

# The Rhetoric of Body, Desire and Consummation in the Song of Songs

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“O that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” Thus begins the Song of Songs, a book that is often seen as perhaps the most remarkable inclusion in the biblical canon.<sup>1</sup> However, Rabbi Aqiba, defending the Song against those who questioned its holiness, gave an emphatic endorsement when he described it as nothing less than the “Holy of Holies” (*Yad.* 3:5). Of course, Aqiba’s injunction against those who turn it into an ordinary song by singing it in wine-taverns and who therefore have no share in the world to come (*t. Sanh.* 12:10; *Sanh.* 101a) indicates that it was the Song’s allegorical reading, which saw it as a celebration of the mutual bond of love between God and his people, that led to such emphatic endorsement.

However, ever since Johann Gottfried von Herder’s influential work,<sup>2</sup> allegorical readings have come under severe criticism, and at present there is wide-spread agreement that the Song’s evocative poetry portrays the passionate yearnings of a human couple for each other.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the waning of the allegorical approach, which, during patristic and medieval times, had turned the Song into one of the most frequently read and commented upon books of the Bible,<sup>4</sup> has seen it relegated to the

1. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 129, even goes so far as to suggest that the Song’s canonization may have been due to “a certain amount of blindness on the rabbis’ part.”

2. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Lieder der Liebe: Die ältesten und schönsten aus dem Morgenlande. Nebst vier und vierzig Minneliedern* (Leipzig: Weygand, 1778). On Herder’s influence on the interpretation of the Song see Robert T. Clark, “Herder, Percy, and the Song of Songs,” *PMLA* 61 (1946) 1087-1100 (p. 1099 no. 29), and the discussion in John D. Baildam, *Paradisal Love: Johann Gottfried Herder and the Song of Songs* (JSOTSup 298; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 294-302.

3. Allegorical readings do persist to this day, however, and should not be dismissed, especially if they take the Song’s celebration of human love and sexuality seriously. For recent allegorical or figural readings, see Robert W. Jenson, *Song of Songs* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2005); and Paul J. Griffiths, *Song of Songs* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011). Other writers have sought to integrate a spiritual approach to the Song into their work without resorting to allegory. Examples of such an approach include Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); and David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

4. According to Carr, *Erotic Word*, 4, there are more Latin manuscripts on the Song than on any other biblical text and, judging by the amount of sermons that have come down to us, it seems that medieval preachers turned to it more often than to any other Old or New Testament book, with the sole exceptions of the Psalms and the Gospel of John.

side-lines where it plays hardly any role in contemporary Christian spirituality and imagination.

Against this trend, it is my contention that the Song is just as important today, now that its evocation of intense erotic longing and its fulfillment in the pleasures of sexual encounter are appreciated for what they are. Given Christianity's troubled history with the body, desire and gender relations, its daring poetry has much to offer to the church and to contemporary theology. And thus, in this rhetorical-critical investigation, I am going to focus on the Song's main types of rhetorical discourse, the rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation, the rhetoric of desire, and the rhetoric of enjoyment and consummation,<sup>5</sup> attempting to show how the Song's poetry foregrounds, celebrates and thus encourages affirmative and constructive engagement with these issues that are of such fundamental importance given our embodied human existence.

#### THE RHETORIC OF AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

The Song's rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation is on display in those passages in which the two lovers extol each other's physical charms. Some brief examples of this are found in the first two chapters where the man praises his beloved's cheeks and neck together with their adornments (1:10), while the woman compares her lover to a lotus among brambles (2:2), an apricot tree<sup>6</sup> among other trees of the forest (2:3) and a gazelle and a young stag (2:9). Both also describe the other as generally beautiful (see 1:15 with its focus on the woman's eyes;<sup>7</sup> 1:16 and 2:14, which concentrates on the woman's voice and appearance<sup>8</sup>).

5. This leaves some aspects of the Song's rhetoric unaccounted for, but these three types of discourse account for most of its material. My study of the Song's rhetoric was inspired by Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, who similarly distinguishes between three types of rhetorical discourse, (a) expressions of the aesthetic appreciation of the other's beauty which focus on the other as the object of one's affections, (b) affective expressions of the lover's feelings in which the lover as the subject expressing those feelings takes centre stage, and (c) expressions of the physical impact of yearning where the focus remains on the speaker while moving from the lover's feelings to the physical impact of desire (see esp. pp. 56-57). However, my approach differs from Walsh's in two significant ways, because I have not found it helpful or necessary to distinguish between affective expressions and expressions of the physical impact of yearning and because I disagree with her contention that there is no evidence of consummation in the Song (*Exquisite Desire*, 97) – hence the need for my third category, the rhetoric of enjoyment and consummation.

6. English translations traditionally speak of an apple, but the common apple is not native to Palestine and its fruit, prior to the application of modern cultivation techniques, would have been small and acid. This has been pointed out by Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 149, who also note that modern botanists tend to identify the תַּפְּוֹחַ (*tappûah*) with the apricot tree.

7. It has been suggested that the point of comparing the woman's eyes to doves might be to praise their oval shape. Alternatively, it could be the gentleness of doves that is in view.

8. The word often translated "face" (e.g. NRSV, ESV, TNK, NIV) is מַרְאֵה (*mar'eh*), which can mean "sight, appearance, form, face, countenance." It occurs twice in this verse, once in the plural ("let me see

Such general focus on the woman's beauty also frames the first of four longer poems that feature descriptions of the two lovers' physical charms (4:1, 7).<sup>9</sup> A similar statement opens the third of these passages (6:4), and yet another one is found towards the end of the fourth (7:7 [6]). In other words, all three poems that feature the man's praise of his beloved's charms (4:1-7; 6:4-7; 7:2-8 [1-7]) include such general praise of her beauty. But the true significance of these texts, which contain the most extensive examples of the rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation and to which must be added the woman's praise of her lover's beauty in 5:10-16, does not lie in such general praise but in the systematic enumeration and metaphorical depiction and celebration of the beauty of the other's body parts.

The Song's rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation is driven by the man's voice. In the first descriptive poem (4:1-7), moving from the top downwards, he praises his beloved's eyes, hair, teeth, lips, mouth,<sup>10</sup> brow,<sup>11</sup> neck and breasts. The second one (6:4-7) reads, at least in parts, like an abbreviated repetition of the first. Here the lips, mouth, neck and breasts are omitted,<sup>12</sup> but in other respects the second poem is an intensification of the first. This is apparent in the opening general praise of the woman's beauty (6:4),

your sights") and once in the singular ("your appearance is beautiful"). Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 156, suggest that the plural "is meaningful and fully motivated: the lover wants to see the Shulamite from every side."

9. These poems are known as *wasfs* after Arabic love songs in which lovers praise the physical attributes of their partners. The investigation of the genre goes back to J. G. Wetzstein, "Die syrische Dreschtafel," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 5 (1873) 270-302, whose study of modern Syrian wedding songs revealed instructive parallels between those songs and the Song of Songs.

10. The second line of 4:3 is ambiguous in that מִדְּבָר (midbār) can refer to the woman's speech (KJV), voice (Ibn Ezra, Rashi) or mouth (NASB, NIV, NRSV, ESV, TNK). Because of a perceived parallel with 2:14 (the adjective נְאֻהָ [nā'weh] occurs in both verses), where the focus is on acoustic and visual aspects (the woman's voice and appearance), and due to the poem's praise of the beauty of the woman's lips and mouth being seen as redundant, Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 170, translate מִדְּבָר (midbār) as "voice." However, they fail to observe that the focus throughout 4:1-5 is on visual aspects. Moreover, far from being redundant, the praise of the beauty of the woman's mouth rounds off the description in vv. 2-3a, which began by praising the whiteness, regularity and completeness of her teeth before moving on to the deep redness of her lips, by summing up and depicting her entire mouth as beautiful.

11. Translators and commentators are not agreed on the identity of the next body part. "Cheeks" (NRSV, ESV) or "temples" (KJV, NASB, NIV) are popular proposals. Yet these translations obscure the fact that רִקְהָ (raqqāh) is in the singular. Nor does the text talk about pieces or halves of a pomegranate, as some imply (e.g. NRSV, ESV, NIV; Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* [Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005] 112). Again, the relevant term (פְּלֶהָ [pelaḥ]) appears in the singular. All this is best captured in the translation of TNK, which reads, "your brow ... gleams like a pomegranate split open." The point of comparison appears to be the colour of the pomegranate, which her brow equals.

12. There are also some minor variations, such as "Gilead" (6:5) instead of "Mount Gilead" (4:1) and "a flock of ewes" (רְחֵלִים [rēḥēlīm]; 6:6) instead of "a shorn flock" (עֵדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת [‘edēr haqqəšûbôt]; 4:2).

which is not only compared to the splendor of Tirzah and Jerusalem<sup>13</sup> but is praised as being as awesome as the stars.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps even more poignantly, the eyes, depicted as doves in the first poem (4:1), now make the man tremble and even lead him to plead with his beloved to turn them away from him (6:5).

In the third poem (7:2-8 [1-7]), which appraises the dancing woman, the movement, appropriately beginning with the dancer's feet that have caught the man's attention, is from the bottom up. Apart from the feet,<sup>15</sup> the man marvels at the beauty of her hips,<sup>16</sup> navel,<sup>17</sup> belly, breasts, neck, eyes, nose, head and hair, and her entire stature. The

13. Assuming the reference to be to the capitals of Israel and Judah, Peter Jay, *The Song of Songs* (1975; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Poetica 31; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1998) 58, believes that "the comparisons gain point ... if the poem was written while Tirzah was still a capital," i.e. prior to 887 BCE, but Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 189, maintain that "Tirzah is yet another element in the rich allusive web that links the Song with the long bygone era when this ancient royal city, like Heshbon (7:5), was part of Solomon's vast empire."

14. נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*), here rendered "stars," is related to two other words in the Song, דֶּגֶל (*degel*), "banner," in 2:4 and דָּגוּל (*dāgûl*), "outstanding," in 5:10. Based on this, Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 191, suggest a literal translation along the lines of "those who are prominent, conspicuous."

נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*) appears again in 6:10 where it is preceded by references to the sun and moon. As Bloch and Bloch point out, when "sun" and "moon" in the Old Testament are followed by a third term, it is one that refers to the stars (see e.g. Gen. 37:9; Deut. 4:19; Ps. 148:3; Jer. 31:35). This suggests that נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*) in 6:10 is best understood as an epithet for the stars or a group of stars, a conclusion that is supported by the structure of the verse, which can be depicted as an interlocking parallelism in which day and night alternate: (a) day (morning star), (b) night (moon), (a) day (sun), (b) night (stars), or as a chiasm: (a) star, (b) moon, (b) sun, (a) stars (see Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 191, for these structural observations). Interestingly, the celestial bodies are not referred to by their usual names but by poetic terms that draw attention to their attributes. The moon is לְבָנָה (*lěbānāh*), "the white one," most likely an allusion to the full moon, the sun is חַמָּה (*ḥammāh*), "the hot one," and the stars are נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*), "the prominent ones."

If it thus appears that נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*) in 6:10 serves as an epithet for the stars, it would seem likely that the term carries the same connotations in v. 4. The translation "stars" is thus preferable to a rendering along the lines of "an army with banners" (thus KJV, NASB, NIV, RSV, NRSV, ESV).

15. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 77, perceptively comments that desire "takes the unnoticed mundane – a sandaled foot – and lights it up for the breathtaking beauty that it really is for the first time."

16. Some translations speak of the woman's rounded thighs (RSV, NRSV, TNK), which is a possible rendering. Hebrew יָרֵךְ (*yārēk*) can refer to the upper thigh, the area of the genitals (Gen. 24:2, 9; 47:29) and the outer area of the hips where, for instance, a sword is worn (Exod. 32:27; Judg. 3:16, 21; Song 3:8). It is therefore equally possible that the reference is to the curved hips (thus NASB), as is assumed here.

17. The rare Hebrew term שֹׁר (*šōr*) is also found in Ezekiel 16:4 where it denotes the umbilical cord. It is partly for this reason that interpreters have concluded that the reference must be to the navel. The comparison with a rounded bowl supports this. Yet the wish that it never lack wine would seem to point in another direction. Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 234, amongst others, has argued that this requires "'navel' to be understood as a euphemism for vulva." He draws our attention to Syrian and Palestinian terra-cotta figurines featuring a rounded bowl that somewhat interchangeably depicts either the goddess's navel or vulva. The same interchangeability of navel and genitalia is demonstrated by pendants from Ugarit and Tell el-Adshul, south of Gaza, which feature a branch or stylised tree that variously grows from the pubic area or out of the navel. Keel adds that the moist vulva is regularly cherished as an intoxicating drink for the male lover in Sumerian sacred marriage texts.

woman, for her part, beginning with her lover's radiant and ruddy complexion,<sup>18</sup> in another downward movement, praises the man's head and hair, eyes, cheeks, lips, arms,<sup>19</sup> belly,<sup>20</sup> legs,<sup>21</sup> general appearance and palate<sup>22</sup> (5:10-16).

While there is much that could be said about these descriptive poems, I want to restrict my comments to some aspects that deserve particular attention, such as the rhetorical function of these lists as lists, their foregrounding of the body, the nature and function of the metaphors employed by the poet, and the nature and function of the rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation.

The first aspect, the function of the descriptive poems as lists, is perhaps most instructively illuminated with reference to Umberto Eco's recent comments on the rhetoric of enumeration.<sup>23</sup> There is a readily perceived exuberance in the lovers' listing

Others have questioned this understanding. Countering a comment by Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7C; New York: Doubleday, 1977) 617-18, that "navels are not notable for their capacity to store or dispense moisture," Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 159, asserts that "it is not the navel but the bowl that is supposed to do so." Hess, *Song of Songs*, 196, similarly points out that "the wine is related to the bowl, not the navel .... It is the function of such a bowl to contain wine; it is the perceived beauty of the navel to be large and deep like such a bowl." Commenting on the figurines presented by Keel, Hess suggests that the prominent display of the navel indicates that it must have been perceived as an object of significance and beauty in itself. Having originally rendered the line "your sex a rounded bowl" and commented that the description here moves to the vagina (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* [New York: Basic Books, 1985] 196-97), Alter subsequently questioned that reading, pointing out that "it is utterly implausible to imagine the Shulamite dancing naked, her sex visible to the audience, and the poetic decorum of the Song precludes the direct naming of sexual organs, though the poet may well intimate *correspondences* between navel, or mouth, or door latch, and the woman's hidden parts" (Robert Alter, "Afterword," in Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995] 127).

Given these considerations, שֶׁר (šōr) is best translated "navel," for that is what the term primarily means. However, as it is in the very nature of poetic texts to trigger layers upon layers of meaning, it would seem misguided and, indeed, futile to seek to rule out additional associations that the notion of a rounded bowl containing mixed wine clearly invites, especially as wine is so strongly associated with lovemaking and the joys of sexual intercourse in the Song (see esp. 5:1).

18. The first adjective (צָהַ [ṣah]), here rendered "radiant," conveys a sense of shining or glimmering; the second (אָדוֹם [ʾādōm]) denotes the ruddy colour of the man's skin. More importantly, he stands out among the crowds. Hess, *Song of Songs*, 163, translates דָּגוּל (dāgûl) as "better looking."

19. Literally "hands," יָדַיַם (yādayim).

20. The term translated "belly," מְעֵיִם (mē'im), which normally denotes the inner organs and the emotions associated with them (see 5:4), here refers to the visible belly as in Daniel 2:32, where it is used of a statue.

21. Literally "thighs," שׁוֹקֵיִם (šôqîm).

22. The lover's palate, which is described as sweet wine (v. 16), stands for his kisses (cf. 7:10 [9]). Some translators have taken the reference to be to the man's speech (e.g. RSV, NRSV), which, while reflecting a possible rendering of the Hebrew term הֶעֱךְ (hēk), is unlikely in the present context. As Keel, *Song of Songs*, 206, has shown, the descriptions of the two lovers usually lead to statements expressing their determination of sensual enjoyment (4:6; 4:16-5:1).

23. See Umberto Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) 124-37.

of each other's physical charms, which leads them to catalogue one after another. It is almost as though, in Eco's words, "what matters is that one is seized by the hypnotic sound of the list."<sup>24</sup> And while the lovers' descriptions do not quite live up to his dictum that the "purpose of a good list is to convey the idea of infinity" – after all, there is a limit to the number of body parts one can praise – their words do convey a sense of "the vertigo of the *etcetera*," to appeal once again to Eco's terminology.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from this pleasure in enlisting the other's charms, these descriptive poems, and indeed the Song generally, illustrate what Eco calls a "pure love of iteration."<sup>26</sup> Again and again, the lovers praise each other's beauty (1:8, 15-16; 2:10, 13-14; 4:1, 3, 7; 5:9; 6:1, 4; 7:2 [1], 7 [6]). The eyes especially are admired repeatedly (1:15; 4:1, 9; 5:12; 6:5; 7:5 [4]), and, of course, the third poem in 6:4-7 repeats, albeit in an abbreviated and slightly modified but also in parts intensified form, the first one (4:1-7). Taken together, the rhetoric of enumeration and iteration clearly foreground the couple's delight in each other's bodies, which are perceived as beautiful and desirable.

Such unembarrassed delight in the body continues to be of invaluable importance given Christianity's troubled relationship with human embodiment. As Elaine Graham lamented not so very long ago, "the fundamentals of human emotion and bodiliness seem neither worthy nor appropriate avenues to the divine, and so, especially in the context of public worship, any mention, let alone celebration, of human sexuality is virtually taboo."<sup>27</sup> In striking contrast to traditional Christian views of the body as a source of sinfulness, corruption and depravity,<sup>28</sup> the poet of the Song, especially in the descriptive poems with their exuberant celebration of the lovers' bodies, presents us with what has been aptly described as a "hymn to the beauty of the body and the goodness of creation, to the sheer joy of bodily existence and its pleasures."<sup>29</sup>

This is conveyed not only in the enumeration of the other's body parts but most expressively also by means of the Song's striking metaphors, which, as Carey Ellen Walsh has observed, in the case of the descriptive poems' rhetoric of aesthetic

24. Ibid., 125.

25. Ibid., 129.

26. Ibid., 125.

27. Elaine Graham, "Truth or Dare? Sexuality, Liturgy and Pastoral Theology," in David Willows and John Swinton (eds), *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000) 95-101 (95).

28. Instructive accounts of traditional Christian attitudes to the body and human sexuality have been offered, amongst others, by James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 37-69; and Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 85-116.

29. Nelson, *Embodiment*, 84.

appreciation are primarily zoological, topographical and architectural in nature.<sup>30</sup> To Walsh's categories needs to be added that of sculpture, which is prominent in the second descriptive poem in which the woman praises her lover's charms (5:10-16). In terms of their sensory appeal, the metaphors in all four poems are primarily visual images<sup>31</sup> rather than tactile, olfactory or palatal ones. There are some exceptions to this, most notably in the woman's description of the man's cheeks (5:13), where the focus is an olfactory one,<sup>32</sup> as well as his lips and palate (5:13, 16), where the more intimate sense of taste prevails.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, it is primarily the woman who moves beyond visual images in her celebration of her lover's appeal.

These observations regarding the nature of the metaphors call for some comment on their function, which I propose to offer in connection with some considerations on the nature and function of the rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation. Robert Alter once suggested that sight and sound, as senses that are experienced at a distance, are of only secondary significance in the Song, characterized by him as a "poem of physical closeness."<sup>34</sup> According to Alter, the only instance where sight features as "a vehicle of intimacy"<sup>35</sup> is in 4:9: "you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes."

However, while it is the senses of taste and smell that predominate in the Song's depictions of the couple's most intimate moments, visual imagery and its focus on the more distant sense of sight clearly and rather fittingly play a substantial role in the descriptive poems of 4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:4-7 and 7:2-8 (1-7). For although it is in their expression of the aesthetic appreciation of the other that the *beginnings* of the articulation of desire are found, that desire is here merely implied rather than overtly expressed.<sup>36</sup> "Complimentary description," Walsh suggests, "remains on the border of

30. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 81. Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Bible and Literature Series; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982) 81, similarly speaks of "images drawn from the realms of nature and artifice."

31. Falk, *Love Lyrics*, 80-87, responding to earlier readings of the Song in which scholarly failure to understand the book's metaphorical language, especially that of the *wasfs*, led to its labelling as "bizarre," "grotesque," "comical" or "puzzling," offers some helpful comments on the process of visualisation that is required for these images to shine in all their startling ingenuity.

32. As Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 166, has noted, when the woman turns to her lover's cheeks (5:13), which are likened to a bed of spice, the reference might well be to a perfumed beard.

33. See also Falk, *Love Lyrics*, 81. Perhaps the image of the gazelles in 4:5 includes a tactile dimension as well, as Alter, "Afterword," 128, suggests, pointing out that "an invitation to caress" might perhaps be implied.

34. Alter, "Afterword," 122, who notes that when sight is mentioned for the first time, in 1:6, it occurs in a negative context: "don't just see that I'm swarthy."

35. *Ibid.*, 123.

36. See Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 57.

flattery – safe, inoffensive, desire neatly packaged.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as she further notes, “these expressions of physical admiration are at best cloaked invitations to further intimacy. [...] Sexual yearning, at this stage, is under flattery’s control and is not going anywhere.”<sup>38</sup> All this, however, is about to change in the Song’s rhetoric of longing and desire.

#### THE RHETORIC OF DESIRE

Rhetoric of desire suffuses the Song from beginning to end. It aims at various levels of intimacy and is expressed in varying degrees of intensity. At one end of the spectrum, we encounter the lovers’ longing simply to be together and enjoy each other’s presence. “Pull me after you. Let’s run!” (1:4) the woman says; and she wants to know where her lover is going to pasture his flocks so that she will not get lost while looking for him (1:7). Comparing him to an apricot tree, she declares that she always desires to sit<sup>39</sup> in his shade (2:3).

The man, for his part, appeals to his beloved to arise and come, because he longs to see her “sights”<sup>40</sup> and hear her voice (2:10-14). His wish that she come to him is expressed again in 4:8-9, a passage in which he talks about his inner turmoil, lamenting that she has stolen his heart<sup>41</sup> with one glance of her eyes. An even stronger sense of inner turmoil is evident in the man’s plea that his beloved turn her eyes away from him because they make him tremble (6:5).<sup>42</sup> There is an evident note of intensification in the man’s references to his beloved’s eyes. At first (1:15; 4:1), they are merely portrayed as doves. Later on (4:9), the lover admits that they have stolen his heart with a single

37. Ibid., 59.

38. Ibid., 67.

39. **יָשָׁב** (*yšb*) can also mean “stay awhile, linger on,” while the Piel of **חָמַד** (*hmd*), “delight,” may have been chosen to convey a sense of continuity or prolonged experience. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 414-16, on the frequentative Piel. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 150, who render the phrase in past tense, suggest that a free translation, such as “I took delight many times, and stayed on and on,” best captures these nuances. The translation adopted here, “I always delight to sit,” similarly attempts to convey the notions of lingering and repetition suggested by the Hebrew text.

40. See the discussion of 2:14 above.

41. The verb **לִבְבַתְּנִי** (*libbātīnī*) has led to much discussion. While it is clear that **לִבָּב** (*lbb*) is related to **לֵבָב** (*lēbāb*), “heart,” its precise meaning is far from certain. One suggestion, adopted here, is that it means something along the lines of “steal, enchant, captivate, ravish the heart.” Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction*, 412, citing Song 4:9 as an example, note that the Piel can denote the taking away of something. Another possibility is to translate “you have heartened, encouraged, emboldened me” (thus Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 175).

42. Once again, the precise meaning of the verb **רָהַב** (*rhb* Hiphil) is uncertain, but translations such as “overwhelm” (NRSV, ESV, NIV, TNK; Hess, *Song of Songs*, 193), “overcome” (KJV), “confuse” (NASB), “disturb” (RSV), “dazzle” (NEB; Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 93), “make tremble” (Fox, *Song of Songs*, 150), or “make crazy” (Keel, *Song of Songs*, 211) all indicate its basic force.

glance, and now, being completely undone by them, he can only plead that she turn them away from him. The woman's hair has a profound effect on him as well, for a king, he says, is captured by its tresses<sup>43</sup> (7:6 [5]), the king, of course, being none other than he himself.<sup>44</sup> Michael Fox notes that ancient Egyptian love songs feature images of a lover captured by the woman's hair like a bird in a trap or caught by it as with a lasso.<sup>45</sup> Alter speaks of "tactile entanglement,"<sup>46</sup> but the language appears to be metaphorical. And yet it is worth observing that the overpowering effect the woman's hair is having on the man's emotional state is expressed precisely in such a metaphor of tactile entanglement.

At a more intimate level, the woman yearns for her lover's kisses (1:2). Remarkably, it is with the expression of this yearning that the Song begins. Later on, the woman wishes to be propped up among blossoms and spread out among apricots,<sup>47</sup> because, being sick with love, she longs for intimate union with her lover (2:5). Intense longing is also evident when the woman talks about desiring her lover at night, which leads her to look for him in the city and bring him back to her mother's house (3:1-4). Her bidding to her lover to be like a gazelle or young stag on the cleft mountains until morning, "until the day breathes and the shadows flee"<sup>48</sup> (2:17), is, as Alter has pointed out, nothing

43. The term used to refer to the woman's hair (רְהָטִים [rēhāṭīm]) is used in Genesis 30:38, 41 and Exodus 2:16 to designate "water troughs." The word for "rafters" (רְהִיטָנוּ [rahîṭēnū]) in Song 1:17 is derived from the same root רָהַט (rḥṭ), "to run." In 7:6 (5) long, flowing tresses appear to be in view.

44. The woman also refers to her lover as king in 1:4, 12.

45. Fox, *Song of Songs*, 161 (see also the relevant lines on pp. 9, 73).

46. Alter, "Afterword," 129.

47. Song 2:5 is difficult to translate. We have already seen that the apples mentioned in the translations are more likely to have been apricots, but the raisin cakes found in many translations are uncertain, too. אֲשִׁישָׁה ('āšīšāh) appears also in 2 Samuel 6:19; 1 Chronicles 16:3 and Hosea 3:1. In the latter case, the fact that raisin cakes are in view is explicitly spelled out by the addition of "grapes" (אֲנָבִים [ānābîm]). It has been suggested that אֲשִׁישָׁה ('āšīšāh) on its own refers to an "inflorescence," i.e. a cluster of flowers arranged on a stem (see Fox, *Song of Songs*, 109).

But what is the woman asking her addressees to do? Most translations think of the provision of some kind of sustenance or refreshment, but רָדַף (rdp Piel) makes that unlikely. Hess, *Song of Songs*, 46, admits that it normally means "extend, spread out," but he believes that the parallel in the first line demands an interpretation along the lines of refreshment. However, the first verb (סָמַךְ smk) is also better understood as "support, prop up." It occurs in an intensified form here (i.e. in the Piel), but it is difficult to see in what sense "refresh" is an intensification of "support."

My reading follows Fox, *Song of Songs*, 109, who has pointed out that "the Shulamite wishes to lie among fruit clusters and apricots .... Following close upon the comparison of the youth to an apricot tree, mention of the fruits naturally makes one think of the youth's caresses. The girl wants to be surrounded by the sweet fragrance of his lovemaking." This interpretation fits the context well since the woman's wish is followed precisely by the erotic encounter she had been yearning for (2:6).

48. Reading "before the day breathes and the shadows flee," Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 157, understand the verse as the woman's request that her lover hurry away before daybreak so that they will not be discovered. However, since the preposition אֲדָשׁ ('ad še) usually means "until," it is preferable to understand the woman's words as an invitation to spend the night together.

other than an invitation “to a night of pleasure.”<sup>49</sup> Essentially the same invitation is issued at the end of the Song when the woman urges her lover to slip away<sup>50</sup> from his friends and be like a gazelle or young stag once more on the spice mountains (8:14). And when, in 4:16, she invokes the north and south winds, calling upon them to blow upon her garden, she once again expresses her desire that her lover come and eat the delicious fruit of sexual union.

Yet another invitation is found in 7:12–8:2 (7:11–8:2), where the woman once again entices her lover to spend the night together. There appears to be a teasing quality to her suggestion that they go and see whether the vine and pomegranates are in bloom (7:13 [12]); she is here echoing the language her lover had used in 6:11). This would be an indication that the time of lovemaking had come, but she already knows that she has stored up “all kinds of delicious fruits”<sup>51</sup> for him (7:14 [13]). Indeed, not only does she desire to kiss her lover openly in public (8:1 [7:14]),<sup>52</sup> she looks forward to giving him her spiced wine to drink, clearly a reference to her kisses,<sup>53</sup> and be taught by him in the art of lovemaking (8:2).<sup>54</sup>

49. Alter, *Art*, 195. This implies that the lotuses and cleft mountains “are on the landscape of her body” (thus Alter, *ibid.*), where, like a gazelle or young stag, the lover is invited to frolic through the night. That this is the intended meaning is reinforced by the parallel in 4:6, which features the same poetic allusion to the break of day and clearly expresses the man’s intent to spend the night on what is there called “the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.”

50. The interpretation of this verse hinges upon our understanding of ברח (*brḥ*), “flee, run away, slip away.” While most English versions translate along the lines of “make haste” (KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV) or “hurry” (NASB, TNK), Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 221, noting that the verb can only mean “flee away from someone,” conclude that the woman is asking her lover to flee away from her, apparently so that the two will not get caught together. Verse 14 is thus understood in much the same way as the woman’s earlier plea that her lover be like a gazelle or a young stag and bound away before daybreak (2:17). However, just as those words are better understood as an invitation to her lover to spend the night together, so the Song’s closing lines find the lovers united once again. The woman is not asking her lover to flee away from her; she is enticing him to “slip away” from his friends in whose company he is found in the previous verse.

51. She literally says that “all kinds of delicious things” are available at “our doors.” The reference could be to all manner of delicacies, but as מְגַדִּים (*mēgādîm*) was used with reference to fruits in 4:13, 16, the same is probably in view here, too.

52. The woman’s worry is that she might be taken for a harlot if she was to kiss her lover openly in public (see Prov. 7:13, which illustrates the practice of a prostitute (זֹנָה *zōnāh*) who openly kisses her punter in public). It is this worry that causes her to use the strong term “despise.”

53. The Song repeatedly associates kissing and wine (see 1:2; 4:11; 5:16; 7:10 [9]). This association is reinforced in the Hebrew by means of the phonetic similarity between אֶשְׁקֶךָ (*’eššāqēkā*), “I would kiss you,” in 8:1 and אֶשְׂקֶךָ (*’ašqēkā*), “I would give you to drink,” in the present verse. The juice of her pomegranates (רִמּוֹן *rimmōn*) that she promises him is sweet and powerful stuff, as the other poetic occurrences of אֶסֶף (*’āsîs*) in Isaiah 49:26; Joel 1:5; 4:18 (3:18) and Amos 9:13 suggest.

54. The third line of 8:2, consisting of only one word in Hebrew (תִּלְמַדְתִּי [*tēlammēdētī*]), has caused interpreters some difficulties. Some regard it as corrupt and change it, in line with the parallel in 3:4, to “to the room of her who bore me” (thus RSV, NRSV and Fox, *Song of Songs*, 165, following an ancient tradition reflected in LXX and Peshitta). The text does, however, make sense as it stands, even if the

The Hebrew term for “desire,” תְּשׁוּקָה (*těšûqāh*), features only once in the Song, in a statement that finds the woman rejoicing in the mutuality of their relationship (7:11 [10]).<sup>55</sup> תְּשׁוּקָה (*těšûqāh*) is, of course, the term used in Genesis 3:16 when the woman is told that her desire shall be for her husband, who, however, will rule over her.<sup>56</sup> Where the Genesis passage thus envisages male domination, the Song speaks of a relationship of mutuality. It also reverses the directionality of desire. While in Genesis 3:16 the woman experiences desire for her husband that is not reciprocated but is met by male domination, in Song 7:11 (10) it is the man who desires his beloved in a context of true mutuality. As Phyllis Tribble has argued, the poet of the Song appears to offer a deliberate reversal of the gender roles envisaged in Genesis 3.<sup>57</sup>

The strength of the woman’s longing is also apparent in her desire to be placed like a seal upon her lover’s heart and arm (8:6) and thus, as Fox suggests, “to be bound to [him] in all his thoughts and actions.”<sup>58</sup> To be placed as a seal on someone’s heart and arm was of profound symbolic significance and indicated belonging and intimacy (see Jer. 22:24; Hag. 2:23). According to Alter, the woman’s words may even be a “daring adaptation” of the divine command to bind God’s words on one’s heart and hand (Deut. 11:18).<sup>59</sup> The reason for the woman’s plea is that love is as powerful as death’s irresistible force and jealousy as possessive as Sheol, the netherworld, from where there was no return.<sup>60</sup> In the Song, jealousy does not appear to be directed at other women,

notion of teaching may seem somewhat surprising at first. Most English translations render it along the lines of “she who used to teach me” or “she who has taught me” (see KJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, TNK), thus taking the referent to be the mother. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 210, point out that the phrase can also be rendered as future tense, “she will teach me,” thus implying that the woman expects her mother to teach her “in the art of love.” They adduce Ruth 3:3-4, where Naomi instructs her daughter-in-law in how to prepare for her nightly encounter with Boaz, in support of their interpretation. Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Bible and Literature Series 7; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983) 250, similarly suggests that the mother “participates in their amorous education.”

However, as the verb can be read as third-person feminine singular, “she would teach me,” or second-person masculine singular, “you (masculine) would teach me,” it is not clear who is doing the teaching, the woman’s mother or her lover, as is assumed here. Landy, *Paradoxes*, 100, regards the ambiguity as intentional, commenting that, just as the woman had expressed her wish for her lover to be like her brother, so he is here, by means of the ambiguity of her words, “assimilated to the figure of the mother”: “as the one who initiates her, he adopts the part of the mother, through whose guidance the child enters the world.”

55. See 2:16 and 6:3 for similar statements of mutuality.

56. The only other occurrence of תְּשׁוּקָה (*těšûqāh*) is in Genesis 4:7 where we read of sin’s desire for Cain. In all three cases (Gen. 3:6; 4:7 and Song 7:11 [10]), the object of desire (the man, Cain, the woman) occurs at the beginning of the phrase for emphasis (e.g. “and *for me* is his desire;” Song 7:11 [10]).

57. See Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978; reprint, London: SCM Press, 1992) 144-65.

58. Fox, *Song of Songs*, 169.

59. Alter, “Afterword,” 131.

60. Some modern translations read “passion” instead of “jealousy” (e.g. NRSV, TNK), but Fox, *Song of Songs*, 169-70, maintains that אַנְּוָה (*qn*) does not denote sexual desire but either “the anger or suspicion

however, as the woman can proudly boast that her lover is loved by other women as well (1:3). The perceived danger rather appears to be that of an interfering society, represented by the city's watchmen (3:3; 5:7) and the woman's brothers (8:8-9),<sup>61</sup> which is intent on putting all manner of obstacles in the way of these two lovers.

Before moving on to the man's rhetoric of desire, we must look at a passage that illustrates the mutuality of the couple's longing, even though it is once again the woman who is the dominant voice in 5:2-8. The man's desire finds expression in his entreaty that she open to him at night (v. 2).<sup>62</sup> The woman, for her part, had been in a state of restless sleep, her mind alert with expectant excitement, as the beautifully evocative opening line, "I slept, but my heart was awake," indicates. In her words to the daughters of Jerusalem (v. 8) she makes it clear that she is sick with love.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, her emotions are so powerful that she faints<sup>64</sup> when, having finally opened the door to her lover, she finds him gone.<sup>65</sup>

Her longing for her lover is most forcefully expressed in the second line of v. 4, which, translated literally, reads "my inwards stirred for him." The noun מְעֵיִם (*mē'im*) refers primarily to the intestines, bowels or guts, understood as the seat of the emotions, but it can also denote the womb (e.g. Gen. 25:23; Ps. 71:6; Isa. 49:1). In combination with הַמָּה (*hmm*), "be restless, turbulent," it is used to express emotions, including desire and yearning (see Jer. 31:20). Here, the reference appears to be to what Marvin Pope has called "erotic emotion."<sup>66</sup> Richard Hess and Ilana Pardes speak of

that a jealous person feels toward that which causes jealousy" or envy, if applied to a third party that wishes to possess something belonging to another.

61. See Fox, *Song of Songs*, 170.

62. As has been noted, the man's request is tantalisingly vague. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 131, comments: "The sleeping Shulamite ... is beckoned by her lover to rise and open what is usually taken to be the door. Yet the door is never really mentioned, which is why the lover's request calls for double readings. Is the lover ... asking his beloved to unlock the door, is he trying to gain access to her body, or both?" Some readers, apparently uncomfortable with the text's erotic connotations, have been quick to supply the missing object. An ancient example of this can be found in LXX, which reads ἐπι τὴν θύραν ἄνοιξόν, "open the door."

63. Most translations obscure the question-answer formula employed in the Hebrew text, which serves to emphasise the message: "if you find my lover, what will you tell him? That I am sick with love." Perhaps the wording reflects the poet's endeavour to capture the woman's broken speech (thus Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 183).

64. The text literally reads "my soul left" (נַפְשִׁי יָצָאָה [napšī yāṣṣ'āh]), which, in the present context, signifies at the very least a deep emotional reaction (thus Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 182) or even that the woman fainted (Fox, *Song of Songs*, 146; Hess, *Song of Songs*, 162).

65. The woman's reaction is caused by her lover's דָּבַר (*dbar*). Hebrew has two such roots, one, the more common one, meaning "to speak" and one meaning "to turn aside, go away." If the former is intended, then this is a recollection of the woman's strong reaction to her lover's words, but it seems more likely that the reaction was caused by her lover's departure, which she had just talked about.

66. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 519.

sexual arousal,<sup>67</sup> with Pardes adding that, in light of the text's "exuberant eroticism," the connotation of the מְעִימ (mē'im) as the procreative organs "is surely activated" so that "the stirring ... affects the womb at least as much as it affects the soul."<sup>68</sup>

It is, at the very least, possible that the woman's state of arousal is in view also in v. 5. On one level, her hands dripping with myrrh indicate that she had anointed herself with fragrant spices in expectation of her lover's visit (see Prov. 7:17-18).<sup>69</sup> However, the metaphorical description of the woman's sexuality as a garden full of aromatic spices, including myrrh, (4:14) and the man's statement that he has come into that garden and gathered his myrrh (5:1), both of which occur in close proximity to the poet's description of her hands dripping with myrrh (5:5), invite a similar metaphorical reading in which the dripping myrrh evokes the woman's sexual arousal.

Turning to the man, we note that he, for his part, alludes to his desire for lovemaking when he says that he imagined<sup>70</sup> his beloved as his "mare among Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9). He, too, desires to spend the night together and thus, echoing the words of the woman's earlier invitation, expresses his intention to "go to the mountain of myrrh" and "the hill of frankincense" "until the day breathes and the shadows flee" (4:6). Similarly, when the man, in 6:11,<sup>71</sup> talks about having gone down to the nut grove to see if the vine and pomegranates were in bloom, what he wanted to know, in what Othmar Keel aptly describes as an "example of the sense of partnership and the consideration for the other that characterize the encounter" of the couple,<sup>72</sup> was whether the time of lovemaking had come.

The prevalence of the Song's rhetoric of desire bespeaks the poet's celebration of the couple's yearning for union with the beloved and thus of such longing generally. As Walsh has pointed out, "the Song is primarily about that want in both lovers [and] is not

67. Hess, *Song of Songs*, 161; Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 131.

68. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 132.

69. Fox, *Song of Songs*, 145, noting that the Egyptians enjoyed such profusion of spices and perfumes, concludes that "it would not be unrealistic (and certainly not unappealing) for the Shulammitte to claim that she had put on so much myrrh that it dripped from her hands onto the lock handles."

70. Most translations render 1:9 in the form of a comparison, e.g. "I compare you, my love, to a mare" (NRSV). While this is possible, דמה (dmh Piel) can also mean "imagine," as in Psalm 50:21, "you imagined that I was just like you."

71. Many translators and interpreters assign 6:11-12 to the woman, partly because they detect a reference to a prince in v. 12. Hebrew grammar does not offer any clues as to the speaker's identity in v. 11, but, as Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 192, have noted, the speaker is more likely to be the man because the garden metaphor elsewhere refers to the woman and her sexuality (4:12-5:1; see also 8:13), vines and pomegranates are associated with her erotic charms (1:6; 4:13; 7:9 [8], 13 [12]; 8:2), and it is always the man who visits her, rather than the other way around (2:8-14; 5:1, 2-6; 6:2). The going down to the nut garden (גִּינַת אֶגְדָּז [ginnat 'ēgôz]) in v. 11 thus parallels the man's going down to his garden in v. 2.

72. Keel, *Song of Songs*, 223.

merely a hymn to the beauty of love.”<sup>73</sup> In this respect, too, the Song has something important to offer to a tradition in which desire has all too often and all too tightly been linked to a negatively understood carnality. Origen’s allegorical reading of the Song, for instance, was prompted, at least in part, by his worry that an immature reader of these poems “will foster carnal desires in himself.”<sup>74</sup> Augustine, similarly, could only conceive of sexual desire as “lust,”<sup>75</sup> which led him to regard even marriage as mere “legalized depravity.”<sup>76</sup>

In contrast to such negative attitudes, the Song’s rhetoric celebrates desire as the good and life-giving power that it truly is.<sup>77</sup> Eros, the God-given force that permeates and energises our being, connects us with the world around us. It propels us out beyond ourselves, driven by physical, emotional and spiritual needs.<sup>78</sup> As David Carr notes, Eros comprises “all sorts of core desires: certainly the sexual, but also intellectual, artistic, and spiritual yearnings.”<sup>79</sup> Charles Davis has similarly emphasized that “the erotic dynamism of bodily love is ... an intrinsic element in the movement of an embodied person in openness toward the plenitude of reality, toward God.”<sup>80</sup> Eros, a vital aspect of our humanity, is essential for our survival and well-being. The poet and classicist Anne

73. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 74.

74. Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies* (trans. and annotated R. P. Lawson; Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation 26; Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957) 22.

75. See Nelson, *Embodiment*, 53. According to Augustine, it was only as a result of the Fall that human bodies became “subject to the same drive by which there is in animals a desire to copulate” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 11:32, as quoted by Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 96).

76. Augustine, *City of God* 14:18, as quoted by Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 94.

77. This is not to deny that human desire can become destructive. Not only is there a danger of it being misdirected, it can also become closed, as Jan-Olav Henriksen, “Desire: Gift and Giving,” in F. LeRon Shults and Jan-Olav Henriksen (eds), *Saving Desire: The Seduction of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) 1-30 (7-11), has pointed out, employing the helpful concepts of opening and closing desire. Closing desire is self-centred and refuses to see the other as a subject in her own right. This is deeply problematic for any number of reasons, not least ethical ones, but it is also fundamentally incongruous, for, as Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000) 153, observes, “there is in reality no self ... without the presence of the other.” We can only perceive of ourselves as a self because of, and over against of, the other.

78. It is worth adding, however, that desire is insufficiently understood if it is perceived only as driven by lack. Eros, as F. LeRon Shults, “Introduction: Saving Desire?” in Shults and Henriksen (eds), *Saving Desire*, vii-ix (viii), notes, is also gift. Wendy Farley, “Beguiled by Beauty: The Reformation of Desire for Faith and Theology,” in Shults and Henriksen (eds), *Saving Desire*, 128-47 (136), in turn, describes the divine Eros, which manifests itself in the creation, as a “paradoxical ‘zeal’ of love that abandons itself in order to express itself.” And this divine erotic action in creating and sustaining the creation, Farley notes, becomes our model: “it is the vocation of Christian communities to participate in the love by which the divine Eros cherishes the world” (*ibid.*, 140).

79. Carr, *Erotic Word*, 9.

80. Charles Davis, *Body as Spirit: The Nature of Religious Feeling* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 126.

Carson illustrates this well in *Nox*, a moving epitaph written after her brother's death, when she sums up her mother's reaction in the simple words "all desire left the world."<sup>81</sup> One of the values of the Song's powerful rhetoric of desire, which is frequently appealed to by those seeking to reclaim a more positive attitude towards human embodiment and sexuality and the material creation more generally,<sup>82</sup> lies in the fact that it serves as a timely reminder of the goodness of human desire, the God-given yearning for self-transcendence and union with the beloved other.<sup>83</sup>

Another point worth noting in this context is that, in contrast to the Song's rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation, which was dominated by the male voice, the lovers' impassioned longing is most powerfully articulated by the woman. Her voice not only opens and closes the Song with the passionate desire for her lover's kisses (1:2) and the sly invitation that he slip away from his friends and enjoy once again the "landscape of her body," to employ Alter's words (8:14).<sup>84</sup> In fact, throughout these poems, it is the woman who voices her yearning for intimacy and the enjoyment of sexual encounter more frequently and in starker terms than the man. This reinforces an observation made in our analysis of the Song's rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation where it was the woman who, in the celebration of her lover's physical appeal, moved beyond visual imagery, rightly characterized by Alter as reflecting a more distanced experience, to the intimate senses of smell and taste (see 5:13, 16).

It should also be noted that there is no linear movement from the rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation to that of desire to that of enjoyment and consummation in the Song. As Walsh has pointed out, its varying discourses on desire "move swiftly and erratically" from aesthetic appreciation to desire and back again,<sup>85</sup> for her a sign that the Song embodies the very emotion of desire, which is not a "clear-cut progressive journey."<sup>86</sup> How quickly the lovers can move from one type of rhetoric to another is exemplified in a particularly startling way in 7:8-9 (7-8) where, in a statement of aesthetic appreciation, the man compares the stature of his beloved to a stately palm

81. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010) n. p.

82. Examples include Nelson, *Embodiment*, 84-85; and Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: Recovering Christianity's Forgotten Love for this Earth* (2008, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London: Canterbury Press, 2012) *passim*.

83. Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism* (trans. Helen Lane; Orlando: Harcourt, 1995) 15, sees "eroticism [as] first and foremost a thirst for otherness." He aptly comments that the supernatural as "the supreme otherness" is therefore the ultimate target of our desire. It seems to me that the question of the Song's spiritual dimension is best explored within such a framework, but this lies beyond the confines of the present study.

84. Alter, *Art*, 195.

85. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 74. As noted earlier, Walsh does not find any evidence of consummation in the Song.

86. *Ibid.*, 28.

tree. However, no sooner has the simile (“this stature of yours is *like* a palm tree”) been introduced than it ceases to be one when the man, quite literally, decides to act upon his desire, climb the palm tree and enjoy its fruit.<sup>87</sup>

#### THE RHETORIC OF ENJOYMENT AND CONSUMMATION

While some interpreters have maintained that the Song contains no indications of consummation, which is yearned for but never quite attained, I would contend that some passages are best read as implying that the couple has experienced the joys of the consummation of their relationship. However, my discussion of the third dimension of the Song’s rhetoric is going to focus more broadly on what I would call the rhetoric of enjoyment and consummation, which includes all those verses that speak more generally about the enjoyment of physical intimacy.

Such a more general sense of the enjoyment of lovemaking in all its nuances is found, for instance, in texts that celebrate lovemaking as better than wine (1:2, 4; 4:10). English translations frequently and somewhat evasively, one is tempted to say, speak of “love” rather than “lovemaking,” as, for instance, in 1:2: “your *love* is better than wine.” However, the Hebrew term דְּדִים (*dōdīm*), which is more concrete than such a rendering implies and can include kisses, caresses and intercourse, is more appropriately translated “lovemaking.” Indeed, as Alter notes, if it “did not have this physically concrete meaning, it could not be repeatedly associated as it is with delectable wine, with drinking, with the honeyed sweetness of the mouth ..., and thus by analogy, with the sweetness of the act of love.”<sup>88</sup>

When the woman describes her lover’s fruit, envisaged as an apricot, as sweet to her palate (2:4), she is marveling at the sweetness of his kisses. The man, too, recalls her kisses with wonder when he talks not only about the woman’s lips<sup>89</sup> dripping honey but also about the honey and milk that are found under her tongue (4:11). Clearly deeply intimate kisses are in view here, and Walsh aptly points out that the description implies “that he has been there before.”<sup>90</sup> Kissing is evoked again in 7:10, another profoundly sensuous verse, where the man’s wish that his beloved’s palate be “like the best wine” leads the woman to finish his sentence for him, only to envisage, rather teasingly, how that wine flows smoothly<sup>91</sup> to her lover, “gliding over scarlet lips.”<sup>92</sup>

87. Alter, *Art*, 195, speaks of the simile being enacted.

88. Alter, “Afterword,” 124.

89. The reference here could also be to the woman’s sweet words, but given the context, which envisages the man tasting the honey and milk found under her tongue, and the parallel in 1:2-3, which explicitly mentions kissing, this seems unlikely.

90. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 91.

91. The notion of wine flowing down smoothly is also found in Proverbs 23:31, where it is expressed with the same terms, i.e. הִלַּךְ (*hlk*) and מְשָׁרִים (*mēšārîm*).

Intimate embraces are recalled in 2:6 and 8:3. It has been proposed that there is a suggestion of genital stimulation in these verses,<sup>93</sup> but such an assumption reads too much into the text. The verb that is used (חבק [ḥbq] Piel) can mean “embrace” in a sexual sense (see Prov. 5:20), but the same term is employed when Esau embraces his brother Jacob (Gen. 33:4). In Song 2:6 and 8:3 it is clear that an amorous encounter is in view and that the lovers are in a reclining position. But that is all that can be said. A similar, though perhaps even more intimate, encounter is referred to in 1:12-14 where the king, who, as we saw, is none other than the male lover, is said to be on his couch,<sup>94</sup> spending the night between his beloved’s breasts.

Repeatedly, the lovers refer to their mutual enjoyment of each other by reference to pleasing scents and fragrances. This is the case in the passage just mentioned, which features spikenard, myrrh and henna blossoms, the latter two especially describing the other’s impact in metaphorical terms: “a sachet of myrrh is my lover to me,” “a cluster of henna blossoms is my lover to me.” Elsewhere, the woman appreciates the man’s anointing oils (1:3), much as he delights in the fragrance of her oils, which are better than all the spices (4:10), and that of her garments, which is comparable to the fragrance of Lebanon (4:11).<sup>95</sup>

92. This phrase is rather enigmatic. Some ancient versions (Peshitta and Aquila) translate “my lips and my teeth,” thus reading שִׁפְתַי וְשִׁנַי (siptê ûšnê) instead of שִׁפְתַי יְשֵׁנִים (siptê yěšēnîm). However, as Fox, *Song of Songs*, 163, points out, this makes little sense, as the wine here is not gliding over her lips and teeth but those of her lover. Modern translations that, somewhat less specifically but more plausibly in terms of the imagery, read “gliding over lips and teeth” (i.e. RSV, NRSV, ESV; see also NIV) similarly have to change the Hebrew text, in this case to שִׁפְתַי וְשִׁנַי (siptê ûšnîm). KJV’s “causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak” reflects an old interpretation found already in Rashi and Ibn Ezra, according to which the wine is so powerful that it even arouses one from sleep.

I have adopted Fox’s reading (*Song of Songs*, 163), which requires only a minor change to the Hebrew text to yield שִׁפְתַי שָׁנִים (siptê šānîm), “scarlet lips,” thus assuming a dittography in the initial *yôd* of יְשֵׁנִים (yěšēnîm). Apart from the changes to the consonantal text of MT being minimal on this reading, it is also made more likely by the fact that the woman’s lips are similarly compared to a scarlet thread in 4:3.

93. Philip Seddon, *Redeeming Eros: Reading the Song of Songs* (Grove Spirituality Series 114; Cambridge: Grove Books, 2010) 4. Things are spelled out rather more clearly in a text relating to a Sumerian sacred marriage rite: “your right hand you have placed on my vulva, your left stroked my head” (see S. N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969] 105), but nothing of the sort is mentioned in our passages.

94. The last word of this line has given rise to a variety of translations. The root סבב (*sbb*) means “surround, encircle.” Some have rendered it as “table” (KJV, NASB, NIV), but, as Alter, “Afterword,” 120, notes, this translation seems to have been adopted out of a “disposition to dilute the sexuality of the poem.” The scene depicted in the following verse clearly favours an item of furniture used for reclining. “Couch” is therefore a more suitable rendering of the Hebrew term (see RSV, NRSV, ESV, TNK).

95. The “fragrance of Lebanon” appears to refer to Lebanon’s fragrant forests and wines. The latter are mentioned in Hosea 14:7.

There is perhaps a hint of the consummation of their relationship in 2:16 where the woman talks about her lover feeding among the lotuses.<sup>96</sup> Lotuses reappear elsewhere in connection with the woman's body (7:3 [2]), possibly the pubic region (the *mons pubis*),<sup>97</sup> and her lover's lips (5:13). Even more importantly, in 6:2, the lover is seen gathering lotuses in his garden, perhaps the Song's most evocative image of the woman's body and sexuality. All this suggests that the notion of the lover grazing among the lotuses is a *double entendre* hinting at the man's enjoyment of his beloved's erotic charms.

Arguably the Song's most suggestive garden text is found in 4:12–5:1 where the woman initially appears as a locked garden (4:12)<sup>98</sup> full of delicious fruits and aromatic trees and spices (vv. 13-14). It has been pointed out that, of the spices mentioned, only saffron and henna are known to have grown in Palestine. Myrrh, cinnamon and cane are likely imports, while spikenard, frankincense and aloes would have been luxury imports from far-away places such as India, Arabia, Somalia and perhaps even China.<sup>99</sup> The woman's sexual charms are thus depicted as highly enticing and precious. Water imagery, too, is used of her, as she is described as a "garden spring,"<sup>100</sup> "a well of living water" and "flowing streams from Lebanon" (v. 15).<sup>101</sup>

The woman desires her lover to come to what is now *his* garden – as Tribble notes, "my garden' and 'his garden' blend in mutual habitation and harmony"<sup>102</sup> – and eat its delicious fruit; and so she calls upon the north and south winds to blow upon her garden so that "its spices may stream out," that her erotic charms may entice her lover to come (v. 16). The man, in turn, in what is the Song's most extensive and also one of its most unambiguous indications that the consummation of the couple's relationship has taken place, jubilantly celebrates that he *has come* to his garden, plucked his myrrh with his spices, eaten his honeycomb with his honey and drunk his wine with<sup>103</sup> his milk

96. The שושנה (*šôšannāh*), usually thought to be the lily, is perhaps better identified as the lotus, but other alternatives, such as hyacinth, narcissus, sea daffodil and water lily, have also been suggested.

97. Alter, *Art*, 201, has made a similar suggestion regarding the "mountain of myrrh" and the "hill of frankincense" in 4:6.

98. The implication seems to be that the woman is a locked garden to all but her lover (cf. 4:16–5:1).

99. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 177.

100. The line literally reads "a spring of gardens." גַּנִּים (*gannîm*) here functions as a generic plural that designates the kind of spring typically found in gardens, hence "a garden spring."

101. Proverbs 5:15-19 similarly applies the imagery of a fountain and other water supplies to the female sexual partner. Along with the term "desire," the water imagery evokes the Garden of Eden passage (Tribble, *God*, 155) and thus the notion of paradise (Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, 42).

102. Tribble, *God*, 153.

103. A notable feature of 5:1 is the repeated use of the preposition "with" (עִם *'im*), i.e. "my myrrh with my spices" etc. instead of "and." Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 179, suggest that this provides a note of exuberance, as if to say, "I have plucked my myrrh, and my spices too." While this observation goes in

(5:1). Sexual connotations are implied not only in the plucking, eating and drinking but in the man's very coming into his garden, since בוא (*bw'*), "come to, enter," is frequently used in the Old Testament to denote sexual intercourse (see e.g. Gen. 6:4). Those who maintain that the Song nowhere implies actual consummation regard the man's words in 5:1 as a statement of intent (see NRSV's "I come"), but there are no particular reasons why the perfect, while capable of expressing a variety of temporal and aspectual nuances, should not be taken in its most typical sense here, which is to denote a narrative past (thus NASB, NIV, ESV, TNK).

The fact that the quest for intimacy continues in the following verses (5:2-8), where the woman desires her lover at night, could be taken as an indication that no consummation has occurred. Walsh, for instance, has argued that "sexual love remains a yearning ... and is never consummated" in the Song, something that she regards as "essential to the book's thematic design."<sup>104</sup> However, as we saw earlier, there is no linear movement from aesthetic appreciation to desire to enjoyment and consummation. The Song moves from one to the other and back again, as indeed is to be expected given that sexual union and the intimacy it offers are short-lived, thus inciting further yearning and desire.

From a rhetorical perspective it is worth pointing out that the man's words in 5:1 are followed by two intriguing lines that have been understood by some commentators as a kind of chorus, perhaps spoken by the daughters of Jerusalem. However, if the preceding lines are best read as the man's jubilant celebration of the consummation of their love, it seems equally possible that the man in his exuberance, which is palpable throughout v. 1, is now inviting others to taste love for themselves and get drunk on lovemaking<sup>105</sup> just as he did.

Another reference to the consummation of the couple's relationship may perhaps be found in 6:12, widely considered to be the Song's most difficult verse.<sup>106</sup> My reading follows Robert Gordis in taking נפשי (*napšî*) as part of the first line,<sup>107</sup> translated "I don't know myself"<sup>108</sup> and understood as an idiomatic expression articulating deep emotional

the right direction, it would appear that the emphasis in this construction is on the first item rather than the second one. This is suggested by the fact that in each of the three pairs, "my myrrh with my spices," "my honeycomb with my honey" and "my wine with my milk," it is the first item that is the more precious or special one.

104. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 97.

105. As Hess, *Song of Songs*, 157, has pointed out, שכר (*škr*), which can mean "drinking without restraint," commonly refers to intoxication.

106. Some commentators, such as Falk, *Love Lyrics*, 40-41, 134, have even declined to translate or comment on the verse at all.

107. Alternatively, נפשי (*napšî*), translated "my soul" (KJV, NASB), "my desire" (NIV, ESV, TNK) or "my fancy" (RSV, NRSV), has been seen as the initial word of the second line.

108. On this reading, נפשי (*napšî*) is understood as a circumlocution for "I."

agitation in the sense of losing one's balance or composure.<sup>109</sup> If this is correct, then it is the woman who is the subject of the second line, which literally reads "she has placed me in the chariots of עֲמִי-נָדִיב ('*ammî-nādîb*)." But what precisely has she done? And what are we to make of those mysterious chariots?<sup>110</sup>

An intriguing explanation has been suggested by Ariel and Chana Bloch, who propose to change the word order of the troublesome phrase to נָדִיב עֲמִי (*nēdîb 'ammî*), "the nobleman of my people" or, in a superlative sense, "the most noble of my people."<sup>111</sup> For the lover to be placed "in the chariot<sup>112</sup> of the most noble of my people" would be an act of "elevation,"<sup>113</sup> a grace granted by the woman to her lover, which Bloch and Bloch interpret as an allusion to the erotic act. This fits the context well in that v. 12 now describes the consummation of the couples' relationship that was anticipated in v. 11 ("I went down to the nut grove ... to see if the vine had budded"). The sequence thus parallels the one found in 4:16 ("let my lover come to his garden and eat its delicious fruit") and 5:1 ("I have come to my garden ... I have eaten").

The Song's rhetoric of enjoyment and consummation, much like its rhetoric of desire, derives much from its striking metaphors, which, in contrast to the rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation, are not so much visual but olfactory and palatal in nature. The allusions to kissing (1:2; 4:11; 5:16; 7:10) with their particular emphasis on the sweetness of the kisses, expressed in recurring references to wine, illustrate this, as do

109. See Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn; New York: Ktav, 1974) 95. The reason for such loss of equilibrium can be great joy and excitement, as in our verse, or despair, as in Job 9:21.

110. Countless solutions have been proposed, usually involving an emendation of the Hebrew text, literally "my people-noble/nobleman," which is unintelligible. Translations that take the phrase as it stands tend to see it as a proper name and read "the chariots of Amminadib" (KJV, TNK). While possible, this does not shed any light on the significance of this otherwise unknown individual and his chariots. LXX and Vulgate read "Amminadab," which, while supplying a name that is attested elsewhere, presents similar difficulties. Readings such as "with a nobleman, prince" (Fox, *Song of Songs*, 154; Hess, *Song of Songs*, 195) change עֲמִי ('*ammî*), "my people," to עִם ('*im*), "with." As Hess, *Song of Songs*, 208, explains, on this reading, the woman, who is perceived to be the speaker of the line, is expressing the fantasy of being "placed beside her princely lover in a dramatic and public display of power."

111. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 194-95, who point to other cases of erroneous inversions of word order in Deuteronomy 33:21; Jeremiah 17:3 and Ezekiel 24:17.

112. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 195, regard the plural "chariots" as a plural of local extension (cf. Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction*, 120), which is to be rendered in the singular.

113. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 194, note that the phrase "the nobles of the people" occurs, with minor variations, in several passages (e.g. Num. 21:18; Ps. 47:10; 113:7-8). The most instructive is Psalm 113:7-8 where the poor and needy is raised from the dust and lifted from the ash heap to be seated "with princes, with the princes of his people" (לְהוֹשִׁיבֵי עִם-נְדִיבִים עִם נְדִיבֵי עַמּוֹ) [*lēhōšîbî 'im-nēdîbîm 'im nēdîbê 'ammô*]. The same notion occurs in 1 Samuel 2:8, albeit without עִם ('*am*), "people" (לְהוֹשִׁיב עִם-נְדִיבִים) [*lēhōšîb 'im-nēdîbîm*]; "to seat them with princes").

In the present instance, to be sitting in a royal chariot would have been a great honour (Gen. 41:43), as was being allowed to ride a horse (Esth. 6:9, 11).

the references to the woman's sexuality, which is described in terms of a lush garden whose fruits and herbs are sensuous delights that please the nose and entice the taste buds (see esp. 4:12-15). And once again the woman's language draws attention to the mutuality of their relationship, in this case the mutual "ownership", or perhaps better the mutual enjoyment, of her body, for her garden is also her lover's garden (4:16).<sup>114</sup>

The novelist A. S. Byatt once expressed herself to be baffled by the Song's rich sensuality, complaining that "there is an element of excess, of too much, too much fruit, too many riches, too much landscape."<sup>115</sup> Yet it is precisely in that richness, which is best seen as an invitation to enter into the ancient poet's imagination, an imagination suffused with rich sensuality, that we encounter the true spirit of the Song. Indeed, as Walsh has so aptly pointed out, its "poetry requires that we pause long enough to taste or feel these metaphors,"<sup>116</sup> metaphors that are more than germane to the subject matter of these poems, for it is precisely the intense sensual gratification experienced in human love and sexuality that leads the poet of the Song to invoke the natural world with all its sights, smells and tastes.

If there is a sense in which the Song's rhetoric of enjoyment and consummation differs from the rhetoric of desire, apart from its different temporal directionality, it would seem to lie in its somewhat stronger emphasis on the sense of touch. Touch, the most intimate of our senses, as the Irish mystic and poet John O'Donohue once noted, "brings us out of the anonymity of distance into the intimacy of belonging."<sup>117</sup> Yet touch does not feature strongly in the Song, not even in its rhetoric of enjoyment and consummation, apparently due to what has been described as the text's "delicacy of expression."<sup>118</sup> Notable exceptions are the somewhat restrained references to intimate embraces in 2:6 and 8:3. A more evocative account of nightly embraces occurs in 1:12-14. As Alter notes, "the image of a sachet resting between breasts ... beautifully suggests the intimate and pleasurable touch of flesh upon flesh," and yet the perfume metaphors employed in these verses foreground the sense of smell.<sup>119</sup>

The Song's rhetoric of desire as well as its rhetoric of enjoyment and consummation celebrate our senses and the gift of sensuality without which we would be isolated from the world around us. As we have seen, there is a strong focus on the smells and tastes that, together with our other senses, connect us with creation. The lovers' discourses cherish nature, its delicious fruits and fragrant herbs. But nature, the divine creation, is

114. "Blow upon *my* garden," she says, addressing the north and south winds, and "let my lover come to *his* garden."

115. A. S. Byatt, "Introduction," in *The Song of Solomon* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998) vii-xviii (xvi).

116. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 65.

117. John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara* (London: Bantam, 1997) 101.

118. Thus Alter, "Afterword," 122.

119. *Ibid.*

not summed up in those references to fruits, spices, gardens and vineyards. If, as Byatt has suggested, the Song metamorphoses the lovers into the natural world,<sup>120</sup> then that metamorphosing indicates an appreciation and celebration not only of the world that furnished the ancient poet with the metaphors that make the Song such a sensuous text but also, conversely, of the lovers' enjoyment of their sensuality and sexuality as a substantial part of that prized creation.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To sum up my observations, the Song oscillates between three primary types of rhetorical discourse. The first, the rhetoric of aesthetic appreciation, finds its most eloquent expression in the lovers' exuberant listing of the beloved's physical charms, the rhetoric of enumeration that reads like a hymn to the beauty of the body and is suffused with visual metaphors that express the lovers' aesthetic appreciation of each other.

The prevalence of the second type of rhetorical discourse, the rhetoric of desire, celebrates the couple's longing for sexual union with the beloved and the goodness of Eros and human desire, the God-given yearning for self-transcendence, more generally. Desire for each other is expressed in the context of a relationship of mutuality. While such desire is articulated most forcibly by the woman, the dominant voice of this type of rhetoric, the poet expressly highlights the man's desire for the woman, thus reversing the directionality of desire envisaged in Genesis 3:16.

The Song's rhetoric of consummation, finally, celebrates the enjoyment of physical intimacy in language that, like the rhetoric of desire, is replete with olfactory and palatal metaphors that express a deep appreciation of the rich sensuality of human love and sexuality. This type of language cherishes the gift of sensuality, a gift that connects us with the world around us, enabling us to enjoy the pleasures of the divine creation, the tastes and smells of fruits and spices and the delights of sexual love.

120. Byatt, "Introduction," 65.