

Song of Songs: A celebration of and invitation to participate in the fullness of life

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The *Song of Songs* is usually appreciated for its celebration of love in the foreground, erotic or divine, if these are not regarded as different aspects of the same experience. This has perhaps led to the neglect of the celebration of life as pertinent background in a unique way in the Hebrew and even Christian Bible as a whole. In a secular world disillusioned by the perceived emphasis on death in traditional religion and therefore desperately obsessed with life, this biblical poetry may come as a surprising liberation through its critical and creative voice even within the religious canons of two world religions.

Introduction

After a brief overview to illustrate how religion has often been perceived as a denigration of life, specific features in the *Song of Songs* will be highlighted to underline the Song's unexpected celebration of life, even including earthy life, without neglecting a wider view of how this is transcended in the sense of going beyond while at the same time including this earthly life. This exploration will finally be situated in the first-world, secular context to show how an old document has critical and creative value in its liberating and perhaps even shocking appeal.

Religion as death

Religions which promise the possibility of a life hereafter usually do so to compensate for the present life which has been critiqued as insufficient (Dollimore 1998:xiii). Even as late as Marx into modernity, religion can be diagnosed as 'the sigh of the afflicted creature, the soul of a heartless world, as it is also the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people' (Marx 1844:71). Marx therefore regarded religion as the cry of the oppressed. That religion encourages gratitude might therefore be only a defence mechanism to cover up that religion is actually not a celebration of life.

Bonhoeffer (1971:335–336) points out that the Old Testament offers historical redemption, that is, in this life, whereas other oriental religions were about myths of salvation beyond death. In this way these religions were not only escapists from present suffering, but also neglected the wealth of present blessings.

Song of Songs

Life

Life is portrayed from conception in *Song of Songs* 3:4 to and beyond death in 8:6 and goes beyond human to animal and plant life. There is a strong and constant relationship with nature of which the lovers are part. Nature, just as love in the refrains (2:7, 3:5, 8:4 and, to a certain extent, 5:8), is personified as if it also plays a part in this love-drama where everything is seen as alive. In fact, the lovers and nature, even when nature is used metaphorically, might be playing equal parts in this Song.

The Song mentions proportionately more plant (e.g. the blossoms in 2:12 and the date palm in 7:8, but for a full overview, cf. Van der Zwan 2012:139–155) and animal (e.g. the foxes in 2:15 and the goats in 4:1, but for a full overview, cf. Van der Zwan 2012:155–163) names than most if not all biblical books. Here they are not dealt with in the context of sacrifice or cleanliness as in the legal texts, but are free and even wild game such as lions and leopards (both in 4:8), suggesting the animalistic or even dangerous parts of life and love which rage in the lovers. Through endearing identifications with doves and deer (1:15, 2:14, 4:1, 5:2, 5:12 and 6:9 and in the refrains, 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4, respectively) the lovers merge with the beauty of nature. From the cultural context it is clear

that particularly the animals function as symbols and are endowed with meaning with connotations of the Divine as is clear from the adjuration refrains, far beyond their physical appearance (Van der Zwan 2012:244–245). The lovers are not only in love with each other, but also with nature which they imitate and with which they are integrated. Any hostility in the Song does not come from nature, but from culture, as the episode about the abusive guardians of law and order who assault and rob the female lover in 5:2–7 makes so patently clear.

The spring season pictures springs and offspring (e.g. 2:11, 4:12 and 4:5, respectively) as archetypal images of birth and new life all over the Song. That is why these poems are recited at the Jewish Pesach festival commemorating not only the exodus, but also celebrating the return to life after the winter.

It is interesting that *חיים* [living] or its derivatives occur only once (4:15) and then metaphorically about flowing waters. Fischer (2010:30) prefers the literal meaning and discovers a religious sense in which purity entails cultic cleansing in these 'living waters' (cf. Leviticus 14:5–6, 50–52; 15:23; Numbers 19:17). This scarcity of the word could perhaps be explained by the nature of language which fills absences to compensate for them: when a reality is so obviously present it would be superfluous to represent it in speech. In this sense language functions like the critical aspect of religion declaring what is not present. This could be a risky argument, as this would imply that the Song is just a compensation for absence and therefore nothing more than an idealistic protest about the absence of a value in the then society. On the other hand, the explicit mention of religiosity and sexuality are both absent despite their very hidden presence in the text (Van der Zwan 2012:264).

Water plays an important role as symbol of life in the Song (in 4:12 and 4:15 ['embracing' the description of a list of plants and their produce], 5:2, 5:12, 7:5 and finally in 8:7 where water can become so dangerous in its power that it can even threaten love, although it never succeeds). It is either enclosed as precious source or flows freely like the love between the two protagonists. To this is perhaps contrasted the arid desert in 3:6 and 8:5 as desolate places from which the parched lover appears.

Coupled with this overarching theme of life are three entry points to life: newness, birth and awakening, all intertwined. As for the first of these, it occurs rather late – in 7:14: *גַּם-יְשׁוּבִים הַדְּשִׁיִּים* [new and old], although it is typical of hymns such as Psalm 148:12. *קָצָבִי* [with freshness] in 6:11 is another general word for new plant life.

Fertility and birth in nature are mentioned in many places throughout the Song but also associated with the female lover, as Van der Zwan (2014:255) has indicated: *הַיְהוּרָתִי* [she who conceived/gave birth to me] in 3:4 *לְיִלְדָתָהּ* [for the one who gave birth to her] in 6:9, and *הַבְּלָהָה אֲמַרְךָ* [...] *הַבְּלָהָה אֲמַרְךָ* [your mother was in travail with you {...}] she was in travail and brought you forth] in 8:5. Offspring is logically linked

with birth: it is particularly the female lover who refers to children in a context where procreation between the lovers is not explicitly intended, as Fox (1985:287–288) remarked about Egyptian and Israelite love poetry.

The female voice thus speaks in 1:6 and 2:3 of sons and eight times she calls on 'daughters' (1:5, 2:7, 3:5, 3:10, 3:11, 5:8, 5:16 and 8:4). In 2:9, 2:17 and 8:14 she metaphorically calls her lover a young hart/deer. *בַּיִת אִמִּי* [the house of my mother] in 3:4 and 8:2 refers to the room where her mother enjoyed the intimacy which led to conception and could at the same time suggest the womb. In 3:11 the female voice refers to the mother of her male lover and in 8:1 she wishes he could have drunk from her own mother, again moving to his mother in 8:5 whom she mentions twice and whose experiences are mentioned three times in a row. With a mother also mentioned in 1:6 and 6:9 this brings the number of times she is mentioned to seven. Moreover, the possibility of pregnancy in 5:4: *וַיְעִי הַמָּוּ עָלָיו* [and my insides were in commotion/roared because of him] should not be excluded.

The male lover is, however, more conscious of the new animals born in spring. In 1:8 he tells the female lover when they could have a rendezvous for their love: *וַיְרִעַ אֶת-בְּרִייתֶיךָ* [and feed your baby goats {which she takes care of – reflected again in the proper name, *עֵיִן* {Engedi}, in 1:14}]. He also speaks of daughters in 2:2, 6:9 and 7:2, thus bringing the total number of instances where daughters are mentioned to eleven in a cultural context where a daughter's main value was to become a mother. To this the male appreciation of *בְּבִטְנֶךָ* [your belly] in 7:3, as subtle hint to her womb, can be added.

In respect of these suggestions about offspring *Song of Songs* is therefore closer to the Near Eastern and specifically the Mesopotamian world view in opposition to that of Egypt (Horine 2001:5).

Awakening to new life as a form of higher consciousness is therefore a strong theme in the Song. Sexual arousal is such an awakening of which the female lover speaks in 8:5. There is, however, a relishing in the apparent 'sleep' of love from which the female lover does not want to be awakened. This becomes a refrain, and the gravitational force of staying in this state is thus expressed as a continual desire. One can speculate that this plea of remaining in the sleep of love (-making) perhaps bemoans the awakening of the male orgasm when love play reaches its peak which could imply the end of the love-game.

The body

Life can only exist embodied, though not all bodies are (yet) alive. The centrality of the body in the celebration of life through love is clear from virtually every sentence in the Song. Not only are the bodies of the lovers sung about in four *ausaf* (4:1–7, 5:10–16, 6:4–7 and 7:1–6), but the animals and plants and even celestial bodies emphasise

that there is no escape into a spiritual disembodied world as so often presented by religion. Care of the body is not ignored, neglected or postponed, but put in the present. This is not a reduction to the concrete either as the Song constitutes a strong critique of materialism. This is clear from 1:5 at the beginning, and more explicitly again at the end, in 8:9–12 where the possession of the female lover by her brothers as both labour and sexual family asset is protested against.

This appreciation for life through the body is also indirectly experienced and expressed through the aesthetic, so strong in both the form and the content of the Song (cf. also Miller II 2012 *passim*). Beauty and pleasure are the most important initial features of the erotic, that is, bodily desire and love. Downing (2003:131) speaks of the ‘aesthetics of abundance, intensification, [and] plenitude’ which is ‘in concentration in Song of Songs’.

The four adjectives (and their derivatives) used for beauty without limiting it to the visual are:

- יָפֵה [beautiful] which occurs twelve times and are rather flexible in meaning
- יָמוּתָה [comely] which occurs four times
- יָעִיף [you are delightful/lovely] which occurs only once, viz. in 7:7
- נִבְטַח [looked at/conspicuous] which occurs only in 5:10.

To this can be added טוֹב [good or pleasant] as general word for pleasure, occurring four times and involving various senses.

For the recipient of the text the most obvious and direct experience of the Song is, of course, the aural, even when it is read quietly. This starts with the metre and sounds of the poems which sing about life and its pleasures – including their interruptions if it is to be about its fullness! – as no detailed philosophical prose can describe or even analyse it. It starts with the playful repetition of an essential word, שִׁיר [song], in the title already expressing the intensity of feeling through a hyperbolic superlative. Alliteration through the repetition of the consonants, שׁ and ק, in the first two words of the next verse and assonance through the vowel, i, in 6:2b–6:3 (to take a leap much further into the poems) create a musicality inviting the reader to participate just as an infant would want to imitate the attractive voice of its mother. This feature is further reinforced by the many parallelisms where an idea is echoed, contrasted or elaborated upon. These are only four examples from a multitude which deserve a separate study (cf. Watson 1995:429–430). In addition, the lovers also speak directly about the experience of each other’s voice in 2:8, 2:14, 5:2 and 8:13.

The other senses are appealed to through the aural, and the intensity of their experience is determined not only by the images offered, but also by the imaginative power and association of the recipient.

The visual is probably represented less than the modern Western mind would be inclined to notice, as many of the comparisons are stereometrical, that is, metonymically portray a similar function rather than appearance as that of the metaphor image (Keel 1984 *passim*; Schroer & Staubli 2005:21; Wagner 2010:85ff.). Yet the Song offers a plethora of delightful experiences to the eyes of the ‘celebrants’. Not only are the four *ausaf* (*vide supra*), but also the nocturnal experiences of 3:1–4 and 5:2–7 which could be dreams and therefore most probably visual (Hillman 1979:186) the best examples of this. Its importance is also clear from the instances where the eyes (in 4:9 and 5:12) and the numerous verbs of seeing (eg. in 1:6 and 2:9) are mentioned.

As eating and drinking form such a strong feature of the Song the gustatory and the olfactory likewise play important roles to convey the joy and meaning of experiencing life and love in their fullness.

The gustatory has a special place in the Song and the olfactory goes beyond food to ointment mentioned in 1:3 already, perfumes and the many plants and their products such as myrrh. Many of these fragrances have connotations of sacrifice and their special link with the divine.

In a love scene the tactile has its obvious and expected place although it is never directly mentioned in the Song. Much will depend on the personal fantasies of the recipient but the kiss and (her?) breasts suggested in the first verse after the title already, the wine in 7:10 and the longing of the female lover to be embraced in 2:6 and 8:3 are perhaps sufficient stimuli for free associations. One is in this regard reminded of the relevant words of Carr (2003:24, 32, 34): ‘much of life is structured by a language of touch and bodily presence’.

Some experiences (could) involve several senses such as the mouth in the first verse after the title where the gustatory, tactile and perhaps even olfactory are invoked. Such sensory clusters enhance the intensity and complexity of the experience and draw attention to the shifting and restless sensations rather than being synaesthesia as Hunt (2008:91, 202) has interpreted 2:14, for instance. Because of the relative scarcity of adjectives in the Song words such as יָרֵךְ [sweet or pleasant] are flexible in their possible meanings depending on the context and perspective of interpretation.

The state of being in love also inhibits certain sensory experiences, such as the vestibular, as when drunk (cf. וְשָׁכַרְךָ [and get drunk] in 5:1) from יַיִן [wine], with its typical loss of balance, proportion, perspective, integration, but also inhibitions, leading to exaggerations and extreme views, or as when asleep.

With this wide range of aesthetic experiences the Song is the book in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles most engaging of the sensual.

Love

This foreground aspect of love has received the most attention in the history of understanding and appreciating the Song, but can also be seen from the broader perspective which is embedded in the poetry. This love is not without suggestions about its physical fruits or offspring (*vide supra*) despite the foreground emphasis on the atmosphere of freedom within which it is experienced and celebrated.

From 8:6–7 love is not only a part of life and therefore seemingly subject to life, but also and ironically its essence, its centre. With love even death is conquered. Erotic love carries us beyond death.

This best-known theme is clear from the high frequency with which two Hebrew words for 'love', *אהבה* and *דוד*, or their derivatives, are used in the Song. The first already occurs in the first verse after the title and more appropriately means 'lover' or 'beloved'. From a total of 35 times *דוד* is associated five times with the incarnated love of the female lover's breasts and then, perhaps suggestively as double entendre, always in the *dualis* form in 1:2, 1:4 and twice in 4:10 and 7:13. Thirty times *דוד* refers to the male beloved as receiver or object of the female love. With the same consonants as the name of the other famous king in the history of Israel, David, the father of Solomon already impersonated in the Song, it may once again remind of the many intrigues with women these two kings enjoyed.

The second, seemingly more abstract noun, *אהבה*, is, however, personified in 2:7, 3:5, 7:7 and 8:4, although this is also suggested when it occurs without a definite article elsewhere (Jenni & Westermann 1971:61–62), almost as if it serves as a proper name. With a total of 29 occurrences *Song of Songs* is the book in the Hebrew Bible where this word is found most often, thus identifying and framing it as its most obvious theme reinforced also by the adjuration refrains in 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4 as well as by the key statement in 8:6–7.

Freedom

The cry for freedom is also expressed in the form of these poems through the relative freedom in language and structure, despite Fischer's proof (2010) that there is more regularity than has traditionally been allowed for. Just as there are no inner prohibitions for the two lovers – except those about disturbing the sleep of dream-love – in the Song, life is not inhibited by any form of asceticism which has been such a strong characteristic in the main religions of this world. This lack of inner prohibitions contrasts and critiques the external superego of the city police in 5:7 and the possessive claims implied in the words of the brothers in 8:8–9.

That is why the skin is the first and only body part to be criticised in 1:5: not only does it represent a boundary, but here it also signifies critique against oppressive ownership: the female lover cannot even possess her own vineyard, her

body, her self. Her dark colour suggests forced labour in the scorching sun: she is possessed by her brothers, not only as a sexual asset with economic value, but also as a labour object. She has to work in someone else's property and as such functions as extension of that property. At the end in 8:6, however, even death is not permitted as life's boundary to this free love which flames above and beyond all floods.

Yet freedom is ironically enhanced by boundaries. In 8:9 the brothers oppose their sister as door to her being a wall. The Freudian reality principle and the law as pruning and stimulating 'skin' or defence contain, encourage and give form to the outward movement, instead of being a centripetal and even autistic force inward. Death is an awakening barrier which raises consciousness to open up to the vastness and fullness of life.

Death

That the Song celebrates this earthly life does not mean that it does not take death seriously, although death is almost personified as a living being in 8:6 where its reality and power are opposed to the power of love, which is either as strong or even stronger, depending on one's reading of the verse. By including death, life and love gain a deeper meaning.

Death and sex are therefore juxtaposed and so, as a kind of merism, includes both *eros* and *thanatos*. Death in 8:6 follows also directly after birth has been mentioned in the previous verse: the two transitions somehow belong to each other. Death is a kind of threshold just as the woman has, or perhaps even is, a 'door' in 5:4, 7:14 and 8:9, 'an unconscious symbol of the female genitals' (Wulff 1997:299).

Even though the protagonists in the Song are probably teenagers the miracle of life and love seems to transcend all boundaries.

Fullness of life

These 'boundaries' and 'barriers' emphasise the fullness of life which should be taken advantage of. At the same time they suggest containment. The Song starts off with a royal scene where luxury and fullness, even excess can be imagined.

In the sense that *Song of Songs* is not about a half measure or some kind of realistic compromise, it initially appears as the expression of idealistic, perhaps even naïve, exaggeration.

This undiluted idealism may seem to be unrealistic, but in terms of Jungian psychology, which emphasises inclusivity also of the dark shadows as enrichment in the life of the soul, both individual and collective, this idealism is a more inclusive view on reality than what the narrowing anxieties of realism usually allow. This does not mean a mere incorporation of unprocessed parts, but a deep transformation where integration is the goal.

Fullness is also expressed by the unreserved, seemingly naïve, claims about perfection which is not as elusive as the postmodern mind would have it: וְכֻלּוֹ מִתְּמִידִים [and all of him is lovely] in 5:16, וְשִׁבְלָהּ אֵין בְּהֶם [and none fails among them] in 4:2 echoed in 6:6, כֻּלְּךָ יָפָה [all of you is lovely] and וְיָמוּם אֵין בְּךָ [and there is no blemish in you] in 4:7, תְּמִימִי [my perfect one] in 5:2 and 6:9 and אֵל-יִקְסֵר הַמִּצֵּן [there is no lack of mingled wine] in her 'navel' in 7:3, a negative statement to reinforce a positive reality.

The fullness of life pictured in the Song should not be seen as a limiting boundary of the freedom previously highlighted. In 5:12 עַל מְלֵאָה [at the full one, i.e. probably: at the full fountain] spells this sense out explicitly (Van der Zwan 2012:119). The substantive is a *hapax legomenon*, suggesting its uniqueness and its superlative nature.¹

This fullness serves to emphasise the reality where there is apparently no lack, suggesting some kind of fantasised perfection. It is, however, exposed as wishful thinking by the continual longing (e.g. תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ [his longing] in 7:11) and desire (e.g. הִמְנַחֵתִי [I desired] in 2:3 and מְתַמְדִים [desires] in 5:16). Feeling included in nature is a vicarious experience of its fullness which brings peace.

The first-world, secular context

The preoccupations, sometimes even obsessions, with youth and health – the latter probably never in history as intense as in this present era – as defences against old age and its implied consequence of death suggests the value that is attached to this life by those who have given up on any alternative one. This kind of 'vitalism' can be interpreted as society's desperate measures to preserve life, also expressed through a stronger urge to care for nature in the postmodern time (Jameson 1993:38).

Another feature of virtually all societies is the value attached to offspring, amongst others, to ensure some kind of survival after this life. In Europe several countries, however, have a declining birth-rate amongst the 'indigenous' population, probably because the anxieties about the present have become so urgent that a future through offspring now seems a luxury (Meadows, Randers & Meadows 2006 *passim*).

These anxieties are often masked by the search for self-actualisation or self-realisation, a hectic, even competitive chase after as many opportunities to fill the present moment, to 'fulfil oneself' and yet, ironically missing it by an excessive focus on the future. With this narcissism comes a narrowing of reality where sight of others and the universe is sacrificed. By multitasking an 'economic' densification of the present is sought, but this control only seems to result in a never-ending void, as no fullness and depth are ever reached. Despite a longer life expectancy every moment seems to be shorter than that experienced by less 'developed' people.

1. Some translations have rendered this enigmatic word as the setting or inlay of jewels in their enclosed casing (Pope 1977:539) which would then strengthen the sense of limitations, but the context does not seem to favour this.

Every limited moment therefore needs to be exploited to wrench the maximum from all available possibilities. This mentality probably stems from materialism, which is not only a reduction, but also based on scarcity value and the closed binary system of the survivor versus the victim (Lasch 1979:36).

When the secular world feels alienated from the ideals of the religious community, their common appreciation of this earthly life could be a bridging factor which could lead to it being recognised as only one part of an infinitely broader and deeper reality pursued by religion. The meaning of the fullness and perhaps even infinity of life cannot be reduced to materialism, hedonism or even eudaimonism.

To these postmodern struggles *Song of Songs* offers a liberating celebration of life in its fullness where the whole of the universe seems to become more alive.

Conclusion

There is no other biblical book which stresses the value of eroticism and probably therefore of this earthly life as that of *Song of Songs*. The question can be asked if it is a song of gratitude or a collection of dreamlike fantasy poems. Idealism is always a protest against reality, but then precisely because it can envisage a greater, wider and deeper reality as potential *in* the present, narrow reality.

Song of Songs is a cry against the oppressive reduction and adulteration of materialism perhaps precisely because there are no children from the love relationship yet who would require possessiveness of the mother and financial investment by the father. In this way *Song of Songs* is a call to first-world, secular society to awaken to the fullness of a life filled with meaning that is offered as gift to be celebrated.

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