

## SONG OF SONGS: FROM TRANSCENDING TO “TRANSCENDENTAL” SEX (2)

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### ABSTRACT

The oral, narcissistic and perhaps depressed woman lover introduced in the first article of the same title by the present author in this issue of the *Journal for Semitics* is nothing but a shadow cast by her bright background. Her neediness and narcissism are due to her false self, which makes her available for projective identification with all the diverse religiosities carried by her but also allows her to dissolve in the feeling of being in an embracing love, her own projection. In this transcendental aspect the feminine resembles the divine. Contrary to the traditional or common reception of Song of Songs as either transcending the foreground sexuality through an allegorical interpretation where exclusive attention is given to its spirituality or, in contrast, a literal approach where a greater holding background is ignored respectively, the text can be read in its openness to sexuality as a pointer towards various religious subtexts. This is despite the fact that no explicit reference to any religiosity is apparently made in the text. When transcendence refers to the realm that includes all lower levels of existence, certain possibilities in Song of Songs can be opened through transpersonal psychology to suggest that the sexuality depicted also has a transcendent dimension.

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## INTRODUCTION

This serves as the second of two articles in which the potential transcendence embedded in Song of Songs is considered. In the first article (van der Zwan 2014) a psychological perspective highlighted the emotional condition of the woman protagonist showing her as oral, narcissistic and perhaps even depressed. Her receptivity to incorporate and include her lover as expressed in various ways also opens her up to an awareness, even if semi- or unconscious, of the multiple hints of religiosity conveyed by the background through associations and other suggestions.

After a brief exposition of the hermeneutics in which the concept of “transcendence” and its connection to religiosity within a transpersonal psychological framework will be introduced, the different contexts of Song of Songs will be outlined to justify the validity of this approach. Some elements from different levels and layers in the history of the text are investigated to show at least some of the ways in which subtexts about inclusion, belonging and wider horizons in which sexuality can be experienced within a transcendent reality are conveyed. This palimpsest of religious vestiges invites the reader or listener again and again to discover new – or even old, but now barely audible – whisperings of the divine in the text and in its current contexts. As for the methodological issues around psychological approaches to the Bible, reference is made to the latter part of the introduction to the first article of the same title.

## HERMENEUTICS

The title of this study presents two concepts that are brought into relation with each other through a particular reading of Song of Songs. The most problematic seems to be the context of “transcendence”, although the concept of “sex” could appear more immediate, relevant and even more urgent in the postmodern context. “Transcendence” is, however, used twice in the title and in two opposite senses: in the first case it implies exclusion and in the second inclusion.

Transcendence not only has a philosophical flavour but is also associated with religiosity. In the latter sense it would therefore somehow resonate with what derives from the Latin, *religio*, from the infinitive, *religare* (to re-link). This is one of the four possible etymological origins of a Western term referring to human orientation to what is regarded as supramundane (Lämmermann 2006:44). Transcendence and religion therefore seem to point in two different directions: the former suggests reaching forward and beyond, and the latter turning back to reconnect with what has become alienated or even lost.

In this study transcendence means inclusion: it functions like a container and therefore includes its apparent opposite, religion. This is also how Wilber (2001:39-40) has used it in his transpersonal psychology. Transcendence is therefore not about anything that is *only* outside, as is often implied in both traditional theology and Freudian critique of religion, as a projection outward of a previously introjected father figure (Freud 1979:11).

Wilber (1998:67-72) likewise builds his transpersonal psychology, rooted in depth psychology, on higher and wider horizons that include and depend on lower and narrower perspectives that are not destroyed or even dominated. At the lowest level is dead matter, from which life, mind, soul and, eventually, spirit follow in this sequence. Spirit is not an abstract or phantom-like pie in the sky, but includes matter, the living body, unconscious and conscious thought, emotions and will. While no level is ever lost but, instead, left in the unconscious even as it is overgrown and transformed, all later stages are potentially also already present as seeds in the lower levels and only sporadically expressed by outstanding individuals or encountered as peak experiences (Wilber 2001:42-43). For transpersonal psychology it is about the wider, higher and therefore also deeper context about what is possible for humans, and about the religious needs that even the lowest levels of development would have. The depth of meaning is here dependent on how comprehensive the context is.

Transpersonal psychology deals with three broad levels of development: the pre-egoic, the egoic and the transegoic levels of consciousness including their subdivisions in all human spheres such as religion, economics and sexuality. Collective

development is repeated by an individual so that personal growth mirrors in its early years what has already happened in the history of humanity.

One can therefore expect to find all these levels somehow expressed in *Song of Songs* as well. Different layers and levels of the text reverberate intertextually by alluding to and, some may say, colluding with other sources, inside and outside the Jewish and Christian canons. No other biblical book has elicited as many commentaries and diverse interpretations. This seems to suggest, on the one hand, that it has an exceptionally strong appeal, echoing what may be universal at least at unconscious levels. On the other hand, its open-endedness may have invited the diversity of projections and reactions.

## **CONTEXT(S) OF SONGS OF SONGS**

Not only the (history of the) text but also the interpretations of *Song of Songs* represent these different levels of consciousness, as each interpretation emphasises the level of consciousness that was dominant at that historical stage. No interpretation can therefore be scorned as naïve, as every interpretation is a projection of the level of consciousness that the recipient of the text had achieved at that point in time. Different levels of sexuality and religiosity, among other things, are therefore embedded in both the text and its various interpretations because religion also reflects human development – including its regressions – and, accordingly, also has different stages or levels. The text has roots in totemic and magical culture that reflect the pre-oedipal stages of the individual. This is then reinterpreted through allegories “transcending” (i.e., here in the exclusive sense of repressing) sexuality as is done in the latent phase and by recognising its obvious sexual content as happens in puberty (van der Zwan 2012, Chapter 3).

This developmental image is particularly suitable to *Song of Songs* where there is not only a budding process in nature and between the two lovers, but also symbolic suggestion through constant ascending outwards to mountain peaks and peak experiences after having descended into the love beds of the garden. There is a general

atmosphere of coming alive and of awakening. If the refrain is about warning not to fast-track love, it is precisely about respecting the natural pace of an unfolding process. It is about the celebration of becoming more alive, more awake, more conscious, and all this with the discoveries and generosity of puberty as a model (Feuillet 1990:206).

During the history of the development of Song of Songs from probably oral fragments until its final redaction, integration and inclusion into two religious canons, it has adapted to and adopted the prevailing contours of the prevailing religion.

Awakening the past in the unconscious is one aspect of growing into a higher level of consciousness with its wider view of reality. For Beauchamp (1990:157), for instance, the typological interpretation deepens human experience, and salvages for the present what, on the surface, seems to belong exclusively to the past. In contrast, what seems to be present only on the surface of the moment also has its roots deep in the past, while the present serves also as the soil of the future. The various inanimate objects, plants, animals, celestial bodies, significant people - mothers and lovers - and even ideational constructions of meaning, all of which occur in Song of Songs, represent various stages of religiosity *in* the text as much as the explicit interpretations *of* the text during history (*after* the text) do as well.

All these elements were once the objects of identification or idealisation and religious devotion, everyday realities that were temporarily held onto as transitional objects before the next level of development could be accessed. They might be forgotten or, when remembered, even scorned, but they remain part of the ranks of the ladder of collective human evolution, of every human being's history and identity, and are relived in the individual's development.

## **SUBTEXTS OF SONG OF SONGS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS**

### **Pre-egoic stage: the archaic level of religiosity**

The earliest religious experiences, even when not realised as such, can only be

preverbal and sensed in the body as sensuality and emotions; in fact, without a body the divine cannot be experienced (Viviers 2002:1546, 1547). Bynum (1991:156, 190) claims that women in particular somatise their spiritual experiences easier than men as they are less dichotomous in their self-image and are naturally more aware of their bodies.

That Song of Songs is highly sensual hardly needs to be mentioned. If religion is a system of symbolisation with the aim of inducing certain moods and motivations, as Geertz maintains, and if all symbolisation ultimately derives from the body, as Gliserman (1996:3) asserts, then the body is the primary site for the manifestation of religiosity. Religiosity is potentially already situated in the body, despite the body's narcissistic roots.

Body awareness is extended to nature – so often referred to as the backdrop of Song of Songs – while the body is also seen as an extension of nature sharing in the same elements and archetypes. In the new body theology there is a desire to discern divine revelation and an experience of the Numinous in both ordinary and extraordinary bodily experiences, which both abound in Song of Songs. It also includes the experiences of the body of the other and how they affect the recipient of these perceptions (Nasr 1996:257). It is as if through the orifices the boundaries to nature and to the other are dissolved to extend embodied experience to include even that of the other (Viviers 2010:123).

The maternal body, to which first article referred (van der Zwan 2014), is the first religious object of devotion, and, according to Ferenczi (1924:27), sexual intercourse is the unconscious rehearsal of re-entry into the womb, for the male as his maternal object, and for the female vicariously and so through the male as subject. Sex symbolising the regression constituted by religion is in this way unconsciously a spiritual experience through the body. The sensuality and bodily devotion expressed in Song of Songs remind one also of the earliest infantile stages, long before the reawakening of puberty, when love was essentially expressed by the mother through *bodily* care. All other and later experiences are always, at least unconsciously, related to and in terms of the body. The allegorical interpretation has an intuition of that as is

proven by the fact that it can read religiosity from bodily metaphors. There must be some common denominator between the religious and the erotic to build the bridge between the “two” experiences. The same applies to the relationship between God and his people which is figuratively portrayed by the prophets as a marriage, that is, a sexual relationship.

### **Sensuality**

If religion is the re-linking (*religio*) back to the alienated, then reconnecting to, and therefore inclusion of, the body and its senses, and through it to the environment and the “other” gender, is all part of that experience as a pilgrimage to the origins and process of transformation. There is probably no other book in the Jewish or Christian canons that has proportionately so many sensory and sensual references or so much contextualising in terms of the many aspects of the surrounding nature.

Song of Songs, for instance, “exudes” various fragrances. Kügler (2000:11) notes that smells directly shape (the narrow) self-image and the (wider) perception of the world. Hillman (1979:186-187) finds smell the best analogy for the psychological perception of invisible and intangible psychic depths. It is, in his view, also significant that the English word “essence” denotes both the hidden core of an entity and fragrance. He adds that smelling something is taking in its spirit. Fragrances signify the presence of the gods or holy people (Kügler 2000:19-20) hinting at a mythical dimension. Watson (2001:154) claims that all fragrances cherished by humans have the same ingredients as their sex hormones and are therefore ultimately based on unconscious sexual stimulation, even the scents used in religious ceremonies.

### **Sexuality**

Human erotic life signifies challenges to one’s own and the other’s integrity by crossing or transgressing at least physical boundaries into the realm of the different; identities are in some way deconstructed (Guinan 1998:44) and transcended through linking, exchanges, openings and penetrations, experienced as overpowering, uncanny

and even dangerous.

Although Keel (1986:41) regards Song of Songs as an anthology of secular love poems, he recognises it as a celebration of the divine power of love, which merges the sacred and the profane, but then “nicht eine dumpfe Gier nach Genitalien, sondern die Bewunderung für das geliebte Gegenüber”. To describe sexual love in such a context is to endow and embrace it with sacred significance, and thus to critique all superficial attitudes to it, without detaching it from the physical. The very nature of sexual pleasure itself already has a transcendental dimension: “We can define the feeling of pleasure as the perception of an expansive movement in the body - opening up, reaching out, making contact” (Fuller 2008:138, quoting Alexander Lowen).

### **Pre-egoic stage: the magical level of religiosity**

Various folk superstitions, derived from the social background against which Song of Songs was composed, have been woven into the text. These elements can still induce a certain atmosphere in the informed and sensitive reader. Even when the magical stage of consciousness is already accompanied by myths, one can, nevertheless, distinguish it as such, due to the animistic feature of blurring the boundary between separate identities. Any object, animate or inanimate, can become identified with in this way and then clung to for protection and prosperity. At an individual level this is represented by the omnipotent illusion of the infant, who regards the body of the mother and the rest of reality as part of itself.

### **Bodily breath as soul**

Breathing is implicitly suggested in Song of Songs through the winds and the smells when the day is personified in 2:17. Winnicott (1975:154) regards breath in the infantile mind as the transitional space between the inside and the outside of the body and between the self and the other. Religious concepts and experiences are, likewise, creations in the space between these two worlds (Winnicott 1975:224) which are not only linked but also mutually included and integrated.



## **Totemism**

Traces of a totemic background in Song of Songs are clear from the high frequency with which stones and minerals, plants and fruit, and certain animals with which humans identify, are mentioned.

Religious connotations from the hunter-gatherer era are thus at least unconsciously conjured up as fragmentary echoes and periodic revivals from the distant past, and survive even in postmodern times where they induce, through associations, a religious atmosphere. In popular personal piety (which often differed from the formal public religion, Albertz 1992:144ff.) the Israelites, at certain stages of their history, resorted in an allegedly regressive way to star, well and even tree worship (Cook 1902:418). Incidentally, the beloved is compared to all three of these natural phenomena: in 4:12, 6:10 and 7:9, respectively. In addition, the majority of decorative features mentioned in Song of Songs occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible almost exclusively in cultic and royal contexts, thus linking these two spheres but also leaving their religious atmosphere in Song of Songs. When the canon is relativised by recognising its diverse religiosity, one's eyes are ironically opened to signs of religiosity beyond its boundaries.

## **The religiosity of stones, minerals and seals**

As amulets, inanimate objects can be expressive of magical, omnipotent thinking and become alive for those who thus invest in them. The fetishistic nature of the Five Scrolls, but also the canon in general, is a continuation of this very early stage in human spirituality.

Loretz (1994:237) has argued that the sachet of myrrh resting between the breasts of the beloved in 1:13 and the seals on the arm wrist and the heart of the lover mentioned in 8:5 do not have the function of sealing or authentication, but of amulets to protect their bearer from misfortune and sickness, the omens of death, and to increase his or her lust for life. Magical power was likewise ascribed to the stone material of the seals of scrolls. Similar to an oath, a seal was invested with intense emotional commitment. Both serve as guarantees, either through symbolic

representation of the guarantor or by calling upon a witness who seals his or her testimony or commitment by appealing to a higher being in whom even more faith has been invested. Seals have also been found in Mesopotamian graves, reminding one of 8:6 where they are mentioned in juxtaposition to death and where the beloved wants, in the form of a seal, to become part of the very body of her lover. This proves that the seal symbolises the body and how closely religiosity is tied to the body. The body is, in fact, metaphorised in all the *auṣâf*. In 4:12 the seal could perhaps refer to and represent the hymen, mentioned euphemistically or to intensify its honour. In 5:11-15 the body of the lover is not only idealised as a superlative, but the precious metals invested with the divine at the same time also enhance his body to obtain a semblance of the statues of the deities in whose image he is described.

### **The religiosity of plants**

Plants could also have functioned as totems. They would have carried something of the divine when they had mind-altering effects or when they, like apples and pomegranates (Müller 1988:113), were believed to be aphrodisiacs or fertility enhancing. Apart from plants or their fruits resembling the body the many trees in Song of Songs remind one of the wooden “*ashereth*”, representing goddesses in the territory of Israel (de Vaux 1978:286).

### **The religiosity of animals**

Deer, lions and doves were, like the date palms, closely associated with the goddess of love across the Near East and Egypt, and often signalled her presence and influence (Keel 1986:102, 111). All these occur prominently in Song of Songs and would inevitably have conjured up connotations of the goddess.

### **Pre-egoic stage: the mythical level of religiosity**

From the identifying and *introjecting* tendencies of the magical consciousness, the self develops to the inverse to cast the other in terms of *projections*. The psychic processes are expressed by personifications and anthropomorphic deities.

Various mythical traditions from in and around Israel underlie Song of Songs but have been “translated” or edited out of its canonical form by the monotheistic redactors. Müller (1988:112), for instance, explains 6:10 as a lyrical reproduction of what was once a mythical idea and its iconographic expression. He regards the ׀ (who) interrogative, which also appears in 3:6 and 8:5, as typical of hymnal style.

### **Bodies as reminders of the gods**

The many gemstones and precious minerals referred to in Song of Songs hint as mythological remnants at the theomorphic representation of the lovers as if they were statues of the deities.

Bodies are not only represented by the statues of the deities but also by celestial objects, stones, holy places such as rivers and mountains, plants and animals, all of which can somehow imply expressions of the divine. Nature as the “body” of God (as suggested by the above descriptions of their religious connotations) mirrors the divine presence in the body itself as well.

### **Gods alluded to**

The mythical level is, in the first instance, represented by the casting of deities on to the religious stage.

The contested suffix, ׀, of שֶׁלֶהֶבֶתָהּ (a flame of YHWH or an intense flame) in 8:6 could be an abbreviated reference to יהוה (YHWH), the God of storm and lightning, or it could just mean lightning. In the latter case it would resonate with his Canaanite-Phoenician, Resheph, in רֶשֶׁפִי אֵשׁ (flames of fire) and would also be associated with Ba'al, amongst others, the god of storms, the love between him and Anath, and their fight against Moth (death), all echoed in 8:6. The mighty waters would then also allude to the underworld, according to, for instance, Psalm 18:4 and Jonah 2:3 (Loretz 1994:241-242).

### Celestial bodies as deities

People for whom the *hifil* and *nifal* of שָׁקַף (look down) are used are usually regarded as superhuman, especially when they do so מִן-הַחַלְזוֹת (from the windows) as in 2:9. These verbs are therefore also used for gods and other supernatural beings (Müller 1988:114). That the woman is compared to dawn, the moon, the sun and the “bannered hosts” suggests therefore that she has celestial status, confirmed by the fact that this verb is elsewhere often accompanied by מִן-שָׁמַיִם (from heaven). The adjective הַמְּאֹדָה (terrible) adds to the sense of *mysterium tremendum*, linking the aesthetic and the numinous (Viviers 1990:244). The body of the beloved therefore becomes as if celestial through her likeness to these heavenly luminaries. Several main themes (i.e., Lebanon, Solomon, the mother, the daughters of Jerusalem, my soul or self and the objects of the lover’s activities in 5:1) are expressed seven times in an era when this figure had special significance due to the seven celestial bodies that were known. This links to the root meaning of the Hebrew word for “oath” as well.

### Oaths

Oath swearing is a cultic act, but also has a magical aspect in that the power of the spoken word is asserted to create a reality. One does not swear by a deity but by its attributes. This is expressed in Song of Songs by the creatures of the wilderness which represent the attributes, thus avoiding polytheism but still retaining the sacred atmosphere (Keel 1986:94).

### Holy places

The proper names of places mentioned in Song of Songs contribute to its mythic dimensions in that they convey pregnant hints to religious centres. These probably developed from the magical interpretation of certain places, especially those containing water, which is so often mentioned or suggested in Song of Songs. The late and almost isolated fire in the climax of the text in 8:6, although constantly adumbrated by the allusions to sacrifice and incense, suggests something of the unnamed fiery YHWH, the God of storm and lightning, who eventually reigns

supreme from his holy mountain over all aqueous fertility symbols.

That ascending and descending are so often mentioned suggests mountains and their association with altars and worship, and add to the general religious sense exuded by Song of Songs (de Vaux 1978:284). This is reinforced by the frequent mention of incense and other fragrances in this regard, conjuring up even more religious associations. יְרוּשָׁלַיִם (Jerusalem) as Israel’s holiest place is not only the first place name mentioned already in 1:5 and more than any other proper name, but also linked to the theme of peace (van der Zwan 2012:194). Its name also refers back to Shalem, probably a pre-Israelite city god of Jerusalem (i.e., “the Foundation of Shalem”), who was in Ugarit the god associated with the evening star, parallel to Shachar (cf. שָׁחַר, i.e., dawn in 6:10), the morning star (Albertz 1992:148n.26 and 206-207), both, of course, suggesting Venus. This network of constant linking even goes beyond the text and its contextual background to be embodied in new contexts such as a religious canon, which infuses additional religiosity by linking it to other religious markers such as Pesach and the Sabbath.

### Canonicity

In the same way that people project their own split-off parts onto other people through idealising or demonising, so they project their own fantasies through eisegesis onto texts that are (already) the very projections of others. They then “recognise” the voice of their deity in it as revelation and elevate the text to scripture and religious canon. This implies a layering of projections with the resultant continuous, if not infinite, deference of ultimate-as-original meaning, as per postmodern deconstruction. Everything is a metaphor of something else and the alleged original remains elusive in the oblivion of this archaeology of the mind. The more repressed and projected, the greater the sensitivity as a vicarious sense of recognition and the more powerful the reaction.

Religiosity is often induced by the contextual use of Song of Songs, especially through the allegorical interpretation rather than discovered in the text, though one can argue that its potential for, or susceptibility to, such possibilities of meaning could still

be discovered. Melting of hermeneutical horizons and investing new meaning by rediscovering lost, neglected or hidden experiences can be relevant to contemporary needs: the desire for the “O/other”, difference and identity in a pluralistic and yet global society as the product of the Second Axial Period (Cousins 1992:13). That is why Loader (2002:74) also agrees that the symbolic, “surplus” or even allegorical readings can also be justified.

In referring to Müller, who regards the imaginary world of Song of Songs as an example of “einer unbewußt religiöse Daseinsaneignung”, Viviers (1990:243-244) explains that religious experiences that have become unconscious surface again during times of confusion and the eclipse of religion such as the Hellenistic time during which Song of Songs received its final form.

By resonating with, and alluding to, other biblical texts, an intertextuality then becomes visible, which seems to confirm the original sense of canonicity. Although Keel (1986:22), for instance, denies any close link to the sacred marriage rituals and regards the poems as even more secular than those of Egypt, he finds the theological character of the book as a whole through its relation with other biblical texts, such as the Eden narrative, wisdom literature and the prophets.

No other biblical book has elicited as many commentaries and diverse interpretations, which seems to suggest that it has an exceptionally strong appeal, resonating with something that may be universal at an unconscious level. However, its open-endedness may have invited the diversity of projections and reactions. In fact, it is the mysterious nature of the book that made Rabbi Akiva regard it as most sacred, the holiest of holies (Krinetzki 1981:31). It may be this “Geheimnis” that gives the deepest sense of belonging and “Heimweh” on a preverbal and pre-egoic level.

### **Pesach and its connection with Song of Songs**

That Song of Songs is sung at and so closely connected to the Jewish Pesach (Pelletier 1989:404), with its roots in the universal spring festival, is perhaps a vestige of the earlier matriarchal sacred marriage and fertility rites, which have survived in the later patriarchal mythical stage.

## Sabbatical peace and its connection with Song of Songs

In 8:10 *שְׁלוֹמִים* (peace) is mentioned, which also links with the Sabbath as rest in that both concepts are about completion, adumbrated by *בְּמָוֶת* (like death) in 8:6 as the eternal Sabbath. This has been personified and deified as the Bride of God, as the ultimate form in the goddess development in Judaism. *Lilith* and the *Matronit* had been the negative and positive aspects, respectively, of, and united in, the Soharic *Shekinah*, the divine presence or indwelling, and regarded by Patai (referred to in Pope 1977:169-171) as the ambivalence of male sexual experience. The Sabbath night then became devoted to sexual celebration in which Israel was the male and Sabbath the female partner, perhaps avoiding acknowledgement of the real woman due to this ambivalence. This is reminiscent of the sacred marriage rituals prevalent in the ancient Near East. This development reached its peak in sixteenth-century Safedic Kabbalah, where the invisible, veiled Sabbath was welcomed as queen and bride with the same *לָכֵה דוֹדִי* (come, my love) of 7:12 in the open field, probably under the rising evening star of Venus, reminding one of *מִי זֹאת עֹלֶה מִן-הַמִּדְבָּר* (who is she, who ascends from the desert?) in 8:5. During the same night, the unholy *Lilith* would roam around, trying to seduce man, and thus perhaps representing *פְּהַד בַּלַּיְלוֹת* (terror in the night) of 3:8 (Pope 1977:171-174).

## Egoic stage: the rational level of religiosity

### Writing and masculinity

If the theory of Shlain (1998) is valid, that is, that alphabetic writing has created a male bias at the expense of our common femininity, then Song of Songs – in fact, all texts – has contributed to that effect. In addition, this invention seems to have coincided with, or even compensated for, the breakdown of the bicameral mind (Jaynes 1976). This would mean that textuality is itself a signal of that loss of the voice of the alleged deities, and thus of religiosity in its theistic form.

### **Ideology and its critique**

Yet, it is also the sobriety of rationality that recognises that Song of Songs has often served as a screen for religious projections and so it advocates an alternative world by representing the subdued yet subversive spiritual dimension in a text with pre-Axial roots. The past serves as an ideal for, and a critique of, the present. However, intertwined with that protest are elements that support class and gender ideology. This is despite its dissonant voice that speaks, even as one of the shortest books in the Bible, on behalf of the outsiders and the marginalised.

### **Sensuality and sobriety?**

God and the beloved are interchangeable, which is perhaps why there is no explicit mention of God in Song of Songs: someone who is sexually in love and obsessed with the beloved has no space, no further need even, for a separate God, except to pray for his help in times of disappointment. Tribble (1993:102) also notices this tendency for God to withdraw in Genesis 2-3 when the lovers unite sexually to discover each other and themselves. Unconsciously, the beloved has become God incarnate, just as all of reality becomes alive and acquires a religious and spiritual nuance, soaked in profound meaning as subtle background. Just as the whole body and being of the lover becomes erogenous, so too does the universe as God's Body, of which the beloved's body is a monad. In that sense the deified beloved is also the shadow, the reminder, of the universal and omnipresent divine.

### **Lack of dogma**

It is the cool, clear mind of rationality that makes one realise that the religiosity of Song of Songs is not one of firm convictions, except perhaps those imbedded in the refrains as well as in 8:6-7, unless they were uttered in the heat of the moment. For what is institutionalised and standardised as religion by society and culture can numb personal religious sensitivities and obfuscate the voice and vision of the divine. As the laws of love extend or even lie beyond the Torah, without interfering with it (Krinetzki 1981:227), so the possibilities of encountering the divine are not closed by any set



revelation. The religiosity of Song of Songs is of a subtle and indirect nature through remnants, suggestions, *double entendres* and connotations conjuring up a holistic atmosphere that reminds one of various religious contexts. The fragmented and leaping nature of Song of Songs has disallowed unanimity about its structure and ample uncertainty exists about the meaning of many expressions. This in itself is significant as it emphasises the preliminary nature of human insight into love and the divine. The absence of dogma and belief can be experienced as liberating for those finding meaning precisely in vertiginous free-fall. Liberated from dogma, one’s eyes are opened to the universal presence of the divine.

### **Romantic love**

According to Goldenberg et al. (2000:207) romantic love can be seen as a strategy to render life meaningful and the self (of both partners) valuable, clearly a religious dimension of what could be seen as a narcissistic orientation. Romantic love is a way to elevate animal sexuality - which is a reminder of mortality - to something uniquely human and sexuality can thus be used to enhance self-esteem.

### **Trans-egoic stage: beyond ordinary rationality**

This stage reaches beyond all the separations that the ego has imposed to reconciliations of opposites.

### **Inclusive universality despite uniqueness**

A peak experience is a religious experience (Wulff 1997:608) and not only the highest level of consciousness someone has reached, but also the highest level of integration of previous levels of consciousness, including some of the unconscious. It reaches into the deepest accessible layers of the soul but also above and beyond the ego; all manifestations of identity, including gender, and rationality. As such it is therefore also translinguistic.

If the reader has had existential “*hapax*” moments, revelatory of immensely deep and incontestable meaning in what seems to remain a mysterious miracle, cracking open a new dawn, somehow changing the direction of life, during what might seem to others as mundane and general events, or at best called “synchronicities”, then pronouncing the silently present, ineffable Name in the infinite beauty and sense of profoundly humbling elevation would be nothing but blasphemous.

The highest level of consciousness is an integration of all experience and is therefore *also* experienced as erotic. In the same way that the earliest religious experiences are bodily based, so the highest religious experiences are also experienced in the body. In fact, the soul and the spirit are nothing but symbolisations, sublimations and therefore projections of the body (cf. also Viviers 2010:110). When humans awaken to and experience the presence of the divine in nature and all of reality as its receptacle, as the lovers do in Song of Songs, they re-link with the plants and the animals, the streams and the mountains, and the stars as manifestations of the sacred. The body as part of the universe to which it relates as its wider context of meaning also reflects it.

The body as a veil, yet manifestation and aspect of consciousness and, what is called in Tantrism, feminine *shakti* power, has a spiritual wisdom significant for spiritual realisation (Nasr 1996:242-243). This also resonates with Isherwood (2000:14): “Bodies know more deeply than minds alone”. The unexpected focus on, and celebration of, the body in Song of Songs within a canon and tradition that has tried to hide, if not control, it (cf Kugle 2007:22) broadens the horizon of spiritual awareness and growth. Only when the body rules over the mind again can the illusion of the ego be transcended and humans be “authenticated by all beings” (Nasr 996:246).

If, through this inclusive recognition of religious elements from various stages, the highest level of Platvoet’s (1993:237-242) types of religions has been reached, this study would have served an interfaith purpose as well. Song of Songs is not a nationalistic text, as are other books in the Hebrew Bible. (That Heshbon in 7:5 could have conjured up expansionist memories is, of course, a possibility.) It seems to

transgress the boundaries of the urban centre of Jerusalem into rural Phoenicia (cf. all the references to Lebanon, especially in 4:8) and to stretch into the southern desert (cf. Qedar in 1:5). It tries to be accommodating and inclusive by balancing two capitals in 6:4. It reaches and looks out at the world in 7:5. In this way it also celebrates the exotic as different and other beyond the narrow confines of the ego.

Song of Songs deals with a theme experienced universally, in all places and times, despite the postmodern critique of all such claims due to their irreducible unique individual character. Song of Songs, accordingly, also orientates itself concretely by anchoring itself geographically. It thinks in local, real and existential terms (cf. Engedi in 1:14). As much as it has been moulded by foreign influences, as much does it transcend any narrow group religion. Yet the repeated occurrences of fantastic, superlative features, hyperboles, dualistic extremes, perhaps also by the many *hapax legomena* (or related to it: words that occur only in Song of Songs or very seldom in the Hebrew Bible) all suggest not only excess, but also singularity and exceptionality. The projection of superlatives as an expression of wishes and ideals is one of the foundational features of religion, according to Freud (1979:31). It lays the foundations of an *as if* reality.

This adds an exotic, esoteric if not mysterious tone to the text. The allusions and citations to things that remain in silence in the background might have been comprehensible only to educated insiders (Keel 1986:257; Fischer 2010:17), including women (Davies 1998:140). In this way it would then also mirror the inaccessibility of the beloved (cf. 2:14, 4:8, 4:12) or their uniqueness in 5:10 and 6:9. This is also suggested by mentioning various mountain peaks symbolising perhaps peak moments. Exaggeration may be a secular way to compensate for a certain lack or absence of religious images of fulfilment, elevating it to a sacred level that borders on the miraculous, bathed in an aura of other-worldliness. In this world virtually magical and supernatural feats, such as leaping over mountains in no time, can be achieved. Stylistically, this atmosphere is created through foreign and archaic words, and through references to exotic elements (Fischer 2010:219). When nature reawakens in spring it

is experienced as a miracle that also reveals the hidden potential for love between people who resonate, respond to and celebrate these wonders (Krinetzki 1981:103).

### **Mystical dissolution of dichotomies**

The transpersonal interpretation recognises the reconciliation of conflict in the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This could include the realisation that both the immanent dimension of religiosity expressed in the archaic and its transcendent aspects as expressed in the mythic are needed for what could be regarded as a panentheistic experience of the text.

A more inclusive, though also more ambiguous and complex, religiosity involves both hemispheres of the brain, the whole body, both hands (cf. 2:6 and 8:3) and both sexes, allows a whole-body orientation which, in turn, renders the holy more wholesome as well. With a wider perspective, more meaning is allowed and recognised.

### **Towards androgyny**

Song of Songs is, among other things, about the linking of genders through sexuality. Its appreciation, also by older non-adolescent people, as classic literature and as canonical is a nostalgic linking, incorporating and re-membering of the old with the new as in 7:14: וְעַל-פֶּתְחֵינוּ כָּל-מִנְדֵּים הָרְשִׁים גַּם-יְשָׁנִים (and at our doors are all kinds of precious fruits, new and old). Where one has linking, one has religion.

### **Regaining and integrating various levels of consciousness**

Many commentators, such as Pope (1977:26), view Song of Songs as a relatively late redaction due to late influences. However, that it contains archaic structures of the mind is suggested by other scholars dating it as far back as 950 B.C.E. (Watson1984:40). In fact, its creation seems to span a long period, analogous to the wide spectrum of states of consciousness that it both reflects and induces. This is enhanced by the sophisticated and erudite poetic devices, including archaising,

creating a sense of nostalgia (cf., for instance, Watson 1984:368-371) reminding one of a lost and partially forgotten world, a golden era, now clothed in mystery, with sacred connotations through its relics and periodic revivals in popular religion. It is this partially lost intuition that can be regained. Like the polysemic nature of poetry and the fact that so many modern commentators (e.g., Keel 1986:35-39) have regarded metaphor as central to the interpretation of Song of Songs, its levels of meaning are multiple.

### **Silence and the ineffable**

There is always a part that remains ineffable even if it resonates as *déjà vu* recognition of an ultimate or original infinity that can never be separated as a concept or split off and projected in language. In fact, language is redundant and obstructing, if this whispering intuition is properly heeded. These are the gaps that Freud traced like a sleuth, the unsaid and the uncanny, the image of mystery for those who are so used to hearing explicit language substituted and compensating for experience.

### **CONCLUSION**

Neither sex nor religion is ever explicitly mentioned in Song of Songs, although both are constantly present and subtly interwoven into the texture of the text that remains open to expansion and elevation. If Song of Songs is a “feminine” text, it is so also because it remains receptive to projections of all kinds of religiosities (and non-religiosities), to investments to be reflected back as revelations, open, yet full of nourishment such as the Great Mother herself, fully available.

That the definition of religion remains elusive suggests due humility and silence, while listening to the faint whispering of the Ineffable. Owing to its unbearable lightness, it is not all that easy to recognise. It reveals itself only in an organic relationship with the text. It exists in the plural and is about an overwhelming

atmosphere that elevates consciousness to recognise the divine presence in the aesthetic and the sensual and, therefore, ultimately, in the body.

When transcendence refers to inclusivity and belonging, then strong suggestions of transcendence clearly underlie Song of Songs which seems to deal in the first place with ordinary sexual attraction between a man and a woman.

This text from “inspired Scripture” can inspire to live on a higher level of love even when the main voice is that of a depressed and anxious character. This stage already contains transcendental pointers that could be recognised, even unconsciously, by readers of virtually any development as their own potential. In this way, sexuality has a transcendental dimension by symbolising a longing to belong to what is infinitely greater than the individual and even the couple. Song of Songs pulses, yes, throbs, with raw and restless life energy that invites celebration and points beyond itself; and vice versa: when nature and the whole universe are alive with a religious atmosphere and deep meaning, sex also becomes transcendental.

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