

Erotic fantasy, spirituality and Song of Songs

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Fantasy plays an essential role in sexual activities. This article investigates (erotic) fantasy from a literary text perspective according to Song of Songs in the Christian Bible. The Song, according to many commentaries, starts with a reference to sex in Canticle 1:2, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine'. Although the word sex is not mentioned in the Song, it is referred to and implied a number of times in the deep structure of the text. The fantasies of this most beautiful woman (beauty, a secondary motif in the Song that is complementary to the main theme of love) are part of the rhetoric of the poet (probably a woman) to convince the reader about the enjoyment and beauty of erotic love. These could most likely stimulate erotic fantasies when reading the text. Part of the poet's rhetoric is the way in which she describes this most beautiful woman and her most attractive lover using metaphors, allusions, symbols and similes to evoke all sorts of imaginations and fantasies in the mind of the reader to complement the erotic fantasies of the reader. The investigation of the composition and 'lived experiences' (spiritualities) of erotic fantasies is approached from the perceptions of how the entanglement of the reader in the text augments fantasies, how the dynamic interaction between the text of Song of Songs and the reader involves the reader in the fantasies and spiritualities of the protagonists and the poet, how the lived experiences of the composed images and erotic fantasies in the text of the Song grip and involve the reader in the text and finally how the use or application of human senses in fantasies can intensify the lived experiences of fantasies. This research points out how God's love and concern for his creatures are present as revealed in the relationship between two lovers. His love and concern are clearly visible in the enjoyment and pleasure given by God to humans in his creation which the lovers find in each other.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research challenges the traditional discourse about sexuality for an enrichment of it. In the article the disciplines of theology, physiology, psychology and spirituality unite to include the entire person in sexual activities. The potential results would end up in a greater enjoyment of making love.

Introduction

Song of Songs is one of the more mysterious books of the Hebrew Bible.¹ It is probably *the* book that gave rise to a 'plethora of interpretations' (Tanner 1997:23).² Tanner (1997:23) quotes Harrison (1969:1052), who writes that 'the absence of specifically religious themes' in combination with 'erotic lyrics'³ as well as 'the vagueness of any plot'⁴ provide 'limitless grounds for speculation'. This certainly would have contributed to the allegorical interpretation⁵ of the Song by both Jewish and Christian scholars throughout a large part of history.⁶ In recent times, the pendulum has swung back to a literal interpretation (cf. Tanner 1997:24; also Exum 2011:3).⁷ This option is verified in the following two paragraphs.

1.Linnemeyer (n.d.:21) refers to it as 'a frustrating book'.

2.The obvious existence of sexual love in the Song is the cradle of the variety of interpretation. In the Western Christian mentality, explicit insinuations about sexual love, even the repetitive detailed descriptions of the anatomy of the human body via similes and metaphors, are most embarrassing to be read in a book from the Bible (Fields 1980:221).

3.See also Ryan (2001:81, 101); Robinson (2004:12). For Sparks (2008:278, 284), Song of Songs is originally a wisdom composition of various love songs. These songs are edited to teach the youth of Jewish women aptness regarding matters of love and sex. Young (2001:81) also sees it as a 'love-poem'.

4.The arguments of Boer (2000:293–294), who suggests that Song of Songs 'is distinctly plotless', are convincing.

5.See Tanner (1997:23–46) for his analysis of The history of interpretation of the Song of Songs. See Garrett (1993:352–366) for a thorough analysis on the various interpretations of the Song in his commentary. Also see Ndogo and Viviers (2000:1290–1294).

6.The Jews at some stage in their history started to interpret Song of Songs as reflecting on the relationship between God and Israel; for the Christians reflecting on the relationship between Jesus and the Church as his bride. See also Ryan (2001:84–90).

7.Ryan (2001:81–104) introduced me here to Ricoeur (1993:294–295), who is of the opinion that the following two factors contribute to the current erotic interpretation of the Song: the growing expertise in historical and literary studies as well as the 'major cultural change'. He continues that '... [T]he search for the original meaning independent of any engagement on the part of the reader is not some atemporal, ahistorical attitude, but itself stems from a history of reading ... the triumph of the erotic sense, taken as self-evident, is itself a fact of reading, where the technical changes within the exegetical field and cultural changes affecting public discourse about sexuality reinforce each other' (Ricoeur 1993:294–295; also Ryan 2001:102). Myers (2011:145) refers to several features of erotic gaze in the Song.

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In his research on the *Early and Medieval Jewish interpretation of Song of Songs*, Fields (1980:231) convincingly points out that no documentation exists about the allegorisation of Song of Songs in the earliest period of Jewish history. The allegorical interpretation of the Song actually became the prevalent method of interpretation among the Jews only during the later periods to which Christianity conforms. Allegorical interpretation is absent in the 'LXX (Hebrew canon), Ben Sira, the book of Wisdom (of Solomon), Josephus, or 4 Ezra' (Fields 1980:231). For Fields (1980:231), the beginning of allegorisation started in the Talmud and continue with the Midrashim and Targumim and became the accepted method for interpreting Song of Songs. Fields then asserts that the earliest method of interpretation was not allegorical; it came only as a later development. Hence, there is no reason for any continuing allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs today.⁸ This has paved the way for literal interpretation of Song of Songs.

Currently, more scholars opt for a literal interpretation.⁹ Exum (2005:1; also Boersma 2011:80) describes the Song as:

a lyric poem¹⁰ about erotic love and sexual desire¹¹ – a poem in which the body is both object of desire and source of delight, and lovers engage in a continual game of seeking and finding in anticipation, enjoyment, and assurance of sensual gratification.¹² (p. 1)

DeClaissé-Walford (2008:392) refers to it as Hebrew poetry.¹³ This book informs the (original)¹⁴ readers what it is to be in love (1:13–14; 2:13–14; 4:9; 5:15–16; cf. Exum 2005:1). This is definitely not a story about two historical lovers but rather

8. See Tanner (1997:23–46) for his analysis of *The history of interpretation of the Song of Songs* (also Bergant 1994:25; Garrett 1993:352–366; Noga & Viviers 2000:1290–1294). Brenner (1993:265) criticises the traditional and modern pursuit of reading the Song allegorically. In her opinion, allegorical reading represents a secondary interpretation, definitely not supported by the text *per se*. See also Carr (2000:234–245) on the misinterpretation of Song of Songs and his reference (2000:235, 247) to the 'original erotic meaning' of the Song. See Davidson (1989:1–4) on the allegorical interpretation throughout many centuries.

9. See Brenner (1989), Tanner (1997), Exum (2005), Boersma (2011) to name a few.

10. Bergant (1994:25) refers to the 'general agreement about the erotic nature' of Song of Songs among scholars. See Murphy (<http://maranathalife.com/teach-of-cantares.htm>) for a list of sexual symbols in the Song. Boer (2000:296–297) refers to Song of Songs as a 'carnal allegory' and 'a vast sexual allegory'. He states that 'the text provides numerous metaphorical descriptions of and allusions to various sex acts' (see also For him 'the song spills out a whole vocabulary of sex ... kids (1:8), lie down (1:7), embrace (2:6; 8:2), hold (3:4), hold captive (7:6/5), stir up (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), awaken love (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), come (2:8; 4:16; 5:1), come up (3:6; 4:2; 8:5), arise (2:10, 13), lead and bring (8:2), knock (5:2), open (5:2, 5, 6; 7:13/12), bud and bloom (7:13/12), gather lilies (6:2), give forth fragrance (1:12), be sweet to my taste (2:3), feed (2:16; 4:5), eat fruit (4:16; see also 5:1), pour out (1:3), bathe feet (5:3), and thrust a hand into a hole (5:3)'). For me, Boer (2000:297) goes too far in his interpretation of the Song. I cannot agree with him in his perverse interpretation of some texts and seeing the Song as a 'poetic porn text'. This clearly shows that he does not understand the functions of these metaphors or the portrayal of sex as beauty and enjoyment. See the work of New Life Community Church (2001); cf. also Young (2001:80–96).

11. Brenner (1993:269) points out that different kinds of love occur in the Song: 'serious as well as light-hearted and humorous; different models of human love are drawn upon'.

12. Desire occurs throughout the Song: The Song opens with the woman's desire, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your lovemaking is better than wine' (1:2), 'draw' after him (1:4). In 1:7 she energetically 'seeks' him, 'seizing' him and/or 'bringing' him to her mother's house (3:4; 8:1–2). In the middle of the Song, the lover 'confesses' to being overwhelmed by one of the glances of the woman (Carr 2000:241).

13. This is supported by Longman (2001:48–49), Murphy (1979:436–443) and Fox (1985), who acknowledge that the Song originally consists of a diversity of poems and an editorial unity of these poems (see Sparks 2008:284).

14. References to readers are in particular to those Ancient Near East readers who were acquainted with the language used in the Song.

a thought about the 'never-endingness' (immortality) of love; a love that lives on (cf. Exum 2005:3).¹⁵ Throughout the song the lovers wish for one another without any description of explicit sexual incidents taking place, although such incidents are embedded in the text and implied.¹⁶ The woman wishes her lover to kiss her, 'let him kiss me' (1:2); 'If only you were my brother ... I would kiss you' (8:1). The lover takes the woman to the house of wine (2:4)¹⁷ and she takes him to the chamber of her mother (3:4). Nothing further is explicitly said about them having sex, though this is implied figuratively (Exum 2005:9) a number of times; see, for example, 4:10–5:1; 5:2–7.

Part of the purpose of this lengthy introduction is to communicate some fundamental and significant information to contextualise my research.¹⁸ I want to start with the question, 'Who are these lovers?'¹⁹ These lovers are portrayed to be *always present for one another* in the Song; 'they are always speaking or being spoken about' (Exum 2005:6). Fantasies seek to make what is absent immanent through language (thoughts). This constructs a lover as 'real' in the text (that is, to be present, for the reader) and grants them meaning. In Canticle 1:2, the woman in a sense creates her lover, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your caresses are better than wine'. She brings him into being, referring to 'him' and 'his mouth' as if he were absent. Then in the very next stanza she addresses him directly, '*your* anointing oils'. In this case the 'articulated desire' of the woman for her lover materialises when she brings him into being (cf. 2:8–3:5; 5:2–6:3) through fantasy (poetic imagination) (Exum 2005:7).

The lovers in the Song *celebrate the enjoyment of sexual love*. In erotic and sensual language, the two lovers exalt the beauty of each other (Davidson 1989:17). In the Song, the love of these two lovers for one another becomes apparent in how they explicitly, metaphorically and symbolically describe one another's body.²⁰ The woman describes the attractions of her lover as well as the enjoyment of their lovemaking in quite provocative language. For this woman her lover 'is comely and agile like a young stag – an animal renowned for his sexual competence' (2:8–9, 17; 8:14) (Bergant 1994:29).

15. Linnemeyer (n.d.:21) verifies this statement. For him, the book: 'ends on a very unsatisfying note, with the lovers yet again apart. It creates a cycle of itself, looping in and out of union and consummation, leaving the lovers forever unsettled, forever seeking, yet, at the same time, forever in the bliss of that dance. The challenges and labors of love don't stop when a couple comes together initially, and the Song of Songs reflect that well' (p. 21).

16. For Leitenberg and Henning (1995:469), sexual fantasies seem to be an 'important aspect of human sexuality'.

17. Landy (1980:68) points out that 'wine is a recurrent sexual metaphor'.

18. This article was presented as a paper at the International *Shir-ha-Shirim* Conference in Pretoria, at the University of South Africa, held on 31 August – 01 September 2016.

19. See my publication 'The woman in the Song of Songs' (2016) for a more detailed description of the woman in particular. See also Harding (2008:43–59) on 'The elusive lover in the Song of Songs'.

20. The use of metaphor through the text implies a unified composition of the Song of Songs (Boersma 2011:81; Exum 2005; Sparks 2008) even though the Song could have been composed from several other shorter songs (Boersma 2011:81). Brenner (1993:266–269) agrees on a unified structure, and perhaps also a unified plot. For her, a single principal idea is to be read simultaneously as text and subtext on a bi-level.

In the style of a *wasf*²¹ (cf. Falk 1982:125–135) the woman praises each part of the body of her lover from his thighs to his head (5:10–15). She communicates how some expensive aromas enhance the zeal of their passion (1:3, 12–14; 6:2). Three times, also in the style of a *wasf*, the lover describes the beauty and body of the woman. These sensuous images evoke both vibrant images and arouse desire (Bergant 1994:29). Nowhere in the Song is there any indication that these two lovers are married (Bergant 1994:32; also Brenner 1993:282; Sparks 2008:281).

The *various encounters* of the two lovers are sought and enjoyed by both of them.²² Bergant (1994:30) lists the venues of these encounters: cultivated orchards (2:3; 6:11; 8:5); gardens (4:16; 5:1; 6:2); vineyards (7:12); natural fertile settings (2:16; 6:3; 7:11) and enclosed chambers (2:4; 3:4; 5:2–6; 8:2; cf. Fox 1985:283–88 and Falk 1982:137–143).

The natural sites are pictured with fruit and presented with the possibility of endless fertility. The references to fertility have nothing to do with procreation, but with continuous sexual satisfaction. Bergant (1994:30) points out that the references to places (locations) where these encounters take place can be understood as having both a literal and figurative meaning. This enriches the Song in a style ‘that only multivalent language can boast’. In 3:4 the woman refers to the room in her mother’s house. She describes it as the place where her life began. We find here an allusion to newness which, according to Bergant (1994:31), is ‘also heavily laden with sexual significance’.

From the above discussion, it seems clear that each place of encounter is saturated with sexual connotations and meaning. It is always the woman who speaks about the site of the encounter. When the lover invites her, it is only to join him (2:10, 13; 4:8). He is preoccupied by her beauty (Bergant 1994:31).²³

Sexuality is also presented in the Song as wholesome, beautiful, good; something to be celebrated and enjoyed without any fear or embarrassment (Davidson 1989:16). The Song describes *sexuality as pleasurable*. The pleasure of sex is the concern of the poet.²⁴ Davidson (1989:16) writes,

21. A *wasf* is an Arabic term which can be translated as ‘description’. It is an ancient genre of poetry to describe the physical charms of a beloved. In the Song there are four *wasfs* (4:1–7; 5:9–16; 6:4–10; 7:2–6). Although these four bear resemblances to one another, no two of them are alike (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:262; also Myers 2011:139).

22. According to Brenner (1993:265), ‘love’ and ‘desire’ are the subject matter of Song of Songs. Fox (1985) and Carr (2000:242) assert that the two lovers depicted in the Song are unmarried teenagers. In accepting this statement by Fox, Brenner (1993:282) therefore proposes that unmarried love is indeed the theme.

23. The man uses different titles for complementing the woman he loves: ‘friend’ (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4), ‘bride’ (4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5:1), ‘sister’ (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1, 2), ‘dove’ (2:14; 5:2; 6:9); ‘perfect one’ (5:2; 6:9); ‘beautiful one’ (2:10, 13) and ‘noble daughter’ (7:2). For Bergant (1994:32), these are all pet names. They express the man’s affection for her. Even the women’s reference to the man expresses her love for him. She says: ‘your name is perfume poured out’ (1:3); ‘You whom my soul loves’ (1:7); ‘my love’ compared with a mare among Pharaoh’s chariots (1:9; also 1:13, 15 beauty).

24. Terminology throughout the Song insinuates the enjoyment of love (and sex): kiss, love better, perfume, rejoice, more than, beautiful, jewels, fragrance, delight, sweet, et cetera.

‘Lovemaking for the sake of love is ... the message of the Song’. The imaginative reader will find sex everywhere in the Song as is evident right from the introductory verses of the Song. The Song encourages reading for sexual meanings (see Fox 1985:298). The erotic is encoded everywhere in the text²⁵ and is only to be activated by the reader.²⁶

The God who created the universe(s) is present in the Song,²⁷ although this divine being is not explicitly referred to (Ryan 2001:83). The *love and concern of this being for people is present* as revealed in the relationships between the lovers.²⁸ This love and concern of God are clearly visible in the enjoyment and pleasure given by God to humans which the lovers find in each other. In harmony with the reference to God’s creation in Genesis, sexuality in the Song is part of the good creation of God (and it was *very* good, 1:31²⁹; Davidson 1989:17). The declaration of human sexual love implicitly affirms God’s love. Klisic (1997:126) states: ‘We see God in the partner and therefore we devote and adore the partner’.

In conclusion, Bergant (1994:32) is of the opinion that the couple has clearly already experienced the pleasures and glories of lovemaking. In 1:13, the woman says ‘he lies between my breasts’ and in 3:4 ‘I held him, and would not let him go’, in 8:5 ‘leaning upon her beloved’ and also in 8:5 ‘Under the apple tree I awakened (aroused) you’. The relationship between these two is one of mutual desire and complete enjoyment. For both of them, their commitments are only to each other. They have experienced some form of sexual union (2:16; 4:10–11; 5:2–6). Both also express their enjoyment and satisfaction that came from it (2:3; 4:10–11). This is both stated throughout the Song and implied by the metaphors of eating and drinking (1:2, 4; 2:3; 4:10–11; 4:16–5:1; 8:2). Thus, the poet emphasises the passionate union of these two lovers for the mutual enjoyment it promises.

This extensive introduction introduces not only the approach of interpretation (namely, literal), but also touches briefly on who this woman is and expresses a basic idea about how love is

25. See the work of New Life Community Church (2001); cf. also Young (2001:80–96).

26. Parallel to this erotic love, at another level in the text, contextual evidence suggests that a single woman offers four oaths to her friends. She warns them also about the dangers of love. She has already fallen in love, probably too quickly and too far. Now she pays the price for that. In order to shield her friends from such an error, she makes them swear ‘by the gazelles and the deer not to awaken or excite my feelings of love until it is ready’ (Sparks 2008:286). These are the words of a wise woman.

27. Ryan (2001:81–104) introduced me here to Ricoeur, who makes a crucial statement that has implications for the interpretation of the Song not being a matter of *either ... or*. He (1993:268) states that any reading should be ‘compatible with the obvious sense of the text as an erotic poem’. He also, correctly, suggests a more encompassing theme. He isolates marital imagery as even more central to the text of the Song. He regards one of the references to marital imagery as erotic love. But then Ricoeur makes another critical statement that, together with or even apart from the erotic, can additionally refer to the relational. He points out that because of the poetic nature of the Song as a poem, its indeterminate and metaphorical character resists easy identification of the Song. For Ricoeur, the lovers’ namelessness opens their identities to further interpretation (as divine or human) that can also ‘accommodate readings that emphasise the relational’ (Ryan 2001:102–103). For Ryan (2001:103) then, the two central themes in the Song are relationality and sensuality.

28. This feature could have led to the allegorical interpretation. The Song has been interpreted as pointing to the relationship between God and Israel (Jews) or Jesus and the Church (Christians).

29. Although I regard Genesis 1–11 not as real history, I respect these 11 chapters to indicate God’s involvement in the creation act.

pictured in the Song. The rest of this research concentrates on the spirituality of sex, facilitated by fantasy as embedded in the text. The title of the article starts with reference to 'sexual fantasy'. If we say *fantasy*, how should fantasy be understood and defined? Thus, in this research:

sexual fantasy refers to almost any mental imagery that is sexually arousing or erotic to the individual. The essential element of a deliberate sexual fantasy is the ability to control in imagination exactly what takes place. Even reminiscences of past events can be altered so that only particularly exciting aspects are recalled or enhanced. (Leitenberg & Henning 1995:470)³⁰

The application of *spirituality* in this research is to elicit the 'lived experiences' of these fantasies, not only with regard to the sensual, but also the 'lived experiences' of the love of God embodied in the intimate love of the two lovers.

To achieve this, I will rely partially on the work of Waaijman (2002) and Iser (1978). Waaijman (2002:742) asserts that readers shape the depiction of sacred texts in their imagination. They do this to participate effectively in the texts. For Iser (1978:131), '[t]his involvement, or entanglement, is what places us in the "presentness" of the text and what makes the text into a presence for us'. In other words, readers are drawn into the world of the texts, and the texts are drawn into the world of the readers (Waaijman 2002:744). This involvement in texts signifies that the serious or contemplative reading of biblical texts produce various kinds of spiritualities, both of the text and of the divine. These various spiritualities critically depend on the content the text communicates (about the divine) and also on who is reading the text.

The rest of this article will focus on mechanisms employed by the poet, firstly, to draw readers into the text to get them involved and, secondly, to facilitate spiritualities and even the intensity of these spiritualities in fantasies. I will focus first on *the entanglement of the reader in the text* (Iser 1978:131), then on two effects that Waaijman (2002:744) discusses through which spiritualities embedded in texts are constituted: *the dynamic interaction between text and reader in the reading process* and *the imaginative composition of images*. This research will also investigate how human senses intensify the lived experiences (spiritualities) of fantasies and conclude with how emotions in fantasies can intensify spiritualities. These effects help to make sense of texts and to determine some of the lived experiences evoked when these texts are contemplatively read.³¹

30. Leitenberg and Henning (1995:470) define fantasy as 'an act of the imagination ...'. They refer to Wilson (1978), who sees sexual fantasies as elaborate stories or even fleeting thoughts 'of some romantic or sexual activity'. For them (Leitenberg & Henning 1995:469), fantasies 'can be about anything – escape to beautiful places, money, revenge, fame – but probably the most intriguing if not most common fantasies concern romance and sex'. For them it is a maxim that the 'brain is at least as important a sexual organ as one's genitals' (Leitenberg & Henning 1995:469). Davidson and Hoffman (1986:185) define fantasy 'as a conscious attempt to engage in a play of the mind utilizing mental images which relate to and/or possess sexual content. A creative process is involved in the direct flow of these mental images and ideational material which usually becomes united by a common theme to produce fantasy such as a previous sexual experience'.

31. See the publications of Van der Merwe (2014, 2015a) where I apply these effects that generate spiritualities when reading ancient texts to the epistle of 1 John.

The entanglement of readers in texts and fantasies

In this section, I want to point out how the poet succeeds in getting the readers involved in the text, the erotic events and fantasies described in the Song. The following three features emerge from the text: namelessness, timelessness and placelessness of the lovers, the illusion of immediacy and the involvement in dialogue and conversations.

In the Song, we meet two lovers who are *nameless*. Nothing is said about their place and the time in which they live. The only two definite references we have are King Solomon and the capital city of Palestine, Jerusalem. The two lovers in the Song are archetypal lovers.³² They are presented by the poet as 'types of lovers' (Exum 2005:8). They are diversified figures. The male is a 'king' (1:12) and a 'shepherd' (1:7), while the woman is a member of the 'royal court'; in one case she 'cares for vineyards' (1:6) and in another 'follow[s] the tracks of the flock' (1:8). She is black (1:5) and she is 'fair as the moon, bright as the sun' (6:10) (Exum 2005:8). Thus the readers can identify with the lovers because they are nameless. This helps the readers to relate even more easily to the events of the lovers, their descriptions of one another and their sexual fantasies.³³

The love of these readers is also presented by the poet as *timeless and placeless*. For Exum (2005:9), this facilitates comparisons of the readers' love experiences with those of the lovers in the Song. Sometimes these lovers appear to be young lovers, sometimes experienced lovers. Sometimes they appear as if they are courting, and sometimes the lovers are pictured to be experienced and knowledgeable or acquainted in the virtuosity of love. In portraying evolving love, the poet succeeds in capturing a sense of excitement and enjoyment of being in love as though experiencing it for the first time, experiencing it to be young again (Exum 2005:9). This presentation accommodates all lovers who read the Song and stimulates their erotic fantasies. The timelessness and placelessness enable the reader the freedom to let their own fantasies become unrestricted.

In her commentary on the Song, Exum (2005:4) also points out that a reader will experience an *illusion of immediacy*; the action described in the text unfolds before the reader, it is taking place in the present, here and now while reading the text. The reader is presented with a concrete vision of love; the concrete picture shows us what lovers do and say to one another (Exum 2014:4). The enjoyment is now.

This love poetry is a *dialogue* between a woman and a man (sometimes between the woman and the women of Jerusalem). Exum (2005:5) reasons that these two lovers are captured in this poetic language as 'on the brink of attaining

32. See the magnificent articles on archetypal metaphors by Osborn (1967:115–126) and Adams (1983:56–61). Osborn introduces these in his general discussion about what the metaphors comprise, while Adams applies them, in particular, to the family (family as an archetype metaphor).

33. See also Ricoeur (1993:268) on namelessness in the Song. For him, their namelessness opens their identities to further interpretation.

their bliss'. A dialectic occurs between wishing and having, longing and fulfilment. Throughout the Song, the lovers are on the brink of experiencing their pleasure. When reading the text, the reader becomes involved in the dialogue. The poet draws the reader into the text. This is also evident in the woman's *conversations* with an audience. Through these conversations, she engages the reader with the private erotic intimacy of the lovers. This audience in the text is the *women of Jerusalem* who are sometimes addressed directly (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10–11; 5:8, 16; 8:4). In some texts, they even speak (5:1, 9; 6:1; 8:5; cf. also 1:8; 6:13). The invitation extended to the women of Jerusalem to share in the enjoyment of the lovers is also an offer to the reader (Exum 2005:7).

In conclusion, it can be said that in the Song three features occur to invite the reader into the text and the text into the reader, to become a lover too and become entangled in the events in the Song: the namelessness of the two protagonists, the illusions of timelessness, placelessness and immediacy that things are happening now and everywhere and, finally, the dialogue between the lovers and the conversations between the woman and the audience (daughters of Jerusalem) (Exum 2005:7). Fantasies become the playground.

Strategies used by the poet to create immediacy and the presence of events to get the reader involved in these events will now be discussed.

The dynamic interaction between text and reader

The following informal strategies, which also facilitate spiritualities, are intentionally or even unintentionally used by the poet in the Song to generate dynamic interactions between the reader and the text. The events described in the Song happen now while the reader is reading the text:

Erotic imperatives (grammatical imperatives; jussives³⁴ and cohortatives³⁵) provide urgency to the moment (Exum 2005:5; also cf. Carr 2000:240). The Song opens with an erotic imperative ('let him kiss me', 1:2) and closes with it ('take flight ... be like a gazelle or young deer', 8:14). These imperatives also occur throughout the text: 'draw me after you', 'let us run' (1:4), 'tell me' (1:7), 'rise up', 'come away' (2:10, 13), 'turn my lover' (2:17), 'open to me' (5:21), 'let me hear' (2:14; 8:13). Finally, the climactic affirmation of love in 8:6–7 is founded in the erotic imperative, 'place me like a seal on your heart, for love is strong as death'. (Exum 2005:5)

Vocatives intensify the presence of the lovers when words of endearment are spoken: 'my darling' (1:9, 15; 4:1; 6:4), 'my lover' (1:16; 2:17), 'my beloved' (2:14), 'my sister, my bride' (4:9, 10, 12; also cf. 4:8, 11; 5:1), 'my dove, my perfect one' (5:2; 6:9), 'most beautiful of women' (1:8; 5:9; 6:1; Exum 2005:5).

Even *participles* capture the present moment: 'Here he comes jumping, across the mountains, skipping over the hills' (2:8), '(he is) standing' (5:15), '(he is) knocking' (5:2). The activities

34: 'a word, form, case, or mood expressing command' (Merriam Webster:online).

35: 'a set of verb forms expressing exhortation' (Merriam Webster: online).

of the lovers as they engage one another in time and space (2:8–9; 5:2). The fantasy entails the reader watching along with the speaker (woman or lover) (Exum 2005:5).

With regard to *metaphors*, Exum (2005:17) makes the following excellent statement: 'Lovers love with their eyes, and often they rely on metaphor³⁶ to describe what they see'. According to Falk (1982:130–131; also Fox 1985:272–277), the metaphoric images used to describe the different body parts are directed to convey certain aspects of each body part. For the early readers, these metaphors would have made sense. Unfortunately, the precise meaning of some of these images is not certain to us today. Exum (2005:19) points out that words and images 'are never simply denotative, and in poetry they are excessively connotative'. In this, the pleasure of the reader lies. These metaphors are applied to trigger the imagination of the reader and also to nurture 'love as desire and gratification' (cf. Exum 2005:19).

In conclusion, through these stylistic features (erotic imperatives, vocatives, participles, metaphors and ambiguous texts), the poet succeeds in drawing the readers into the text and the text into the readers. The readers become part of the text and subsequently involved in the events and experiences described in the text, to simulate the lived experiences (spiritualities) in their own erotic fantasies.

The composition of images and the lived experiences of fantasies

When literary texts are read, the imagination of the readers composes images of the presentations in the text. The readers subjectively and selectively compose '... images out of the multifarious aspects of the text' as well as the metaphors that appear in the text (cf. Iser 1978:150; Van der Merwe 2015:86). The existential images, physical objects, attitudes and virtual events described in texts are usually imaginatively experienced. The reading process then assists the fusion between the meaning of a text and the experience of the text in the minds of the readers. This entails a connection between the text and the readers (Iser 1978:150). At this point, various perspectives of segments of the text (canticles) start to relate, to make sense and actualise in relation to and in comparison with preceding parts. In such a reading activity, readers create a succession of these images in their minds. The successive images again increasingly constitute a certain construction to generate both a field of meaning and experience (Iser 1978:108–118). Such a construction is then interpreted, understood and applied in the lives of the readers (see Van der Merwe 2015:86 for an application).

The lover *pictures the body parts* of the woman three times in the Song via *wasfs* (4:1–7, 10–15; 6:4–10; 7:1–6). He describes her from her head downwards (4:1–5; 6:4–7) and also from

36. Colman (2005) makes an invaluable contribution in his reference to the value of metaphor. He says: 'We do not judge a metaphor in terms of whether it is 'correct'; far less do we expect things to be represented by only one metaphor. Metaphors are to be judged by whether they are apposite and illuminating' (p. 658).

her feet to her head (7:1–5). He also describes in an erotic extended metaphor her body as a pleasure garden in 4:10–15. Only once, in 5:10–15, does the woman describe the body of her lover in an equivalent manner. Throughout the Song, it becomes apparent that part of the capturing of love is the mutual pleasure in visualising and fantasising the body of the one that she loves³⁷ (Exum 2005:20). These lovers delight themselves in the body of the other. Each one describes the beloved one by analysing the body of the other one in an effort to know the other's body. They invest each part of the body with so much meaning through metaphors, allusions, symbols, hyperbole and similes, not only to express the ultimate quality of that body part (cf. Exum 2005:21), but also to experience that person existentially and intensely.

A game the lovers play in the Song is that of *appearance and disappearance*. Through words the lovers materialise or dematerialise. The man creates the woman in his detailed metaphoric description until she materialises in the mind of the reader (*wasf*, 4:1–5, 10–15; 6:4–10; 7:1–6). The woman also metaphorically creates her lover to let him disappear in order to create him again³⁸ (2:8–17; 3:1–5; 3:6–11; 5:2–6:3). She goes even further and lets him speak. She imagines the contents of his speech. In 5:2–6:3 she creates him begging entry to her chamber. Then she lets him disappear quickly. From then on, via metaphors she describes his body in prolific detail to the women in Jerusalem (see also 3:6–11; Exum 2005:6).

In the erotic love described in the Song, *beauty* plays a critical and imperative role. The description of the woman by her lover comes from his dialogue with the woman and when he replies to her questions. As early as his first words to the woman (1:5) he refers to her as beautiful (cf. also 2:10, 13; 4:1, 7; 6:4, 10; 7:7) and also describes her as the fairest among women (1:8; also 5:9; 6:1). Even the 'daughters of Jerusalem' call her 'the most beautiful among women' (5:6). A detailed reading of the Song pictures the woman as astonishing.³⁹ There is no other woman like this woman (2:2; 6:8–10); her beauty is simply immaculate (4:7).⁴⁰ Her eyes have mesmerised her lover (4:9; 6:5). Every part of her body is gorgeous (4:1–5; 6:5–7; 7:2–6; also 7:8–10) and her voice is sweet to the ear (2:14). The lover compares this woman to a garden. She is accessible only to him and no one else (4:12–15; 5:1).

For Bergant (1994:29), this lover refers to a man 'who has been smitten by love'. Bergant, in agreement with Exum and Brenner, asserts that the lover's interest in the woman is certainly erotic. She also finds no indication by the lover that he desires her selfishly for his own pleasure. She interprets

37. Exum (2005:21) states that the woman: 'draws on images of hardness and solidity, as well as value. To describe the firm muscular body she treasures; rods of gold for his hands, an ivory bar for his torso, marble pillars on gold pedestals for his legs. The man favors nature imagery and images of tasty delicacies to be consumed to picture her as a bountiful source of erotic pleasures ... But the woman enjoys the man's body too: the sweet taste of his fruit (2:3), the scent of his face (5:13), the taste of his kisses' (5:13, 16).

38. See Exum (2005:6–7) and Harding (2008:58).

39. See Van der Merwe (2015b) for a more detailed description of the identity and character of the woman.

40. For Brenner (1993:275), beauty is the core metaphor of the Song.

the desire as mutual, seeking mutual fulfilment (1994:29). Brenner (1993:267) argues that the 'climactic sexual intercourse' of the Song is posited at its very centre (4:9–5:1).

In allowing the linear line of sex, fantasy and spirituality to make sense, I want to concentrate for a moment on the occurrence of beauty in the Song, in particular in Cantic 4:1–7 which is presented in the form of a *wasf*, in which a multitude of metaphors and similes have been used. The structure of this *wasf* is divided into two symmetrical parts (4:1b–2 and 3–4).⁴¹ In the first section the head of the woman is the focal point: 'your eyes', 'your hair' and 'your teeth'. All three metaphors used to describe the perfection of these body parts are drawn from the domesticated animal world: 'doves', 'goats' and 'sheep'. In the second section, the similes are all preceded by the preposition 'like' or 'as': 'like a scarlet thread', 'like a slit of pomegranate' and 'like the tower of David'. These similes refer to products of the Israelite culture: textiles, fruits, architecture (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:262).

In this *wasf* the lover announces the absolute beauty of the woman he loves. The *wasf* starts and ends with the lover's astonishment at the exquisite beauty of this woman. In 4:1 it starts, 'How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful'. The *wasf* then culminates in 4:5 with the lover's appreciation of his beloved's breasts. Here her breasts are compared to playful gazelles. In 4:7 the *wasf* ends with, 'You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you'. This slight change at the beginning of the line with the insertion of 'altogether' is 'intended to [*be used*] as a collective metonym for the beauty of the woman's entire self – body, mind, soul' (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:262).

Through the repetition of certain words and metaphors, the particularity of this woman is made visible to the reader. Various metaphors like doves, goats, sheep, pomegranates, towers and gazelles are used to evoke images of the woman's eyes, hair, teeth, brow, neck and breasts. They occur repeatedly in the Song in connection with the woman (1:15; 4:1b, c, 2, 3b, 4; 6:5, 6, 7; 7:4, 5). The lover's chief pet name for this woman is 'my love', which occurs nine times in the Song (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4). The 'beauty' of the woman is referred to 12 times on different occasions (1:8, 15 [2x]; 2:10, 13; 4:1 [2x], 7; 5:9; 6:1, 4, 10) (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:265).

Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:265) interprets and understands the beauty portrayed in the Song as beauty 'that always comes embodied in particularity and specificity; it is always individuated and site specific'. According to him, we can 'only know beauty as it is given at specific sites'. He then compares it with wine that comes in many different varieties and in:

multiple delights, each with its own accent and peculiar appeal. In fact, there may be no better model for an individuated and particularised beauty than the human body, which ... refuses to be confined to a single type or shape ... The beauty of a person is a beauty singular and many-faced. (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:265)

41. Each part consists of four couplets. The first three of each part are similes and the last one is more elaborate than the previous one.

To find beauty pleasurable relates to the emotional and cognitive goods it prompts (cf. Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:276) in the fantasies of the reader.

The culmination of the woman's beauty is described in 6:10: She is as 'fair as the moon, as bright as the sun'. This is a powerful combination of the sun and moon. They are the rulers (brightness) of day and night in her person. For Landy (1980:70), with this comparison, the woman transcends society. She has now become a cosmic figure.

In conclusion, it can be agreed that 'beauty' plays a critical and fundamental role throughout the Song which the poet has captured in many metaphors and similes. The extreme beauty of the lovers stimulates the desires, the intensity of the fantasies or spiritualities and the (erotic) love between the two lovers. The intense and overwhelming beauty contributes to the enjoyment of this erotic love and of one another. This beauty also has its effect on the erotic fantasies of the reader.

Senses and the lived experiences of fantasies

This section concentrates on the senses.⁴² The poet makes use of all the human senses to encompass reality and to stimulate 'spiritualities' in the erotic fantasies of the lovers as well as of the readers. References are made to all the senses in the Song: sight (1:6, 9; 2:14; 4:9; 5:5; 7:1–6); hearing (2:14; 5:2; 8:13); touch (1:2; 2:4, 6; 7:9); taste (2:3; 4:16; 7:9; 8:3); smell (1:3; 7:13). In this research, I attend only to the *smell and taste senses* because of their high frequency of occurrence throughout the Song.

According to the above discussion of beauty, it becomes clear that in fantasy there is no limit in creating the most beautiful sex objects (cf. Leitenberg & Henning 1995:469). They can differ in each fantasy, which create new spiritualities every time. But fantasies and consequential-related spiritualities that emanate from fantasies can become even more intense. This becomes evident in the Song in the crucial role of the two senses of taste and smell.

In the Song, visual (to a lesser extent aural) imagery is used to provoke the erotic.⁴³ Actually, throughout the Song, the two lovers evoke the smell and tastes of fruit, spices and oils when they describe each other and their lovemaking. When one of these two lovers describes the other and the description moves towards erogenous areas of the body, a shift takes place from visual images to the senses of smell and taste. In a similar way, when they describe actions, smell and taste references allow the reader to infer that the text refers to sexual activities (Boersma 2011:81).

Boersma (2011:82) reasons that the poet chose the senses of taste and smell because these two senses 'are perhaps the

42. In this section I rely extensively on the excellent article of Boersma (2011:80–94).

43. This is, according to Boersma (2011:30), a common phenomenon in modern culture.

most intimate of the five major human senses'. In contrast to sight and sound, which perceive things from a distance, and touch, which requires contact (not necessarily intimate), smell and taste 'require taking of something into our bodies in order to experience the sensation' (Boersma 2011:82). This imagery transports the reader into the act of lovemaking, engaging the reader's fantasy of smell and taste (nose and tongue). With the high frequency of references to these two senses in the Song, the poet 'wants to play with the actions rather than offering a mere description of the physical contact involved' (Boersma 2011:82).

These two senses (smell and taste) are referred to in the Song in 1:12–14; 2:3–4, 13; 3:6–11;⁴⁴ 4:1–6, 10–11, 13–14, 16; 5:1, 2–8, 13, 16; (6:2–3); 7:3, 8–10, 13–14; (8:2, 14). In these texts, it seems that when taste and smell are induced, it is to refer to sexual organs, kissing, or other sexual actions and images. Although the senses (taste and smell) do not have a sexual connection in 5:2–8, they have other sexual references,⁴⁵ which will now be pointed out. At the end of Cantic 4 (4:16), the woman calls the North and South winds to blow the evidence of her arousal to her lover ('Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad' – to her beloved) (cf. Boersma 2011:92). In Cantic 5:1, her lover admits his sexual desires and this introduces a new section (5:2–8) where, at a deeper metaphoric level, sexual intercourse is described.

The events in this section begin in 5:2a, 'I slept, but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking'. These words imply a dream or a conscious fantasy (Walsh 2000:111–114). They further imply that the woman is not hearing her lover. She imagines or fantasising him saying, 'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night' (5:2b). She is fantasising her lover to be at her door. He entreats her to let him in. In the next moment she improvises some questions in her mind: 'I had put off my garment; how could I put it on again? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them?' (5:3). She is naked and alone in bed. She fantasises about her lover and imagines that she feels him touching her with his hands, 'My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him' (5:4) (Boersma 2011:92). As the fantasy develops she experiences as a reality how he touches her. In her mind his hand or fingers penetrate her, 'I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt' (5:5).

These words again have an aromatic connotation. The myrrh is, in particular, a liquid myrrh. The previous cantic refers to the woman feeling a hand upon (also in) herself. Boersma (2011:93) is of the opinion that this is not the

44. According to Boersma (2011:89), the senses evoked in 3:6–11 (procession) and 5:2–8 (night scene) are less obviously sexual, although at a deeper level (metaphorically) both texts can be interpreted as dealing with a sexual experience.

45. The night time scene in 5:2–8 has been interpreted by some scholars in a purely literal sense as a woman in bed hearing her lover (Carr 2003:125), by others as a dream (Carr 2003:168–171), as metaphors for longing (Falk 1982:94–95), or just a single understanding (Bloch & Bloch 1995:180–183 cited by Boersma 2011:92).

hand of her lover, but rather her own hand. Why? Because it is a fantasy. Through and in the fantasy she has aroused herself, bringing herself to orgasm – her body, she herself is moaning for her lover. In Canticle 5:5, still fantasising, she stands up and goes to the door, while her hands are damp with her own ‘myrrh’. Then metaphorically the poet informs the reader how this beautiful woman comes out of the fantasy, only to realise that her lover is not present. Then reality replaces fantasy and she finds herself alone. In this section the use of smell and taste for erotic images occurs consistently⁴⁶ (Boersma 2011:93).

In conclusion, throughout the Song the two senses of smell and taste are consistently used as metaphors for sex. When a scene or description, as in 5:2–7, moves towards sexuality, it swings from visual images to the senses of taste and smell (Boersma 2011:94), which makes the spiritualities in the sexual fantasies so much more intense.

Lived experiences through emotions

In contrast to the Egyptian love songs, which seem to be monologues according to Fox (1983:219–221), the Song of Songs is ‘true dialogue’ all the way through. The two lovers, speak mostly to each other, ‘often in an exchange whose rapidity suggests the excitement of their love’ (Fox 1983:21). Through such dialogue they influence one another. Their dialogue consists of speaking and sometimes immediate responses. The poet of the Song elevates the ‘interaction of the lovers’ by establishing a mutuality in their communication. She makes ‘the words of the one lover echo the words of the other’ (Fox 1983:221). These echoes are sometimes found next to one another and sometimes later in the Song (1:15–16; 2:10; 2:12–13; 2:15–16; 7:7; 7:12). In 1:15–16, such echoing occurs immediately. The lover says, ‘Ah you are beautiful, my love; ah you are beautiful; your eyes are doves’. Then immediately the woman responds nearly verbatim, ‘Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely. Our couch is green’. Then a few canticles later (2:2–3a) exactly the same happens. The lover says, ‘As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens’. Then immediately in a similar vein the woman praises him, ‘As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens’. In 2:15 again, we find such a parallel:

Man: *My darling, you are beautiful!* Oh, you are beautiful, ...
 Woman: You are so handsome, *my lover*, ... and so pleasant!

This echoing is further substantiated by the two statements made by the woman about their love relationship: ‘*My beloved is mine* and *I am his*’ (2:16); ‘*I am my beloved’s* and *my beloved is mine*’ (6:3).

This chiasmic structure in both these references emphasises their unity and mutuality and heightens their emotions.

⁴⁶ Here the lover intends to enter and consummate their love. This passage is interpreted by some scholars (Bergant 1994:31; Fox 1985:310–315; Pope 1995: 4–6) as describing coitus. In this part of the text, the lover is referred to as having immediate access to the room of his beloved. Literally, the text could refer to an actual room or figuratively to her genitalia. The interpretation of the text is problematised by the delay of the woman in opening for him to enter (her or the room?).

Because of the high frequency repetition of this echoing in the Song, the poet probably intentionally tries to evoke certain emotions, not only in the two protagonists in the Song but also in the readers, to cause certain lived experiences of unity with their partners in their fantasies. As a result of this, Fox (1983:228) understands love in the Songs not as ‘a composite of two principles, feminine sexuality and masculine sexuality’. These two lovers are one in quality and intensity. There is no kind of pleading or aggression from the man and an unyielding or bashful woman who has to be enticed into compliance:

Each lover invites the other to come away, each goes out to find the other, each knows moments of hesitation, each desires the culmination of their love as intensely as the other. This egalitarianism reflects a metaphysics of love rather than a social reality or even a social ideal. There is only one sexuality, one eros, and this pervades the universe projected by the lovers’ imagery. (Fox 1983:228)

Conclusion

Historically-oriented scholars are unanimous that Song of Songs revolves around *love, actually ‘the enjoyment of love’*. Within this environment of love, three complementary and crucial aspects in sexual fantasies receive extensive attention, namely *enjoyment, beauty* and *detail*.

This research has proven how a literary text can facilitate sexual fantasies and spiritualities to be further exploited by readers to enrich their own sexual fantasies and spiritualities. For Christian believers, these spiritualities should resonate with another spirituality embedded in the text of Song of Songs. This spirituality is an experience of the beauty (body), joy and pleasure (body and orgasm) of sexual love, seeing these as part of the exquisite creation of God. Giving all the honour to this divine being (is not this probably the reason why Song of Songs is part of the canon or why it has also been interpreted allegorically?) the divine love lies embedded in a deeper level of the text. This interpretation can be verified by the numerous descriptions of the beautiful bodies of the two lovers as well as the rich metaphoric descriptions of love.

The Song ‘plays with its readers. In nearly every line, the poetry parallels earlier images in the book, weaving together each theme and motif until they’re practically inseparable’ (Linnemeyer n.d.:22). Metaphors, allusions, similes, symbols and hyperbole are used so that the different readers can add their own sexual experiences and even their own *improvised* sexual experiences into their fantasies.

Fantasies of enjoyment have been created which evoke in different readers varieties of sexual spiritualities. Different mechanisms have been used intentionally or unintentionally by the poet to stimulate, during the reading of the Song, the reader’s own fantasies on making love. The first two researched mechanisms (entanglement and dynamic interaction) draw the readers into the text, and the other mechanisms (images, senses and emotion) involve the readers in the text to exploit the unity and interaction between

the lovers as lived experiences in their own fantasies. Did I enjoy reading Song of Songs? No, I did not! The Song did not make sense to me, even after I read through it five times. It was only when I investigated it and read the numerous superb publications on the Song that it became interesting and I became excited about what I had learned and experienced from it.

Fantasies about sex can become much more enjoyable and more existential lived experiences by picturing the lover as extremely beautiful or attractive, picturing varieties of places in sexual encounters, the absolute detailed picturing of the different parts of the body (wasf); the repetition and even variations or elaborations of the same fantasies (see the wasfs), the involvement of all the senses in sexual fantasies, and finally the involvement of emotion. All these mechanisms make erotic fantasies not just existential, but existential lived experiences.

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