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Taylor Klassman
Denison University

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Eros Created, Eros Contaminated, Eros Condemned

Taylor Klassman

Editors’ Note: We recommend that the reader skim the “The Song of Songs” in the Hebrew Bible to fully appreciate this essay.

The Song of Songs highlights the power of physical unity between two people, while concurrently celebrating the love between God and human beings. Most would agree that God is inherently a lover, but the terms to which we generally confine this love may not fully appreciate the intimacy of that love. If we speak of loving God and God’s love as infinite and limitless, then it must encompass the passionate love of sexual intimacy. The word “erotic” stems from the term for love, “Eros;” it seems that the innate eroticism of God and between humans is better understood than ignored. So then why is this collection of love poetry one of the only mentions of sexuality in the Bible that is not governed by the censorship and regulation of sexual expression? In this paper, I will argue that the religious community has ignored healthy (that is, consensual, mature and respectful) sex for too long, instead of embracing it as another outlet to God or at least to discovering the ultimate, the divine and the essential truth of life—the heightened, passionate love of God’s infinite plan.

A true transformation of our culture would require a reclaiming of the erotic as an inward empowerment. The erotic can be the bridge that connects feeling with action. It can ignite our sense of control with emotion, so that our actions become life serving instead of destructive and selfish. The erotic can confirm our uniqueness while affirming our deep oneness with all being. At the heart of second wave feminism is a familiar notion that “the erotic is the realm in which the spiritual, the political, and the personal come together”1. In a combination of literary analysis, social historicism and theoretical analysis, this research of the Song of Songs will shed light on the reality that “Love in the Song of Songs is redemptive; it is able to change guilt into innocence and weeping into laughter”2. Further, it will argue that not only is the Song an homage to healthy eroticism, but it also speaks to non-normative sexuality and operates as the climax of biblical songs as ancient proof of the depth of our sexual nature. In such, I will textually analyze the Song of


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Songs with the goal of revealing the hidden, yet explicit, sexuality of the text and its importance in the greater context of the Canon. I will then examine the details of the text as they relate to the greater social and political reception of the text and desire in general.

I. Literary Analysis

Prologue:
The prologue sets the tone for the rest of the collection of poems, one of powerful but delicate Desire. We are first introduced to a female voice who is professing, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love-making is sweeter than wine”\(^3\). In the typical Romeo and Juliet fashion, the beloved is confessing her yearning for her lover; he is intoxicating like wine and seeps into her life like oil forever stains fabric. The tone drastically shifts when “the opening lines of the Song of Songs convert the motif of the name to the service of sexual fulfillment” and leaves us thirsty for satisfaction\(^4\).

First Poem:
The first poem of the collection begins with the characterization of desire’s allure as the Beloved begs, “Draw me in your footsteps”\(^5\). Again the importance of the female voice is most important. She praises her love not as dominion to him, but as ecstasy in the rightness of their love\(^6\). The next verse embodies a revelatory moment in the profession of the beloved’s “blackness.” The beloved almost warns her lover not to be scared or distracted by her difference, her blackness. Even though the lover exclaims his beloved’s beauty, her blackness still implies that the antithesis of beauty has some support in biblical usage, since bodily health and beauty are described as white and glowing. Thus, the beloved would have been rejected in biblical times as an outlier, because of her status in terms of sexuality.

Throughout this poem and the Song in general, there are many references to the lover, “King,” as a term of endearment, as opposed to referencing God the Lord. This distinction is critical in understanding the Song not as an allegorical praise of love for God, but as the narrative of human sexual love. Then we are introduced to the Chorus of the Song, which appears a few more times in the Song in various forms, but in all cases revolves around the notion of the beloved as the “loveliest of women” that is intoxicating and captivating for her lover.

\(^3\) Bible, Song 1:2.
\(^5\) Bible, Song 1:4.
The lover then begins his exaltation of his beloved’s beauty and grace, “my mare, harnessed to Pharaoh’s chariot”7. This phrase brings up an interesting paradox: both empowering and restricting women. The woman is harnessed to a man, but she is concurrently the force that moves him. In this sense, the man fears and honors the power of the mare and, “The latent force of the woman’s sexuality had the power to throw a powerful army into confusion8. She has the power to move him in any direction, and yet he holds the reigns and the ties to her cannot be disconnected. Other than this specific declaration of praise, he constantly professes, “How beautiful you are my, my love,” in quintessential courting fashion9.

The myrrh in this poem parallels the anointing oil in Exodus, “My love is a sachet of myrrh lying between my breasts”10. In Exodus, the oil was used to anoint the Tent of Meeting and the ark of the Testimony, and the symbolism of this sachet resting on her chest implies the anointment on her heart. It could also represent the Beloved as the land of Israel and the Tent of Meeting at the heart of the land. If we assume that the first theory is accurate, this phrase affirms the holiness of the lovers’ relationship as a matter consecrated in the heart.

There is a reminder of the creation story in Genesis when the beloved deems her lover “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood” akin to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden11. His delightful shade provides her with solace and his sweet fruit satisfies her hunger. She asks him to “restore me with apples, for I am sick with love”; in the Song the apples provide life and strength, whereas in Eden the apple derailed the lovers from achieving happiness12. The lover ends this poem with a request not to disturb his beloved before she is ready to wake. There are many ways to interpret this entreaty, one of which is to assume that the lovers only encounter each other in their dreams, and that by waking her, their tryst will be spoiled. Another theory is that this verse is “an admonition not to disturb lovers indulging their passions”13. Regardless of the interpretation, the closing verse can stand as a testament to the Lover’s patience and deep-seated care for his beloved; there is clearly much more to come of their love.

7 Bible, Song 1:9.  
9 Bible, Song 1:15.  
10 Ibid, 1:1.  
11 Ibid, 2:3.  
12 Ibid, 2:5.  
Second Poem:

The second poem is told mostly from the female’s perspective in addition to her lover’s sweet serenade. He speaks to her from “behind our wall” where he sneaks longing glances at her through any opening he can, reminiscent of a prisoner peering at freedom. The lover announces the arrival of spring: “Flowers are appearing… The fig tree is forming its first figs and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.” The imagery of ripening plants and fruits provides a euphemism for sexual readiness in the landforms of the sexual body. The body is currently ready for sex, but is teasingly forbidden to her lover. While her body is blossoming and “our vineyards are in fruit,” there are sly foxes that are pillaging the fruit.

In this poem, there is a possible instance of divine presence: “My dove, hiding in the clefts of the rock, in the coverts of the cliff, show me your face.” This passage is akin to the visual between God and Moses on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 33:18-25. It could also be another instance of the lovers’ playful round of chase. The cleft is a safe meeting place for the lovers; its similarity to the scene on Mt. Sinai could represent that we can find God in the proximity of our lover. With any interpretation, this scene embodies the mystery of desire akin to the mystery of seeking, seeing and hiding from God.

The beloved often regards her lover, “like a gazelle, like a young stag.” She also often professes her frustration: “I sought but could not find him!” which remind us of the tedium of their yearning for each other. The Song is not only an ode to their uniting, but it is mostly about “the longing and searching, particularly of the lover for his lady, and his difficulty in finding her” and vice versa. In her seeking for him, she is vulnerable to the profundity of their love as she wanders alone at night to find him. The absent lover motif could support a modern theory of relationships: “Sexual desire in particular cannot be sustained when the state of union with the loved being is an uninterrupted, perpetual possibility; it is precipitated by separations, deferrals, absences, all of which further incite desire, make the heart grow fonder.”

The second poem ends with the lover’s charge, identical to the last lines of the first poem, which reinforces the notion that in the Song “the lovers display their

14 Bible, Song 2:9.
16 Ibid, 2:15.
19 Ibid, 3:2.
emotions rather than report them”\textsuperscript{22}. In this sense, the lover may be showing the depth of his love for her by tending to her in any way to which he is able. The zoological images of the gazelles and wild does convey an image of the other as a visual object of desire, rather than the felt desire of the lover itself by distancing the lovers through natural metaphor. Thus, desire is scripted as natural, beautifully wild and roaming, but desire is distanced from the lovers by way of metaphor that only imagines desire.

**Third Poem:**

The third poem uniquely begins with a monologue from the poet himself/herself. The identity of the male lover is left unknown throughout the collection, but Solomon is certainly a contender for the title. Known for his wisdom and for being a shepherd, “the identity cannot be confirmed and does not really matter, since the Song is devoted to desire itself and not its object”\textsuperscript{23}. In light of this, however, the poet speaks of Solomon, the assumed Lover here, and his excited preparations (i.e. a lavish palanquin—or an enclosed couch on poles carried by men) for his Beloved. The poet is highlighting the depth of Solomon’s arrangements for “his heart’s joy”\textsuperscript{24}.

The Poet is reminiscent of the desert wanderings in Exodus: God promises a guide for the journey “by day in a pillar of cloud to show them the way, and by night a pillar of fire”\textsuperscript{25} which is mirrored in the “column of smoke” in the Song\textsuperscript{26}. The column of smoke, invariably from fire, implies that this scene takes place at night, which highlights the vulnerability of being alone with God and also with being alone with ourselves. Nighttime also heightens the sensuality of the poem, as the darkness cloaks the lovers in shadows allowing them to uncover their desires and discover each other.

The Lover begins a lengthy ode to his beloved’s beauty, where he describes her using very natural, earthly descriptors. Every phrase of admiration reinforces that his beloved’s beauty symbolizes “the transcendental signifier of virtue”\textsuperscript{27}. He mentions her “veil” many times, implying a sense of mystery and also the covering of a martial ceremony. He refers to her as “a sealed fountain,” which reminds us that his beloved is a virgin and is still out of his reach\textsuperscript{28}.

\textsuperscript{23} Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 203.
\textsuperscript{24} *Bible*, Song 3:11.
\textsuperscript{25} *Bible*, Exodus 13:21.
\textsuperscript{26} *Bible*, Song 3:6.
\textsuperscript{28} *Bible*, Song 4:12.
The Song has historically been demonized for its exaltation of premarital sexuality, an aspect of the lover’s relationship only explicated in the Beloved’s title of “my promised bride.” Other than the few instances where this phrase is used, there is no recognition of their marital status. However, such a focus of sexuality independent of marriage “corresponds to the increase in non-marital sexualities and their visibility in contemporary culture.” Thus, the Song tends to resonate with modern lovers, because they can transplant their lives onto the romantic story of the betrothed lovers.

The downfall of male power with the influx of desire is captured in the lover’s admission, “You ravish my heart with a single one of your glances, with a single link of your necklace.” Even her necklace taunts him, because it can touch her where he cannot; she benefits from his entrenched affection. He can be brought down by the smallest of glances, which signifies that “the often overpowering male of Israel’s legal and prophetic texts is replaced here with a male passionately bound to the woman who loves him.” The Song reverses the gendered power dynamic by highlighting how vulnerable the male lover is to his female beloved’s allure. This book stands out to many in the Bible because of this inverse gender relationship which gives promise to feminine power.

The lover speaks of his beloved as the Promised Land: “Honey and milk are under your tongue; and the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.” This promise was made in the Exodus from Yahweh for his people to come to “a country flowing with milk and honey.” It promised them nourishment, a sweetness of life and prosperity, the lover finds all of these things with his beloved. Milk and honey is the same language used in 1 Samuel 14:26 when Jonathon violates Saul’s prohibition on food and eats the honey. This parallel could signify the danger of disobedience in the lover’s consumption of her milk and honey, or it could represent the freedom and prosperity in her midst.

Their love has been presented as a way of redeeming Eden; where at once, “She is a garden enclosed,” the beloved responds by beckoning him into her garden. Her lover complains that she is a closed garden, or a sealed fountain, but she asserts her sexuality as a free-flowing fountain, she asks him to “taste its most exquisite fruits.” In Genesis, this scene would be a foreboding instance of im-

29 Ibid, 4:8.
31 Bible, Song 4:9.
33 Bible, Song 4:11.
34 Bible, Exodus 3:8.
35 Bible, Song 4:12.
36 Ibid, 4:16.
pending sin and punishment, but the Song reformatom the forbidden fruit to an exotic desire to be savored and enjoyed.

**Fourth Poem**

The fourth poem takes place in a dreaming state, which sheds light on the power of fantasy in human sexual love. The beloved informs us of her slumber, “I sleep, but my heart is awake. I hear my love knocking”\(^{37}\). Some scholars question if the Song is in fact a dream, thus this poem is depicting a dream within a dream, where the poet conveys the beloved’s dream of her lover’s words\(^{38}\). This dreaming poem reinforces the idea that the Song is a fantasy story, but that fantasy is not evil. However, its illusory nature almost makes the reader numb to its rootedness in truth and risks being perceived as purely imaginative. On the other hand, “it envisages an alternative reality, which can subvert or at least critique the real world of quotidian experience,” so that it can become a new vision of reality, as opposed to a dream\(^{39}\).

In this alternate reality, the beloved speaks explicitly about her sexual experience and her lover returns this enticement by talking allusively about her body and his love without shame. This dream scene also has implications of masturbation as the beloved awakes with “pure myrrh off my fingers”\(^{40}\). Again, the liquid mentioned is myrrh, which could very well have been used during sexual intercourse, but was also forbidden in Exodus 30:32 from being used as anointing oil on the human body. The return to myrrh puts a kink in their rendezvous, because the liquid reminds us that this sexual encounter would not have been anointed as per Exodus law. Despite this, she is ready to embrace her lover, as she proclaims, “I opened to my love”\(^{41}\). She is vulnerable in this state of nakedness and eagerness, but her lover is not there. The vulnerability of desire is a key aspect of the Song’s honesty about opening and accepting love, knowing the consequences.

We meet the infamous Watchmen again, seen throughout the poem as keepers of control and order, but this time in a violent instance. When the beloved goes out to find her lover, she encounters the watchmen “who go on their rounds in the city. They beat me, they wounded me”\(^{42}\). This encounter exemplifies the trafficking and policing of desire, but it also says something about the poet: “What sort of man might be disposed to suppose or imagine that a woman dreams or fantasies

\(^{37}\) Bible, Song 5:2.


\(^{40}\) Bible, Song 5:5.


about being beaten by men.” This interpretation is almost a queering of the text, by imprinting a sadomasochistic reading of the dream sequence.

The beloved begins a laundry list of her lover’s features that excite her, but in very natural, subtle and sweet metaphors. She compares his features to “pure gold… doves… beds of spices… lilies… ivory.” All of these metaphors are sensuous, but not overbearingly so; she has itemized his body (note the unique gender bending in this often sexist act), but does so to honor each piece of him as special and majestic. It is paradoxical that these beautiful sensory spectacles color a text that has been allegorically scarred with a “radical repudiation of the flesh.” The poem ends in affirmation, as the lover, “went down to his garden, to the bed of spices, to pasture his flock on the grass and gather lilies.” He is waiting in the garden of flowers—symbolizing virginity and feminine sexuality— and that is where she will find him. The beloved ends with a statement of commitment; the lovers belong to each other in a union— what is more romantic than that?

Fifth Poem:

The fifth poem begins with the lover’s admiration of his beloved similar to that of the beloved’s in the previous poem. He interjects with an interesting metaphorical and rhetorical mention of “chariot.” This chariot that he is hurled on could be akin to the chariot that carried the ark of Yahweh, or it could be the old prophets who were identified as the chariot of Israel. However, thematically, it is most likely referring to a mythical figure that rides around on a chariot interfering in love affairs. All three uses of the “chariot” are enacted in the scene.

The glorified references to natural beauty and earthly delicacies in the Song are contrasted with Genesis 2-3. In Genesis, the lovers’ free will is being tested, and they encounter the fall into sin as opposed to the presence of blossoms for the taking. In this regard, the lover pronounces, ‘I shall climb the palm tree, I shall seize its clusters of dates!’ He is not fearful of the fall, but he is ready to enjoy the sweetness of the ripe fruits. His beloved embraces his desire, “I should give you spiced wine to drink, juice of my pomegranates.” The pomegranate is used throughout the poem as a symbol of fertility and lushness; in this specific stanza, the pomegranate seems to better represent an aphrodisiac.
On the note of female fertility, the Song of Songs is one of the only books in the Bible, barring Ruth, that specifically references the mother’s house. Not only does this contrast the common patriarchal construct of the “Father’s house” seen throughout the Canon, but it also highlights that “A feminine love has brought them together and has paved the way to their mutual love”\(^{51}\). Again, the notion that a feminine force has brought about such a powerful union ignites strength within female authority. The fifth poem ends with the same charge as the first two poems, which is concurrent to its cyclical style of prose and reminds of us of the ceaseless nature of the beloved’s beckoning.

**Epilogue and Appendices**

The epilogue and appendices are arguably the richest stanzas in the poem. The epilogue begins with the familiar erotic symbolism of the apple tree in 8:5, reminding us of “the sexual passion which passes from one generation to the next”\(^{52}\). The phrase “awakened” is used euphemistically to imply the lover deflowered his beloved under that apple tree\(^{53}\). If this phrase is read as the consummation of their love, the beloved replies with a request for commitment, “Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is strong as Death”\(^{54}\). This admission proves that their love, and sexual encounter, is not to be taken lightly as some vulgar fling.

This stanza proves that erotic love is powerful enough to absorb the threat of death, because “Love and death are thus the two sides of the same reality; they share the same ultimate finality”\(^{55}\). The Song continues to its impressive climax describing the union of their love as, “a flash of fire, a flame of Yahweh himself”\(^{56}\). This avowal of love “is described as a mighty force, the very flame of God” Gordis concludes that this image of Yahweh verifies, “Natural love is holy”\(^{57}\). The flame metaphor continues to describe how this is a “Love no flood can quench”\(^{58}\). It is so powerful that it cannot be extinguished; it is a permanently committed love, witnessed by Yahweh. Finally, the epilogue ends by disbanding the notion of many ancient Israelite men, that marriage was simply an economic transaction as the beloved proclaims, “Were a man to offer all his family wealth to buy love, con-

\(^{51}\) Ibid, 167.
\(^{53}\) Bible, Song 8:5.
\(^{54}\) Ibid, 8:6.
\(^{55}\) LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote*, 174.
\(^{56}\) Bible, Song 8:6.
\(^{57}\) Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 74.
\(^{58}\) Bible, Song 8:7.
tempt is all that he would gain”\textsuperscript{59}. Their love cannot be bought with shekels and transcends contractual purposes.

The appendices sound like an older brother’s warning to his sister’s new boyfriend. The tough guy reminds us how young his sister is-- “her breasts are not yet formed”\textsuperscript{60}. Thus, they will guard her like the Walls of Jerusalem; of course the guards are male, but the beloved also has a role in self-guarding. She concludes, “I am a wall, and my breasts represent its towers,” and likens her breasts to towers is a symbol of her feminine strength\textsuperscript{61}. Solomon paid a servant to tend his vineyard, but the beloved proclaims, “I tend my own vineyard”\textsuperscript{62}. We are left with the exaltation of this love as a powerful and empowering one for the beloved and the “young stag” lover; their love is promoted as an example for other lovers to follow.

II. Social Historicism

Context of the Song: Eros Created

A major debate in the biblical studies realm is whether or not the Song should have been included in the Canon, because of the explicit references to sexual encounters and the erotic passions of the Song’s lovers. On the other hand, the song expresses pure human and mutual loyalty to one another. “Even though the physical side of their love is expressed with a frankness we should not emulate”\textsuperscript{63} should we dismiss the power it has?

Again, one can read the Song as a contrast to the Garden of Eden story in Genesis for it combines work and sexual play. The garden, depicted in the Genesis story as an inaccessible place that is banished for humanity, is rediscovered in the woman in the Song of Songs containing no evil serpents or forbidden fruit. It is in a union or communion with her that her lover rediscovers the bliss, which was forbidden in Eden. Thus, the world around her is recreated, too; the Song becomes a garden of love that the reader can enter for a time.

The Song of Songs is located directly after the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which both depict a vastly different script of desire. Proverbs essentially consists of training desire to long for the incorporeal, instead of being “led astray by excessive folly.”\textsuperscript{64} The Song presents sexuality in solidarity with the larger family unit, which directly contrasts “the illicit love presented in Proverbs 7, where

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 8:7.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 8:8.
\textsuperscript{61} Bible, Song 8:10
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 8:12.
\textsuperscript{64} Bible, Prov 5:23
sexual activity is inimical to home and heart”65. Similarly, Ecclesiastes discusses the training of desire to long for something that is beyond our earthly senses. The writer concludes that everything is futile, “mere chasing after the wind”66. However, the writer also deems earthly satisfaction to be “the lot of humanity” and one may indulge oneself in “eating and drinking and enjoying” until the point of contentment67. Furthermore, Ecclesiastes reminds us that we are in fact safer, more content and literally kept warm when we are not alone68. Does this conclusion not “lead the soul to union with God who is beyond the grasp of images and conceptual understanding” which is the positioning of the Song69? It seems that as much as scholars of the Old Testament are concerned with the position of the Song, the message often aligns.

The Song is also contextualized as a precursor to the New Testament that revolved around the notion that love, not law, was the road to union with Christ. In contrast, the importance of the body presented in the Song is, “incompatible with the new ‘commonism’ described in the book of Acts”70. This commonism is embodied in Acts: “All that believed were together, and had all things in common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need71. Clearly the intimacy depicted in the Song between the two devoted lovers does not align with this communal style living depicted in the New Testament.

It is clear that the notorious burst of fornication condemned by Paul was far from being a backsliding lapse of hedonism. The ecstatic sexual expressions were inseparable from the immediacy and pre-eminence of Love itself and a desire to act upon it. The spirit cut across divisions of sex and property; so then in Paul we see that marriage was both a hindrance to the mystical union with Christ and the key to divine intimacy with God and our partners. Marriage was a “safe” way to find union in humanity, but in our union with our partners, there is a fear that we will forgo our union with Christ. Sexual and/or marital union was not an act of indulgence in human nature, I argue that the Song reminds us how beautiful and holy love and loving can be.

The conclusion we can draw as a reader of the Song is that interpretations of it are bursting with critique and misunderstanding of its placement in the canon, but we “must strip away our deeply embedded assumptions about Canticles…

66 Bible, Ecc. 1:14. 
68 Ibid, 4:11-12
70 Hurcombe, Sex and God, 213.
and re-engage with the text that lies before us”⁷². There are so many presuppositions about the text’s meaning and intricacies, but we must leave those behind us and begin critically thinking about the text as it stands before us. The Canticle is sexual and sacred, and the fact that the second element of the definition is not understood leads to seeing only a profane sexual song. Inversely, if the first element is not understood, one falls into pure allegory.

**Purpose of the Song: Eros Condemned**

There are essentially two schools of thought about the intended purpose of the Song and its inclusion in the canon. The conservative theory is that “the Song was a ticking time bomb within Scripture itself, an occasion of sin just waiting to happen, which only the ingenuity of the allegorist could successfully defuse”⁷³. The male celibates in the ancient and medieval Church could not accept the explicitly sexual nature of the Song, so they turned to allegory to explain why it was included in the Canon. It was read as a representation of “Israel’s love for God, or for Christians, of Christ’s love for the church”⁷⁴. However, this allegorical shield has not just limited our scope of interpretation; it “is not merely a harmless misunderstanding or a curious hermeneutical aberration. It is witness to a refusal by its male readers over the centuries to come to terms with their own sexuality, to acknowledge it power and to recognize its acceptability”⁷⁵. This viewpoint does not domesticate the Song to pious devotion, but reinforces that the erotic fabric of our lives has not been treated affirmatively in the history of Christian life and thought.

The conservative, anti-sexual interpretation was met by an artistically informed theory for the Song’s purpose: the censorship of sex becoming “an apparatus for producing an even greater quantity of discourse about sex,” because in denying it or silencing the dialogue, we incite more intrigue and desire to talk about sex⁷⁶. We give sex too much power by denying its relevance and shunning discussion about it. H. Rowley states, “Love is ever content to express itself, and we need ask no other purpose of the Song. Its author was an artist, who created in these poems masterpieces of beauty” ⁷⁷. We can read the Canticles as beautiful love poetry, instead of crude erotica. The expression of this pure and exciting human sexual love also gives us strong images of a healthy relationship, where the lovers become poets as they sing their love, overflowing with abundance and energy for life⁷⁸.

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⁷² Patmore, “The Plain And Literal Sense,” 249.  
⁷⁶ Burrus and Moore, “Unsafe Sex,” 32.  
Another thought is that the expression of humanly love in the Song acts “as a vehicle for rediscovering the Paradise of the Garden of Eden” as it recovers the sullied image of man and woman expelled in Genesis79. One notion rooted in the creation story is the denial of human nature and the denial of human desire, which “leads to the valorization of resistance to all one’s appetites- in nonsexual, as well as in sexual contexts”80. When one “falls to sin,” it can be easier to simply disband any urges which may lead one to sin again; however, this type of mentality promotes numbness and lack of human relation, which can be a more dangerous threat. Origen’s interpretation of the Song sums up the literal reading of the Song as an awakening within the soul the passionate and erotic love for God, which manifests itself in our human relationships, especially sexual relationships.

III. Theoretical Analysis

Anti-Patriarchal Bend

Of course, the Song is subversive for its sexually explicit content and the positive light it sheds on human sexuality and love. Another element of its radically political role in the Bible is its anti-patriarchal tendencies. The anti-patriarchal model of love in the Song could be made to function as a counter voice to the misogynist prophetic degradation of the nation, because the Song relies on mutual courting, attraction, and admiration81. In this respect, the lovers’ gender identities are not given or fixed, rather “they are constructed in the course of the process of reading, leading to the subversion of normative models of gender interrelations”82. According to the one-sex concept of humanity, male and female bodies are the same; therefore, “what made men ‘men’ and women ‘women’ was not their bodies, but their place on a broader cosmic hierarchy”83. In the context of the Song, this divine hierarchy is dissolved into the primarily egalitarian narrative of the lovers, because their roles are not limited to their sex. Nowhere else in the Bible is there any gender ambiguity, which adds to the seditious nature of the Song.

Female eroticism is presented in a favorable and empowering light; even the seeking of her lover is an inverse of a traditionally male prerogative. The female protagonist is vastly different from the archetype of the biblical female: “Where a
proactive, rule-breaking woman is the image of a disobedient, adulterous community in Hosea, now the Song of Songs features a woman who faces down the disapproval of her audience for her dark skin, seeks her lover at night, and revels in her love for him."84 The writer uses euphemism to depict the lovers’ intercourse, which makes way for the central subversion of the song “eliminating the notion that the inherent pinnacle of the sexual act is penetration”85. The woman is the most prominent voice in the Song, because she opens and closes the book86.

The mutuality of the love affair is by far the most anti-patriarchal aspect of the Song. The fact that the lovers give “each other fond erotic names foregrounds the reciprocal nature of the relationship” and destabilize the one-sided, property archetype of biblical relationships87. If anything, the male lover puts himself into the feminine consciousness in his constant admiration for his beloved, but “through an identification with the Bride discovers himself in a new way as a masculine type” as an admiring, respectful lover, not as a self-gratifying, consumer of women88.

Finally, the intimacy with which the poet writes about from the female perspective supports the idea that the writer of the Song is a woman. After all, is it likely that a man, no matter how great an artist, could know of, and present so vividly a woman’s dream? Or could speak from a woman’s point of view with such ease and accuracy?

**Tantalized by the Possibility of Fulfillment**

A common thread of the human condition is always being close to fulfillment, but not quite enough to grasp it completely—the proximity to which brings us equal pleasure to total fulfillment. This idea is a favorite theory in theological debate. The dialectic of God’s transcendence and God’s proximity leaves believers concurrently satisfied and yearning to know God. This same dialectic can be applied to the climactic embrace of the lovers in the Song, as “the poetry tantalizes us with the probability of their embrace”89. The poet portrays the lover’s aching desire for his beloved as something almost masochistic as he “not only rejoices in the agony of his unfulfilled desire, he actively wills that the pain be intensified”90.

Thus, he constantly experiences this yearning for the future of his desire, but we are never quite given the satisfaction of what is to come; something like the constant to desire to seek God, but never fully actualizing God.

85 Almog, “Flowing Myrrh,” 253
86 Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 145
87 Almog, ““Flowing Myrrh,” 255.
90 Burrus and Moore, “Unsafe Sex,” 45.
Then tension between chastity and sexual freedom is scripted in the narrative of the Song, because “however explicit it will get at time about the man’s and woman’s bodies, [it] never attempts to tame their sexual union (or our imaginative creation of it) with language”\(^91\). We must encounter the erotic in order to question and to know it, just the same as we must acknowledge the existence of God if we ever wish to question and know him. We cannot encounter the body with our current ideals, “the body tends to be downplayed in scholarship, or uncomfortably passed over, with maybe an incidental remark about its quirkiness or grotesque”\(^92\). However, in order to honestly read the text, we must start encountering the body through text and recognize its eroticism, or it will be a dark shadow on the Canon.

### Constantly Seeking the Beloved

In light of being teased and toyed with by the possibility of fulfillment, we are left struggling and constantly seeking the beloved. In fact, the most common themes of the Song are “the seeking of the beloved and the invitation of one lover to another to come away”\(^93\). This yearning exists on a cycle for the lovers of the Song, “beginning with separation and desire, concluding with union and fulfillment”\(^94\). Each round of the refrain tells the story of the sexual acts about to take place or already in the works. The beloved is constantly calling out for her stag, who is off galloping on a mountain; satisfaction is so close, but utterly impossible to reach.

Just as we are hindered from fully encountering God, so too are the lovers met with “hindrances laid in the path of love”\(^95\). However, the poem is not passive; it reacts to these interferences by pursuing desire even more vehemently. The poem’s purpose in this regard comes down to the purpose of desire: “desire seeks not its consummation but the eternal prolongation of desire”\(^96\). Once desire is consummated, we become satiated, no longer seeking to find fulfillment of it. Our search becomes empty and void; therefore, desire must perpetually repeat itself. This notion is embodied in the cyclical nature of the Song, reminding us that the object of desire must always be just out of reach, or else it will no longer be an object for which is yearned. That is why this text is so important and cannot be denied of its eroticism; the nature of desire is frustrating, painful and beautiful, but it cannot simply be denied.

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93 Patmore, “The Plain And Literal Sense,” 240
95 Ibid, 98.
96 Roland Boer, *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door: The Bible and Popular Culture*, (Routledge: London, 1999), 63-64.
Denying Desire

One solution to the battle against desire is the utter denial of desire—a common defense of the clerical and conservative sect. However, to deny the sacred power of our embodied yearnings is to be pulled away from one another and hence from ourselves. Therefore, “to have our bodyselves trivialized and demeaned is to be snatched out of our senses and alienated from our erotic desires”\(^{97}\). This process of alienation from our sacred power produces anti-erotic psyches and lives in which our bodies and feelings are satisfied by abusive power dynamics: domination, coercion, and violence. Thus, “our erotic capacities are formed and deformed by our alienation from one another and from ourselves” which jeopardizes the experience of mutuality which can strengthen us to live prophetically as enablers of mutuality\(^{98}\).

Many progressive scholars argue that the erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of God. As such, it is the source of our capacity for transcendence, the ‘crossing over’ among ourselves, making connections between ourselves in relationship. The erotic is the divine Spirit’s yearning, “through our bodyselves, toward mutually empowering relation, which is our most fully embodied experience of god as love”\(^{99}\). If we deny the desire lurking within our human hearts, we are shutting out the possibility to “know” God in the most intimate sense of the word.

Purifying Desire

This begs the question of how we might distill this desire into something positive and pious. Just like iron, desire can be purified of its impurities. Therefore, desire does not need to be extirpated, but educated; one must not rid “oneself of desire, which can devolve into lust; it is a question of desire’s proper flow”\(^{100}\). The problem with desire is not necessarily concerned with the body, but “that the soul seeks ultimacy in what is not God”\(^{101}\). The hidden wonders of desire, and the hope of wholeness in it, lie in a place of longing in human beings, which is made new in hope\(^{102}\). The hope is that whether or not we are sexual lovers “we must learn to touch and be touched if we want to respect the needs of our common body”\(^{103}\). This respect transcends the social order that has deemed the erotic as something marginal and to be transgressed; this mutuality and respect speaks to the essence of being which must be redeemed as laudable and relevant in our modern world.

\(^{98}\) Ibid, 144.
\(^{99}\) Ibid, 99.
\(^{100}\) Laird, “Under Solomon’s Tutelage,” 509.
\(^{101}\) Ibid, 508
\(^{103}\) Heyward, Touching Our Strength, 149
Eros Redeemed

Once desire is refined the religious community must redeem the Eros, which it has condemned for all of history. Eros is power, like money, indeed to be feared for its destructive potential and the mess it can make when not handled with gratitude, mercy and grace. It is for these reasons that “the church makes a sacrament out of this touching place of human relatedness, and laws around its breaking”\(^{104}\). We should not mistake a learned caution for a prohibition against erotic love.

The charge from this collection of love poetry is to begin to refine our senses, “and thereby know, they can teach us what is good and what is bad, what is real and what is false, for us in relation to one another and to the earth and cosmos”\(^{105}\). In this light, sensuality is a foundation for our authority. A refinement of the senses necessitates a mastery over sexual appetite, which invariably happens through abstinence. Such mastery is limited to the patriarchal realm and “an integral part of this mastery-heroism is denial—denial of the power of sexuality, refusal of the overwhelming desire for woman.” Therefore, men can believe that if they deny their needs for women, they will prevail “and to retain seed is to be one’s masterly, masculine self”\(^{106}\). Other than the clearly sexist implications of this mastery, there is an inherent flaw in complete denial.

Eros is a fundamentally spiritual impulse to reach out for something beyond ourselves, to become vulnerable to that something often against all other instincts. Thus, the sexual aspect of Eros ignites a bodily desire to seek such connection, which puts lovers at risk for being swept up in the vulnerable whirlwind of unarmed passion. However, with honesty, this risk can be resolved if we are ultimately grounded in covenantal love of God and this love informs our love and covenants with others. This intimacy, whether sexual or not, creates a life full of passion and pain; it creates a life that mirrors a world beyond and yet remains totally present in our own.

In the Pauline ideal, this Eros is still terrifying. Sexual love is “The very thing that presents a difficulty to soul’s union with God [but] is also part of what makes it possible and enables soul to scale the mountain to God”\(^{107}\). This precipice can only be reached when we overcome what terrifies us the most: to be truly touched and to touch in the deepest sense of the word. That being said, “Erotic power… is too great a power to eliminate altogether from the realm of faith”\(^{108}\). Yet, the church is tearing itself apart over its fear of erotic love. However, if the church made an

\(^{105}\) Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 93.
\(^{106}\) Blumenthal, “Where God Is Not,” 87
\(^{107}\) Laird, “Under Solomon’s Tutelage,” 509.
\(^{108}\) Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, 123.
effort to experience the erotic as sacred, we could “begin to know ourselves as holy and to imagine ourselves sharing in the creation of one another and of our common well-being”\textsuperscript{109}.

In our modern world, “desire fuels the motives behind many of our actions” and is a central facet of our socialized lives; maybe the centrality of desire is in fact the essence of the human condition\textsuperscript{110}. This desire “is an impulse and emotion for more in life at any given moment. God is a belief that there is something more to life. Cannot those be the same”\textsuperscript{111}? If not the same, they certainly can conform to a similar path. This path is upheld in the text of the Song, but is generally denied in the church. Let us pursue the magic, “Haste away, my love” and rejoice in unbounded love that is glorified by the actualization of desire\textsuperscript{112}.

“And our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine of Hippo)

\textbf{WORKS CITED}


\textsuperscript{109} Heyward, \textit{Touching Our Strength}, 102.

\textsuperscript{110} Walsh, \textit{Exquisite Desire}, 2.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid}, 11

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Bible}, Song 8:14.


