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The Song of Songs as Pedagogy of Desire

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Abstract

This study explores how the Song of Songs could and should be interpreted in its own form, i.e., as erotic poetry, and on the basis of sexual desire. The common interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love of God for his people appears to have been an attempt to avoid bestowing any significance on the body— or, at least, of smoothing out the complexities of our embodiment. This thesis argues that, when read instead as erotic poetry, the Song works as a pedagogy of desire – a desire that is founded on the sexual but that opens up to the erotic, a more encompassing desire, confessing that sexuality has more to it than satisfaction of biological urges. Through the sexual desire presented in the Song, we learn the contours of a desire that surpasses its sexual dimension and shapes all other relations, be it with the human, the other-than-human, or the divine other: nearness, otherness, and reciprocity. As pedagogy, the Song’s narrative of sexual desire primes and shapes our orientation to the world and God through the effect its sensuous imageries have on the body. With the help of the Song, we are also able to intimate that God desires human beings in a similar way and with a similar intensity as the lovers in the Song desire each other. Through this bodily apprehension of the divine, God awakens our desire for Godself.

Keywords: Song of Songs; desire; eros; sexuality; common life

And this unceasing, strenuous, vulnerable attempt to make some Christian sense of things, not just in what we say, but through the ways in which we 'see' the world, is what is known as doing theology.

(Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence*)

Abbreviations

Comm. Cant.	Commentary on the Song of Songs (Origen)
Hom. Cant.	Homilies on the Song of Songs (Origen)
Princ.	De Principiis (Origen)
SSCC	Sermons on the Song of Songs (St. Bernard)

1. Introduction

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים or the best of songs. It hits us as a surprise to read the book of Song of Songs. What is this song about that it deserves such a title? As many have tried to answer this question in the past, the only way to justify the presence of such a fleshly book in the Bible seemed to be to interpret it solely allegorically. Yet, what if the Song of Songs could and should be interpreted in its own form, i.e., as erotic poetry, and on the basis of sexual desire?

For some, this study may be uncomfortable, unsettling, if not controversial and scandalous, but the Incarnation shows us that God does not shy away from human flesh. On the contrary, the body is the locus of God's greatest manifestation of love. God acknowledges that we are bodies and comes to meet us in our embodiment, "our being-in-the-world and the horizon of our understanding."¹

The common interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love of God for his people appears to have been an attempt to avoid bestowing on the body and sexual desire any significance – or, at least, of smoothing out the complexities of our embodiment. What is meant here is that some have interpreted the Song of Songs as a poetry about the love of God for his people (more commonly in Christian context, as the love of Jesus for the human soul), disregarding – if not negating – the sexual desire present in the text. That is, this type of allegorical interpretation presupposes that what one sees on the surface (the literal) is not what the text is about in reality. Negating the sensual content of this book and solely attributing to it a spiritual meaning presumably comes from the theology that all that is carnal, i.e., bodily, must be put to death. After all, our flesh is weak (Mk. 14:38; Rom. 6:19), carries sinful passions (Rom. 7:5, 8:4, 13:14; Eph. 2:3), is contrary to what is spiritual (Rom. 7:14; 1 Co. 3:1) and is hostile to God (Rom. 8:6-9). Although the flesh has a negative valence in the scriptural texts mentioned above, our embodiment ought not to be seen in the same way. Udo Schnelle, in his study on the apostle Paul, indicates the differences in the use of the words 'body' and 'flesh' in Paul's works, respectively σῶμα and σὰρξ, in Greek.² The former denotes the body as material substance but also the human self, while the latter – as in all of the biblical instances above – indicates the human nature as opposed to God or what is spiritual.³ Due to limitations of time

¹ Ola Sigurdson, "Theology in the Middle of Things: Existential Preconditions of Systematic Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12395>.

² Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2012).

³ *Ibid.*, 495-96.

and space, a full analysis of the usage of the term ‘flesh’ in the Bible is out the scope of this thesis. Yet, it is worth mentioning that, when expanding on σάρξ, Schnelle writes that “fleshly people are characterized by self-centeredness and self-satisfaction.”⁴ Therefore, as embodied beings, we can put σῶμα to the service of σάρξ, when we act upon self-centeredness. Nonetheless, our corporeality should not be seen as a burden. On the contrary, it is a gift, God’s handiwork, and our existence, one that God celebrates. “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). For this reason, σῶμα is not God’s enemy.

Still, the eagerness to allegorize the theme of the Song, i.e., to consider only its spiritual facet, is very common in Christian settings, but it ignores sexuality, which is constitutive of our being-in-the-world, and disregards embodiment, without which God’s manifestation in this world would be pointless. By having its sexual imagery acknowledged, the Song, I argue, works as a pedagogy of a desire that is founded on *sexual desire* (the plain sense) but that opens up to another desire that I refer to as *erotic* (the figural sense). In order to further clarify what is meant by plain and figural senses, an explanation is necessary. According to Robert W. Jenson, “we cannot construe allegory for a passage until we understand the overt text that solicits it.”⁵ For him, *overt* is different than *plain*. In his view, what I call theological allegory – in this case, the Song is about the love between the Lord and Israel or Jesus and the soul – is the canonical plain sense. The overt sense is that the story of the Song of Songs is about two human lovers. His definition of overt sense is what I am calling the plain sense here. Paul J. Griffiths, in his turn, writing about allegory, explains that the allegorical sense ignores what Jenson calls overt sense.⁶

When I suggest that erotic desire is the figural sense of sexual desire, what is meant is that the latter is a figure or image of the former. The figured is revealed through the affirmation of the figuring, which remains what it is and cannot be abolished. In this sense, the event that figures another is not negated but participates in the figured one. This means that, by suggesting sexual desire as the plain sense, that is, the figuring, I am arguing that it participates in the figured, i.e., erotic desire, which is more encompassing and cannot be contained in the figuring, confessing that sexuality has more to it than only sexual satisfaction. Because sexual desire is not being considered an end in itself, but a figure, through it and by affirming it we learn the

⁴ Ibid., 498.

⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Song of Songs: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 8.

⁶ Introduction to *Song of Songs*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), lvii.

contours of a more comprehensive desire that surpasses its sexual dimension and shapes all other relations, be it with the human, the other-than-human or the divine other. I have called this desire *erotic*. Moreover, in this study I argue that sexual desire has its roots in God, a desiring being as presented in Scripture. My proposal is that sexual desire is God revealing divine desire in human terms: through our bodies. Consequently, I claim that sexuality belongs to God.

By affirming the plain sense of the Song, the reader can be transformed by this desire that is grasped affectively, not rationally, for it occurs before any cognitive processes. In *Deeper Than Reason*, Jenefer Robinson presents how literature, music and arts can enrich our affective understanding of the world, by unfolding in us nuances and shades of emotions, when we emotionally respond to “their content, the thoughts and images that they provoke.”⁷ So it is, I argue, that the Song’s readers grasp viscerally, by empathizing with the lovers’ sexual desire for each other, how human beings need relationships, concomitantly learning to desire rightly. The readers become erotic beings as desire for the ‘other’ is woven into their bodies.

1.1 Purpose

The aim of this dissertation is threefold. The first is to reflect on what the Song of Songs imparts through its sensory imagery regarding desire. Having as reference sexual desire as it is presented in the Song of Songs, I argue that its poetry and imagery have a formative role, for they teach us to desire rightly. Ignoring the sexual content of the Song of Songs is not necessary and not wished for. Therefore, I present a reading that affirms the body and its sexual desire without transforming the latter into an idol, that is, an end in itself.

Secondly, and more boldly, I state that sexual desire participates in divine desire, which allows us to understand God as one that longs for us. The Song gives us a glimpse into how God desires and wishes to be desired in return: God and humanity as desiring and desirable. If the lovers in the Song represent God and his people, or Jesus and the soul, as theologians have suggested, then God is a desiring God even in a purely allegorical reading, conveying the idea that desire can be considered part of God’s very nature.

Lastly, using additional literature, I attempt to defend the view that desire, more precisely erotic desire, is central to our relationality to the ‘other’ – be it family members,

⁷ *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Kindle.

neighbors, strangers, creation, or God. This study, besides telling a story of the “messy entanglement” of sexual desire and God,⁸ and considering that human sexuality can be a means to grasping how God longs for creation, offers a contribution to the discussion on how erotic desire is necessary for flourishing relationships. As previous literature has argued, desire promotes a life that moves actively towards what is other.⁹

As I shall argue, through the visceral effect it has on the body, the Song is a tool to reshape one’s way of interpreting the world. The lovers of the Song can help us internalize the contours of a desire that affects our being-in-the-world. Briefly, then, this study aims to investigate what the Song of Songs teaches us about sexual desire, how the latter participates in divine desire, and how, being erotic, desire is essential for a life built upon interdependency, and a relationship to God.

1.2 Theoretical Framework and Method

The Song of Songs belongs to the Hebrew collection called books of wisdom.¹⁰ Very differently from the other books in the collection (Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), the Song does not seem to overtly impart wisdom. Is there hidden wisdom in the Song then? I suggest that, indirectly, it teaches us how to live a good life, one that is not self-sufficient but interdependent of the other, a life that is attuned to God’s song. Unexpectedly, however, the tool it uses is the body and sexual desire. My proposal is a rereading of the Song that goes against the grain of a spiritual reading that tends to ignore the very appeal to sexuality in the Song, suggesting that even sexual desire has theological importance.

The first step in this investigation of desire in the Song is a comparison of two classic theological interpretations, those of Origen and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, with the plain text of

⁸ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'on the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 272-73.

⁹ Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller, *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), Kindle; David B. Morris, *Eros and Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), Kindle; Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Desire: Gift and Giving," *Saving Desire: The seduction of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2011); Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Grace Jantzen, "New Creations: Eros, Beauty, and the Passion for Transformation," ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller, *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); F. LeRon Shults and Jan-Olav Henriksen, eds., *Desire: Gift and Giving*, *Saving Desire: The Seduction of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2011); Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Kindle.

¹⁰ Jenson, *Song of Songs*.

the Song. Sensuous imageries are the means by which its author articulated desire. Therefore, the main focus of the analysis will be on how the senses are employed in the Song, and, briefly, how Origen and St. Bernard understood them.

After this succinct analysis of the senses, this study will trace how sexual desire is expressed through olfactory and gustatory metaphors, and what they tell us about the lovers' nearness, mutual desire, and perception of otherness. I will then explore the move from sexual to erotic. As I shall explain, eros cannot be subsumed under sexual intercourse, otherwise it would be restricted to erogenous zones. Erotic desire is, more basically, what brings us into motion: out of self-sufficiency and into relationship with the other. Finally, I present the Song as a pedagogy of desire, teaching us affectively how to desire rightly, and the implications for a life in relationship with the creator and the created world.

It is important to highlight two methodological premises. First, this study is based on the view that Scripture is the narrative of a God who wants to be one with creation, as it is most clearly seen in the Incarnation – an always present and active God in this world. To accept the Song as part of the biblical canon, although it might have been written in a nonreligious context, is to acknowledge that it has something that resonates with the other books of Scripture, composing the above-mentioned narrative. Therefore, it can be expected that the text will reveal God's story in some way, which affects its appreciation. It does not mean, however, that the Song is only about "spiritual" things. On the contrary, I posit that the divorce of the spiritual from the bodily is deceptive. In my point of view, God recognizes that, as created beings, we have bodies, which are not to be seen as a prison to souls. That is, our immanence is constitutive of our human nature, the horizon of our understanding, and we communicate with the world and God, and vice-versa, with our whole being. Hence, I argue, the need to spiritualize sexual desire (the plain sense) in the Song is unfounded. Theologian Ola Sigurdson summarizes it well: "It seems to me that if we wish to advance a theology of desire for our time, we have to escape from the impasse between a sublimated or domesticated sexuality on the one hand and a suspicion of desire as such on the other."¹¹

The second premise is that Scripture has a formative role, according to 2 Tim. 3:16. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for

¹¹ Ola Sigurdson, "The Passion of Christ: On the Social Production of Desire," ed. F. LeRon Shults and Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Saving Desire: The Seduction of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2011), Kindle.

every good work.” This formation, however, involves humans as a whole, not only their cognition or souls.¹² The assumption is that God is interested in seeing humankind flourish in all of its being (and creation in general, for that matter), and for that purpose uses Scripture and interpersonal relationships. The undercurrent belief is that humans are plastic and able to change incrementally over time.

Although this thesis encompasses a study of the Song, its focus is not on its exegesis as such. Nor it is concerned with the psychoanalytical concept of desire, which is beyond the scope of this investigation. What I aim to do in the present study, however, is to present a hermeneutics of desire from a theological perspective, which sees the body as an active participant in the interaction with others and with God. It is undeniably a Christian reading of the Song.

It is not known when the Song was written, why and by whom.¹³ What is sure is that there are versions of the Song in various languages, but Hebrew, Greek and Latin are the most used for in-depth studies.¹⁴ For the purpose of this thesis, the use of a certain version is not a matter of importance, because in any language the sensual and passionate imagery used in the Song will always speak of physical love and sexual desire. That is, the theme of desire is not so much affected by the translation. Certainly, there is more to the poem in the Hebrew version of the texts. For instance, J. Cheryl Exum mentions “assonance, alliteration, sound play (paronomasia), parataxis, enjambment, and ellipsis... chiasmus, inclusion...,” which contribute to “an aesthetic effect that cannot be captured in translation.”¹⁵ Here, however, we will be dealing with the text offered by modern languages (English in this case), which are the ones laypeople use. According to the Gospel Coalition, the New International Version (NIV) is the most popular Bible in English.¹⁶ Its translation is considered a mediating one, that is, it lies between formal and functional. It means that the rendition considers not only the source text (literal translation) but also the target language, making it readable. For these reasons, the NIV

¹² For a conversation on Scripture as formative, see Jeannine K. Brown, Carla M. Dahl, and Wyndy Corbin Reuschling, *Becoming Whole and Holy: An Integrative Conversation About Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2011).

¹³ J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, ed. Tremper Longman III, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017); Jenson, *Song of Songs*; Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2001).

¹⁴ Griffiths, *Song of Songs*.

¹⁵ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 31.

¹⁶ Gospel Coalition. *The Bible in Translation*. n.d., accessed 02.26.2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-bible-in-translation/>. Any other passages from Scriptures that do not refer to the Song of Songs are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

will be used in this study.¹⁷ Here it is useful to remember that what this study tackles is the visceral effect of the Song on the reader. The goal is thus to appreciate the Song as it is presented to us in our own languages, where it can have this effect in the strongest way possible.

In the same way, the identity of the lovers is not important for this discussion. As Carey Ellen Walsh puts it, “Who really cares about... who is writhing in desire in this Song, when it is the writhing and the desire themselves that are so tantalizing?”¹⁸ Although the text never mentions if the lovers were or ought to be married, I can conceive how considering the lovers a married couple can increase the acceptance of the story to those who treasure sexual life inside marriage. Yet, my reading of the Song will put this theme aside and focus on physical desire. Similarly, the discussion about structure and composition, i.e., if the Song is either a collection of poems or a unity, will not be of importance for the common reader.

1.3 Background

Although said to be one of the most commented on books of the Bible, the truth is that the Song of Songs is not one of the most popular books of Scripture in contemporary Christian settings. Pastors do not preach about the Song, and many Christians simply do not read it. For one, the Song does not seem to inspire anything spiritual at first glance. On the contrary, it is very carnal, which seems to be dissonant from the rest of Scripture.

The Song is written as a series of dialogues between the lovers, and between the lovers and their friends, which is unusual for love poetry, as Exum explains. Together with the use of verbs in the present tense, this feature affects how the poem is perceived, namely, as if the story unfolds at the moment of reading.¹⁹ Richard S. Hess adds that the dialogue “heightens the passion” and ardor of the lovers.²⁰ This format also affects the readers in another way. It brings the interaction between the characters to the fore and pulls the readers into the lovers’ intimacy and exchange. The imperative to listen (Song of Sg. 2:8; 5:2) and look (Song of Sg. 2:8; 3:7,10) brings not only the friends into the story but the readers as well. This feature ends up having a didactic purpose. We are invited to come closer and learn from the lovers. Exum explains that the fact that the characters have no name makes it possible for the readers to identify themselves

¹⁷ Nevertheless, for a bold translation that takes into account the Hebrew words and their literal meanings, I suggest Exum’s version of the Song of Songs.

¹⁸ Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, chap. 1, Canonical Setting

¹⁹ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 4.

²⁰ Hess, *Song of Songs*, 26.

with the lovers and experience their desire. If the poetic dialogue were transformed into a first or third-person narrative, i.e., a monologue, the pull would arguably be loosened – the readers would take a step back, distancing themselves from the lovers.²¹

The Song has many similarities with poems from the ancient Near East.²² This suggests that it may belong to a category of literature that is known for its eroticism, which leads us to believe that it was not originally made to be a religious text. On the contrary, it may have been written to be used as a literary composition for entertainment. The awareness of the genre of the Song is crucial to a better appreciation of the text: the Song is considered lyric poetry.²³ As such, its goal is to achieve empathy or catharsis by way of provoking specific feelings in the listeners.

The means the author of the Song uses to provoke a response in the readers (or listeners) is metaphor, insinuation, and double entendre. In the Song, these create a world where the senses are engaged at their maximum, inviting the reader to interpret it through a perspective of bodily desire. The “body” of desire is constructed through the appeal to the reader’s senses via the lovers’ senses. “Lovers love with their eyes, and often they rely on metaphors to describe what they see,” Exum states.²⁴ Not only with the eyes, however. The body is ever present through metaphors connected to sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The lovers of the Song experience each other with their ears, noses, tongues, and skin: to desire the other’s presence is to do it with the whole body.

1.4 The Senses

The senses are the basis of our interaction with the world, the means to experience it and make meaning. The Song is a poem constructed upon sensory imagery about two bodies perceiving and being perceived, desiring and being desired. This imagery is how sexual desire is spelled out. The Song’s sensory language appeals to the reader’s senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch²⁵ – and reproduces in her ripple effects of the desire present in the poem. With the help of the Song’s imagery, the reader is immersed in the emotions it evokes, in the desire of

²¹ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 3-8.

²² Ibid.; Hess, *Song of Songs*.

²³ Exum, *Song of Songs*; Hess, *Song of Songs*; Jenson, *Song of Songs*.

²⁴ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 17.

²⁵ The senses mentioned are the ones connected to sense organs. Other types of senses are not considered in this study because they do not fit its purposes.

the lovers.²⁶ Griffiths explains that arousal is one of the effects of the Song.²⁷ Yet, desire echoes in the reader “not by analysis but by immersion: to understand it is to be pulled into the *feel* that it evokes, to resonate with the corporeal significance conveyed, even if that meaning can never be put into words.”²⁸ It is an affective understanding that is prior to cognition.

The table below gives examples of the sensuous language of the Song divided in categories according to sense and respective body parts.

Categorization	Description lines	Reference in the Song
Sight	... show me your face... your face is lovely.	2:14
	How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves.	4:1
	You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes...	4:9
	His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels.	5:12
	... come back, come back, that we may gaze on you!	6:13
Hearing	let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet... ²⁹	2:14
	Listen! My beloved is knocking: “Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one.	5:2
Smell	Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. ³⁰ No wonder the young women love you!	1:3
	How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of our perfume more than any spice!	4:10
	Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere.	4:16
Taste	Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men.	2:3
	I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.	

²⁶ Cf. Fiona Black for a different appreciation of the imageries in the Song. "Beauty or the Beast? The Grotesque Body in the Song of Songs," *Biblical interpretation* 8, no. 3 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851500750096363>.

²⁷ Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 90.

²⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2013), 116 (italics in the original).

²⁹ The Song also uses synesthesia, which in this case combines hearing (voice) and taste (sweet).

³⁰ Synesthesia: hearing (name) and smell (perfume).

	Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue.	4:11
	Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.	4:16
	I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk.	5:1
	His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely.	5:16
Touch	Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth	1:1
	His left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me.	2:6

Table 1. Sample categorization of the senses in the Song of Songs

If read literally, that is, as a lyric poem, the Song clearly emphasizes the physicality of desire. The imagery presenting the lovers is very concrete; it comes from an embodied world that is accessible through the senses, which are the means to relating to and rejoicing in the other. It is through the sensory language of the Song that one realizes how the lovers are open to each other. However, an allegorical interpretation of the Song will work out the senses differently. Origen and St. Bernard of Clairvaux will serve as examples of it. Although they differ in their appreciation of the senses, both deflate desire from its sexual dimension by giving it a purely spiritual interpretation.

2. Readings of the Song of Songs

The Song, alongside with the book of Esther, does not mention God's name or have any overt teaching on God. Yet, a spiritual reading of the Song is justifiably expected. After all, the book is part of a scriptural corpus where one can find analogies of the bridegroom as God, and the bride as Israel. Notwithstanding, Jewish exegesis has not denied the literal meaning of the text. William E. Phipps writes that the first Jewish commentary of the Song "erects an allegorical superstructure" over the literal meaning.³¹ On the other hand, Christian readings of the Song were influenced by the Greco-Roman world and its dilemma about sexuality as a source of

³¹ William E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 1 (1974): 85, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/stable/1461529>. See also Richard Kearney, "The Shulammitte's Song: Divine Eros, Ascending and Descending," ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller, *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), Kindle.

evil.³² Therefore, the common Christian exegesis of the Song is a non-physical, Christological reading that tends to emphasize the allegorical at the expense of the literal.

According to Phipps, the patristic interpretation of the Song tried to suppress its sensual message.³³ Origen and Bernard of Clairvaux are examples of a spiritualization of sexual desire, turning it exclusively into desire for the divine. These features can clearly be seen in their interpretation of the senses and the body: a way of bypassing sexual desire.

Origen was the first theologian to tackle the question of the role of the senses in knowing God.³⁴ In his understanding, a profitable reading of Scripture was spiritual, i.e., allegorical, which means that his reading of the Song and the sensorial language it uses is determined by it (Princ. 4.7-9). In his turn, although influenced by Origen, St. Bernard of Clairvaux uses the body and the senses in a more nuanced manner. He conceptualized the spiritual using bodily senses and saw our embodiment as the way to reach our minds and souls. He claims, however, that God could pour Godself directly into our souls, but that God chooses corporeality to teach us about the spiritual.

Presented below is a brief sketch of their exegesis of the Song based on the senses. It is an indication of Origen's and St. Bernard of Clairvaux's views on the connection – or disconnection – of the material and the spiritual.

2.1 Origen

Origen is considered the first of the Church Fathers to interpret the Song of Songs as allegory.³⁵ He states that the Song was written as “a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God” (Comm. Cant. prol. 1). Although arguing that the biblical text has multiple layers, Origen saw the spiritual as the better one. “Now the reason of the erroneous apprehension of all these points on the part of those whom we have

³² Phipps, "Plight," 86.

³³ Ibid. For a counterargument, cf. Michael John Mols, "Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs: A Contemporary Encounter with Contemplative Aspirations" (M.A., Institute for Christian Studies 2007), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/bernard-clairvaux-on-song-songs-contemporary/docview/304779973/se-2?accountid=11162> (MR43122).

³⁴ Gordon Rudy, "Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages" (Doctor of Philosophy The University of Chicago, 1999) (9934109).

³⁵ Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); J. Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199272182.001.0001>.

mentioned above, is no other than this, that holy Scripture is not understood by them according to its spiritual, but according to its literal meaning,” he warns (Princ. 4.9). The Church Father, therefore, negates that the sensuous imagery found in the Song really refers to bodily things, and affirms that the language of the Song expresses desire for what is spiritual. For this reason, one could describe Origen’s reading as “asomatic,” i.e., disembodied.³⁶

Already at the beginning of his commentary, Origen warns the reader about the dangers of the Song. This book, he writes, is only for the spiritually strong, not for those who live according to the flesh, lest the Song fosters sexual desire in the weak Christian. Those who cannot control themselves ought not to read it. For example, Origen writes that Song 2:6 (“His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me”) is the picture of a bride who desires to consummate the union with her bridegroom. Yet, he warns, “Turn with all speed to the life-giving Spirit, and eschewing physical terms, consider carefully what is the left hand of the Word of God... and do not suffer an interpretation that has to do with the flesh and the passions to carry you away” (Comm. Cant. 3.9). Cupid (or Eros) is responsible for carnal desire while the arrows of the Word of God kindle heavenly longing (Comm. Cant. prol. 2). Origen argues that Scripture does not use the terms desire or passion, but charity or affection instead, in cases where the passion of love could be understood as carnal. Charity is to be understood as passionate love, Origen states, but a love for the right things, namely, what is incorruptible and nonperishable. We should love God, and then

wisdom and right-doing and piety and truth and all other virtues; for to love God and to love good things is one and the same thing... So it makes no difference whether we speak of having a passion for God, or of loving him... [The Song of Songs], therefore, speaks of this love with which the blessed soul is kindled and inflamed towards the Word of God. (Comm. Cant. prol. 2)

It is clear then why Origen avoids using the word ‘desire’ to define the passion one can feel in the Song: to prevent the reader from mistaking the theme of godly love for carnal love. Origen does not want the reader to be inflamed by sexual desire, and, therefore, he bypasses the book’s explicit sexuality, jumping straight into a spiritual interpretation. After all, in his understanding,

³⁶ King, *Origen*, 270.

Scripture is about higher things.³⁷ Therefore, one should think of things spiritual, not of the flesh.

Origen defends that the Song is to be studied with the intellect not the body, that is, we behold “[things divine and heavenly] with the mind alone, for they are beyond the range of bodily sight” (Comm. Cant. prol. 3). If what is conveyed in the Song is only about things spiritual, a question arises with regard to the senses. As I have shown above, the Song is a book where the senses are employed abundantly, which emphasizes corporeality. What is Origen’s solution for an asomatic reading of the senses then? The answer is a doctrine of spiritual senses (αἴσθησις πνευματική).³⁸ In his commentary on the Song, Origen states that “[Paul] points out that there are other senses in man besides these five bodily senses; the other senses are acquired by training, and are said to be trained when they examine the meaning of things with more acute perception” (Comm. Cant. 1.4). Origen makes an analogy of the bodily senses with the spiritual senses as faculties of the ‘inner man’. Just as corporeal senses allow us to interact with the material world, spiritual senses are the way to know God. For instance, as the physical eye can have its vision disturbed or hindered, so the spiritual eye by ignorance. Spiritual senses perceive what is spiritual and need to be trained in order to function well. In other words, the invisible is perceived through a spiritual mode of perception (therefore, the carnal person does not perceive and does not acknowledge that the Song is about spiritual things). In the following excerpt, Origen summarizes his spiritual understanding of the body and its senses:

Scripture says: *The commandment of the Lord is lightsome, enlightening the eyes.* Let him then tell us what sort of eyes these are, that are enlightened by the light of the commandment! And again: *He that hath ears to hear, let him hear!* What ears are these, whose possessor alone is said to hear the words of Christ? And again: *For we are the good odour of Christ unto God;* and, among other passages: *O taste and see that the Lord is sweet!* And what else does it say? *And our hands have handled of the Word of life.* Will a man of this sort, do you think, unless he is actuated by the vice of contention and boasting, fail to be moved by all this evidence, and to see that these things were not spoken about the senses of the body, but about those which, as we have taught you, reside in everyone according to the inner man? (Comm. Cant. 1.4, italics in the original)

³⁷ See Origen, *De Principiis*, ed. Kevin Knight. trans. Frederick Crombie, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature 1885), book 4, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04124.htm>.

³⁸ Gavriluk and Coakley, *Spiritual Senses*.

Origen indicates that the Word of God can offer an experience of itself to each of the senses. Nothing sounds, tastes, feels, looks and smells better than the Word. It is a delight for the mind and soul. All one's soul desires is found in it.

He is called the true Light, therefore, so that the soul's eyes may have something to lighten them. He is the Word, so that her ears may have something to hear. Again, He is the Bread of Life, so that the soul's palate may have something to taste. And in the same way, He is called the spikenard or ointment, that the soul's sense of smell may apprehend the fragrance of the Word. For the same reason He is said to be able to be felt and handled, and is called the Word made flesh, so that the hand of the interior soul may touch concerning the Word of life. (Comm. Cant. 2.9)

Interestingly, Augustine presents a similar use of the spiritual senses in *Confessions*:

You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.³⁹

The table below presents specific examples of how Origen employs the senses in his commentary on the Song.

Categorization	Description line	Reference in the Song
Sight	“For of a truth nobody can perceive and know how great is the splendour of the Word, until he receives dove’s eyes – that is, a spiritual understanding.” (Comm. Cant. 3.2)	1:16
	“The sight by which God is seen is not of the body, but of the mind and spirit.” (Comm. Cant. 3.12)	2:9
Hearing	“We can take the windows as meaning the bodily senses... Similarly, when a person hears some piece of vanity, and especially the vanity of the false knowledge of perverted teachings, then death enters that soul through the windows of the ears... And also, when she listens to the Word of God and takes delight in the reasonings	2:9

³⁹ *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.27 (38).

	of His wisdom and knowledge, to her the light of wisdom enters through the windows of her ears.” (Comm. Cant. 3.13) ⁴⁰	
	“He calls her, therefore, and invites her to come out from carnal things to spiritual, from visible to invisible, from the Law to the Gospel.” (Comm. Cant. 3.13)	2:13
Smell	“...the Bride... having perceived the fragrance of the divine ointment and realizing that all the spices [i.e., the Law and the Prophets] she employed before are vastly inferior when set beside the sweetness of this new and heavenly ointment, she says: ‘The fragrance of Thine ointments is above all spices.’” (Comm. Cant. 1.3)	1:3
	“Sin has a putrid smell, virtue exhales sweet odours” (Hom. Cant. 1.2)	4:10
Taste	“... He bears fruit that not only surpasses all other fruits in taste, but also in fragrance, and thus appeals equally to the soul’s two senses, taste and smell. For Wisdom furnishes her table for us with a variety of riches: she not only sets thereon the bread of life, she also offers us the Flesh of the Word.” (Comm. Cant. 3.5)	2:3
	“... when the Church compares the sweetness of Christ’s teachings with the sourness of heretical dogmas... she describes as “apples” the sweet and pleasant doctrines...” (Comm. Cant. 3.5)	2:3
Touch	“... that He may now no longer speak to me only by His servants the angels and the prophets, but may come Himself, directly, and kiss me with the kisses of His mouth into mine, that I may hear Him speak Himself, and see Him teaching.” (Comm. Cant. 1.1)	1:1
	“For there is a certain spiritual embrace, and O that the bridegroom’s more perfect embrace may enfold my Bride! (Hom. Cant. 1.2)	2:6

Table 2. Sample categorization of the use of the senses in Origen

⁴⁰ Cf. St. Bernard’s interpretation of the same verse: “The windows and the lattices by which He is said to look out are as, I think, the senses of the flesh, and the human affections and feelings by which Christ gained an experimental knowledge of human necessities. He has, then, made use of the human feelings and bodily senses as windows and openings, so to speak, by which, being a man, He might know by personal experience the miseries of men, and so become compassionate. He no doubt knew them also before, but after another manner” (SSCC 56.1)

Table 2 shows that, according to Origen, through the spiritual senses we grasp what is invisible and spiritual. Secondly, it shows that the bodily senses should yield to what is spiritual and serve spiritual purposes, as Origen explains:

Paul the apostle teaches us that the invisible things of God are understood by means of things that are visible, and that the things that are not seen are beheld through their relationship and likeness to things seen. He thus shows that this visible world teaches us about which is invisible, and that this earthly scene contains certain patterns of things heavenly. (Comm. Cant. 3.12)

As windows to the soul, the physical senses can harm or benefit the soul. Gazing with lust or listening to perversion lead to spiritual death. Listening to the word of God or seeing God in creation is life-giving. In other words, the body should be put in the service of the soul's goal to find its way back to God. The soul who loves the Word hears when the Bridegroom calls her to attain what is spiritual, leaving behind desires who satisfy the sinful flesh. Origen castrates the Song's body, eliminating its sensual connotations.

Origen's interpretation of the Song is important because it has influenced other interpretations all through the Middle Ages until modern times. His allegorical reading of the Song as the spiritual marriage between Christ and the Church, or the Word of God and the human soul, can be seen in later commentaries by other teachers as well.

2.2 St. Bernard of Clairvaux

St. Bernard, the abbot of Clairvaux, did not write a proper commentary on the Song, but he wrote sermons on some of the verses of the book, teaching spiritual truths. The verses are expounded in isolation, disconnected from the rest of the text but forming a bridge to other bible verses. Making use of the Christian allegorical tradition, St. Bernard sees the bridegroom as Jesus, and the bride as the believer's soul, which receives insights about spiritual realities when it becomes one with God.

Although influenced by Origen, Bernard does not use the former's doctrine of spiritual senses. Differently from Origen, he believed that body and soul are connected.⁴¹ It is in fact a characteristic of the late medieval mysticism not to distinguish between external sensations and

⁴¹ Rudy, "Mystical Language."; Wm Loyd Allen, "Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs: Why They Matter," *Review & Expositor* 105, no. 3 (2008/08/01 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463730810500305>.

spiritual senses.⁴² The outer and the inner are a fluid extension of each other, in an almost psychosomatic way. For example, hearing the word of God with the ears is also hearing with the heart.

It was not uncommon for mystics to use sexual language to describe the spiritual encounter with God (a corporeal sensation of the spiritual experience). Still, a carnal reading of the Song would be to misinterpret its message, and Bernard warns the reader against it, explaining that the book is not to be read by those who do not have the capacity to understand things spiritual:

This song is not to be sung or to be understood by a soul which is as yet a neophyte in the infancy of its virtue, and but newly turned from the world. It belongs to the advanced and instructed soul, which, by the progress in grace made by it through the power of God, has grown as far as to reach a perfect age, and, as it were, to have become marriageable (remember that I speak not of years, but of virtues), and fit for the nuptials with its heavenly spouse... (SSCC 1.11)

For Bernard, the body leads us “onwards to the knowledge of things spiritual and intelligible” (SSCC 5.3); because humans are embodied beings, it is via the corporeal that spiritual truths are attained, if one “transfer[s] every use of temporal things to the profit of things eternal” (SSCC 5.3). Therefore, for Bernard, the Song remains a book of ascension from carnal to spiritual love.⁴³

It is inside this framework that Bernard finds freedom to use the Song’s sensuous language. For instance, Bernard speaks of a burning desire with which the patriarchs longed for the incarnation of Christ (SSCC 2.1), or of “ineffable delights” which the Bride and Bridegroom experience (SSCC 14.5); divine eyes drawn downwards unto humans represent “inward senses and affections” (SSCC 24.6); there is also “fiery longing” (SSCC 31.4), and the Bride “burning inconceivably with holy love” (SSCC 67.3).

What is special about Bernard’s use of the senses is that he recognizes that they are part of our being-in-the-world, and that the body is a means by which we can experience God,

⁴² Bernard McGinn, "Late Medieval Mystics," in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 190.

⁴³ Rudy, "Mystical Language."

for, indeed, those things which are made — that is, corporeal and visible things — unless they be perceived by the instrumentality of the body, do not come to our knowledge at all. The spiritual creature, therefore, which we are, must necessarily have a body, without which, indeed, it can by no means obtain that knowledge which is the only means of attaining to those things, to know which constitutes blessedness. (SSCC 5.1)

Likewise, the Incarnation is also understood as the way Christ is accessible to humanity and he can make God known because he took on flesh: “To those who knew only the flesh, He offered His Flesh, in order to teach them by it to know also the Spirit.” (SSCC 6.3)

The table below is a representation of Bernard’s use of the senses.

Categorization	Description lines	Reference in the Song
Sight	“The senses declare that He is black; but faith protests assuredly that He is fair as the lily (Cant. ii.1), and altogether beautiful. He is, indeed, black, but only to the eyes of those void of understanding; for in the judgment of the faithful He is wholly beautiful; <i>black yet comely</i> ... (SSCC 28.3; italics in the original)	1:5
	“Nor would you be able to behold [the light] even in a certain degree, if the light of your body, that is, the eye, did not resemble in some degree the light of heaven in its inborn clearness and serenity” (SSCC 31.2)	1:7
Hearing	“By the hearing is discovered a truth which the sight was unable to reach; appearance has deceived the eye, and the truth has entered by the ear ... It was not without reason that St. Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, as if to open an entrance for the truth, and that the truth should free him, that is, make him free.” (SSCC 28.5)	1:5
	“Since both flowers, then, have appeared, and the voice of the turtle has been heard in our land, without doubt the Truth has been made known both to hearing and to sight. For a voice is heard and a flower seen. By flowers are meant miracles, as I have explained above, which, joined to the impression made by the voice (of him who preaches the truth of the Gospel), brings forth the fruit of faith.” (SSCC 59.8)	2:12

Smell	<p>“Who will not run with ardour, with rapidity, after Him who delivers from error, and forgives offences; who by His Life bestows merits, and by His Death acquires (for thee) rewards? What excuse can there be for him who does not eagerly run in the fragrance of these perfumes, except perchance that their sweetness has not reached him? But the odour of life has gone forth into the whole world; for the whole earth is full of the mercy of the Lord, and His goodness is over all His works.” (SSCC 22.8)</p> <p>“For these souls do not venture to address themselves directly to the Bridegroom, yet their endeavour is to press closely in the footsteps of her who leads them on (magistræ); they will enjoy the delightful perfume of the oil poured forth, and will be incited by it to desire and to seek for still higher and better things.” (SSCC 14.5)</p>	1:3-4 1:3
Taste	<p>“<i>His fruit was sweet to my taste</i>, signifying the heavenly charm of the contemplation which she had obtained when sweetly lifted up by love... Where the Bride makes pause, let us pause too; glorifying, for the portion given to us of spiritual dainties delightful to our taste, Him who is the Head...” (SSCC 48.8)</p> <p>“For as they [i.e., the Bridegroom’s words] are sweet in the grace which they contain, so they are fruitful in senses and deep in mysteries. To what shall I liken them? They are as food which surpasses all other by a threefold excellence; delicious in taste, solid in nutriment, and efficacious as a remedy. (SSCC 67.1)</p>	2:3 2:16
Touch	<p>“Let Him rather who is fair beyond the sons of men, let Him come to me with the touch of His Lips... He it is whose speech, living and powerful, is to me as a kiss, and that not the mere meeting of the lips, which oftentimes is but a deceptive sign of peace in the heart, but rather the imparting of joys, the revealing of things hidden, and a certain wonderful, intimate, and wholly ineffable mingling of the heavenly light which enlightens the soul, and the soul which is illuminated by it.” (SSCC 2.2)</p> <p>“As if it were only when He were ascended that He either could be, or desired to be, touched by her! Yes, doubtless, He could be touched, but by the heart, not by the hand; by prayers, not by the eyes; by faith, and not by the bodily senses.” (SSCC 28.9)</p>	1:1 1:5

“That faculty [i.e., faith], then, can alone touch Me worthily, which shall contemplate Me sitting at the Right Hand of My Father, no longer in humble guise, but in celestial glory; in My very Flesh, but in quite other semblance than aforesaid.” (SSCC 28.10) 1:5

Table 3. Sample categorization of the use of the senses in St. Bernard

Bernard’s conviction appears to be that the bodily senses allow only limited experience. Literally, there is more than meets the eyes. The soul has to rise above the earthly things by transposing what is material into spiritual. As Bernard explains, “Although the words in which those visions or similitudes are described are corporeal, and describe objects in the physical sphere, yet they are intended to suggest things spiritual to our minds, and for this reason the causes and meanings of them are to be searched by the spiritual faculty” (SSCC 32.1). In sum, although the body is the means to knowledge, corporeal experiences have importance in that they render spiritual meanings.

Despite the difference in understanding about the importance of human embodiment between Bernard’s view and the present study, both agree on two points. First, that embodiment is constitutive of being a creature, and, therefore, the interaction with the divine and the world takes place via the body. Secondly, and consequently, as I suggest that the Song impresses the reader affectively, so does Bernard. He acknowledges that the body has an understanding beyond the rational, one that is founded on the corporeal senses. Wm. Loyd Allen writes,

In Bernard’s exegesis passion mediated through touch and taste is a way of knowing that precedes rational understanding. He is not trying to explain the poetry; he is attempting to convey its essential affect upon him as a symbol of the love of God as he has known it in his experience.⁴⁴

2.3 Discussion

Are Origen’s and Bernard’s readings of the Songs to be discarded then? Certainly not. Although they employ allegorical exegesis, their interpretation enhances how great the love of God is for God’s creatures and how humans ought to love God. What concerns the theme of desire, Origen and Bernard also speak of a longing for the ‘other’. Although Nietzsche has accused the Church

⁴⁴ Allen, "Bernard of Clairvaux," 409.

of being hostile to desire because of the dangers it poses, and asceticism of intending to kill the passions because it considered them destructive,⁴⁵ neither theologian is against desire, but in favor of what they both consider the right form of desire, the spiritual one. One cannot, therefore, discard the presence of an erotic (yet not sexual) desire in their writings. The critical point is that the other is the divine and, therefore, in their opinion, carnal desire must be transcended. It is possible to conclude, then, that desire itself is not taboo. The object and goal of desire is the problem.⁴⁶ Origen, for example, states that one should long for what is spiritual, not to satisfy the desires of the flesh for temporal things. “If you despised all bodily things – I do not mean flesh and blood, but money and property and the very earth and heaven, for these will pass away,” he writes (Hom. Cant. 1.2). In his turn, Bernard states that we should desire vehemently, ardently, and earnestly to be in union with Christ (SSCC 32.2). That is, desire for things above is considered good, for its object is God and its aim is a loving relationship with God. Things eternal, unperishable, are worthy of being desired because they are of greater value. Ephemeral pleasures are not. The sidelight of their interpretation is the affirmation that desire is malleable and can be reshaped.

Yet, one cannot but notice a difference between Origen and Bernard in regard to corporeality. While for the former desire is disembodied, the latter thinks that the body has a mediating role for spiritual desire. That is, for Bernard, a person is able to recognize things spiritual because of the experiences in the flesh. As an example, he argues that because one loves first, one can understand that the Song is about love.

As mentioned above, Origen and Bernard give the sensory imagery of the Song a spiritual signification. It is certainly the case that Origen’s and Bernard’s beliefs about embodiment influences their exegesis of the Song, as tables 2 and 3 exemplify. An allegorical reading of the Song demands the senses to be either treated as spiritual and/or as a means to grasp spiritual truths – what is comprehensible, considering God’s immateriality. Corporeal senses must in any case be finally transcended. In a way, it is an attempt to master what is carnal by spiritualizing it, as if the theological quest were only about the spiritual (in contrast to bodily) dimension of human beings. Intriguingly, in Origen and Bernard, the marriage of the Bride (the soul) with the Bridegroom (Jesus) is purely spiritual.

⁴⁵ Alan D. Schrift, "Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze: An Other Discourse of Desire," in *Philosophy and Desire*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 180.

⁴⁶ Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), Kindle; Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*.

What concerns the immaterial God, this study assumes that our bodies, and more specifically sexual desire, are involved in the process of knowing God – even if only partially. That is, in a very visceral manner, we grasp how God desires. I argue that the desire felt in the flesh is a partial but concrete revelation of a desire that is also present in the source of life, the divine. Therefore, this study critiques the idea that God’s revelation is only possible via spiritual perception. Origen and Bernard offer an allegorical interpretation for the Song, “a step or bridge to true spiritual love for the spiritual God beyond physicality,”⁴⁷ while I defend sexual desire as the somatic level of the divine eros, an approach that does not empty desire of its sexual dimension. On the contrary, this reading of the Song is rooted in sexuality. Hence, I am assuming that even spiritual desire has a bodily component, and that God speaks through our carnal experiences. *Pace* Origen, I argue, therefore, that our apprehending God – and the world for that matter – is enriched when life in the body, in this case, sexuality, is taken into consideration. Therefore, in contrast to Bernard’s view, I suggest that the body is not only an insignificant means to grasp the spiritual but an element that has importance in itself, for it modulates the perception of the spiritual. I invite the reader to look at the body neither as a window through which we peek in order to see what is on the other side, nor as a transparent thing, but as an object that has meaning in itself.

3. A Hermeneutics of Desire

Mexican writer Octavio Paz claims that poetry is a true “testimony of the senses” for “its images are palpable, visible and audible.”⁴⁸ This study has hinted at how desire is expressed in the Song, namely, through poetic, sensory language. It seems fitting at this moment to move from the *how* to the *what*. What are the characteristics of the sexual desire the Song elicits and which the reader affectively grasps?

3.1 The Contours of Sexual Desire

To start I would like to highlight that bodily senses and nearness/distance are interrelated. Sight and hearing, for instance, do not necessarily require closeness to an object. Smell, in turn, is more intense as the distance is shorter. Touch and taste require immediate contact. Interestingly, taste as well as smell are, strictly speaking, also haptic. Molecules have to enter the mouth and

⁴⁷ Rudy, "Mystical Language," 103.

⁴⁸ Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 1.

“touch” the taste buds, or enter the nostrils and activate the sensory cells, in order for the brain to recognize savors and scents. Taste and smell are the most intimate of the senses. Not even touch is so intensively near. When something is brought to the mouth or it is olfactorily perceived, it is *incorporated* (even if just at the molecular level), while touch stays at the surface of the body. As a matter of fact, Origen also sees a progression of intimacy according to the senses: the Church hears Christ’s voice; follows his scent; taste of the sweetness of his teachings; and they move into his chambers to consummate the union.

In the Song, this theme of the senses and nearness/distance are intimately linked to desire. A closer analysis shows that the author makes use of the bodily senses to convey that desire wants to close distances and draw near, starting with the very first verse of the poem.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth
for your love is more delightful than wine.
Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out. (Song of Sg. 1:2)

Let him kiss me speaks of longing for closeness, which is evaluated as more delightful than the taste and intoxication of wine. The lover’s perfumes also denote the nearness of his body, probably coming close to kiss. As it is clear, one desires the embodied presence of the other. Another passage of the Song that plays with closeness and the senses is found in 1:12-14.

While the king was at his table,
my perfume spread its fragrance.
My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh
resting between my breasts.
My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
from the vineyards of En Gedi.

The beloved is very close, between the lover’s breasts. Not only that, but he is also compared to myrrh and henna blossoms that point to pleasant smells. Exum mentions that “perfumes convey the appeal the lovers have for each other.”⁴⁹ The olfactory metaphors in the Song refer to the pleasure the other gives. The good-smelling spices and flowers indicate that the presence

⁴⁹ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 111.

of the other is appreciated and positively rated (also in, e.g., Song of Sg. 4:13-14, 6:2). The sensory, sexual imagery of the Song is rich in gustatory metaphors as well:

Categorization	Description line	Reference in the Song
Gustatory metaphors	I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste	2:3
	How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume more than any spice! Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon	4:10-11
	You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water	4:15
	Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits	4:16
	I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk	5:1
	Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine, the fragrance of	7:7-9

your breath like apples, and
your mouth like the best wine

Table 4. Sample categorization of gustatory metaphors.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel observes that both hunger and sexual desire relate to an object that is outside of the self, “only in this case it is usually a person rather than an omelet.”⁵⁰ Similarly, the gustatory metaphors one finds in the Song voice a hunger or thirst for the other, making a parallel between sexual desire and biological needs. In the Song, however, it is a matter of degustation, not consumption, of the source of pleasure. The constant demand of the lover’s embodied presence, the seek-find-seek again pattern in the book indicates that this desire is not consuming or totally satiable.⁵¹ If it were not so, total satisfaction could hinder the lovers from wanting the other repeatedly, transforming them into inert beings and breaking relationality. Interesting enough, the lovers’ interaction in the Song seems to stabilize and then break over again. Connection, disconnection, reconnection. It confirms that desire is recurrent, exactly because it is insatiable, claiming and pursuing each other’s presence over again, as shown in the excerpt below.

Open to me, my sister, my friend...
I have taken off my robe.
Am I to put it on again?
I have washed my feet.
Am I to get them dirty?...
I opened to my lover,
but my lover had turned and gone...
I sought him... (Song of Sg. 5: 2- 6)

As the Song shows, the physical absence of the other results in an attempt, and an appeal, to draw the lover nearer over and over again, either by pulling the lover or by moving in the lover’s direction (e.g., “Let him kiss me”; “Arise... come with me”; “Show me your face, let me hear your voice”; “Here he comes, leaping across the mountains”; “I will go to the mountain of

⁵⁰ Thomas Nagel, "Sexual Perversion," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 128.

⁵¹ Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, Cultural memory in the present, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

myrrh and to the hill of incense”; “Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits”). The lover’s physical absence signifies a great distance that needs to be shortened in order for interaction to take place. It does not seem, however, that absence is the opposite of presence. Even if just in the sensory memory of the other, the lover is ever present, which suggests that desire is not sparked by the lack of something but by the longing for nearness. According to Alan D. Schrift, Hobbes makes a distinction between desire and love by the absence or presence of things. What is desired is absent while what is loved is present, a distinction the Song does not make. “So that desire and love are the same thing; save that by desire, we always signify the absence of the object; by love, most commonly the presence of the same,” he writes.⁵² Also Descartes sees desire as futural, for it longs for an object that is not present. Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, on the other hand, propose that desire does not arise from lack. In fact, they argue that the experience of lack is a result of desire.⁵³

In the Song, desire is not extinguished when the other is present. On the contrary, it seems to be intensified by the appeal of the physical presence to the senses and the concomitant realization that, even in fullness of presence, it is impossible to fully reach the other. There seems to always be a remnant distance between the lovers that cannot be overcome by physical presence. The distance we call ‘otherness’, this other body that is not mine. It is this distance, this veil, as philosopher Byung-Chul Han would describe it, that does not allow desire to be fully satiated.⁵⁴ Han argues that “a successful relationship with the Other finds expression as a kind of failure.”⁵⁵ Because the other is not a commodity, we fail to consume, possess, dominate it. “The abolition of distance does not create more closeness, but rather destroys it. Instead of closeness, a complete gaplessness ensues. Closeness and distance are interwoven, kept together by a dialectical tension,” he affirms.⁵⁶ In fact, otherness preserves not only distance but also the power of seduction. What one does not fully know is enticing and fuels desire.

In light of this, one could say that nearness and distance undergird desire and pull one subject to the other. It is in each other’s presence that the other can be tasted and smelled and touched, and interaction can take place. To be able to say that “*your lips distill nectar, my bride;*

⁵² Schrift, "Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze," 174-82.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Han, *Saving Beauty*.

⁵⁵ Han, *Agony of Eros*, 11.

⁵⁶ Byung-Chul Han, *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 6.

honey and milk are under your tongue” (Song of Sg. 4:11), the touching of mouths is arguably necessary. However, to draw near does not mean to efface distance.

Another characteristic of the desire presented in the Song is that sexual interaction behooves voluntary reciprocity. If one of the lovers had denied the kisses asked for, or had not stood up to go with, or had hidden the face or silenced the voice, there wouldn’t have been any exchanges. A positive response upon invitation to intimacy is crucial. Both lovers desire and wish to be freely desired in return. The invitation of desire into a union of bodies wants to be met with a positive answer: sexual desire wants the other to allow proximity, to let oneself be seduced. By showing that the other is wanted, sexual desire’s goal is to provoke a reaction, i.e., to arouse desire in the other. It wants pleasure to be mutual. Rowan D. Williams expresses it beautifully, writing that “my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body... We are pleased because we are pleasing.”⁵⁷ Supporting this idea, Griffiths mentions in his commentary that verbatim repetitions found in the Song strongly indicate that the reciprocity is symmetrical.⁵⁸ Below is a table that exemplifies the argument.

Categorization	Description line	Reference in the Song
Desiring and being desired	My beloved is mine and I am his	2:16
	<i>She</i> Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.	4:16 – 5:1
	<i>He</i> I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk.	
	I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; he browses among the lilies.	6:3

⁵⁷ Rowan D. Williams, "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 313.

⁵⁸ Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 72-75.

	<i>He</i>	7:8-9
	May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.	
	<i>She</i>	
	May the wine go straight to my beloved, flowing gently over lips and teeth.	
	I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me.	7:10
Symmetrical reciprocity (verbatim)	<i>He</i>	1:15,16
	How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!	
	<i>She</i>	
	How handsome you are, my beloved! Oh, how charming!	
	<i>He</i>	2:2,3
	Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the young women.	
	<i>She</i>	
	Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men.	
	<i>She</i>	1:2-3, 4:10
	for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes.	
	<i>He</i>	
	How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume more than any spice!	

Table 5. Sample categorization of reciprocity.

In a nutshell, the Song makes it clear that desire necessitates otherness in order to unfold. The dialogic structure of the Song tells the readers that there are two parts, two others who are necessary for the realization of a relationship. As Sigurdson suggests, bodies cannot be involved with each other “in a mute way, but in a way that involves reciprocal communication... Human embodiment constitutes a sort of ‘radical availability’ that the Christian faith affirms, and

sexuality is a stubborn reminder of exactly this radical availability.”⁵⁹ To put it another way, the coming together of these parts can only come to fruition if both are desiring and available, and if otherness is acknowledged and maintained, i.e., the other can be tasted, smelled, and felt, but not appropriated. As shown above, nearness, otherness, and reciprocity are contours of the sexual desire the reader learns affectively from the Song.

3.2 Erotic Desire

I am proposing that the contours of sexual desire in the Song inform the readers about a more encompassing desire, namely, erotic desire. I argue that erotic is the desire that moves human beings out of individualism and into a relationship with others. ‘Erotic’, in this case, although having the characteristics of the Song’s sexual desire, stretches beyond sexuality, contrary to the most common use of the word. It is a distinct concept that one needs to bear in mind throughout this thesis.

As one might guess, ‘erotic’ derives from the Greek word *eros*. Eros, presumably the oldest Greek deity, was known as the god of passion whose chief associates were Longing and Desire.⁶⁰ According to Glenn W. Most, however, the Greek poet Hesiod (flourished c. 700 BC) sees Eros as the force that brings Earth and Chasm into movement, “out of their lethargic self-sufficiency.”⁶¹ Most emphasizes:

Eros is, for Hesiod, not merely an emotion, still less a solely human emotion, a passion that we mortals feel often more strongly and sometimes less so, but is also, at least at this early stage of world history, a divine, and hence irresistible, force of cosmic stimulation and movement, one that compels other entities to depart from their ordinary complacent repose and to enter into relations with one another that will end up producing further entities.⁶²

This definition is similar to that found in Sigurdson’s “Desire and Love” where he writes that eros is a “motor that moves us forward towards the other.”⁶³ Han shares the same view and

⁵⁹ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 482.

⁶⁰ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Eros." Encyclopædia Britannica, February 12, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eros-Greek-god>.

⁶¹ Glenn W. Most, "Eros in Hesiod," in *Erôs in Ancient Greece*, ed. Ed Sanders et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 166.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ola Sigurdson, "Desire and Love," in *The Oxford Handbook Of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).

argues that eros pulls us out of narcissism into an experience of otherness.⁶⁴ From an entirely different perspective, Anders Nygren's well-known book *Agape and Eros* has set the foundation for a Christian understanding of eros that many have considered wanting: while *agape* is God-driven, selfless love, eros is human-driven and self-seeking, and they are irreconcilable. Very often, besides being circumscribed to sexual activity and romantic love, eros is used to refer to consumerism in a society where capitalism shapes our desires.⁶⁵

The concept of erotic in this thesis goes along with Hesiod's, Sigurdson's and Han's definitions of eros, rather than that of Nygren. That is, in my view, erotic is basically the movement towards the other. Therefore, 'erotic' exceeds 'sexual', but sexual can be erotic. Sigurdson points out that while in the ancient Christian tradition eros was dissociated from sexuality, modernity has reduced eros to it.⁶⁶

However, this study expands the definition of erotic. Here, this movement towards what is other unfolds into longing for nearness, reciprocity, and acknowledgement of otherness – independently of its being sexual or not. These contours of erotic desire are based on the characteristics of the relationship the lovers embody. Letting the Song set the parameters for erotic desire is motivated by the belief that sexual desire is informed by a more encompassing desire that cannot be reduced to its sexual manifestation.

Erotic desire, thus understood, allows Christians (or all the readers of the Song, for that matter) to contribute positively to a flourishing life in community, both with humans and other-than-humans. As a means that God uses to open up the readers to a new way of relating to others, the Song's influence reaches beyond the church community and into all spheres of life where they are engaged.

If it is true that erotic desire informs the sexual, and sexual desire participates in the erotic, it follows that the sexual is not the most primal desire. I argue that the sexual longing humans have is a desire that has its source in God, the creator. God as a desiring being is most clearly seen in the Incarnation: God reaching out to humanity and wanting to be desired in return. When I argue that sexual desire can be a corporeal expression of erotic, I point to its

⁶⁴ Han, *Agony of Eros*.

⁶⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2008); Han, *Agony of Eros*; Sungpo Yi and Tun Jai, "Impacts of Consumers' Beliefs, Desires and Emotions on Their Impulse Buying Behavior: Application of an Integrated Model of Belief-Desire Theory of Emotion," *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* 29, no. 6 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2020.1692267>. Byung-Chul Han argues, however, that our consumerist society is not erotic but pornographic. Han, *Agony of Eros*.

⁶⁶ Sigurdson, "Desire and Love," 525.

essence as a movement towards the other that aims at nearness and reciprocity. Similarly, divine desire is also erotic, as in the movement of Incarnation. That is, erotic is a quality of the divine desire; at the same time, sexual desire is an expression of the erotic. To say it differently, eros is the essence of sexual and divine desires. The conclusion I suggest here is, therefore, that sexual desire discloses divine desire: through it, God's own desire can be felt and grasped concretely in the human dimension.

Through such a reading of the Song, I argue that sexual desire wants to be filled with the presence of its source, not to be emptied of it. That is a reason why an allegorical interpretation that bypasses the corporeality of desire is not wished. In my view, negating the sexual imagery of the Song and giving it a merely spiritual connotation is, at best, to render sexual desire meaningless. On the other hand, to affirm that sexual desire can be the corporeal expression of divine desire is to place it again under God. More precisely, to see sexual desire as having its sources in the divine desire is to participate in what God is. Sexual desire as erotic is the corporeal image of divine desire because they share the same essence.

A tendency to either fix the gaze upon what is material – negating the spiritual and transforming sexuality into an end in itself – or to hurry the gaze from the material to the spiritual – bypassing the chance of grasping mysteries in a very concrete manner –, hinders the opening up of sexual desire into divine desire. Negating the meaning that sexual desire may have in the process of knowing and participating in God is to sustain a comatose embodiment, poor in God's presence. Like in the Passover meal, the bread and the wine mean more than just the physical bread and wine. They open to something more. But without their very material nature a connection to the spiritual would not be possible. The bread as bread and the wine as wine need to be affirmed and embraced so that the opening is feasible.

I am not proposing however that God – or knowing God, for that matter – can be circumscribed to materiality. Yet, my approach is one that could be called iconophilic, where I argue that the image of sexual desire mediates divine desire: it affirms divine presence in our embodiment. This means that sexual desire is always claiming to be understood as a revelation of the divine, although human beings have distorted it into a means to self-fulfillment. Sexual desire is always opening up to God, but we are incapable to see this and end up using it as an instrument of our self-centeredness. Therefore, the importance of the Song as pedagogy of desire is that it changes our perception of desire by teaching us viscerally to desire rightly. One could say that the Song redeems sexual desire by showing us what desire is really about.

I have argued that God desires human beings, and that the Incarnation is the very expression of how God wants to embrace humanity and become one with it. Furthermore, the Word incarnate, being God in human body, reveals Christ as “[the Image] who breaks open the visible image to the invisible prototype and discloses all the world as a visible image of the invisible.”⁶⁷ I am not proposing that sexual desire is an incarnation of divine desire. But I do argue that it is a sign of God’s presence in human existence in this world. Therefore, sexual desire can disclose the primal desire without the anxiety of being eradicated, for it is a visceral sign of human participation in the divine. It is supposed to be embraced, especially because it teaches us not only how intense divine desire for humanity is but also how great the human need for the other is. As Professor Christina Howells summarizes it, “Desire is not desire for pleasure, for sexual intercourse, or for orgasm. These are its end but not its aim. They are secondary objects that habit, convention, or fatigue may cause us to confuse with the primary object of desire – the other.”⁶⁸ As erotic, i.e., as movement towards the other that aims at coming near and be desired in return, sexual desire is an embodied *expression* of the divine.

To better understand how sexual desire can be considered an expression, not an incarnation, of divine desire, it is helpful to liken sexual desire to an image or an icon. Feminist theologian Natalie Carnes argues that an image is an object that has a signified, i.e., it opens up to something beyond itself. But the signified always has a surplus of meaning that cannot be totally encompassed by the image. The result is that in some respects the image is both similar and dissimilar to the signified. One could also say that an image has a cataphatic as well as an apophatic capacity. Dissimilarity is crucial for a distinction between signifier and signified, otherwise the image could be confused with the original, circumscribing the signified to the signifier. Yet, no image can totalize the signified. If there were no dissimilarity, one of the two would be eradicated by amalgamation: either the signified, when the focus is only on what is visible; or the image/signifier, when the visible is bypassed or negated.⁶⁹ When all that is left is the visible, the palpable, the tangible, the image becomes either an idol or an object to be consumed – it has become an end in itself, for it substitutes a reality that cannot be fully contained in the signifier. C. S. Lewis’ analogy illuminates it.

⁶⁷ Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia*, Encountering traditions, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 183.

⁶⁸ Christina Howells, "Sartre: Desiring the Impossible," in *Philosophy and Desire*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 87.

⁶⁹ Carnes, *Image and Presence*.

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited.⁷⁰

However, when the visible is bypassed, suppressed, negated, the meanings that the image conveys are also denied. What Carnes tries to show is that an image carries with itself the resemblance of something that is bigger than the image itself. The image is insufficient, however, to represent the meaning in its fullness. It serves rather as a reminder of something that is more encompassing. She uses *Maria lactans* – the image of Mary nursing the baby Jesus – to clarify her point.



Figure 1. Giampietrino, *Madonna Nursing the Infant Christ*, c. 1520, Galleria Borghese, Roma, Italy. Used with permission.

⁷⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 4-5.

She explains that this painting, more specifically the breast, produces a reaction in the viewer that opens up to a deeper meaning. Mary is ready to give the baby Jesus the nourishment for life. According to Carnes, Incarnation shows that the God who put on humanity became dependable of another one for life and growth. Mary's breast speaks of this dependency, which is also real for all human beings, and emphasizes the humanity of the son of God. We and Jesus could only exist because there were others. Carnes affirms that Mary's breast should not be desired pornographically, but it ought not to be negated either. The exposed breast does not invite us to consumption, but we nevertheless have to affirm the message it conveys – the child suckling Mary speaks of nourishment and dependence. Come and drink! – it invites us together with the baby Jesus. Although it is not Mary's breasts that are desired, eradicating the breast from the image (negating it) undermines its function and disrupts the connection to its signified. It is by being affirmed that the breast opens up into more.⁷¹ Alongside Carnes, Brian E. Daley affirms that images “make present what they signify, without actually losing their earthly character—bring the divine before our eyes by signifying it in creaturely form,” and considers that in the Incarnation “God, in a new way, had become visible, and that visibility engaged the heart as well as the senses.”⁷²

Carnes' analysis throws light on the hermeneutics of Origen and Bernard. What they do is, in a way, to eradicate the sexual sense of the Song. In Carnes vocabulary, this would be an iconoclastic attitude, “a fear-governed attempt” to hamper the lust the sexual imagery of the Song could elicit and maybe make its readers turn away from God.⁷³ They end up denying the signifier and thus also the meaning it conveys. However, to deny sexual desire is also to deny a part of our humanity. By annihilating the sexual component of desire, we deprive ourselves of grasping this intense, concrete form of desiring that informs us of our need for the other, for nearness, for being desired in return. It even hinders us from understanding God as a lover and desiring being in Scripture (e.g., Ezekiel 16).

I have argued that what sexual desire allows us to experience in our bodies as an instance of erotic desire is, first, the pull out of individualism and into relationship, to break distances between bodies. The desire presented in the Song, although sexual in nature, teaches about a desire that goes beyond sexuality. Sexual desire in the Song propels one lover toward the other,

⁷¹ Carnes, *Image and Presence*, 29-55.

⁷² S. J. Brian E. Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 266, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199281336.001.0001>.

⁷³ Carnes, *Image and Presence*, 24-25.

just as eros stimulates into action, closing distances. Besides, the Song indicates that desire wants to be reciprocated. Finally, it informs us that in a sexual relationship otherness is a *sine qua non*, for one does not exist in a vacuum but in relation to an ‘other’.

In few words, I propose that sexual desire as shown in the Song can be seen as a corporeal manifestation of a more encompassing desire, one I call *erotic*. Similar to an image, sexual desire carries the erotic (and with it the divine), but it is not able to totalize it, for the former presupposes a sexual context, while the latter is not limited to it. To be clear, I am suggesting that something as ordinary and mundane as sexual desire and the biology of the body, which has to do with human embodiment, can carry a greater significance. The body itself becomes the hermeneutics of desire, and a means for the disclosure of the transcendent without materiality collapsing into transcendence and vice-versa.

As an opening desire,⁷⁴ sexual desire informs our bodies what erotic desire is. The characteristics of sexual desire in the Song tell us that erotic desire is the force that pulls us out of our self-sufficiency and into relationship with the world, making itself vulnerable in its yearning for reciprocity. Desire makes us porous, open to relationality to the other, and transforms us into “a self that is able to receive something from the outside or is able and willing to stand out from itself.”⁷⁵ More than that, according to Richard Kearney, the philosopher Merleau-Ponty sees this porosity as healing – from “thanatos (the death drive of closure) to eros (the life drive of communion).”⁷⁶ Here it seems only fitting to cite Song of Songs 8:6, which uses the Hebrew word אהבה for love. According to the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon, אהבה means throughout Scripture human love for other humans, including sexual desire, as well as God’s love to God’s people.⁷⁷

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death

⁷⁴ Henriksen, "Desire: Gift and Giving."

⁷⁵ Sigurdson, "Theology in the Middle of Things."

⁷⁶ Richard Kearney, "The Recovery of the Flesh in Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty," ed. Sarah Horton et al., *Somatic Desire: Recovering Corporeality in Contemporary Thought* (Lanham Lexington Books, 2019). 45.

⁷⁷ *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (2010), s.v. “אהבה.” Strong’s Concordance Number 160.

I have argued that erotic desire as defined here is what will move us towards the other, seeking nearness and reciprocity, and helping us recognize that auto-sufficiency, if at all possible, is shallow and unsatisfying. When moved by desire, we contemplate the other with curiosity, openness, and without fear of what is not the same. More still, erotic desire yearns for the other and embraces otherness.

The Song, in its dialogical form teaches one to listen, access the other, learn from and with the other, contemplate the other in her idiosyncratic beauty. Moreover, in dialogues, contrary to monologues, there is reciprocity, that is, the desire towards the other also comes from the other towards us. One does not only see but is seen, perceives and is perceived. This relationship is only possible when both parties are open to each other and let themselves be perceived by each other and seduced into interaction. These bodies are bodies led by erotic desire. *Grotesque* bodies, as Sigurdson characterizes them, bodies “intertwined with the other bodies that surround it” and in transformation,⁷⁸ and that let themselves “be recreated by another person’s perception,”⁷⁹ as Williams affirms. The opposite of a *grotesque* body is one that is defined as *classical*: “the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade... a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and the world.”⁸⁰

The table below with examples from the Song supports the argument above. In these verses, the voices of the lovers describe what they perceive, indicating first and foremost that there is an ‘other’ who is seen and assessed through a desiring body, in a two-way street. Exum points out that the author of the Song makes desire concrete in that he or she describes the lovers as gazing and available to being gazed at. It is a dialogic perception. She writes that “the bodies of the lovers are created through the way in which each is imagined by the other and in relation to the other.”⁸¹

Categorization	Description line	Reference in the Song
Perceiving and being perceived	<i>Her perception of him/ His perception of her:</i> <i>My beloved is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten</i>	Chap. 4, 5 and 7

⁷⁸ Sigurdson, "Christian Body," 254.

⁷⁹ Williams, "Body's Grace," 314.

⁸⁰ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 388.

⁸¹ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 24.

*thousand/You are a garden
locked up, my sister, my bride;
you are a spring enclosed, a
sealed fountain.*

*His head is purest gold; his
hair is wavy and black as a
raven/ Your head crowns you
like Mount Carmel. Your hair
is like royal tapestry.*

*His eyes are like doves by the
water streams, washed in milk,
mounted like jewels/ Your eyes
are the pools of Heshbon by
the gate of Bath Rabbim.*

*His cheeks are like beds of
spice yielding perfume/ Your
temples behind your veil are
like the halves of a
pomegranate.*

*His legs are pillars of marble
set on bases of pure gold/ Your
graceful legs are like jewels,
the work of an artist's hands.*

*His appearance is like
Lebanon, choice as its cedars
His body is like polished ivory
decorated with lapis lazuli/
Your breasts are like two
fawns, like twin fawns of a
gazelle that browse among the
lilies. Your navel is a rounded
goblet that never lacks blended
wine. Your waist is a mound of
wheat encircled by lilies.*

*His lips are like lilies dripping
with myrrh. His mouth is
sweetness itself/ Your lips are
like a scarlet ribbon; your
mouth is lovely.*

Table 6. Sample categorization of mutual perception

My proposal is that the Song, through the image of sexual desire, i.e., the sexual dimension of erotic desire, impinges on its readers the need humans have for each other and for creation, stir

in them the wanting, and teaches them neither to be isolated selves nor to aim at self-fulfillment. It is a divine tool to shape us and teach us how to desire rightly, which affects our perception of and comportment towards the world.

4. A Pedagogy of Desire

Miroslav Volf has said that “a major purpose of the Christian faith is to shape the lives of persons and communities.”⁸² I am suggesting nothing less than that the Song first and foremost functions as a tool in the hands of the Spirit to reshape one’s way of interpreting the world, informing its readers through its sexual imagery how humans are in need of each other. It also modulates their gaze to see the other (including the divine other) as desirable, and themselves as desired, teaching them viscerally about divine eros and shaping them into erotic beings. This way, the Song gives sexual desire a significant role. Consequently, it shatters the cocoon of the isolated self, less through an emphasis on the act of sexual intercourse, and more through the visceral effect sexual desire has on the body. As Carey Ellen Walsh argues, the Song’s focal point is not sexual relief but desire itself.⁸³ Affectively learning the contours of the Song’s desire, the reader has her way of leading life gradually shaped according to them and suffused with erotic desire, and her perception of God and the world changes. Consequently, the way she relates to the world changes with it. Sarah Coakley writes that “sexual desire is... the ‘precious clue’ woven into our created being reminding us of our rootedness in God,” but that “to bring this desire into right ‘alignment’ with God’s purposes, purified from sin and possessiveness, something profoundly transformative has to happen.”⁸⁴ As it is, I suggest that the Song is an instrument of redemption in the hands of the Holy Spirit, who redeems our experience of sexual desire from a tool of self-centeredness and self-fulfillment into eros.

Julia Kristeva says of the work of a text on the body: “How much risk there is in a text, how much [...] corrosiveness it holds for those who chose to see themselves within it.”⁸⁵ As

⁸² Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 13.

⁸³ Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, chap. 1, A Definition of Yearning.

⁸⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 309-10.

⁸⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1980), 163.

lyric poetry, the Song has the advantage of rendering emotions and passion in an intense form.⁸⁶ Everything else – plot, history and characters – is irrelevant. What is to be followed is not an ordered narrative but the desire the lovers have for each other and whatever it entails: vulnerability, openness, longing, nearness, pleasure. A very important feature of the lyric poetry for the function of the Song as a pedagogy is that the message of the Song is there to be *felt*; it is an affective, visceral intelligibility. This line from the movie *Bright Star* translates well the experience of the Song:

A poem needs understanding through the senses. The point of diving in a lake is not immediately to swim to the shore but to be in the lake, to luxuriate in the sensation of water. You do not work the lake out. It is an experience beyond thought.⁸⁷

As we read the Song, we inhabit and experience its world by the means of our bodies, which allows it to train us into a certain way of gazing, evaluating, and perceiving the world. Daniel J. Siegel confirms that our perceptions are shaped even without our being consciously aware of it.⁸⁸ In the case of the Song, we are shaped by what we feel, as a reflection of the lovers' journey of desire, longing, search, and intimacy. The Song's sexual desire resonates in the reader. Consequently, we readers are shaped by the contours of this desire the lovers feel for each other and we are trained viscerally to gaze at life through erotic eyes. The Song offers an appealing picture of a purpose and meaning for life, and what it means to live well – one that we learn to love through the effect it has on the body.

What is meant is that a certain perception of the world and a predisposition towards it, in this case, one that is shaped by erotic desire, is engrained in the way we automatically do life. As Smith explains, "Much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our passional orientation to the world – affected by all the ways we've been primed to perceive the world."⁸⁹ This perception Smith writes about should not, however, be understood as a distant observation of things but already as participation, involvement in and with the world, he explains. When the readers of the Song absorb and

⁸⁶ Tod Linafelt, "Lyrical Theology: The Song of Songs and the Advantage of Poetry," ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller, *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). 296, Kindle.

⁸⁷ Jane Campion, *Bright Star* (Stockholm Atlantic Film AB, 2009).

⁸⁸ Daniel J. Siegel, "Emotion as Integration," in *The Healing Power of Emotion: Affective Neuroscience, Development, and Clinical Practice*, ed. Diana Fosha, Daniel J. Siegel, and Marion Fried Solomon (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

⁸⁹ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 31.

internalize, through the effect that its sexual/erotic desire has on the body, that life is done in interaction with the other, and how this coming together has the potential of being pleasurable in itself, their comportment towards the world and God is shaped by it. With time, as one learns how to respond in a certain way, it becomes a second nature, a spontaneous attitude towards life. In other words, the Song provides us with a social imaginary that shapes the way we access the world. Smith calls this “an affective, noncognitive understanding of the world,” which offers us “frameworks of ‘meaning’ by which we make sense of our world and our calling in it,” a social imaginary.⁹⁰ In this study, however, these frameworks of meaning affect more than just the social. The Song offers a narrative that encompasses God and other-than-humans.

Therefore, it is right to say that such a training as the Song provides, that is, to learn to be in the world as erotic beings, has spiritual, socio-political, and ecological consequences, for it affects how we engage with and understand God and live in community with creation. Erotic desire modulates a perception of the world that promotes a good and flourishing life. For Christians, a faith informed by erotic desire encompasses more than the relationship between God and the soul, and spills beyond the church walls. A body (also the ecclesial) shaped by eros is one in movement, a fluid, open, social body which is transformed and shaped in contact with other bodies. Sigurdson writes about how the Christian body could (or better, should) be an erotic body, one “that expresses in bodily actions its longing for God, for other human bodily beings and of redemption.”⁹¹ For this goal, the Song has an important contribution as formative of erotic beings; not as a cognitive education but as a visceral shaping. By calling forth the sexual dimension of desire, the Song primes the readers to engage with the world and God as erotic bodies, shaping first their dispositions and, consequently, attitudes and behaviors, and influencing all spheres of life. Therefore, to talk about desire in the Song is to do theology – not because the book is part of the canon, but because “Christian theology is not just a set of ideas; it is about making possible a new way of seeing ourselves, others, and the world, with implications for the way in which we behave,” as Allister McGrath explains.⁹²

It is true, however, that the relationship between the Song’s lovers seems to be beautiful, perfect, without complications or hindrances. They do not mistreat or reject each other. The

⁹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 68.

⁹¹ Ola Sigurdson, "The Christian Body as a Grotesque Body," in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*, ed. John Michael Krois et al. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 256.

⁹² Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (West Sussex: Wiley, 2017), 85.

other is always welcomed, wanted. Therefore, scholars like David J. A. Clines see the Song as a dream, the reflection of the author's unconscious psychological needs both of a partner who is bold, sexually driven, and forward (but who does not in reality exist), and also of mutual desire, a perfect, naïve life in the Garden of Eden.⁹³ He continues,

Deep down, and in its essence, the Song of Songs is fantasy, escapist literature, and its dream stuff signals that... The downside of fantasy is that it can deflect attention from what needs to be done in the real world, and so for Marx, for example, it was counter-revolutionary, like utopianism in general.⁹⁴

It is well known by experience that a life in community is not always bliss. Every human being has her particularities, idiosyncrasies, and a specific view of the world, which can make life together a rough patch. It is, therefore, with no surprise that we come to recognize why some societies invest so much in individualism. We avoid what that is other, what is not compatible with us, what is not the same.⁹⁵ As a result, our monologues keep us afloat in superficiality, for there is nothing that challenges our conceptions and status quo. For this reason, Luke Bretherton states that “how to respond to the other, the one not like me, the stranger” is a moral problem that needs to be addressed.⁹⁶

Clines does not only disapprove fantasy, however. He mentions that there is an upside in it. The alternative reality it offers can be the substratum for subversion, and he argues that fantasy, by critiquing the real world, can lead to social transformation. Could one say, then, that the Song images an ideal interaction, a wonderful fantasy? Maybe. Yet, if it not only teaches us to hope for and dream about what is better, but it also shapes us into erotic beings and empowers us to transform our contexts, then the Song is already a gift for humankind.

From a Christian perspective, the Song, as part of God's narrative, is an instrument the Spirit uses to train human beings to desire rightly, God's own way of relating to others in this world. As such, this text has an effect on the reader that reaches beyond what its author may have intended. The effect I suggest here is that erotic desire, as the Song presents it, is arguably a way out of individualism and self-centeredness, and into the depths of a shared life with all

⁹³ David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁵ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2019), Kindle; Han, *Agony of Eros*; Han, *Expulsion of the Other*; Han, *Saving Beauty*.

⁹⁶ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 299.

its ups and downs. To be human is to be open to the other as one who is not me, not the same, but nonetheless an equal, fellow human being or fellow creature. It is erotic desire, then, that forges community because it is what moves us into the other's direction, into participation, into promoting a good common life amid differences. Therefore, the Song offers not only spiritual but also ethical and political formation.

James K. A. Smith affirms that Christian education requires “attending to the formation of our unconscious, to the priming and training of our emotions, which shape our perception of the world.”⁹⁷ This sums up the role of the Song as pedagogy, as I have portrayed it, in a few words. Unconsciously and affectively the readers are shaped by the contours of the desire presented in the Song, which primes them to relate with the world as erotic beings.

The assumption that the Song functions as a pedagogy of desire raises the question of which form a life that is suffused by erotic desire takes. As already argued, the Song functions as a modulator of our perception, teaching us to see the other through the lenses of erotic desire. If the Song shapes our being-in-the-world, as I propose, it follows that it has an impact on our relationship with human and other-than-human beings, and God. What is being put forward is that erotic desire has a potential role in socio-political, ecological, and theological spheres.

In the next sections I will meditate the possible outcomes of the shaping of the Song via the sexual in the relations between humanity, other-than-humans and God. The first step, however, is to argue that sexual desire has its roots in God: sexual desire as an embodied expression of divine eros.

4.1 Erotic Desire, Humanity and God

According to Paz, “eroticism is first and foremost a *thirst for otherness*. And the supernatural is the supreme otherness.”⁹⁸ Much has been written and preached about how humankind should be open to receive God and how God wants to be loved “with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength” (Deut. 6:5). Although especially Bernard writes about God's reciprocal love for the bride, the main theme of his and Origen's readings of the Song is how the Bride – the soul, the church, God's people – desires the Bridegroom – Jesus or God. After all, according to the Christian view, God is the creator of all, and the ultimate goal of human

⁹⁷ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 38.

⁹⁸ Paz, *Double Flame*, 15 (italics in the original).

existence. God is the desirable other. However, the emphasis is put on the desire for God by God's creature, as a one-way street. What if God also desires humankind with all that God is?

To entangle sexual desire with desire *for* the divine is not new. Especially the mystics have done that, Bernard being one of them. Granted, he uses a language heavy with sexual imagery, but still he feels the need to transcend what is carnal in order to achieve the spiritual, as it has been argued. Contrary to the sublimation of sexual desire, I am suggesting that we can behold the divine through the desire felt in the body. Yet, more than that, I propose that with the help of the Song we are able to intimate that God desires human beings in a similar way and with a similar intensity as the lovers in the Song desire each other. If it can be considered, as Origen and Bernard suggest, that the Song would also be speaking of God/Jesus and humankind, and that, as it has been demonstrated, the lovers in the Song reciprocate desire, then this would mean that God desires human beings as they desire God. After all, the woman's desire for the man unchains his desire for her and vice-versa. It is a two-way street where both want intimacy, both see and are seen, and are perceived as desirable: God and humanity; heaven and earth mingled in a kiss, embracing and being embraced, closing distances. To say it differently, to understand the Song as lyric poetry that expresses sexual desire is to bring the theme of sexuality back into God's realm. As Coakley argues, "'Desire' [is] the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul – however dimly – of its created source... Desire is an ontological category belonging primarily to God, and only secondarily to humans as a token of their createdness 'in the image'." ⁹⁹ The movement I argue here is a descending one at first, where sexual desire, as part of our nature and embodiment and having God as creator, indicates a desire that belongs to God's own nature.

God's expressions of desire are better understood if sexual and divine desires are seen as entangled. That is, sexual desire has the capacity to reveal divine eros because it is originally rooted in it. I emphasize that sexual desire is a bodily apprehension of the divine desire for humankind. As Hess asserts, desire felt in the body becomes "the closest experience this side of the grave of the transcendent knowledge of the living God."¹⁰⁰ In *Heavenly Bodies*, Sigurdson proposes a theology of the gaze, which has to do with the beholding of the divine through what is visible.¹⁰¹ In a similar manner, I argue for a theology of desire, which has to do with beholding the divine through what is carnal. Because of our condition as finite, embodied

⁹⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Hess, *Song of Songs*, 34.

¹⁰¹ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*.

beings, sexual desire is the bodily expression closest to the desire that is part of God's own nature, making it possible for us to apprehend a certain characteristic of God through our bodies. To be sure, what is being argued is that God reveals in our embodiment God's desiring nature, albeit in a limited and imperfect way, especially considering what humanity has made of sexuality. Nevertheless, to desire someone with such passion and intensity as we do sexually images the intensity with which God desires creation.

To propose that sexual desire is the imaging of divine desire in the body is likely to cause some disquiet among Christians. However, I intend it to be seen as an invitation to a theological stance where God is perceived as a desiring and desirable god, which is very much attuned to God's attitude and attributes found elsewhere in Scripture. This stance also states that sexual desire has its source in divine eros. In Sarah Coakley's opinion, "sex is really about God – the potent reminder woven into our earthly existence of the divine 'unity', 'alliance', and 'commingling' that we seek."¹⁰² Williams writes that "the whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us."¹⁰³ The invitation to apprehend God through the lenses of desire comes nevertheless with a caveat: it can affect how we interpret Scripture, for our prejudices against our embodiment, and preconceptions of God are called into question.

As already stated, this study has its foundation on the importance of our embodiment. Unfortunately, the Christian tradition has given less importance to the body than to mind/soul in the relationship with the divine. For instance, one of the common understandings of the concept of the *Imago Dei* promotes the dichotomy between materiality and immateriality. Usually, the image and likeness of God, as Genesis 1:26 states, "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness," is linked to the rational nature of humanity and seated in the soul.¹⁰⁴ Theologian Douglas John Hall writes,

The notion that it is human reason that constitutes *Homo Sapiens*, God's earthly *imago*, is so firmly entrenched in the conventions of Christendom that it is hardly possible for everyone who is part of the intellectual stream of our culture to read Genesis 1:26-27 without

¹⁰² Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 316.

¹⁰³ Williams, "Body's Grace," 312 - emphasis original.

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh et al., ed. Vernon J. Bourke (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1958), 12.24.

immediately and subconsciously assuming that the ancient Hebraic author's phrase "image of God" specifically referred to the rational capacities of the human nature.¹⁰⁵

צֶלֶם, the Hebrew word for image, however, also refers to a carved image or painted picture (e.g., Num. 33:52, 2 Kgs. 11:18, Ezek. 7:20, Ezek. 23:14). This, together with the meaning of the word דְּמוּת (resemblance, likeness), could suggest that our corporeality can also be taken into consideration in the concept of *Imago Dei*.¹⁰⁶ That is, God may be seen through our embodied existence in the world, the invisible manifested in the visible.

Another fact to remember is that, as Scripture shows, God uses images of the world we live in to reveal God's character and nature. Although they cannot totalize God's infinitude and magnificence, they are a means God uses in order for us to grasp who God is, albeit partially and imperfectly.¹⁰⁷ Karl Barth expresses this idea this way:

We have no claim on [God] with our images, concepts and words, no claim that he must be their object. But God can lay claim to our images, concepts and words; he can claim to be their first, last and true object... For just as certainly as our images, concepts and words refer to his creation (indeed are part of that creation), God the Creator knows himself in them all. They proclaim him, tell us what he is like, as does the whole of creation itself.¹⁰⁸

The Song, I propose, by means of the sexual desire it speaks about, also reveals God, i.e., how God desires humanity and wishes to be desired in return. Although not exhaustive in itself, a certain perspective of God is offered when sexual desire is understood as participant in divine desire. Just as Christians believe that the Incarnation is God's revelation in "unmistakably human terms," sexual desire is divine desire being revealed in human terms.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, I suggest that it is by affirming sexual desire that we grasp divine desire. However, in order to

¹⁰⁵ Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 91, quoted in Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 143.

¹⁰⁶ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005). <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip054/2004028522.html>. Cf. discussion in Grenz, *Social God* 186-89. See Strong's Exhaustive Concordance and The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon for Hebrew meanings.

¹⁰⁷ Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2016), 481, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/GU/detail.action?docID=4859069>. See 1 Co. 13:12.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936) quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Communio Books, Ignatius Press, 1992), 148.

¹⁰⁹ Daley, *God Visible*.

understand how God can be found in sexual desire, we anchor our understanding in eroticism but go further into the erotic, lest sexual interactions become the ultimate signifier. Yet again, sexual desire ought not to be negated or vilified. On the contrary, it needs to be affirmed to enable (affective) understanding.

I have previously proposed that erotic desire modulates human-divine relations. The very possibility of a union between humanity and divinity akin to the relationship between the Song's lovers depends, however, upon otherness, as I have already mentioned. The ontological difference between God and humankind is maintained. Human beings do not become God when in union with God through Christ. They remain humans just as God remains divine. This ontological otherness is crucial for a real relationship of desire between God and humanity, for it secures that what moves God towards humanity is not a narcissistic self-mirroring: God loving his own image and likeness in humanity. We are image bearers but not the image itself. It also guarantees that we appreciate God for who God is, in all divinity and incomprehensibility, which assures that God cannot be appropriated or domesticated by us. The greatest difference between God and humanity is that God remains partially veiled to us, while nothing is hidden from God ("For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known," 1 Co. 13:12). I argue, however, that God, although knowing all, respects otherness in that God waits for us to gladly reciprocate God's desire. Divine desire wants us to allow proximity, to let ourselves be seduced by it, but it will not force it. As a matter of fact, because God respects otherness, God makes Godself vulnerable to rejection.

It is not possible to talk about God's vulnerability without having to discuss God's impassibility, albeit briefly. In the classical view, to say that God is impassible does not mean to say that God is aloof or incapable of emotions, but that God cannot be affected from the outside, by the things creatures do.¹¹⁰ The very omniscience of God guarantees that God is in control of everything, and, hence not vulnerable; God is not caught by surprise, it has been affirmed. God does not have emotions that are not willed. Such an understanding is based on the premise that, if affected by the other, one is under the other's control. However, as I have attempted to show, erotic beings have their agency, their subjectivity, their otherness preserved

¹¹⁰ Robert Glenn Lister, III, "Impassible and Impassioned: Reevaluating the Doctrines of Divine Impassibility and Divine Relationality" (Ph.D., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/impassible-impassioned-reevaluating-doctrines/docview/304819755/se-2?accountid=11162> (3314605).

even when affected by the other. In the same way, God continues to be transcendent (that is, an ‘other’) even when choosing to suffer passion. To be affected or moved does not mean to lose control but to open oneself to the other. Here I would like to emphasize God’s agency in vulnerability. The common opposite of agency is passivity, but Sigurdson points out that they are not exclusive.¹¹¹ The words ‘passive’ and ‘passion’ have a common Latin root, so that both relate to something that one undergoes and is caused by an external force.¹¹² However, Sigurdson suggests, there is more involved in passivity than an experience of being moved from without. As the ‘I’ relates to the influence of the ‘other’, letting oneself be moved is a way of relationality – one that renders the self vulnerable – and, therefore, it implies agency.

Impassible or not, God has taken a step towards humanity and allowed Godself to be involved with it. By being involved, besides rendering human beings significant, God creates the possibility of being meaningful to someone, to bring joy to another, but also of being perceived, accepted, desired, what Williams suggests as the joy of erotic relations.¹¹³ In my view, this fits well into the narrative of the Song, and more generally of Scripture: the story of a God who is voluntarily involved with humankind, desiring to be amidst it and be desired in return. This relationality is possible not despite ontological differences but exactly because God is ‘other’. The tension between nearness and distance (otherness) is sustained in divine-human relations, like erotic human relations. Respect for otherness means that the other *allows* herself to be seduced without being forced to do it. Impassibilists usually fear that granting that God is passible would be the same as saying that “God’s emotions [could be] extracted from him involuntarily by his creatures.”¹¹⁴ Yet, in an erotic relation, nothing is taken by force. If the Song informs us about an erotic relation between God and humanity, then I suggest that God can be moved because God let Godself be moved.

In my view, not only the Incarnation but also the cross and the resurrection support an understanding of the relationship between the divine and the human as erotic, according to the definition given in this study. Jesus is the embodied divine otherness and the pinnacle of divine desire for humankind. At the same time, in relation to God, he is the human other and the pinnacle of human desire for God. Jesus is both the human and the divine closing distances.

¹¹¹ Sigurdson, "Vulnerable Creatures."

¹¹² Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “passive,” accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passive>. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “passion,” accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passion>

¹¹³ Williams, "Body's Grace."

¹¹⁴ Lister, "Impassible and Impassioned," 192.

The cross, in its turn, suggests that this movement towards the other and the desire for nearness does not fear vulnerability and rejection (“... they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” Lk. 23:21; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matt. 27:46). Finally, the resurrection is what enables the ascension, the very movement of the human towards the divine and vice-versa, as the man Jesus ascends to the Father, and the Holy Spirit descends upon humankind (“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” John 16:7). Therefore, I suggest that Christ represents in his whole existence God in an erotic relation with the human nature. As Frederik Christian Bauerschmidt puts it, “Christ’s body is a body of flesh that desires our flesh, that indeed is shattered by desire for us,” as well as for God, I add.¹¹⁵

As God’s desire for nearness propels God into coming into the world as a human being, guaranteeing that humanity would be brought near through Christ, it stirs us to desire God in return, because we feel desirable and desired. The intensity of God’s desire expressed in the life of Jesus can be felt partially through the desire we feel in the body, if we grasp that God desires a human being the same way the lovers in the Song desire each other. To be so passionately desired is irresistible. As Bernard writes, before such desire humans are able to respond in the same feelings of affection (SSCC 79.1). We are aroused and awakened (Song of Sg. 3:5). David sang, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Ps 42:2).

To put it more simply, the Song helps us understand how God desires humankind, which can affect the way we respond to God. If the Song expresses the divine desire for us, it presents God as an erotic being that is able of standing outside itself and be touched and moved. Scripture seems to confirm it. For instance, Moses pleading with God not to destroy the Hebrew people (Ex. 32:7-14); or God assenting to Abraham’s request not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous were to be found there (Gen. 18:23-33); also, Jacob wrestling with God and prevailing (Gen. 32:22-32);¹¹⁶ even God calling Israel to come and argue things out (Is. 1:18); the Canaanite woman convincing Jesus to heal her son (Matt. 15:21-28); and Jesus, God’s perfect image, weeping over Jerusalem’s rejection (Lk. 19:41-44). These are some examples of

¹¹⁵ Frederik Christian Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 107, quoted in Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 390.

¹¹⁶ In her analysis of Genesis 32, Jacob wrestling with the angel, Dorothee Sölle writes that this encounter becomes the place where God let Godself be conquered. Dorothee Sölle, *Es Muss Doch Mehr Als Alles Geben: Nachdenken Über Gott* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Spektrum, 2003), 58.

how God let Godself be moved by humans, implying a two-way relationship that I refer to as erotic.

Throughout Scripture we read about a God that wants to be amidst God's people and be desired in return. Other narratives in Scripture attest divine desire for humankind, and present God as a desiring God. It will suffice to think of how God uses the image of intimacy and jealousy when speaking of Israel (e.g., Ez. 16, and Hosea). Pseudo-Dionysius writes,

And we must dare to affirm (for 'tis the truth) that the Creator of the Universe Himself, in His Beautiful and Good Yearning towards the Universe, is through the excessive yearning of His Goodness, transported outside of Himself in His providential activities towards all things that have being, and is touched by the sweet spell of Goodness, Love [*agapesis*] and Yearning [*eros*], and so is drawn from His transcendent throne above all things, to dwell within the heart of all things, through a super-essential and ecstatic power whereby He yet stays within Himself. Hence Doctors call Him "jealous," because He is vehement in His Good Yearning towards the world, and because He stirs men up to a zealous search of yearning desire for Him, and thus shows Himself zealous inasmuch as zeal is always felt concerning things which are desired, and inasmuch as He hath a zeal concerning the creatures for which He careth.¹¹⁷

If it is true that God's actions are expressions of what God is, then, to assume that God yearns towards humankind, as Pseudo-Dionysius argues, is the same as to say that desire belongs in the Godhead. "For the Yearning which createth all the goodness of the world, being pre-existent abundantly in the Good Creator, allowed Him not to remain unfruitful in Himself, but moved Him to exert the abundance of His powers in the production of the universe."¹¹⁸ The "Real Yearning," that is, divine desire, that undergirded God's creative acts is what continues to move God towards created beings.¹¹⁹ As a lover, God invites us to taste and see how good God's love is. God is not distant. On the contrary, God closes distances. God is not apathetic. Rather, God is warm and open. God is not indifferent but wants to be desired in return. In other words, as an erotic being, God cannot be immovable.

¹¹⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Dionysius, the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. trans. Clarence Edwin Rolt (Kila, MT: Kessinger 1992), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 4.13, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/rold/dionysius.html>. The Greek words added to the text are taken from Kevin Corrigan and L. Michael Harrington, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.10.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.12.

This brief consideration of the implications of the Song as a pedagogy of desire in relation to divine otherness has shown that sexual desire offers us a visceral way, albeit limited, of grasping how God desires. This means to say that sexual desire allows us to experience in our bodies a manifestation of God's erotic desire for human beings. Yet, divine desire cannot be fully identified with bodily desire. They have similarities but also dissimilarities. Sexual desire can be considered a reminder of God, "like shadows and reflection of the sun in the water, which show the sun to our weak eyes, because we cannot look at the sun himself, for by his unmixed light he is too strong for our power of perception" (Oration 28.3), as Gregory Nazianzen writes.

Although sexual desire remains an imperfect manifestation of divine desire, such a reading of the Song could promote a re-enchantment of the world. To re-enchant our lives means to find God in the mundane, outside the church walls where transcendence has been marginalized and circumscribed to. To experience God, we need more than our reason, argues David Brown in his *God and the Enchantment of Place*.¹²⁰ What I have proposed in this thesis is that through the body, more specifically sexual desire, it is possible to experience something of the divine essence. According to C. E. Rolt, Pseudo-Dionysius declares that the Godhead, in its creative act, "belongs concurrently to two worlds: that of Ultimate Reality and that of Manifested Appearance. Hence, therefore, the possibility not only of Creation but also Revelation (ἐκφάνσις)."¹²¹ Given that God is the source of everything, it follows that sexual desire, as part of creation, will manifest the essence of the creator when understood as erotic desire and not as an end in itself. That is, human desire can serve as a paradigm to discover something about Godself. God, by creating desiring beings, offers us the picture of a desiring God. In other words, coming from God's own essence, creation can be theophany. Therefore, God is not hidden "in the abyss of the divine mystery,"¹²² but available in our corporeality, which is significant to this study.

It could thus be said that I am defending a re-enchantment of our corporeality. Alongside Brown, I argue that the divorce between immanence-transcendence is illusory. On the contrary,

¹²⁰ David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹²¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, Introduction to *Dionysius, the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. trans. Clarence Edwin Rolt (Kila, MT: Kessinger 1992), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 9, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/rold/dionysius.html>.

¹²² David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 74.

transcendence can be revealed in materiality. Brown claims that architecture, gardens, and dance can be ways of experiencing the transcendent. Similarly, the horizon I use in this thesis is one of a hermeneutics of desire that considers the carnal body a locus of God's revelation. Through sexual desire, God is telling something about Godself.

4.2 Erotic Desire, Society and Politics

Yet, how exactly does erotic desire affect our daily lives, the dealing with different opinions, religious beliefs, political stands, worldviews and, not to forget, the environment? I have mentioned that erotic desire is socio-political because it can affect how we relate to one another, influencing how we do life together. It is also ecological, for erotic desire will influence how humanity sees its status as part of the created world. I suggest that when relationships are undergirded by erotic desire, the *leitmotif* of our lives' narratives becomes the other (both the 'I' and the 'you' as others), and reciprocity is sustained, so that no one is invisible.

However, as we may already know by experience, meeting what is other does not necessarily ensure pleasant feelings. On the contrary, it can bring anguish, discomfort, even pain, for in the encounter with what is other we turn into foreigners ourselves. Nonetheless, different perspectives of the world that are unfamiliar to us, or even contrary to our own, although challenging our assumptions and beliefs, poking us and stretching us, also expand our horizons and even give us contour.¹²³ To be in a relationship with the other is to navigate new territories, which suddenly awakens our perception of ourselves, that the 'I' exists in reference to a 'you' and sees itself in (and exposed to) the gaze of another. It is the otherness of the other that sheds light on our own forms. Otherness dismantles the illusion of *uniformity*. By being confronted with the other, the 'I' recognizes its shape.

Han critiques the modern society, which foments a culture of the same. Here, sameness wants to get rid of the disturbance of otherness.

The time which there was such a thing as the *Other* is over. The Other as a secret, the Other as a temptation, the Other as eros, the Other as desire, the other as hell and the Other as pain disappear. The negativity of the Other now gives way to the positivity of the Same.¹²⁴

¹²³ Han, *Agony of Eros*; Han, *Expulsion of the Other*.

¹²⁴ Han, *Expulsion of the Other*, 1.

For him, sameness is a violence because it suffocates otherness. He asserts that an undisturbed sameness is what this age looks for, which leads to the rejection of the otherness of the other. Such a society has transformed Eros into Narcissus. It is otherness, however, that is seductive: the other as a person who possesses a distinctiveness, a differentiation; the other as singular. Nietzsche comments on the joy over a being that “acts and feels in a way different from and opposite to ours.”¹²⁵ Erotic desire, as proposed in this thesis, does not annihilate the other nor does it smother alterity. On the contrary, desire acknowledges the other as different and, therefore, other. Otherness is not seen as menace and, therefore, does not need to be conquered in order to become sameness. By experiencing the otherness of the other and being experienced as other, we break the narcissistic gaze that is only able to behold reflections of itself everywhere and can only like what is *same*. The effect of an erotization of our dispositions means longing for the coming together with the other: other perspectives, opinions, worldviews; other beings, other natures.

In the social sphere, for instance, there could be a change in our posture not only regarding interaction with our closest ones but also with different beliefs, religions, and peoples. This could promote a considerable effect in the well-being of our societies. Members of a society who live erotically want to engage, to exchange ideas, to listen to the other. Bretherton points out that “attentiveness and reception— characterized by a posture of listening or contemplation— are the precursor of shared speech and action, and thence the coming into being of a common life.”¹²⁶ Listening and contemplation, however, require welcoming the other, an invitation that affirms the other’s being-in-the-world.

Such an inclination to engage with the other fosters a flourishing common life “within and through differences,” but only when we are open – and therefore vulnerable – “to others we don’t understand, don’t like, and may even find scandalous or threatening.”¹²⁷ Embracing otherness paves the way to societies where a pluralism of voices is made possible, giving people the power to be agents and contributors through dialogue and action.

Bretherton, however, does not offer the way to acquire such a disposition. Yet, I argue that a life shaped by the desire that I have defined as erotic can empower us to do so. Under the

¹²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human, Part 2*, trans. B.A. Paul V. Cohn, Project Gutenberg ed. (New York: MacMillan Company, 2011, 1913), part I, Miscellaneous Maxims And Opinions 75. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37841/37841-h/37841-h.html>.

¹²⁶ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 48.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

dimension of erotic desire, the other is elevated to a place of importance in the making of a common life. Let us take, for example, the importance of such a statement for the social sphere, more precisely concerning power struggles. Jesus, divine desire incarnate, uncovered and condemned master-subordinate relations that dominated the society of his time. The way he dealt with the Pharisees, the woman caught in adultery and the Samaritan woman shows that he exposed abuse of power in religious, gender and racial spheres. The case of the adulterous woman, as an instance of gender issues, reveals that a life suffused by erotic desire does not favor men over women. In Jesus' perspective both needed to be treated equally. Similarly, I argue that the Song presents an erotic perspective where the male-over-female pattern of subordination is dismantled. The woman and the man in the Song are subordinated to and in command of each other, both actively seek each other. That is, it is a story of two wholly 'others' having an encounter as equals and equally interested in each other. The flourishing that an erotic outlook of life may shape is mutual for men and women, for eros allows both to develop their different vocations as persons and gives them the chance to show their unique talents (and lacks). In my view, eros does not give room to imbalance in the role that each person can have in a community because of gender. On the contrary, eros allows one to speak and enables the other to listen actively with an openness of mind and heart that fosters mutual flourishing. It is eros that calls out: "Show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely" (Song of Sg. 2:14). To be sure, the other's voice can be sweet and the face lovely because beauty can be found in the very movement towards the other and in the anticipation of interaction. Eros empowers our eyes to see the beauty in the *grotesque*. We need relationships where each participant, independent of gender, is awakened into fellowship and involvement, with the goal of walking together into a life with purpose, towards truth, and hopefully towards God.

This theme is especially important considering the Christian legacy and influence in the world. A non-erotic gaze has affected the way we read Scripture: as an androcentric, not a Theocentric book. Scripture as the source of Christian doctrines has a place of honor in the making of the life of a believer. However, not everyone is aware of how non-erotic cultural frameworks and religious traditions have shaped the way one interprets Scripture. My suggestion of a rereading of the Song as lyric poetry and its role in teaching its readers viscerally erotic desire has its importance highlighted by the problem of interpretation: if one lets the text speak through its form and content, it can become transformative. I must hint at how the usual allegorical interpretation of texts on gender roles is both influenced by a patriarchal society and

reinforces gender stereotypes. The Church Fathers' interpretation of the Song, for instance, comes from a socio-cultural perspective of the female whose role is to surrender to the male, as feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out.¹²⁸ The church or soul is the receptacle of God's masculine desire. Arguably, however, desire in the Song does not forge a relation of one-sided subordination. Therefore, I dare to evaluate Origen's and Bernard's interpretation as influenced by a non-erotic perspective. As a matter of fact, if one would suggest that the bridegroom in the Song represents the soul while the bride represents Christ, many a Christian would be anxious. The norm is that the male is the nobler, the powerful, the leader, the savior; the female is the subservient, dependent, the one in need of redemption. Therefore, God has to be represented by the masculine.

Although Exum points out that the Song cannot escape the influence of the patriarchal society of its time, even when it portrays conventional and unconventional behaviors especially concerning the woman, I propose that the image of the relationship between the lovers the Song gives us is of an interdependent one, characterized by freely giving and consensually taking, as suggested in the verses below.

She

Let my beloved come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits

He

I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk. (Song of Sg. 4:16- 5:1)

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest
is my beloved among the young men.
I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.
Let him lead me to the banquet hall,
and let his banner over me be love. (Song of Sg. 2:3-4)

¹²⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, Second edition ed. (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015).

Eros, as presented in the Song, can help break the chains of stereotypical gender roles, making it possible to unfold one's own character traits in God's presence and in society.

Not only in the social sphere, but also in the political arena erotic desire has its importance. Bretherton argues that "politics is a foundational part of forging a good or flourishing life," where the 'I' does not stand in the center of social narratives.¹²⁹ Bretherton continues: "Politics... refers to forming, norming, and sustaining some kind of common life between friends, strangers, enemies, and the friendless amid their ongoing differences and disagreements and as they negotiate asymmetries of various kinds of power."¹³⁰ We are social animals, embedded in community and dependent on fellowship in order to flourish, and flourish together. I will not attempt here to define what a good common life is, but as already suggested, desire is what undergirds it.¹³¹ Without erotic desire, as here defined, either people continue moving centripetally and remain self-centered and individualist, or human relations tend to become phagocytotic. Phagocytosis is a biological process where cells from the immune system ingest or engulf foreign, invading cells or particles in order to get rid of them. Analogously, in a phagocytotic relation, the other is engulfed, assimilated and destroyed in the process because of the threat otherness supposedly poses.

The politics Bretherton proposes is one Han explores in his books and calls a *politics of eros*.¹³² He argues that we live in a consumerist society, which means that even the other is seen as an object that can be appropriated. But a politics of desire is instead one that will educate human beings so that relationships are not built on the basis of self-fulfillment alone. In this sense, this politics is an education in flourishing common life, thus transforming the narratives of our lives. From this perspective, the Song and the sexual desire it elicits, which in turn shapes us into erotic bodies, can be seen as related to politics in important ways. A right relationship entails, as the Song shows, giving and receiving, where both parts contribute to each other's flourishing and well-being.

As an example, people who have been primed to live a life suffused with erotic desire could be able to reconsider a global politics that has sustained the Western world as the better (or even the only correct and possible) model for life. In such politics, the non-Western and the

¹²⁹ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 17.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 445.

¹³¹ To an excellent study on the common life, please refer to Bretherton and Volf.

¹³² Han, *Expulsion of the Other*; Han, *Saving Beauty*; Han, *Agony of Eros*.

minority other is seen as in need of salvation. Nicholas Lash points out that in our world the challenge that is presented to a globalized society is to build a politics that is also global *de facto*, meaning one that has the well-being of all in mind. In this sense I posit that the Song's desire has a political dimension because it can promote healing, unity, and mutual flourishing in social relationships. It is important to make it clear that unity does not mean sameness. On the contrary, it implies living interdependently in plurality with the same goal of a flourishing common life, despite differences, just as the human body works as a unity but is constituted of different parts that have different functions and qualities. The result of leading a life that is erotic in its constitution is that it makes it possible to deal more ethically in political situations and to buttress the richness that can be found in otherness, and consequently in plurality.

John Milbank and Adrian Pabst's book *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and Human Freedom* criticizes liberalism's economic and political systems, which in their opinion have failed to support a society where responsibility, economic justice, and shared well-being prevail.¹³³ The authors claim that liberalism does not empower human beings to develop their potentials so that they can flourish, neither as individuals nor as citizens. On the contrary, liberalism is predatory and practices greed, narcissism, and egocentrism instead of looking for the common good. In such a political thought, the individual is seen as self-sufficient and taught to cherish wealth and power instead of mutual recognition and flourishing. In other words, one's gaze is focused on oneself.

It begs the question of how a society that nurtures relationality and where citizens are actively involved in the sharing of resources and responsibilities can be created. As I have suggested, the answer lies in a predisposition towards the world that is shaped by erotic desire. Milbank and Pabst argue that liberalism promotes self-centeredness, disconnection, and lack of reciprocity, opposite characteristics of erotic desire's contours. Erotic beings are those who are inclined to move outwards and in the direction of the other, who desire to connect with what is other and are open to let otherness speak, fomenting dialogue, interaction, and flourishing. "I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares" (Song of Sg. 3:2). This movement towards the other, this step into relationality that eros propels turns people into transforming agents. That is, erotic beings become engaged citizens who do not use their agency for becoming self-making individuals but for promoting the common good, for the other is not

¹³³ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).

seen as a commodity to fulfill self-interests. This also includes governments that do not look for merely asserting themselves through power but striving for the well-being of all, caring for and nurturing people, serving the common good, and handling the economy of a country under the right light. To be sure, eros will not guarantee moral and political flourishing – there are far too many other variables to be added to this equation – but it will pave the way to some ethical decisions. As Han argues, to change a society where everything is seen as commodity for private profit, one needs to relearn to perceive the other as other, by shifting the “orbit of desire” from oneself to outside of the self. “Only eros, is capable of freeing the I... from narcissistic entanglement in itself,” he states.¹³⁴ Reading the Song and learning viscerally what desire really entails can redirect our gaze outwards.

The same thought applies to the ecology of our planet. Global warming, animal and flora extinction, air pollution, among many, are a telltale of how humankind interacts with the other that is not human: human beings tend to position themselves as subduers instead of coinhabitants of this planet. Exploitation, not a cooperative relation of interdependency is what has taken place. Arguably, humans have been doing a poor job in the interaction with the other-than-human. Erotic desire provides us with the possibility to slow down the trail of destruction that an interaction based on exploitation and domination leaves behind, for this desire awakens in us the awareness of and the passion for the other – in this case, the nonhuman. This movement towards creation as the other, powered and shaped by erotic desire, could allow humankind to act towards the environment in an ethical way. The respect for what is other could bring changes to how animals are treated and bred, vegetables are cultivated, the earth is taken care of. It would also strengthen the disposition not to engulf and destroy nature, as if it were at the disposal of humankind. Through an erotic encounter with humanity, creation can respond positively in return. To be precise, the stance taken here is not a patronizing one, that has humankind as stewards but still above all creation. On the contrary, erotic desire as proposed here confronts our beliefs about human status in creation: that humankind is in the center and above all that is not human. Human self-centeredness is dismantled by this desire. Eros reinforces, in this instance of ecotheological thinking, that we are embodied beings living among other bodies in a relation of mutuality.

Daniel P. Horan points out that the stewardship model, supported by its proponents according to Gen. 1:28, “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in

¹³⁴ Ibid., 68.

number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground,” is founded on a hierarchical dualism, which contributes “to the maintenance of systems of subordination.”¹³⁵ It is this same hierarchical system that is woven in gender relations, as previously mentioned. According to Horan, feminist scholars criticize a patriarchal attitude in relation not only to women but also to the rest of created order: a master-subordinate one.

Interestingly, references to other-than-human beings are abundant in the Song. Both lovers are aware of the world around them, which they seem to cherish. This awareness is expressed in their descriptions of each other. More than just denoting the rural setting in which the interaction takes place, the sensorial imageries in the Song make use of the realm of nature to praise the lovers’ features, revealing first of all a desire for one another but also the delight found in nature. The table below shows how the Song displays both lovers as intimately connected to creation.

Categorization

Beloved

eyes
hair
teeth
temples
breasts
lips/tongue

Lover

hair
eyes
cheeks
lips
arms
legs

Elements of nature

mare, lily of valley, dove

doves
flock of goats
flock of sheep
pomegranate
fawns, cluster of grapes
milk and honey

myrrh, henna blossoms, apple tree, gazelle

raven
dove
bed of spices
myrrh
gold
marble

¹³⁵ Daniel P. Horan, *All God's Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (Blue Ridge Summit: Fortress Academic, 2018), 57.

Table 7. Sample categorization of elements of nature

Arguably, in the Song, other-than-human creation is included in this erotic comprehension of the world as desirable. The Song points to a relation where humanity does not treat the other-than-human as weaker or inferior because it is other. On the contrary, when erotic desire has shaped the readers' attitude towards the world, the ontological difference between humans and other-than-humans is an impediment to a relationality built upon subordination, and a reminder that nature is not a commodity humans can use and abuse as they wish.¹³⁶ As such, contrary to the common claim that Scripture has exalted humans above other-than-human beings, the Song and the desire it teaches offer an invaluable contribution to environmental issues. Because erotic desire modulates our perception of the world, our actions towards creation can also undergo changes, culminating in a positive response from creation.¹³⁷

A note of caution is crucial at this point. Being motivated by erotic desire does not mean condoning, nor even agreeing with, what is said or done. That is to say that desire is not about annulling oneself or finding excuses for predatory behavior in order to get along either. This would be too naïve a proposal, for we are people who unfortunately can hurt each other. Again, considering how erotic desire does not consume what is other, it is critical to be reminded of the respect for one's own otherness, and of reciprocity as a tenet of erotic desire. In this sense, erotic desire also protects us from accepting relationships that are harmful or destructive, at the same time that it gives us courage to invest in interactions that sustain "healing, reconciling, and life-giving relations."¹³⁸ As mentioned before, when two 'others' meet, what takes place is an experience in-between them, that rubs and pokes but that does not consume. Neither party need to be negated. Erotic desire makes possible the mingling of two different beings, where otherness is preserved and even augmented. As Falque puts it, "Each becomes more himself or herself, as the erotic experience is absolutely not an experience of fusion;"¹³⁹ one is always a resistance, the limit to the other, which however does not make them impenetrable and isolated.

¹³⁶ For a critique of the concept of alterity, cf. Horan, *God's Creatures*.

¹³⁷ For a discussion on the theme of ecology and creation, see John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019); Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology* (Toronto: Novalis, 2008); Horan, *God's Creatures*.

¹³⁸ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511803499>.

¹³⁹ Emmanuel Falque and Richard Kearney, "Embrace and Differentiation: A Phenomenology of Eros," ed. Sarah Horton et al., *Somatic Desire: Recovering Corporeality in Contemporary Thought* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019). 75.

In fact, it is part of reciprocity, as differentiated beings, to rub and poke back – there are two sides being shaped by each other as it is written, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). As argued, the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ with their points of view, beliefs and ways of being-in-the-world are preserved. Nevertheless, the hope is that, by being porous and malleable, the two will have opened themselves to other perspectives that will lead to an enriched and viable common life.

This section has reviewed possible effects of an erotic attitude toward the world. When we start living a life that is suffused by erotic desire, there is a hope that the little changes that happen gradually as we grow in this disposition toward the world will become a habit that can be transmitted socially. Consequently, the outcome of conducting life in a framework of erotic desire can have a rippling effect into future generations as well. Slowly but certain, starting in close circles and then expanding, societies can be changed.

4.3 Erotic Desire and Agape Love

I have argued that sexual desire is a corporeal paradigm, an image, of erotic desire, and that it could be understood as a revelation of divine eros. Does that mean then that sexual desire is a lower form of desire? If we take into consideration that God is the creator and source of all things, and that God reveals Godself in the created things, as Pseudo-Dionysius suggested, it can be assumed that sexual desire participates in divine desire, and it is, therefore, not to be understood as inferior. The presence of the Song of Songs in the canon shows that God is including our embodiment in the story of God’s revelation to the world and, consequently, deeming it important.

But one might ask why *eros* and not *agape* should be considered the theme of the Song. There are a few reasons for it. The first is that *agape* has been defined by the Paulinian description of love found in 1 Corinthians 13 as love that is not self-seeking, bears all things, never ceases, and endures everything. Therefore, *agape* is commonly understood as a love that only gives and expects nothing in return. In many a pre-marital course, future married couples are taught that this is the right type of love in a marriage. Like in *eros*, the focus is on the other, but reciprocity is here downplayed. In Christian contexts, *agape* is used as a call for one to forget oneself.

Eros, as described in this thesis, presents similarities to *agape*. As argued before, *eros* is the motor towards the other, out of self-centeredness and into interaction. However, there are also dissimilarities. *Eros* is more than that, for *eros*, contrary to the common understanding of *agape*,

does not keep one of the parties in invisibility; it is not asymmetrical. Sigurdson writes that “it is primarily in [desire for the other] that joy also arises over the experience of being oneself desired by someone.”¹⁴⁰ It is only by perceiving and being perceived, desiring and being desired, that an erotic interaction is possible. Another difference still is that, according to the Nygrenian view, agape cannot be motivated by external forces. However, the concept I present here states that eros can call forth eros, for it wants to be reciprocated.

God’s love seems to be not only agape but eros as well. As a matter of fact, neither Origen nor Bernard refused to see eros as the love of God. It was modernity that erected a wall round eros, confining it to sexuality and expelling it from theology.¹⁴¹ Therefore, although I think that eros and agape cannot be so neatly disassociated from each other, these nuanced characteristics of eros is what I desired to emphasize in the relationship between humans, humans and nonhumans, and with God. Moreover, by looking at the Song from the perspective of eros, it has been possible to shine a theological light on the theme of sexual desire.

5. Conclusion

A question was raised at the beginning of this study about what a non-allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs would render. It has been explained that the common interpretation of the Song tends to transcend its narrative of sexual desire and its carnality. I started by showing how the Song appeals to the bodily senses and, consequently, to our condition as embodied beings. The bodily senses were the focus in the analyses of Origen’s and St. Bernard’s interpretations of the Song of Songs, as I aimed at showing how sexual desire had been bypassed in their readings. Although the Song exudes sensual intimacy, neither theologian saw the desiring and desired body as a possible locus of God’s revelation. Given that the body in their hermeneutic is thus sublimated, one could arguably conclude that Origen and Bernard viewed the body as a means to a higher knowing, namely, a spiritual one. However, I argued that such an interpretive ascent – from the bodily to the spiritual – where carnality is negated is not necessary. On the contrary, in our bodies and through our sexuality the divine expresses itself.

What I have therefore proposed, *pace* Origen and Bernard, is that an interpretation of the Song of Songs should take into account its form as erotic poetry. However, the sexual desire that undergirds the poem is not the end in itself but it opens up to a desire that is more

¹⁴⁰ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 485.

¹⁴¹ Sigurdson, "Desire and Love."

encompassing still, and that spills beyond the sexual into all human relations. Theologian Stanley J. Grenz puts it this way: “The ultimate goal of sexuality, and hence the impulse towards bonding, is participation in the fullness of community – namely, life together as the new humanity, as the eschatological people in relationship with God and all creation.”¹⁴² In this hermeneutic of the Song, sexual desire should be seen as expressing corporeally a desire that has its source in God, which I referred to as *erotic*. In sum, I have presented a reading of the Song as entirely based on sexual desire. This means to say that this thesis has elaborated a *figural* not an *allegorical* sense, because the reality of sexual desire is not denied nor sublimated. On the contrary, it is the pivot. Erotic desire encompasses sexual desire, and the latter participates in the former. Making a comparison with the role of images, as Carnes presents it, sexual desire is not to be understood as an object that “hurries the gaze through the visible world, pointing beyond itself to the invisible” – as Origen and Bernard do – nor as an idol in which the signified is circumscribed.¹⁴³ Instead, it is to be understood, as a corporeal expression of erotic desire, one that is also divine.

I have also suggested that the Song of Songs can shape, through its theme of sexual desire, our mode of being and the way we relate to the world and to God. As such, the Song also functions as a pedagogy of desire. The body has its own way of knowing, which is not rational but affective, i.e., it is prior to an intellectual reading. The Song appeals to this kind of understanding. The lovers’ interaction in the Song tells the readers affectively that desire needs an ‘other’ towards whom one gravitates and by whom one wants to be desired in return. As it has been shown, the contours of desire as presented in the Song are longing for nearness and reciprocity, and recognition of otherness.

What our bodies learn affectively with the Song is that desire is first and foremost a movement toward what is other, seeking nearness and yearning for reciprocity. This has important implications for our lives as social beings, not only for how we interact with our neighbors but also for such things as how we do politics and treat the environment. As the readers of the Song learn such an erotic apprehension of the world, habits are created and passed on, influencing future societies in a positive way.

Considering God as the transcendent other, I argued that human-divine relations are also affected by the Song’s teachings. First of all, sexual desire expresses in the body the

¹⁴² Grenz, *Social God*, 280.

¹⁴³ Carnes, *Image and Presence*, 124 (emphasis mine).

analogous intensity of God's own desire for humanity, which make us aware to the fact that God sees humanity as desirable. God wants to draw close and to be desired in return. Grappling with sexual desire in the Song gives us a glimpse into God as a desiring God. Secondly, by grasping this divine desire in the body, human beings are aroused and awakened to it, and are able to reciprocate. The relationality between the divine and the human can indeed be called erotic. In their coming together, their ontological otherness is preserved. This guarantees that one sees and respects the other as they are, and that one does not domesticate the other. Yet, as desire makes us open to what is other, one can move and influence the other. God makes Godself voluntarily vulnerable to us and vice-versa.

Given that this thesis deals with sexual desire and human relationality based on the Song of Songs and affirms that its sexual desire is a bodily expression of divine desire, it follows that this study can be considered as nothing less than a theological hermeneutics of carnal desire. In our embodiment, sexuality makes tangible how we are made to desire, to be desired and open to one another, and how God desires (to be desired) and is open to his creatures. Through the aroused body we encounter the other.

Let us know an inch of the Infinite

Love that fills time and space.

Let us know a feast of the fullness of God

Though we just get a taste.

(Kaitlin Reichenbach and Simeon Hemminger, *Inch of the Infinite*)

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