

A Biblical Answer to Family Problems

Paul-Cezar Hârlăoanu

*Rev.Lect.PhD.
Faculty of Orthodox Theology,
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, ROMANIA*

Abstract:

The contemporary family faces many challenges. Divorce is one of the most serious problems in our society. It is caused by different stresses with which the family must deal. The “Song of Songs” offers hope in resolving such stresses. It proposes a different way of life as opposed to the trials of modern marriage: love, sacrifice and enduring passion.

Keywords: family, divorce, Song of Songs, love, passion, competition, sacrifice

Introduction

This paper confronts the realities of two different worlds. The first reality is one of biblical times, which is an ancient reality. The other aspect is that of our present times. It may seem strange to put them side by side and to find a strong connection between these two epochs.

The “Song of Solomon” belongs to the Old Testament and thus it is part of the Divine Revelation. This paper does not want to change the patristic exegesis, but we think that it is important to look at the “Song of Songs” also from a different perspective.

Since this book speaks about love, Divine and human, it can be an important source for reestablishing relationships between husbands and wives. Many divorces are caused by the fact that love becomes an outdated feeling. The “Song of Songs” speaks about passionate love, desire and fidelity.

This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

The purpose of this paper is to bring together two realities in order to apply them to family relations. It proposes a way of healing and addressing some of the problems a family faces in modern times.

Methodology

First of all, we will point out the reason we have chosen the book of Songs, especially since it is not a very commonly read or quoted book of the Bible.

In the second chapter we will address common problems a family has to deal with in contemporary Romania. We will also take a closer look at the abnormality of divorce. To do so, we have used the statistics provided by the European Union and the National Statistics Institute (NSI).

The third chapter is dedicated to the identification of the main causes of divorce. For this, we have used especially our pastoral experience from a priestly perspective.

And finally, in the fourth chapter, we will show how principles from the “Song of Songs” offers hope for divorce problems by applying images from this book to the root causes of marriage dissensions. For this reason we deliberately avoided many of the expository books and papers written about this particular book. This is actually our personal proposal: the courage of accepting the “Song of Solomon” as a love story which can heal a wounded family.

Why “The Song of Songs”?

The “Song of Songs” is one of the most interesting and powerful books of the Bible because it displays a canticle of genuine love. There were indeed some discussions about whether it belongs to the Sacred Canon of inspired books. This kind of discussion occurred in the Jewish tradition during the first century of the Christian era. Was it good or not to have in the Bible such a book which speaks clearly about human, erotic love? The “Song of Songs” contains a number of images which may scandalize a very religious person. This is the case of the breast description: “your two breasts are like two young roes that are twins” (4:5; 7:4). In the same way it might be quite difficult for one to accept the bride’s attitude toward her lover: she is willing to kiss him in the street in

front of everyone's eyes. We must understand that we have to look at these images through the eyes of a religious person living in the third or fourth centuries before Christ.

Even during the beginning of the Christian era the "Song of Solomon" was not well received everywhere. These writings were indeed accepted in the Christian Canon of the Old Testament because they belonged to the Canon assimilated from the Synagogue. But not all Christians understood it. This was the reason why certain Fathers of the Church who lived during the early centuries produced explanations of the "Song of Songs". Two of these Fathers are Origen and St. Gregory of Nyssa. In the "Song of Songs" they have indeed perceived something other than the love between a man and a woman, between a bride and a groom. It was the love Christ has for His Church (Origen 1956: 58-59), or between a man's soul and Christ (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1982: 122). There is also an image taken from Old Testament exegesis, where the bride was Israel and the groom was God.

As we mentioned in the beginning, however, the book of the "Songs" might also be understood as just a simple love story between two people, especially in the context of modern family problems. This is the way we approach the "Songs of Solomon" in this paper. It is not the mystical and allegorical aspect in which we are interested, but the human and relational meaning of the book. The book can be seen only as example of a love between a man and a woman, and not between God and someone else. Otherwise such a model would be difficult to accept and follow.

Thus, our intention is not to deny what the Church Fathers have said, but for our purposes we just prefer the literal interpretation of the book. We do not perceive this book, however, as an erotic story, like other scholars did (Fruchtenbaum 2010: 2). We will deal with it just as if it were a simple love song.

Problems of the modern family

What problems does the contemporary family face? This is a question that needs to be asked in order to know what we are attacking. Today when economic crisis is affecting the world, when the future is dominated by instability, the family is under great stress. Modern family

problems are numerous but we think that one particular phenomenon stands out: divorce. Someone might ask why we highlight this particular issue since there are also many others. It is true, indeed. For Christian families, however, divorce seems to represent a kind of painful end and a failure in fulfilling the covenant the two made at their wedding.

According to Eurostat, the European Union's statistic book (Europe 2015), in Europe the year 2012 has seen about two million marriages and one million divorces. The same statistic book observes that the marriage rate in the EU-28 declined from 7.9 marriages per 1 000 inhabitants in 1970 to 4.8 marriages per 1 000 inhabitants by 2008. The following two years have shown another important aspect, namely, the rate of divorce doubled from 1.0 divorce in a year per 1000 inhabitants in 1970 to 2.0 divorces by 2010. This change can be explained by the fact that some countries changed their policy concerning the divorce.

According to the National Institute of Statistics, in 2013 in Romania there were about 28,507 divorces of which 19,594 were in urban areas and the rest in rural areas.

When we speak about the age of the men and women involved in these statistics, one will notice that divorces can be found in different age groups: less than 20 years old (4), 20-24 years old (289), 25-29 years old (1421), 30-34 years old (2006). The figures change with aging: there were 570 divorces above the age of sixty.

Six-hundred and thirty-four divorces took place within the first year of marriage. After a year there were 1224 divorces; after two years of marriage there were 1472 divorces; after three years of marriage – 1584 divorces; after four years of marriage – 1774 divorces; after 5-9 years of marriage : 7474; after 10-14 years of marriage: 4690 divorces; after 15-19 years of marriage: 3596 divorces; after over 20 years, there were over 6129 divorces.

We can observe that the number of divorces decreases the longer the marriage lasts. The husband and wife are probably getting used to one another and they are pleased with their life together.

How can we explain this divorce rate? How did it happen and what went wrong? Among the many reasons for divorce in Romania we can identify and speak concerning a few of them.

We can speak about lack of love. People do not love each other anymore. It is strange because this lack of love occurs right after their marriage, during the first years of their marriage. How can someone be in such a deep love with his wife or her husband and in a few years stop loving and caring for them? Sometimes love turns into hate and in other cases it becomes total apathy. Where is that powerful love and passion that characterized their relationship or that deep and intimate connection between them? As a priest I have witnessed many such cases.

What is the origin of these problems?

One of the reasons is selfishness. The man and wife love each other, but they care more about their own interests than about their marriage. In a family everyone should leave strictly personal interests aside. One's habits are important, one's wishes are important, but concern for the other person is more important.

The selfishness we speak about is strongly connected with the absence of the self-sacrifice. It is indeed quite difficult to accept someone else's opinions and to put them above one's own. Many will ask why one should give up his or her ideas and to accept the ones of their husband or wife. How long should one act like this?

These questions are the starting point of a struggle for supremacy. Who is most important in a family: the husband or the wife? In the context of the women's emancipation, both the man and the woman have the same rights. And this used to be a good principle. According to the Scripture, God created the man and the woman. Sometimes, however, the wife obtains a more important job than her husband. Thus a competition between them ensues. Who is more important? Who earns the highest salary? As long as the wife will have a more important position on the social scale, a husband will try to balance it in the family relationships. He will try to over-act as the head of the family.

Frustration will likely develop in such a relation perhaps precipitating violence, physical and psychological violence. At this stage of such a relationship love is gone between the two of them.

The “Song of Songs,” a possible answer

The book of the “Songs” shows that one of the main aspects of love between the bride and the groom is the joy of loving one another. He or she is the most important person to the other. Neither of them is afraid to show their feelings for one other. The bride looks for her groom in the mountain (1:7-8), in the heat of the sun (1:6) or during the night (3:1). She asks everybody about him and she is not embarrassed to show her love for him.

The bride knows very well what her short-comings are: she says that she is black, but she is still beautiful (1:5). She makes this remark in front of all the other daughters of Jerusalem. When she describes herself she uses words which depict a working woman (she had to guard her vineyard 1:6). It is not her skin that makes her beautiful, but her love for the groom. In the same way, the groom sees only her beauty: “your cheeks are lovely” (1:10). For him, she is not black; she is not burned by the sun. And no matter what others may say, he will still love her. For the groom, the bride is perfect.

They belong to each another. If she speaks about herself, she calls herself a beautiful garden and she invites him to taste from his garden (4:16).

The same statement of love is made by the groom. The book shows that there is no contest between them. She is willing to give everything up for her lover. And so is he. This is sacrifice, a sacrifice of love.

Thus, the first problem the modern family – that of selfishness – is solved through love, a love which is stronger than any contest. To the selfishness of the modern world the book of the “Songs” demonstrates its disinterest in love itself.

When we study this biblical book, we understand that neither of the partners is in competition with the other. There is no fighting. It is not about who the boss is and who takes the decisions. As we have previously mentioned the bride is not ashamed to be in love and to show her love in front of everyone. She diminishes herself in order for her groom to be exalted in everyone’s eyes. The feeling of love for the groom or for the bride is the spring of a movement toward his/her feelings and desires. For the man in love there is nothing more important than the happiness of the

loved one. In some modern families, though this feeling is missing. There is no desire for self-sacrifice to be found there.

In today's world, another very important aspect for the family is desire. Today we can see much desire on display. But it is a desire for power, for decision making. The book of the "Songs" speaks about a different kind of desire, a desire which does not want to possess in order to consume. It is a desire of being together. In the "Songs," both groom and bride have the desire of being together and there is nothing that would stop them from loving one other. The bride looks for the groom during the night. She goes out into the streets of Jerusalem, just to find her lover (3:4). Also, the groom comes over at night and knocks on her door in order gain entrance (5:4-5).

Conclusions

According to our discussion, we can conclude that the "Song of Songs" can provide a genuine treatment for a family that is corrupted by selfishness, hatred or inner competition. This book speaks clearly about love, desire and passion, and these represent the medicine the modern family needs. The crisis families experience can be cured through love. Marriage is about true, long-lasting love.

How is our study different? The "Songs of Songs" invites everybody to follow a model other than the models newspapers or television promote. The lovers do not argue and they do not fight each other like we are used to seeing couples do in our daily experience. As people are increasingly exposed to the idea of competitiveness in their lives, they sometimes forget that this rule does not apply in marriage ties.

This paper was aimed at highlighting one key aspect: family home is not a "battle field". That being said, everyone should "fight" to solve their own problems, but they should fight with love for their life partner. Everyone should fight selfishness with self-sacrifice, and most importantly, everyone should be athirst for the other.

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