

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN WRITERS

THE WORKS OF THE FATHERS IN TRANSLATION

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THE SONG OF SONGS COMMENTARY AND HOMILIES

TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED
BY

R. P. LAWSON

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reprint of the Latin text by Baehrens, appeared recently as Vol. 37 of the series *Sources Chrétiennes*: Dom O. Rousseau, *Origène, Homélie sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris 1954). To my knowledge, the *Commentary* itself has not been translated into a modern language before; though selections taken from here and there have been offered in English by Tollinton,²⁸ in French by Bardy,²⁹ in German by von Balthasar.³⁰

PART ONE

THE COMMENTARY

FROM THE LATIN TRANSLATION BY RUFINUS

PROLOGUE

1. *The Song of Songs a Drama of Mystical Meaning*

It seems to me that this little book is an epithalamium,¹ that is to say, a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word² of God. And deeply indeed did she love Him, whether we take her as the soul made in His image, or as the Church. But this same Scripture also teaches us what words this august and perfect Bridegroom used in speaking to the soul, or to the Church, who has been joined to Him.³ And in this same little book that bears the title *Song of Songs*, we recognize moreover things that the Bride's companions said, the maidens who go with her, and also some things spoken by the Bridegroom's friends and fellows. For the friends of the Bridegroom also, in their joy at His union with the Bride, have been enabled to say some things—at any rate those that they had heard from the Bridegroom Himself. In the same way we find the Bride speaking not to the Bridegroom only, but also to the maidens; likewise the Bridegroom's words are addressed not to the Bride alone, but also to His friends. And that is what we meant just

now, when we said that the marriage-song was written in dramatic form. For we call a thing a drama, such as the enaction of a story on the stage, when different characters are introduced and the whole structure of the narrative consists in their comings and goings among themselves. And this work contains these things one by one in their own order, and also the whole body of it consists of mystical utterances.

But it behoves us primarily to understand that, just as in childhood we are not affected by the passion of love, so also to those who are at the stage of infancy and childhood in their interior life—to those, that is to say, who are being nourished with milk in Christ, not with strong meat, and are only beginning to desire the rational milk without guile⁴—it is not given to grasp the meaning of these sayings. For in the words of the Song of Songs there is that food, of which the Apostle says that *strong meat is for the perfect*; and that food calls for hearers *who by ability have their senses exercised to the discerning of good and evil*.⁵ And indeed, if those whom we have called children were to come on these passages, it may be that they would derive neither profit nor much harm, either from reading the text itself, or from going through the necessary explanations. But if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach it, to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust!⁶

For this reason, therefore, I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it. For they say that with the Hebrews also care is taken to allow no one even to hold this book in his hands, who has not reached a full and ripe age. And there is another practice too that we have received from them—namely, that all the Scriptures should be delivered to boys by teachers and wise men, while at the same time the four that they call *deuterōseis*⁷—that is to say, the beginning of Genesis, in which the creation of the world is described; the first chapters of Ezechiel, which tell about the cherubim; the end of that same, which contains the building of the Temple; and this book of the Song of Songs—should be reserved for study till the last.

2. The Theme of the Song of Songs

Before we come to consider the things that are written in this book, therefore, it seems to me necessary to say a few things first about love itself, which is the main theme of this Scripture; then about the order of the books of Solomon, among which we find that this one is put third; then about the name of the book itself, why it is entitled *The Song of Songs*; and, lastly, for what apparent reason it is written in dramatic form and, like a story that is acted on the stage, with dialogue between the characters.

Among the Greeks, indeed, many of the sages,⁸ desiring to pursue the search for truth in regard to the nature of love, produced a great variety of writings in this dialogue form, the object of which was to show that the power of love is none other than that which leads the soul from