread to give that is splendid and delicious, the bread of that book called “The Song of Songs.” Let us bring it forth then if you please, and break it.

2. Now, unless I am mistaken, by the grace of God you have understood quite well from the book of Ecclesiastes how to recognize and have done with the false promise of this world. And then the book of Proverbs — has not your life and your conduct been sufficiently amended and enlightened by the doctrine it inculcates ? These are two loaves of which it has been your pleasure to taste, loaves you have welcomed as coming from the cupboard of a friend. Now approach for this third loaf that, if possible, you may always recognize what is best. Since there

are two evils that comprise the only, or at least the main, enemies of the soul: a misguided love of the world and an excessive love of self, the two books previously mentioned can provide an antidote to each of these infections. One uproots pernicious habits of mind and body with the hoe of self-control. The other, by the use of enlightened reason, quickly perceives a delusive tinge in all that the world holds glorious, truly distinguishing between it and deeper truth. Moreover, it causes the fear of God and the observance of his commandments to be preferred to all human pursuits and worldly desires. And rightly so, for the former is the beginning of wisdom, the latter its culmination, for there is no true and consummate wisdom other than the avoidance of evil and the doing of good, no one can successfully shun evil without the fear of God, and no work is good without the observance of the commandments.

3. Taking it then these two evils have been warded off by the reading of choice books, we may suitably proceed with this holy and contemplative discourse which, as the fruit of the other two, may be delivered

only to well prepared ears and minds. Before the flesh has been tamed and the spirit set free by zeal for truth, before the world's glamour and entanglements have been firmly repudiated, it is a rash enterprise on any man's part to presume to study spiritual doctrines. Just as a light is flashed in vain on closed or sightless eyes, so "an unspiritual person cannot accept anything of the Spirit of God." For "the Holy Spirit of instruction shuns what is false," and that is what the life of the intemperate man is. Nor will he ever have a part with the pretensions of the world, since he is the Spirit of Truth. How can there be harmony between the wisdom that comes down from above and the wisdom of the world, which is foolishness to God, or the wisdom of the flesh which is at enmity with God? I am sure that the friend who comes to us on his travels will have no reason to murmur against us after he has shared in this third loaf.

4. But who is going to divide this loaf? The Master of the house is present, it is the Lord you must see in the breaking of the bread. For who else could more fittingly do it ? It is a task that I would not dare

to arrogate to myself. So look upon me as one from whom you look for nothing. For I myself am one of the seekers, one who begs along with you for the food of my soul, the nourishment of my spirit. Poor and needy, I knock at that door of his which, “when he opens, nobody can close,” that I may find light on the profound mystery to which this discourse leads. Patiently all creatures look to you, O Lord. “Little children go begging for bread; no one spares a scrap for them;” they await it from your merciful love. O God most kind, break your bread for this hungry flock, through my hands indeed if it should please you, but with an efficacy that is all your own.

5. Tell us, I beg you, by whom, about whom and to whom it is said: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.” How shall I explain so abrupt a beginning, this sudden irruption as from a speech in mid-course? For the words spring upon us as if indicating one speaker to whom another is replying as she demands a kiss— whoever she may be. But if she asks for or demands a kiss from somebody, why does she distinctly and expressly say with the

mouth, and even with his own mouth, as if lovers should kiss by means other than the mouth, or with mouths other than their own ? But yet she does not say: “Let him kiss me with his mouth”; what she says is still more intimate: “with the kiss of his mouth.” How delightful a ploy of speech this, prompted into life by the kiss, with Scripture’s own engaging countenance inspiring the reader and enticing him on, that he may find pleasure even in the laborious pursuit of what lies hidden, with a fascinating theme to sweeten the fatigue of research. Surely this mode of beginning that is not a beginning, this novelty of diction in a book so old, cannot but increase the reader’s attention. It must follow too that this work was composed, not by any human skill but by the artistry of the Spirit, difficult to understand indeed but yet enticing one to investigate.

6. So now what shall we do? Shall we by-pass the title? No, not even one iota may be omitted, since we are commanded to gather up the tiniest fragments lest they be lost. The title runs: “The beginning of Solomon’s Song of Songs.” First of all take note of

the appropriateness of the name “Peaceful,” that is, Solomon, at the head of a book which opens with the token of peace, with a kiss. Take note too that by this kind of opening only men of peaceful minds, men who can achieve mastery over the turmoil of the passions and the distracting burden of daily chores, are invited to the study of this book.

7. Again, the title is not simply the word “Song,” but “Song of Songs,” a detail not without significance. For though I have read many songs in the Scriptures, I cannot recall any that bear such a name. Israel chanted a song to Yahweh celebrating his escape from the sword and the tyranny of Pharaoh, and the twofold good fortune that simultaneously liberated and avenged him in the Red Sea. Yet even though chanted, this has not been called a “Song of Songs”; Scripture, if my memory serves me right, introduces it with the words: “Israel sang this song in honor of Yahweh.” Song poured from the lips of Deborah, of Judith, of the mother of Samuel, of several of the prophets, yet none of these songs is styled a “Song of Songs.” You will find that all of them, as

far as I can see, were inspired to song because of favors to themselves or to their people, songs for a victory won, for an escape from danger or the gaining of a boon long sought. They would not be found ungrateful for the divine beneficence, so all sang for reasons proper to each, in accord with the Psalmist's words: "He gives thanks to you, O God, for blessing him." But King Solomon himself, unique as he was in wisdom, renowned above all men, abounding in wealth, secure in his peace, stood in no need of any particular benefit that would have inspired him to sing those songs. Nor does Scripture in any place attribute such a motive to him.

8. We must conclude then it was a special divine impulse that inspired these songs of his that now celebrate the praises of Christ and his Church, the gift of holy love, the sacrament of endless union with God. Here too are expressed the mounting desires of the soul, its marriage song, an exultation of spirit poured forth in figurative language pregnant with delight. It is no wonder that like Moses he put a veil on his face, equally resplendent as it must have

been in this encounter, because in those days few if any could sustain the bright vision of God's glory. Accordingly, because of its excellence, I consider this nuptial song to be well deserving of the title that so remarkably designates it, the Song of Songs, just as he in whose honor it is sung is uniquely proclaimed King of kings and Lord of lords.

9. Furthermore if you look back on your own experience, is it not in that victory by which your faith overcomes the world, in "your exit from the horrible pit and out of the slough of the marsh," that you yourselves sing a new song to the Lord for all the marvels he has performed? Again, when he purposed to "settle your feet on a rock and to direct your steps," then too, I feel certain, a new song was sounding on your lips, a song to our God for his gracious renewal of your life. When you repented he not only forgave your sins but even promised rewards, so that rejoicing in the hope of benefits to come, you sing of the Lord's ways: how great is the glory of the Lord! And when, as happens, texts of Scripture hitherto dark and impenetrable at

last become bright with meaning for you, then, in gratitude for this nurturing bread of heaven you must charm the ears of God with a voice of exultation and praise, a festal song. In the daily trials and combats arising from the flesh, the world and the devil, that are never wanting to those who live devout lives in Christ, you learn by what you experience that man's life on earth is a ceaseless warfare, and are impelled to repeat your songs day after day for every victory won. As often as temptation is overcome, an immoral habit brought under control, an impending danger shunned, the trap of the seducer detected, when a passion long indulged is finally and perfectly allayed, or a virtue persistently desired and repeatedly sought is ultimately obtained by God's gift; so often, in the words of the prophet, let thanksgiving and joy resound. For every benefit conferred, God is to be praised in his gifts. Otherwise when the time of judgment comes, that man will be punished as an ingrate who cannot say to God: "Your statutes were my song in the land of exile."

10. Again I think that your own experience reveals

to you the meaning of those psalms, which are called not Songs of Songs but Songs of the Steps, in that each one, at whatever stage of growth he be, in accord with the upward movements of his heart may choose one of these songs to praise and give glory to him who empowers you to advance. I don't know how else these words could be true: "There are shouts of joy and victory in the tents of the just." And still more that beautiful and salutary exhortation of the Apostle: "With psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles, singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts."

II. But there is that other song which, by its unique dignity and sweetness, excels all those I have mentioned and any others there might be; hence by every right do I acclaim it as the Song of Songs. It stands at a point where all the others culminate. Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this, and only personal experience can unfold its meaning. Let those who are versed in the mystery revel in it; let all others burn with desire rather to attain to this experience than merely to learn about it. For it is not

a melody that resounds abroad but the very music of the heart, not a trilling on the lips but an inward pulsing of delight, a harmony not of voices but of wills. It is a tune you will not hear in the streets, these notes do not sound where crowds assemble; only the singer hears it and the one to whom he sings — the lover and the beloved. It is preeminently a marriage song telling of chaste souls in loving embrace, of their wills in sweet concord, of the mutual exchange of the heart's affections.

12. The novices, the immature, those but recently converted from a worldly life, do not normally sing this song or hear it sung. Only the mind disciplined by persevering study, only the man whose efforts have borne fruit under God's inspiration, the man whose years, as it were, make him ripe for marriage years measured out not in time but in merits — only he is truly prepared for nuptial union with the divine partner, a union we shall describe more fully in due course. But the hour has come when both our rule and the poverty of our state demand that we go out to work. Tomorrow, with God's help, we shall continue

to speak about the kiss, because today's discourse on the title sets us free to resume where we had begun.

SERMON 2

VARIOUS MEANINGS OF THE KISS

During my frequent ponderings on the burning desire with which the patriarchs longed for the incarnation of Christ, I am stung with sorrow and shame. Even now I can scarcely restrain my tears, so filled with shame am I by the lukewarmness, the frigid unconcern of these miserable times. For which of us does the consummation of that event fill with as much joy as the mere promise of it inflamed the desires of the holy men of pre-Christian times? Very soon now there will be great rejoicing as we celebrate the feast of Christ's birth. But how I wish it were inspired by his birth! All the more therefore do I pray that the intense longing of those men of old, their heartfelt expectation, may be enkindled in me by these words: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." Many an upright man in those far off times sensed within himself how profuse the graciousness

that would be poured upon those lips. And intense desire springing from that perception impelled him to utter: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," hoping with every fiber of his being that he might not be deprived of a share in a pleasure so great.

2. The conscientious man of those days might repeat to himself: "Of what use to me the wordy effusions of the prophets? Rather let him who is the most handsome of the sons of men, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. No longer am I satisfied to listen to Moses, for he is a slow speaker and not able to speak well. Isaiah is a man of unclean lips, Jeremiah does not know how to speak, he is a child; not one of the prophets makes an impact on me with his words. But he, the one whom they proclaim, let him speak to me, "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." I have no desire that he should approach me in their person, or address me with their words, for they are "a watery darkness, a dense cloud;" rather in his own person "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth;" let him whose presence

is full of love, from whom exquisite doctrines flow in streams, let him become “a spring inside me, welling up to eternal life.” Shall I not receive a richer infusion of grace from him whom the Father has anointed with the oil of gladness above all his rivals, provided that he will bestow on me the kiss of his mouth? For his living, active word is to me a kiss, not indeed an adhering of the lips that can sometimes belie a union of hearts, but an unreserved infusion of joys, a revealing of mysteries, a marvelous and indistinguishable mingling of the divine light with the enlightened mind, which, joined in truth to God, is one spirit with him. With good reason then I avoid trucking with visions and dreams; I want no part with parables and figures of speech; even the very beauty of the angels can only leave me wearied. For my Jesus utterly surpasses these in his majesty and splendor. Therefore I ask of him what I ask of neither man nor angel: that he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. Note how I do not presume that it is with his mouth I shall be kissed, for that constitutes the unique felicity and singular privilege of the human

nature he assumed. No, in the consciousness of my lowliness I ask to be kissed with the kiss of his mouth, an experience shared by all who are in a position to say: “Indeed from his fullness we have, all of us, received.”

3. I must ask you to try to give your whole attention here. The mouth that kisses signifies the Word who assumes human nature; the nature assumed receives the kiss; the kiss however, that takes its being both from the giver and the receiver, is a person that is formed by both, none other than “the one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus.” It is for this reason that none of the saints dared say: “let him kiss me with his mouth,” but rather, “with the kiss of his mouth.” In this way they paid tribute to that prerogative of Christ, on whom uniquely and in one sole instance the mouth of the word was pressed, that moment when the fullness of the divinity yielded itself to him as the life of his body. A fertile kiss therefore, a marvel of stupendous self-abasement that is not a mere pressing of mouth upon mouth; it is the uniting of

God with man. Normally the touch of lip on lip is the sign of the loving embrace of hearts, but this conjoining of natures brings together the human and divine, shows God reconciling “to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” “For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one.” This was the kiss for which just men yearned under the old dispensation, foreseeing as they did that in him they would “find happiness and a crown of rejoicing,” because in him were hidden “all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge.’ Hence their longing to taste that fullness of his.

4. You seem to be in agreement with this explanation, but I should like you to listen to another. Even the holy men who lived before the coming of Christ understood that God had in mind plans of peace for the human race. “Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets.” What he did reveal however was obscure to many. For in those days faith was a rare thing on the earth, and hope but a faint impulse in the heart even of many of those who

looked forward to the deliverance of Israel. Those indeed who foreknew also proclaimed that Christ would come as man, and with him, peace. One of them actually said: "He himself will be peace in our land when he comes." Enlightened from above they confidently spread abroad the message that through him men would be restored to the favor of God. John, the fore-runner of the Lord, recognizing the fulfillment of that prophecy in his own time, declared: "Grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ." In our time every Christian can discover by experience that this is true.

5. In those far-off days however, while the prophets continued to foretell the covenant, and its author continued to delay his coming, the faith of the people never ceased to waver because there was no one who could redeem or save. Hence men grumbled at the postponements of the coming of this Prince of Peace so often proclaimed by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient times. As doubts about the fulfillment of the prophecies began to recur, all the more eagerly did they make demands for the kiss,

the sign of the promised reconciliation. It was as if a voice from among the people would challenge the prophets of peace: "How much longer are you going to keep us in suspense? You are always foretelling a peace that is never realized; you promise a world of good but trouble on trouble comes." At various times in the past and in various different ways this same hope was fostered by angels among our ancestors, who in turn have passed the tidings on to us. 'Peace! Peace!' they say, "but there is no peace. If God desires to convince me of that benevolent will of his, so often vouched for by the prophets but not yet revealed by the event, then let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth, and so by this token of peace make my peace secure. For how shall I any longer put my trust in mere words? It is necessary now that words be vindicated by action. If those men are God's envoys let him prove the truth of their words by his own advent, so often the keynote of their predictions, because unless he comes they can do nothing. He sent his servant bearing a staff, but neither voice nor life is forthcoming. I do not rise up, I am not awakened,

I am not shaken out of the dust, nor do I breathe in hope, if the Prophet himself does not come down and kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”

6. Here we must add that he who professes to be our mediator with God is God’s own Son, and he is God. But what is man that he should take notice of him, the son of man that he should be concerned about him? Where shall such as I am find the confidence, the daring, to entrust myself to him who is so majestic? How shall I, mere dust and ashes, presume that God takes an interest in me? He is entirely taken up with loving his Father, he has no need of me nor of what I possess. How then shall I find assurance that if he is my mediator he will never fail me? If it be really true, as you prophets have said, that God has determined to show mercy, to reveal himself in a more favorable light,” let him establish a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant with me” by the kiss of his mouth. If he will not revoke his given word, let him empty himself,” let him humble himself, let him bend to me and kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. If the mediator is to be acceptable

to both parties, equally dependable in the eyes of both, then let him who is God's Son become man, let him become the Son of Man, and fill me with assurance by this kiss of his mouth. When I come to recognize that he is truly mine, then I shall feel secure in welcoming the Son of God as mediator. Not even a shadow of mistrust can then exist, for after all he is my brother, and my own flesh. It is impossible that I should be spurned by him who is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh.

7. We should by now have come to understand how the discontent of our ancestors displayed a need for this sacrosanct kiss, that is, the mystery of the incarnate word, for faith, hard-pressed throughout the ages with trouble upon trouble, was ever on the point of failing, and a fickle people, yielding to discouragement, murmured against the promises of God. Is this a mere improvisation on my part? I suggest that you will find it to be the teaching of the Scriptures: for instance, consider the burden of complaint and murmuring in those words: "Order on order, order on order, rule on rule, rule on

rule, a little here, a little there.” Or those prayerful exclamations, troubled yet loyal: “Give those who wait for you their reward, and let your prophets be proved worthy of belief.” Again: “Bring about what has been prophesied in your name.” There too you will find those soothing promises of consolation: “Behold the Lord will appear and he will not lie. If he seems slow, wait for him, for he will surely come and he will not delay.” Likewise: “His time is close at hand when he will come and his days will not be prolonged.” Speaking in the name of him who is promised the prophet announces: “Behold I am coming towards you like a river of peace, and like a stream in spate with the glory of the nations.” In all these statements there is evidence both of the urgency of the preachers and of the distrust of those who listened to them. The people murmured, their faith wavered, and in the words of Isaiah: “the ambassadors of peace weep bitterly.” Therefore because Christ was late in coming, and the whole human race in danger of being lost in despair, so convinced was it that human weakness was an

object of contempt with no hope of the reconciliation with God through a grace so frequently promised, those good men whose faith remained strong eagerly longed for the more powerful assurance that only his human presence could convey. They prayed intensely for a sign that the covenant was about to be restored for the sake of a spiritless, faithless people.

8. Oh root of Jesse, that stands as a signal to the peoples, how many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see, and never saw it! Happy above them all is Simeon, by God's mercy still bearing fruit in old age! He rejoiced to think that he would see the long-desired sign. He saw it and was glad; and having received the kiss of peace he is allowed to go in peace, but not before he had told his audience that Jesus was born to be a sign that would be rejected. Time proved how true this was. No sooner had the sign of peace arisen than it was opposed, by those, that is, who hated peace;" for his peace is with men of good will, but for the evil-minded he is "a stone to stumble over, a rock to bring men down." Herod accordingly was perturbed, and so was the whole of

Jerusalem. Christ “came to his own domain, and his own people did not accept him.” Those shepherds, however, who kept watch over their flocks by night, were fortunate for they were gladdened by a vision of this sign. Even in those early days he was hiding these things from the learned and the clever, and revealing them to mere children. Herod, as you know, desired to see him, but because his motive was not genuine he did not succeed. The sign of peace was given only to men of good-will, hence to Herod and others like him was given the sign of the prophet Jonah.” The angel said to the shepherds: “Here is a sign for you,” you who are humble, obedient, not given to haughtiness, faithful to prayer and meditating day and night on God’s law. “This is a sign for you,” he said. What sign? The sign promised by the angels, sought after by the people, foretold by the prophets; this is the sign that the Lord Jesus has now brought into existence and revealed to you, a sign by which the incredulous are made believers, the dispirited are made hopeful and the fervent achieve security. This therefore is the sign for you. But as a sign what

does it signify? It reveals mercy, grace, peace, the peace that has no end. And finally, the sign is this: “You will find a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” God himself, however, is in this baby, reconciling the world to himself. He will be put to death for your sins and raised to life to justify you, so that made righteous by faith you may be at peace with God. This was the sign of peace that the Prophet once urged King Achez to ask of the Lord his God, “either from the depths of Sheol or from the heights above.” But the ungodly king refused. His wretched state blinded him to the belief that in this sign the highest things above would be joined to the lowest things below in peace. This was achieved when Christ, descending into Sheol, saluted its dwellers with a holy kiss, the pledge of peace, and then going up to heaven, enabled the spirits there to share in the same pledge in joy without end.

9. I must end this sermon. But let me sum up briefly the points we have raised. It would seem that this holy kiss was of necessity bestowed on the world for two reasons. Without it the faith of those who

wavered would not have been strengthened, nor the desires of the fervent appeased. Moreover, this kiss is no other than the Mediator between God and man, himself a man, Christ Jesus, who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns as God for ever and ever. Amen.

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