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## THE “OPENNESS” OF THE SONG OF SONGS

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PIETER VAN DER ZWAN

Post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Pretoria<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: pvdz1961@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

More than any other biblical book the Song of Songs has received a wider range of interpretations, most of which seem to be valid, even when they sometimes contradict each other. A literary approach to both the form and contents of the Song can assist psychological investigations into this diverse reception and show that the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the Song, sometimes experienced as disturbing, can also be an invitation to creative play where the recipient almost becomes a participating character in the poem.

### INTRODUCTION

This article follows in the wake of another by the same author<sup>2</sup> about the application of psychological, and more specifically psychoanalytical, approaches to the text (and more specifically the characters in terms of their body images) of the Song of Songs. Psychological approaches used in biblical studies can focus on the author, the texts, or the reception of the text. This exploration deals with the text's reception and endeavours to explain the enigma of the seemingly endless multiplicity of responses to a single text from a transpersonal-psychological perspective. Whereas the author(s) behind the text and the characters in the text seem to be stable and static (or even void), the reception, that is, the world in front of the text, seems to have no boundaries, as projections are constantly made on an open, seemingly “empty” and therefore receptive text, and thus undermines any initially fixed impressions of the text and therefore of the author(s) despite the excellent preservation of the text compared to other poetry in the Bible (Pope 1977:21; *vide infra*).

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<sup>2</sup> Van der Zwan (2016:658–672).

This study will first show through the history of the interpretation, that is, the reception of the Song, why it can be perceived as open. Thereafter both its contents and form (which cannot always be neatly separated) will be identified as factors for its open reception to determine how this openness is made possible by the text itself. Finally, this openness will be contextualised within postmodern approaches to texts to suggest its implications for the recipient. As literary criticism, it will therefore also include a psychological, and more specifically a transpersonal-psychological investigation of the reception of the Song at the same time.

## **THE DIVERSE HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG**

A brief history of the interpretation of this short book (it consists of only 8 chapters with a total of 117 verses) will highlight some “records set”, some unique features, to show the diversity in its reception over the last approximately two and a half millennia.

### **Defence of canonisation**

The first known remarks about the Song are those of Rabbi Aqiba who claimed it to be the holiest of all books in the whole world (Pope 1977:19) and that it is equivalent to and even contains the whole Torah (Pope 1977:92). By keeping its interpretation limited through the Song’s inclusion in the Jewish canon, a certain status was attributed to it. In addition, it was in this way embedded into a certain context which it otherwise seems to lack, and which the modern attempts to provide through its interpretation as cultic-mythical have addressed. However, they have also differed about its original context before its Jewish canonisation. While De Jassy regarded it in 1914 as a liturgical expression of the Egyptian Osiris and Isis myth (Krinetzki 1981:35), Meek (1924:*passim*), amongst others, saw it as a Babylonian ritual text for the Tammuz-Ishtar belief system.

According to the same Jewish canonical tradition the Song’s initial recitation occurred at Sinai (Wolfson 2006:347), because there God got married to the Hebrew people and this book was believed to be about that marriage.

### **Medieval allegorisation**

During the medieval period the Song was the biblical book which inspired the most commentaries and sermons (Scheffler 2008:1265–1269). That this happened when the allegorical interpretation had a virtual monopoly in both the Christian and Jewish traditions suggests that this approach in particular allowed a great diversity of often contradictory understandings which, in fact, turned out to be the reason why this method of interpretation has been discredited amongst Protestants and secular people since the modern age. The greatest influence came from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153 C.E.) who, over a period of 18 years, wrote 86 sermons covering just the first two chapters of the Song (Pope 1977:123).

### **“Literal” interpretation in modernity**

At the time of the Reformation, on the other hand, it was the only biblical book on which Calvin did not write any commentary, already suggesting his literal understanding of the erotic nature of the content which might either have offended his piety or left little to be added by commentaries as it was already so understandable, despite its sometimes perplexing metaphors and lacunae. This literal understanding became the dominant one in Protestant Christianity and in secular circles since J. G. von Herder (1827), even though the exact interpretation, for instance in respect of the number of lovers, remained disputed.

To summarise: for most of the last two thousand years people read exactly the opposite of what the book describes at first glance: the Song celebrates erotic love but due to their own inhibitions recipients could not accept this, and concluded that the inverse must be meant. Something strange has been going on with the reception of the Song.

## Postmodern references to the Song's mystical potential

In modern and postmodern times, an unexpectedly large number of noted philosophers have commented on this simple Song, particularly on its openness.

### Lacan

The atheist Jacques Lacan, who was also a psychoanalyst, comments in his 1972 seminars on the erotic experiences of mystics such as Teresa in her contemplation of the Song. Her feminine *jouissance* (orgasm), which cannot be reduced to *foutre* (come), has gone beyond the merely genital and has opened towards God and so put her “on the path of ex-sistence”, a transcendent realm “good at one remove” (*bien au second degré*). This “extra” (*en plus*) is “supplementary” due to her feminine lack (*manqué*) which is the missing phallus as signifier of fullness. Instead of a lack it becomes, in fact, a surplus. Her “non-fullness” therefore constitutes an openness (Lacan 1999:76). In other words: as women cannot have phallic *jouissance*, they reach out beyond it and find their *jouissance* in the mystical openness to the infinite void. To apply this to the Song, one could argue that the woman, who dominates it through the “air-space” she uses, that is, the quantity of her words, has induced this same openness to it because of her nature as a “non-whole” being, to use Lacan’s word. That is why the Song has been so exceptionally open for mystical interpretations, especially by women. If one interprets the Song as avoiding the consummation of love, the male voice can be regarded as courtly love parallel to the female voice who finds phallic *jouissance* elusive and deferred. Missing this erotic “centre” and due to this ἐν-στασις (obstacle) the Song therefore remains open to ἔκ-στασις (ecstasy) thanks to both the female and the male experiences which, however, they know nothing about (Lacan 1999:69). Kearney (2006:334) therefore moots the possible inference from Lacan’s speculations that feminine desire is “a privileged landing site for incoming divinity”.

### Bataille

Georges Bataille (1993:167) hinted at another “obstacle” when he included in his essay *La partie maudite* (The accursed share), originally published in 1949, a whole

subsection on the Song, stating amongst others: “the inhibition of love heightens the intensity of pleasure”.

In addition, his suggestion of openness is clear from his words: “Only eroticism is capable ... of admitting the lovers into that void ... where it is no longer just the other but rather the bottomlessness and boundlessness of the universe that is designated by the embrace ...” (Bataille 1993:168). Human eros ultimately aims at thanatos (suggested in 8:6) and this terrifies humans so much (Kearney 2006:334, 335) that they try to escape through endless reinterpretations of the Song. That is perhaps why mystics whose experience has “no limitation” can descend from the elevated sublime to the “abyssal sublime” of the deepest depths of the unconscious (cf. also van der Zwan 2012:14) and the formless God of the silence of negative theology and why the Song served as an appropriate beginning which they could transcend, not only upwards in allegories but also downwards, in both directions, however, seeing in sex more than sex. Divine eros “is really about a desire to blissfully and sublimely dissolve into limitless fusion. With what? With what behind the illusory veil of an imaginary God is nothing other than nothingness, death, indifferenciation” (Kearney 2006:336).

In addition, the virtual ubiquity of metaphors in the Song opens up Ricœur’s concept of indetermination. Thus the identities of the nameless characters, even as speakers, in the Song are never certain (despite the case made out by Fischer 2010a:*passim*) and the questions in 3:6, 6:10, and 8:5 are perhaps more than rhetorical:

... it is precisely the primacy of the indeterminately fluid ‘movements of love’ over the specific identities of the lover and the beloved that guards the open door. We are kept guessing. This guarding of the Song as an open text of multiple readings and double entendres – divine and human, eschatological and carnal – provokes a hermeneutic play of constant ‘demetaphorising and remetaphorising,’ which never allows the Song to end. (Kearney 2006:339)

**Kristeva**

In her *Histoires d'amour* (Tales of love), originally published in 1983, Kristeva (1987:90) speaks about the Song's excess of meaning as "undecidable infinitization, semantic polyvalence brewed by the state of love – seat of imagination".

These testimonies confirm that the text of the Song does not seem to be stable. The content mirrors that by constantly speaking of movement, even some restlessness; there is a kind of fragmentation which reflects the nervous energy of the state of the lovers and their openness to a wider context. These fragments then leave an apparently infinite number of dotted-line pictures which are clear from the fact that the Song has been riddled – meant in both senses of the word – with so many questions to which no final answers have been found. The gap between the dots is bridged by metaphors which do not efface the difference caused by the fissures of the diastemic discourse (cf. Wolfson 2006:343).

**THEMES OF OPENNESS IN THE TEXT OF THE SONG****Fragmentary feelings**

The fragmentary character as form of the Song (*vide infra*) leaves the content open as well. Of course, this kind of structure does reflect something of the way that being in love somehow shatters one's previously held identity as if it is falling apart in fragments as well. This is clear from the moments when the lovers confess being overwhelmed by the beauty of the beloved other, such as in in 2:5, 4:9, 5:4, 8, and 6:5. Love is portrayed as a dangerous experience about which the principal refrains of adjuration in 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4 warn. They are like overwhelmed cries for protection to the cosmos in this hesitant and vertiginous state: the lovers have entered an uncharted labyrinthine territory.

**Flowing fantasy**

The fantasy and at times almost dream-like nature of the Song invites the reader to participate in it with his or her own fantasies to bridge and fill the gaps of which the

relative brevity of the Song also forms part. Fischer (2010b:339–343) associates the possible dream or fantasy scenes in 3:1 and 5:2 with the various spaces which are timelessly traversed and which therefore likewise serve as projection screens for differing moods and wishes at an individual level and for gender connotations at a social level to suggest the fictive nature of the narrative. This kind of dream state could also refer to threshold consciousness, either as a hypnogogic or a hypnopompic state.

### **Archetypally anchored openness**

The dreaminess of the lovers is also reflected in the archetypal nature of the Song. In 1970 Günter Krinetzki introduced a Jungian approach to the Song, and included the contributions of Erich Neumann on the feminine archetype manifested in the Great Mother and above all expressed in אֶהְבֶּהָ (love) with which the female beloved is identified. This work culminated in a whole psychological commentary on the Song in 1981. He limits himself, however, mostly to identifying and analysing the animus and the anima in the Song and one often gets the impression that one is not reading about real lovers but about solipsistic parts of the Self. Krinetzki (1981:198) therefore seems to oppose any literal understanding of the Song as if that superficiality would falsify it, denying historical influences by interpreting everything in terms of the universal structure and dynamics of the psyche, and claiming that almost everything mentioned in the Song is actually a reference to something else, for example, the lilies stand for the erotic. This means that even the main protagonists remain like shadows, spectres or phantoms of an almost infinite number of possibilities to be projected onto them, just as archetypes are the fixed forms to be filled by any number of possible incumbents fulfilling that specific role.

From a study of the body-images of the characters portrayed in the Song (van der Zwan forthcoming), for instance, it is clear that there are no clear faces or forms (whether they are fat or lean, etc.), only their effects. Their bodies remain like silhouettes and their identities anonymous. As such they are simply frames. One may critically counter this observation by pointing out that body-observation is always

culturally relative and therefore always selective, even when they remain “unnamed”. Yet these two aspects, facial appearance and body-size seem to be fairly universal amongst most cultures.

### **The female lover-beloved**

The woman is the main protagonist in the Song; her speech as well as her openness seems to predominate.

She is not limited by procreation, purity, or as a possession, the three focal points in biblical views of female sexuality according to Drora Settel (Clines 1995:114). Although there are traces of narcissism (van der Zwan 2014:854), this also means that she contains her lover and her environment through her openness.

Already in the second verse her immediate focus is on the mouth of her lover, showing that her mind is concerned with what can generally be regarded as the entry through this open orifice into the body. This is repeatedly thereafter confirmed with the intake of food and drink mostly in metaphorical ways and so orality becomes suggestive of her openness and eagerness to contain. Of course, within the erotic context this hints at her sexual longing to contain her lover, as she also wishes to be contained. The interest in the mouth is further enhanced by later references to her palate in 7:10 and, if she was the author of this text, vicariously also through his speech about her lips and teeth. Many of her references to plants and fruits are likewise suggestive of her interest in incorporating the other and this openness is also confirmed by her general awareness about her natural environment and all its beauty which reflects her own body. She is the metaphorical garden which nourishes through her openness towards her lover. Tied in with this theme is her description of opening to her male lover’s entering behavior, such as in 1:4, 2:4, and 2:9. Her possessiveness and her longing to contain the fruit of their love in motherhood is also symbolised by her enclosing the text by being the first and the last speaker. Ironically she is the one three times called “closed” by her lover in 4:12: *גַּן נְעוּלָה; אַחֲתַי כְּלֹהָ, גַּן נְעוּלָה; מְעַיִן חָתוּם, גַּל נְעוּלָה* (a garden shut up is my sister, my bride; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed). She also locks herself in in 5:4 even when she opens up in the next verse. Almost right at the



end, in 8:10, she again confirms that she is still a “wall”, ignoring the implied question whether she is a “door” in 8:9. This exclusive intimacy therefore stands in sharp contrast to the otherwise open nature of the Song.

This sense of openness also creates some discomfort for the female lover as she seems to have some issues about her skin in 1:5 and by implication contrasts hers with that of her male beloved in 5:10. This could indicate some boundary problems (van der Zwan forthcoming), and might be linked to her invitation to intimacy where one’s “skin” is shed or at least temporarily “taken off” in the process of emotional “undressing”.

Her male lover also associates her with a spring and with water which symbolises her receptiveness, fluidity and inclusivity. She reaches out beyond herself in what could be called at least a primitive stage of transcendence. There is a longing for something, no, Someone, greater. Sexuality is one important way of expressing this. Despite the exclusivity about other potential lovers who are but שְׁעָלִים קְטַנִּים (foxes, little foxes), there is an openness and sensitivity towards each other and about the divine in the context.

David Clines (1995:104–106) says the female lover is so open and so loving because she never existed, she is nothing but the figment of the male author’s wish-fulfilling imagination: he dreams of a woman dreaming of him. Although Clines probably wants to suggest the openness of fantasy expressed in the Song, he might actually be closing the text by denying the woman her reality just as the allegorical interpretations he critiques have done when they re-interpreted her as either the church or God or anyone who is not a woman (Clines 1995:113).

### “Transgressions”

The Song transcends, perhaps transgresses, any national and perhaps many other boundaries: it compares the beauty of the woman with Mount Lebanon in the north and brings Qedar in the far south to mind. It looks from the Lebanon-tower in the west towards Damascus in the East, and from Carmel on the coast to Heshbon east of the Jordan River (7:5–6). It sings about her beauty which is like both Tirzah in Israel

(mentioned first) and Jerusalem in Judah (6:4). It plays with opposites and the elitist style fantasises in travesty about the love of simple shepherds and shepherdesses. It seems like it wants to include everyone, it is not limited to the narrow-minded (cf. also Schellenberg 2014:*passim*). It balances both genders, as is well known, and so offers an inclusivity which may be disturbing to those in need of strict boundaries. It celebrates the erotic love of two teenagers in the open field away from the city, beyond their parental authority and by implication undermines the social constraints of contracts and conditioning. Richard Kearney sees in this the “breaking open of divine desire beyond tribal and social confines” (Kearney 2006:310). All in this short book. Of course, by seeing and saying all these things, one is projecting one’s own wishes onto this open text – which allows one to do it. The text, probably composed over many centuries before its final redaction, invites the recipient also to read and re-read it and participate in rewriting it, not only once but as many times as the recipient feels the desire to do so.

### **Shifting ideologies and religiosity**

One could assume that the content, even if there is not much narrative, contains some controversy which elicits divergent reactions according to the recipient’s own interests and affiliation. Hall (1998:1060) quotes Vološinov that reality is not reflected but refracted in an ideological sign. Meaning is the result of a social struggle. The Song, despite its romantic surface, must therefore be hiding ideological signs stemming from conflicting discourses which need to be analysed and made conscious.

Different from other biblical books, and even other lyrical poetry in the Bible, the Song is not “limited” by explicit religiosity, even when some kind of intuited religiosity can be sensed and recognised as a subtext at various instances in the text (van der Zwan 2012:*passim*). There are traces of religiosity from different stages of consciousness according to its development from a transpersonal-psychological viewpoint: pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal, with each stage including the previous stage(s). These stages have then also been reflected by the four kinds of interpretation without them coinciding exactly with only one stage of consciousness

(*vide supra*). One could therefore speak of different kinds of religiosity depending on the state of the interpreter and in this way opening up the text to the recipients. This multiplicity of perspectives on religiosity derives from contexts lent to the Song by each interpreter and contributes then to its openness from an overarching view of its reception. Each interpretation in itself, however, appears as closed because it represents only a part of the truth. This does not mean that each interpretation is in itself completely true but that it accurately reflects the state of consciousness of the interpreter, high-lighting certain aspects and potentials of the text. As a result each interpretation is a correction and critique on every other interpretation which claims to monopolise the text.

## **THE OPEN FORM OF THE SONG**

### **A flexible form**

Logical structuring of Song of Songs has defied uncontested results, despite ingenious attempts by Exum (1973) and Fischer (2010a): one is never really sure whether it is one long poem or an anthology, and if the latter, neither where one poem ends and the next begins. The semi-structure seems to reflect the struggle to find order and a sense of sobriety in the chaotic mental states of being in love and of being overwhelmed by the divine which both defy narrow, rational understanding. There does not seem to be a specific solution to the puzzle of this Song as there are always pieces which do not quite fit in or which could be superfluous in the strict poetic economy. The possibilities remain in flux and accents reshuffle themselves according to the needs and wishes of the recipient.

### **Lyrical nature**

It seems that the nature of lyrical texts is to invite not only different interpretations but also emendations of the text as is clear from other poetry in the Bible but which is, ironically, not the case during the transmission of the Song through the ages (Pope 1977:21; *vide supra*).

The Song is also an open text, because it is lyrical poetry. Since Plato and Aristotle and in particular since the Renaissance many people have regarded narrative, drama, and lyric as the three main forms of literary discourse. Yet dramatic and narrative features have also been identified in the Song.

On the one hand, the Song was interpreted as a drama from very early on, for example, by Origen in the third century, Delitsch, Ewald, Ginsburg, and Renan in the nineteenth century, and even in the twentieth century by people such as Hazan (Pope 1977:35). On the other hand, scholars such as Stephan Fischer (2010a) have been exploring the narrative dimensions of the Song. However, the virtual absence of plot (or history), characterisation, and the minimal setting in the Song disqualifies it from either drama or narrative. The Song is mainly, but not only, lyrical poetry.

What seems like setting in the Song is mostly metaphorical and the dialogue reveals relationality and feelings rather than character. Even when this dialogue is between the first and second persons, the recipient as an outsider third party identifies with either or both of them and is thus drawn into their emotional encounter.

What seem like characters are really voices: the male lover is never named, if one accepts that he is (precisely) not Solomon, and הַשׁוּלַמִּית (the Shulammit) in 7:1 is the enclitic use of an adjective.<sup>3</sup> Her “nickname” perhaps plays intertextually with “Shunammite”, the extremely beautiful girl who tried to “warm” David’s bed. However, there is very little internal plot or character development in terms of peripeteia (reversal of fortune) and anagnorisis (a dramatic moment of recognition or truth) which is so typical of narrative characterisation, except perhaps in the two narrative sections in chapters 3 and 5 (Linafelt 2006:297). The absence of real characters prevents their difference from opening up the text to the reader who can now not only more easily adopt the feelings expressed in the text (Linafelt 2006:300) but also project his or her own emotional experiences without being inhibited by the specific circumstances of the protagonists’ personalities.

Lyricism is about feelings and inner life experiences. While non-Biblical narratives often describe a character’s internal life, it is conspicuously absent in

<sup>3</sup> Although one finds an adjective with a definite article sometimes in Hebrew as a proper name (Kautzsch 1983:406, but Sommer 2009:167).

biblical narrative. Then, although it is, of course, always presented from an internal perspective, it is never done in such an emotional way as in lyric poetry which stimulates but also challenges the reader to project his or her own feelings and experiences beyond the recognition of those of the lyrical voice. The Song is rife with exaggerated testimonies, so often expressed by superlatives. Playing with metaphors, images, etc., in lyrical poetry also invites the recipient to associations with his or her own often private experiences.

Projection is inevitable and, in fact, ideal because the text presents at most only a certain outline of emotions and other inner experiences but more often only clues and in the best cases merely prods or provocations as a good psychoanalyst would do in therapy. These hints need to be connected by the reader who can then utilise his or her own internal resources of past and present experiences. As in good psychotherapy, good lyric should only provide a holding frame with as little content as possible in order to provide as much space for the recipient to become a producer. It is then that the recipient-producer claims that this “container” really understands because the experience of the recipient is then one of feeling mirrored as if the text actually expressed the same experiences. Apart from expressed feelings there is very little content in the Song with the emphasis on a form as an inviting container. Even what seems to be the first second order discursive reflection in the third person as if it presents a metaphysics of love in 8:6b–c is actually an emotional crescendo after all the previous explosions of feeling:

כי-עֵזָה כְּמוֹת אֶהְבֶּה קֶשֶׁה כְּשֵׂאוֹל קִנְיָה

(for strong as death is love, as radical as She'ol is passion)

רְשָׁפֶיהָ רְשָׁפֵי אֵשׁ שְׁלֵהֶבֶתֶיהָ

(its flames are flames of fire, an intense flame)<sup>4</sup>

What seems like plot in the pseudonarrative of 3:1–5 and 5:2–8 could just as well be interpreted as fantasies and therefore the inner life of the voice speaking. These two passages remain, however, without a context or consequences. Different from narrative and drama which both reflect or imitate external reality or a third

<sup>4</sup> Author's translation.

party/person (if the text serves as a second person to the first-person recipient), lyricism mimics the internal life of usually a single voice which induces these inner experiences in the recipient who participates empathically with the thoughts and feelings thus induced. Whereas drama and narrative show social relationships and thus function more in a sociological way, lyricism interacts more individualistically with the reader or listener and therefore works more psychologically (Linafelt 2006:292). It isolates feelings to render them more intense without any explanation or judgement (Linafelt 2006:297). That is why lyric is so closely related to music, already suggested by the title of this book. Music without lyrics presents a form without a context. It is as if even finality about the form of the text would simply leave it as a virtually empty container offering itself for the recipients' projections. The content happens in the moment, while it is read; lyricism does not remember feelings from the past, but expresses how they are experienced right now. It is no static sculpture or painting remembering former events but instead performs art in the present moment. The words of the Song are perhaps more like a musical score to which the recipient is invited to provide lyrics, and so more about the form than about content, a form created by repetition and rhythm and cadence, amongst others. It needs to be heard rather than read.

Lyricism plays in this creative way linguistically with structure, syntax, metaphor, productive ambiguity, etc. There are also structural developments in the Song as if replacing a development which a plot would have provided.

### **Sounds as form**

Its imagery is often expressed through double entendre which teases the reader with divergent possibilities and plays with meanings repeated in metaphors which reflect both similarities and dissimilarities at the same time. They link diverse realities and so broaden human experiential horizons. In this way lyric concentrates on feeling but stretches the context towards the universal to allow for more meaning in human experience while the patterns of repetition creates a holding sense of safety.

Bartelmus (2015:20) points to numerous homonyms and their ambiguous meanings, unless some of them are double entendres for which the Song is well known. As an example he refers to שְׁחוֹרָה, the first word in 1:5 which is commonly translated as “be(come) black”. However, he recognises the same consonants as those of a different root, meaning “seek eagerly for” or “be enchanted with” and even moots the possibility that שָׁחַר (dawn) which would occur later on in 6:10, could also (unconsciously) be associated with it to result in a cluster of shifting meanings of something like “her enchanting blackness”. Two words later, וְנִאֲוָה (and/but beautiful), could also be linked to another root, אוּוָה (desire), which fits the context very well. In the same verse, כִּי־רִיעוּת (like the curtains of), has been translated by the Septuagint and the Vulgate by words which mean “skin”. As Solomon could not have a black skin, the answer lies in שְׁלֹמֹה (Solomon), later incorrectly vocalised as it should refer to a desert tribe, Shalma. There are therefore four ambiguous words in just one short verse. The choice in each case depends on the context in which one chooses to embed the words. Of course, this kind of multiplication of possible meanings can be said of many words even in prosaic life, but are probably invited more spontaneously by a liberating poem.

Bartelmus (2015:25) shows that ambiguity can also be derived without homonyms as in the next verse where אַל-תִּרְאוּנִי (don’t look upon me) can be a plea not to heed the numinous nature of her blackness or a call not to be looked down upon with contempt or envy. This leaves the recipient with a riddle to be solved by active imagination.

## Interrogatives

Interrogatives can be found in several instances in the Song. Some may be regarded as rhetorical or exclamatory, but this is not always clear. In 1:7 (three times); 3:3, 6; 5:3 (twice), 8, 9 (twice); 7:1; 8:4, 5, and 8 a total of 14 questions are posed to the beloved, the accompanying choir or the audience. In 8:4 the adjuration refrain, having already occurred in 2:7 and 3:5 as almost imperative injunctions, now becomes a question. As if symbolic, the majority of questions are in the first, the fifth, that is, in the centre,

and in the last chapter. Questions therefore frame and centre the Song. In the majority of cases they concern the search of the female lover's beloved as embodiment of love. Even before an answer is proposed, such as after 5:8 and 9, the recipient is prone to wonder and to risk a tentative response. Being overwhelmed by love as a theme in the Song would naturally raise questions about its nature. On another level, in such a richly ambiguous text philosophical questions resist answers; meaning is rather to be found in the reader's aesthetic wonder and imagination.

## **EVALUATING THE OPEN NATURE OF THE SONG**

### **Barthes's views**

In his book *Le Plaisir du Texte* (The pleasure of the text), published in 1973, Roland Barthes, the great French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician distinguishes between two effects that a text can have on a reader: "plaisir" and "jouissance", i.e., pleasure and orgasmic bliss, which respectively relate to the nature of a text as being "lisible" or "scriptable", i.e., readerly or writerly, two concepts he had already coined in his 1970 book, *S/Z*.

A text gives plaisir (pleasure) when it does not challenge the reader as a subject, i.e., most of the information is given to a reader who can simply passively absorb it.

A text, however, provides jouissance (bliss or orgasm) when it is scriptible, a word Barthes creates in French, and in that sense also "wrote" his own language. This reminds one somehow of the *hapax legomena* in the Song which might have been at least partially the products of poetic freedom. Due to their nature they also leave open the question of what their exact meanings could be and in this way refuse to close the text. A text is scriptible, writerly or writable, when the reader has to "write" the text him- or herself because too little information is given and literary codes are in that way exploded. Some hints are given in the text but the reader is challenged as a subject to break out of a prescribed position and to come up with his or her own imagination which bridges the breaches between these hints. That the bliss, which a writerly text helps the recipient to achieve, is of some orgasmic kind, is, of course,



particularly relevant for a text like the Song with its erotic suggestions but withholding enough so that the reader does not just lie there but actively has to participate at least in the imagination to reach some ecstatic and creative breakthrough.

Barthes prefers these open, writerly texts because they end up being constantly new texts, depending on the context, personal state and perspective or the reader-writer.

The Song has, in fact, been read in a writerly way in the Jewish context where it has had the flexibility from serving as a liturgical text for Pesach and symbolising new dimensions of the Sabbath to providing an esoteric platform for kabbalistic explorations where “the female lover becomes an open space ... receiving the male into herself ... and subsequently expands and overflows beyond herself” (Kearney 2006:314).

### **Traditionals’ shock**

The initial reaction to the Song’s alleged openness in the Jewish tradition in which it was canonized could be one of shock, since what is regarded as the Word of God can have but one meaning. Revelation from the Bible which adjusts itself to the personal situations of the recipients is still foreign, especially in conservative circles, even when they constantly pray for personal guidance. It is particularly in times of crises that clinging to an anchor as regression or even fixation is a strong psychological and spiritual need. Openness as progression sounds contradictory as the need is precisely for a closed, “homely” feeling of protection and safety. It is during those times hard to imagine that the so-called inspired Word of God can and should even be an inspiring Word of God. In addition, the more objective danger is, of course, that this openness can deteriorate into hermeneutical promiscuity, that is, reckless interpretation without following any socially agreed rules.

### **Positive psychological surprises**

With Barthes one may then be thankful that one knows so little about the background and origin of the text. This ignorance now liberates us from the singleness of the text

and opens up a plethora of possibilities because the Song does not seem to be a “single” book. From a psychoanalytic perspective openness and even vagueness is evidence of a constant creative and dynamic relationship between the text and the recipient, often expressed in symbols to suggest the ineffable nature of this experience which needs to be responded to in a participative way (Borbely 1998:930). The meaning remains in tension and context sensitive (Jakobson 1970:*passim*). Through a whole-object relationship the polysemy sometimes experienced as the creative tension of ambivalence yet integrated opens up a richer meaning for the recipient. That this openness is partially due to the nature of the text testifies to the text as facilitating its constant, creative, and lively reinterpretation.

The openness of the Song is perhaps related to the elusive-as-ideal and ineffable object of love which escapes any final grip on its meaning just as the last verse of the text does not leave it with real closure: there is no final word on this text.

Perhaps the text serves as a test, a kind of Rorschach test, a mirror which simply reflects what the religiosity of the reader is, independently from the text, a litmus test which indicates the religious inclination or not of the recipient.

The Song elicits all kinds of fantasies, fantasies which are important if one wants to understand the recipients of the text. During the two thousand years of research on the text there has, in fact, been virtually no research on the psychological reasons for the reception of the text.

### **Mystical dimensions**

The most important advantage of an open text such as the Song may be found in the “emptiness” which Rudolf Otto has recognised, apart from silence and darkness, as circumstantial requirements for the development of a deeper sense and experience of the numinous. Emptiness, or rather openness, is a well-known feature of Eastern spirituality. In Western religiosity this is mainly found in the Biblical book of Job where the protagonist has to learn to live without answers but even there the principal message is usually seen rather in the piety of the protagonist.

The references to the (wide-stretching) desert in 3:6 and 8:5, especially linked as both of them are open interrogatives, as well as the poetic simplicity of sometimes ordinary and repetitive vocabulary, such as the word יָפֵה (beautiful), in an elevated atmosphere adds the Eastern recognition of (here, relative) emptiness as numinous element in the aesthetic (Otto 2014:89–90), even when this is again at times disturbed by the unexpected *hapax legomena*. By creating an alternation between the calmer and more arousing parts of the poetry, and by repeating certain central feelings or ideas, for instance, in the various refrains, space for a more meditative processing is allowed in the Song. This feature of the Song can also be intuited from the “openness” which it has experienced in its interpretation.

Shocking to both the traditional and the modern interpretations could be that the Song is actually silent (in the sense of being explicit) about religion and sex respectively although both are constantly present and subtly interwoven into the texture of the text which remains open to expansion and elevation. Otto’s insight that the recognition of the numinous (which cannot be communicated by language) despite this silence agrees with the view of transpersonal psychology that “reality” is dependent on the state of consciousness.

A sense of darkness can be found only indirectly in the Song and then presents something of the unexpected to be included. The first reference to darkness comes actually quite early and quite literally as the female lover refers for the first time to her physical appearance and more specifically her dark skin. Even if one imagines the Song to play out mostly in sunny fields of nature, the aesthetic impressions leave them with obscure feelings which transcend their control as in 2:5, 5:8, 6:5, 6:12 and 7:6b. From the principal refrains it sounds as if being in love with the beauty of a body is like a sleep from which the lovers rather not be awakened. The suggestion of nocturnal experiences in 2:17 (after the hushed and lingering “musicality” of 2:11–16) and 7:12, as well as the twilight of dawn hinted at by the shadows of 2:17 and 4:6 (and perhaps even by 6:12) could reflect something of this toned-down light. There might also be a struggle against the darkness of death in 8:6 when the flames of love survive it. By withholding details about their surroundings one is kept in the dark and seduced, so to

speak, to join in the sleep of love and dream of things precisely because they are absent.

The openness of the Song calls for humility and can be a model for interreligious dialogue where it becomes clear that divine revelation can also have another much more flexible nature than what one has been taught. The cultic-mythical interpretation is reflected in the magical and mythical stages of religious development and opens up interfaith understanding of commonalities and relativity between different religious traditions rather than undermining and discrediting religious claims. The literal and naturalistic interpretations of Song of Songs reflect the need for sobriety of the rational stage of religiosity as another expression of the search for human universals and the appreciation for the immanent and the aesthetic. The allegorical repression of sexual awareness is parallel to the latent stage of individual development when sexuality is temporarily toned down. It expresses, however, the need for internal linking through symbolisation in a corrective effort to transcend the narrow flatland orientation which cannot sense anything beyond the physical. However, in doing so the physical is instead demeaned. The mystical is perhaps the most inclusive as it accommodates all these attitudes, integrates them and even strives to go beyond them. These stages represent the stations of transpersonal psychology (van der Zwan 2012:*passim*).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study started off by scanning the history of the interpretation of the Song to show its openness to the projections of its readers. Some themes of openness in the text itself, and the features of the form of the text as lyrical poetry, were added to strengthen this general impression of the Song. Another reason for the openness is, of course, situated in the historical distance resulting in many layers and therefore uncertainties about its meaning, which has likewise been translated in divergent ways over the centuries of its transmission, but this applies to other biblical books as well. From this it became clear that a psychological understanding of the reception of the text is closely linked and dependent on the nature of the text, even when it is also

influenced by the context of the reception. An evaluation of the effects of such an open text was then presented to acknowledge both its challenges and its potential.

Two heuristic questions now arise. What does this openness mean for a text which is part of two religious canons, with claims of divine revelation attached to them? With the focus on the internal life of the voices with which that of the recipient is supposed to resonate, why has psychological understanding as an important entry into the text not yet become more important during the long history of its interpretation as one would have expected?

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