

Izvirni znanstveni članek/Article (1.01)

*Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 81 (2021) 3, 641—653

Besedilo prejeto/Received:06/2021; sprejeto/Accepted:07/2021

UDK/UDC: 27-277-243.67

DOI: 10.34291/BV2021/03/Avsenik

© 2021 Avsenik Nabergoj, CC BY 4.0

*Irena Avsenik Nabergoj*

## **The Semantics of Love in the Song of Songs and Directions of Its Interpretation<sup>1</sup>**

### *Semantika ljubezni v Visoki pesmi in smeri njene interpretacije*

*Abstract:* The literary structure of the Song of Songs shows a thematic and contextual unity that is founded on the literary structure of the dialogue between the young man and the young woman. This article focuses on poetic dialogue as the two young lovers use metaphors and other literary forms to express their longing and desire for each other. In assessing the literary structure of the Song of Songs, the specific focus is on words expressing love in the original Hebrew text and the Greek and Latin translations (Septuagint and Vulgate) – that is, the two translations that most comprehensively influenced the interpretation of the Song of Songs in Judaism and Christianity. The extensive range of interpretative directions regarding the Song of Songs and the erotic and spiritual dimensions of love allows us to pay greater attention to complementary rather than exclusive aspects. Paying greater attention to approaches that seek aspects of complementarity between erotic and spiritual love allows us to make both a more appropriate assessment of comparative analyses of the Song of Songs concerning the tradition of love poetry in the cultures of the ancient Middle East and to make a more reliable assessment of recent applications of the principle of close reading of individual texts in their literary structures. The complementarity principles and close reading are open to textual and intertextual relationships in the comparative analysis of texts from the same and different cultural and religious frameworks. The full range of textual and intertextual relationships allows for a more reliable assessment of the possibilities and limits of integrative approaches.

*Keywords:* Song of Songs, love, dialogue, emotion, metaphors, unity of the song, directions of interpretation, close reading

*Povzetek:* Literarna struktura Visoke pesmi prikazuje tematsko in kontekstualno enotnost, ki temelji na literarni strukturi dialoga med mladeničem in mladenko.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written as a result of work within the research program P6-0262, which was co-funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

V prispevku se osredotočam na pesniško obliko dialoga med njima z množtvom metafor in drugih literarnih oblik, s katerimi mladenič in mladenka drug drugemu izrekata svoje hrepenenje in ljubezensko željo. V presoji literarne strukture Visoke pesmi se še posebej osredotočam na rabo besed za izražanje ljubezni v izvornem hebrejskem besedilu in v grškem ter latinskem prevodu (Septuaginta in Vulgata), ki sta najbolj vsestransko vplivala na interpretacijo Visoke pesmi v judovstvu in krščanstvu. Izjemno velik obseg smeri interpretacije Visoke pesmi v zgodovini judovstva in krščanstva v razponu med erotično in duhovno razsežnostjo ljubezni nam omogoča izostritev čuta za večjo pozornost na vidike, ki so komplementarni, ne izključujoči. Večja pozornost na pristope, ki iščejo vidike komplementarnosti med erotično in duhovno ljubeznijo nam omogoča bolj ustrezno presojo primerjalnih analiz Visoke pesmi v razmerju do izročila ljubezenske lirike v kulturah starega Bližnjega vzhoda in bolj zanesljivo vrednotenje novjših aplikacij načela natančnega branja (*close reading*) posameznih besedil v njihovi literarni strukturi. Načeli komplementarnosti in natančnega branja sta odprti za tekstualna in intertekstualna razmerja v primerjalni analizi besedil iz istih in različnih kulturnih in religioznih okvirov. Celoten razpon tekstualnih in intertekstualnih razmerij omogoča bolj zanesljivo presojo možnosti in meje integrativnih pristopov.

*Ključne besede:* Visoka pesem, ljubezen, dialog, čustvo, metafore, enotnost pesmi, smeri interpretacije, natančno branje, semantična analiza

## 1. Introduction

In its content and form, the Song of Songs is a unique biblical work. In simple, sensual and passionate language, it praises love. Love is portrayed in the many aspects of its reality – aspects that encompass yearning, invitation, fulfilment, distancing, and perpetual searching. Because of its enormous metaphorical potential, the poetic form of a song naturally conveys emotional experience in a way that touches one more deeply than any other genre. The eight poems of the Song of Songs poetic cycle are composed mainly as a dialogue between two lovers, intermittently joined by a chorus of the women of Jerusalem. The lovers express mutual praise and longing, proffering invitations to enjoyment. We are attentive to the specific literary tools the Song of Songs employs to achieve dramatic effects ranging from the emotional peaks of elation and bliss to their dark counterpoints in the doubts and anxieties of the mutually pursued love relationship.

The Song of Songs uses rich imagery loaded with symbolism and wordplay to communicate intimate feelings and inclinations. Full of passion and longing, love and sadness, the Song uses a simple form of a dialogue between lover and beloved as they trade refined expressions of love. The picturesque style of the Song is rich in metaphors taken from nature (2:8-17; 7:11-13). The imagery pertaining to plants, fruits, products of the field and animals, which showcase the original-

ity of the song, reveal the magnificence of the natural world and resonate with a genuine sense for nature's beauty. The words, selected from literary tradition, derive from common experience and have an intrinsic relation to the objects they designate. The alternation of nearness and distance and the metaphors of admiration of the lovers intensify the moments of mutual dedication.

Any attempt to interpret this unique poem means confronting a distinctly lyrical poetic representation of an intense love dialogue between a young man and a young woman. Ambiguous or indefinite vocabulary is used to express the love relationship between them; this openness is further complicated by the extensive intertextual relationships of love within the Old and New Testaments and extra-biblical sources, as well as by the impenetrably rich history of interpretation in Judaism and Christianity. Since the nature of love does not allow for one-sided definitions but rather encourages us to tap into the breadth and depth of the experience of love in its complementarity and wholeness, no one approach can capture all the potentials of addressing this topic. As a result, most interpreters opt to focus on selected aspects when interpreting this poem, with the inevitable consequence that their interpretations do not cover the totality of the issues that interest most readers. The basic aim of this article is to address the fundamental and ever-present question of the complementary relationship between the traditions of erotic and spiritual love, which have been strongly influenced by allegorical approaches in the history of interpretation.

## 2. The Love Theme and the Technique of Dialogue

There is something impressionistic and elusive about the language of love in the Song of Songs. The man and the woman long for each other, praise each other and seek each other. They are constantly wrapped in a numinous, theomorphic aura. The basic dialogic form guarantees the unity and inner coherence of the poems. Content and form allow this more or less reliable structure:

- 1:2-6 the introduction, expressing the bride's longing;
- 1:7-2:7 a dialogue between the bride and the bridegroom;
- 2:7-17 the bride describes a visit from the bridegroom and his invitation for her to respond to him;
- 3:1-5 the bride describes seeking her lover to the 'daughters of Jerusalem';
- 3:6-11 a description of a wedding procession;
- 4:1-5:1 the bridegroom praises the beauty of the bride;
- 5:2-6:4 a dialogue between the woman and the 'daughters of Jerusalem';
- 6:5-12 the bridegroom admires the bride;
- 7:1-8:4 the bridegroom admires the beauty of the bride;
- 8:5-14 separate units: lines 5:6-7,8-10,11-12,13-14.

The effect of the dialogue between the lover and the beloved, which progresses in a relationship of seeking, has been noticed by many interpreters, one of the

most famous being Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In his *West-östlicher Divan*, he speaks of Hebrew literature (1998, 28–129) and comments thus on the Song: »And still the central theme continues to be the glowing attraction of youthful hearts, which search out and find one another, both rebuff and allure, under all sorts of quite simple conditions.« In more recent times, the Song has raised many questions among theologians, literary theorists, philosophers, intellectual historians and psychologists concerning the ‚ontology of love‘ and designating the supreme act of the person: Is love presented in the Song of Songs as a human fiction or as objective truth? Is love apprehended by reason, or is it a feeling that reason cannot describe?

Roland E. Murphy, in his article „The Unity of the Song of Songs“ (1979), analyses the repetition of themes and refrains in the Song of Songs, noting, among other things, that »the man and the woman never tire of saying the same things to each other: how beautiful the other is, personal longing, trysts in the garden and other idyllic places, narratives of visits—all the typical love experiences. This is held together by dialogue and even by what one might call dramatic articulation.« (Murphy 1979, 442) Murphy argues: »What needs to be recognized here is the evidence of the dramatic presentation of love experiences that continually repeat themselves. This constitutes an argument for unity of the poem.« (443)

Recurring groups of words, motifs, and metaphors that express the central theme of love invite close reading of the Song. J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James take this introductory position in their book *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading* (2018): »The argument of this volume is that minute attention to the body of the poem itself – careful, sustained attention to the text and its distinctly poetic features, what we are calling ›close reading‹ – is the best way to understand individual poems. The reading of biblical poetry must attend to the form of the poem itself, how it means, not just what it means.« (2018, 1)

In their use of the term ‚close reading‘, the authors are working with the tradition of the New Criticism, which came to the fore in the mid-twentieth century. Tod Linafelt limits his treatment of Song of Songs to a close reading of the first chapter of the poem. He notes that close tracing of the Song of Songs‘ complex and subtle poetic technique can reveal its basic emotional totality and reveal a worthy artistic achievement: »if our close attention to the sound and structure of chapter one of the Song of Songs has revealed anything, it is that this sense of the spontaneous overflow of passion is in fact the product of complex and subtle poetic technique. To attend to such technique is to give the poetry its proper due as the polished, highly constructed literary achievement that it is.« (2018, 130)

Sarah Zang pays special attention to the significance of emotions in reading biblical poetry. Her close reading of the Song of Songs wishes to show how the reader’s emotional integrity enhances rather than hinders one’s interpretation. She glosses ‚emotional integrity‘ in the following manner: »Unlike what is assumed in the conventional distinction between form and content, poetic language is not merely a disposable medium of the message. Serving the original goal of

emotional integrity, poetry embodies the materiality of language more than any other discourse.« (Zhang 2018, 134)

### 3. Use of Words Denoting ‚Love‘ in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Bibles

In my close reading of the Song of Songs, I have paid attention to the repetitions of the basic vocabulary expressing feelings of love in the original Hebrew text, in the Septuagint as the most influential Greek translation, and in the Vulgate as the most influential Latin translation.

Among the most obvious unifying literary devices of the Song of Songs is the constant use of words denoting ‚love‘ or ‚beloved‘ in various forms, in most cases in conjunction with a pronoun: *dôdîm*, ‚love‘ (5:1); *dôdî*, ‚my beloved‘ (1:13,14,16; 2:3,8,9,10,16,17; 4:16; 5:2,4,5,6,8,10,16; 6:2, 3; 7:10,11,12,14; 8:14); *dôdêk*, ‚your beloved‘ (5:9; 6:1); *dôdâh*, ‚her beloved‘ (8:5); *dôdêkâ*, ‚your love‘ (1:2,4; 5:1; 7:13); *dôdayîk*, ‚your love‘ (4:10 twice); *ra'yâti*, ‚my love‘ (1:9,15; 2:2,10,13; 4:1,7; 5:2;6:4).

The Septuagint translates the Hebrew form *dôdîm*, ‚love‘ (5:1), with the plural *adelphoî*, ‚brothers‘; for *dôdî*, ‚my beloved‘ (1:13,14,16; 2:3,8,9,10,16,17; 4:16; 5:2,4,5,6,8,10,16; 6:2,3; 7:10,11,12,14; 8:14), one constantly sees *adelphidôs mou*, ‚my kinsman‘, sometimes in a different numerus (1:13,14,16; 2:3,8,9,10,16,17; 5:1; 5:2,4,5,6,8,10,16; 6:1,2; 7:10,11,12,14; 8:14); *dôdêk*, ‚your beloved‘ (5:9; 6:1), is translated as *adelphidôs sou*, ‚your kinsman‘ (5:9,17); *dôdâh*, ‚her beloved‘ (8:5), is translated as *tôn adelphidôn autês*; *dôdêkâ*, ‚your love‘ (1:2,4; 5:1; 7:13): *mastoi sou*, ‚your breasts‘ (1:2); *mastous sou*, ‚your breasts‘ (1:4), *adelphoî*, ‚brothers‘ (5:1), *adelphidê sou*, ‚O my kinsman‘ (7:13); *dôdayîk*, ‚your love‘ (4:10 twice): *mastoi sou*, ‚your breasts‘ (twice); *ra'yâti*, ‚my love‘ (1:9,15; 2:2,10,13; 4:1,7; 5:2; 6:4): (*hê*) *plesion mou*, ‚my companion‘ (1:9,15; 2:2,13; 4:1,7; 5:2; 6:3).

The Vulgate omits the equivalent of *dôdîm*, ‚love‘, in 5:1; for *dôdî*, ‚my beloved‘ (1:13,14,16; 2:3, 8,9,10,16,17; 4:16; 5:2,4,5,6,8,10,16; 6:2,3; 7:10,11,12,14; 8:14), one constantly see *dilectus meus*, ‚my beloved‘ or *dilecte mi*, sometimes in a different numerus (1:12,13,15; 2:3,8,9,10,16,17; 5:1; 5:2,4,5,6,8,10,16; 6:1,2; 7:9,10,11,13; 8:14); *dôdêk*, ‚your beloved‘ (5:9; 6:1), is translated as *dilectus tuus*, ‚your beloved‘ (5:9; 6:1); *dôdâh*, ‚her beloved‘ (8:5) is translated as *dilectum suum*, ‚her beloved‘; *dôdêkâ*, ‚your love‘ (1:2,4; 5:1; 7:13) is rendered: *ubera tua*, ‚your breasts‘ (1:1); *uberum tuorum*, ‚of your breasts‘ (1:3), *carissimi*, ‚the dearest ones‘ (5:1), *dilecte mi*, ‚O my beloved‘ (7:13); *dôdayîk*, ‚your love‘ (4:10 twice): *mammae tuae – ubera tua*, ‚your breast – your breast‘; *ra'yâti*, ‚my love‘, in NRSV, ‚my darling‘, in NIV (1:9,15; 2:2,10,13; 4:1,7; 5:2; 6:4) one reads *amica mea*, ‚my friend‘, everywhere (1:8,14; 2:2,10,13; 4:1,7; 5:2; 6:3); in Slovenian translation, *moja ljuba*.

The terms denoting the subjects or objects of mutual adoration and expressions of love between a woman and a man are fairly constant throughout the

poem in the three languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Latin). This is even more true when it comes to using words from the semantic field of ‚love‘. The Hebrew text shows consistent use of the grammatical forms of the root *‘hb*: the noun form *‘āhābāh*, ‚love‘ (2:4,5,7; 3:5,10; 5:8; 8:4,6,7); and its verb forms *‘āhab* (1:3,4,7; 3:2,3,4). This root maintains constant equivalents in the noun and verb forms also in the oldest and most significant Greek translation (Septuagint) – as the noun *agápē* (2:4,5,7; 3:5,10; 5:8; 8:4,6,7) and as the verb *agapōō* (1:3,4,7; 3:2,3,4). In no place does the word *érōs*, so characteristic of classical Greek literature and culture as a whole, appear. Since the translators of the Septuagint were Jews, their consistent choice of the Hebrew root *‘āhab* and the Greek root *agap-* clearly points to a fundamentally spiritual aspect of the expression of love.

The situation is somewhat different in Jerome’s Latin translation. The Vulgate translates the Hebrew noun in all four instances of the chorus’s »I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem« (2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4) with the adjective form *dilecta/dilectus*, which implies that the translator specifies the indefinite Hebrew meaning of ‚love‘ with the subject of love ‚beloved/lover‘. The state in all three languages is thus: »I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, or by the hinds of the field, that you not stir up, nor awaken love (*‘et-hā‘ahābāh* – Septuagint: *tēn agápēn*; Vulgate: *dilectam*), until it so desires!« For the Hebrew noun form *‘āhābāh*, ‚love‘ (2:4,5,7; 3:5,10; 5:8; 8:4,6,7) appears in the Vulgate: *caritas* (2:4; 3:10; 8:7), *amor* (2:5; 5:8), *dilecta* (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), *dilexio* (8:6); the verb *‘āhab* (1:3,4,7; 3:2,3,4) appears only in the Latin form *diligo* (1:2,3,6; 3:2,3,4).

Origen does not contrast sensual and spiritual dimensions of love in his major commentary and two homilies on the Song of Songs. In the prologue to his commentary to the Song, he emphasizes the divine origin of a human passion of love and explains: »It is against its nature to love anything corruptible, seeing that it is itself the fount of incorruption.« (Lawson 1956, 33) He states that »some people pervert this faculty of passionate love, which is implanted in the human soul by the Creator’s kindness« (36). He finds existential proof for this crucial argument in the intrinsic unity of love in the sense of a natural destiny for purity and fidelity: »Suppose, for instance, that there is a woman with an ardent passion of love for a certain man who longs to be admitted to wedlock with him. /.../ Will this woman, whose whole heart and soul and strength are on fire with passionate love for that man, be able to commit adultery, when she well knows that he loves purity?« (37)

Origen, in fact, held the view that the study of the Song of Songs was best reserved for the advanced, spiritually oriented reader and knew that the Jewish interpreters promoted the spiritual significance of the Song. In the prologue to the Song of Songs, he writes:

»If any man who lives only after the flesh should approach it, to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love’s language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away

from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust.« (22)

Origen knows »that with the Hebrews also care is taken to allow no one even to hold this book in his hands, who has not reached a full and ripe age« (23).

Jerome, who had also translated Origen's two homilies on the Song, likewise advocated the spiritual underpinnings of the Song of Songs. Jerome prefaces the translation of Origen's homilies with a prologue addressed to Pope Damasus, saying, »While Origen surpassed all writers in his other books, in his *Song of Songs* he surpassed himself« (Lawson 1956, 265; Fürst and Strutwolf 2016, 26). Alfons Fürst and Holger Strutwolf, in their preface to the significant volume *Origenes: Die Homilien und Fragmente zum Hohelied* (2016), explain that Origen set his homilies in such a way as to lead his listeners from the first stage of spiritual ascension – from ethical cleansing from carnal desire and sin to the final unification of the soul with God (Fürst and Strutwolf 2016, 9). The dramatic structure of the poem likewise expresses a yearning for the Lord. Jerome's translation of Origen's homilies on the Song shows the formulation *spiritalis cupido vel amor* as the expression of the yearning of the soul and all its senses for the understanding of truth and wisdom (19). Referring to Origen's homilies on the Song of Songs, the authors establish: »In this perspective, it fails to counter the Platonic *eros* of the Christian agape and to construct a great ideological contrast through the centuries.« (20) The authors furthermore state: »In the Latin version of the homilies after Hieronymus, as well as the commentary after Rufinus, *amor* (and *cupido*) is used as the equivalent of *ἔρως* as well as *caritas* (and *dilectio*) as a translation of *ἀγάπη*. *Eros* and *Agape* are not contrast terms in the Song of Songs, but synonyms.« (21–22)

#### 4. The Song of Songs in Textual and Intertextual Relations

Early Jewish and Christian interpretive approaches to the origin and nature of love invite a brief look into the venerable history of ancient Near Eastern cultures. The use of motifs and metaphors for love in their love literature is echoed in many aspects of the Song of Songs. On the existential level, similar motifs appear in the depiction of love in the form of monologues and dialogues between lover and beloved, with an underlying theme of longing for encounter and union. In his commentary, Marvin Pope has collected the most extensive comparative material on the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs (Pope 1977, 54–229).

Among the oldest comparable works is the partially preserved Sumerian love poem dedicated to Shu-Sin, fourth ruler of the third dynasty in Ur, from approx. 2000 BC. This poem is narrated by a female character, the goddess Innana. She

addresses the king as a god, flaunting her potent charms in the third person so as to arouse in the divine king a passion for sexual unification in the sacral ritual of marriage (Kramer 1969, 496). In a second poem, the goddess Innana, in two monologues, expresses her gentle affection for the lover Dumuzi (639–640). In yet another ecstatic love poem, Innana and Dumuzi converse sensually as ‚brother‘ and ‚sister‘ (645).

Tremendously rich is the Egyptian love poetry from the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty period (ca. 1305–1200 BC) and the early 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty (ca. 1200–1150 BC). The poems speak of a young boy and girl who are still under the governance of their parents (Foster and Hollis 1995, 162–171; Fox 1997, 125–130; Wilson 1969, 467–469). Contrary to the sacral tradition of Mesopotamian love poetry on a relation between gods and people of royal heritage, the Egyptian poems are earthly in nature, cherishing love between man and woman, sometimes husband and wife, without specifying their hierarchical status. Foster and Hollis, in their introduction to their volume of Egyptian poems, state:

»These poems are the precious legacy of lyrical poetry of the ancient Egypt, setting before the contemporary reader a spark of insight into the intimate emotions and stories of young lives filled with passion and yearning, intrigue and hypocrisy, love and sorrow. /.../ Ancient Egyptians might have loved their gods and kings, yet a special place in their heart was reserved for the closest human being/s.« (Foster and Hollis 1995, 162)

Egyptian love poems express a profound yearning for fulfilment in love, expressed in a thoughtfully composed literary form. Its characteristics are: the interchange of the male and female speaker, the convention of flattery using ‚my brother‘ and ‚my sister‘, a rich array of metaphors from the natural and social environment, and a penchant for wordplay. The ancient Egyptians held a refined sensitivity for literary form, finding a unique substance of elevated thought and emotional expression within it. The poems consist of free verse and a plain, widely accessible language. A popular motive is that of grave obstacles to unification, for example, the crocodile-filled River Nile. The lover is willing to dare the deadly waters to reach his beloved on the other bank. In their union, the boy and girl seek ideals of reciprocal faith and permanent happiness.

In his study *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (1985), Michael Fox explores the similarities and differences between the Egyptian praise poetry and the Song of Songs while also touching on the love poetry of the other cultures of the ancient Near East in several places. The primary aim of his extensive study is an attempt to interpret the Song of Songs as something unique in the sense of the non-breakable solidity of the thematic and semantic composition that expresses »the qualities of the lovers, and the qualities of their love« (Fox 1985, 237). Fox believes that the »concept of love as it is found in the majority of love poetry is more a proposed ideal of love than its reality« (297). He establishes that all Egyptian love poems are essentially monologues professing the indi-



viduals' love experience, while the Song of Songs features perpetual discourse and true dialogue, upholding the reciprocity of communication between the protagonists.

Fox also comments on the role of lovers in Egyptian love poetry: »What governs the particular aspects of love to appear is primarily the presence or absence of the lovers, or its expectation.« (1985, 323) He posits that a significant difference between the Song of Songs and Egyptian love poetry lies in the fact that the gender equality of the Song of Songs more closely mirrors the metaphysics of love than it does a social reality or even a social ideal. For the Egyptian poets, love was primarily a mode of experience represented by the imagery of relationship harmony and pleasant interaction. In the Song of Songs, love is not merely an emotion but a representation of the coalescence of two souls through dialogue (330).

In his study *Song of Songs: A Close Reading* (2011), Gianni Barbiero describes the Song of Songs as a 'metaphoric' presentation of love. He is of the opinion that the human love which is extolled in the Song of Songs is open to a supernatural, theological dimension because it is not merely human but has in itself a supernatural dimension. He explains:

»If the allegorical interpretation turned the Song into a solely ›spiritual‹ book, eliminating the sexual aspect, the natural interpretation runs the opposite risk, that of considering only the material aspect, and eliminating the spiritual and theological dimensions. Both show themselves to be incomplete. It is necessary to reconstruct the two meanings as two aspects of a single reality which is ambivalent in itself. The Song is not an allegory, but it is a metaphor, a symbol which refers to something higher. It belongs to the logic of the Incarnation: the divine is present in the human and inseparable from it because the love between man and woman is at the same time sensual and spiritual, human and divine.« (41–42)

In his article „The Song of Songs as Allegory: Methodological and Hermeneutical Considerations“ (2015), Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger considers the role of the entire biblical context in judging the dilemma of whether to interpret it literally or allegorically. In seeking answers to this dilemma, he considers »the content and unity of the whole Scripture«, as proclaimed in the Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council (Dei Verbum 12). He concludes: »Someone who is familiar with the Bible or who uses a concordance to get information cannot deny that the Song of Songs is rooted deeply in Holy Scripture. Its correspondences to prophetic texts are particularly remarkable.« (14–15).

Schwienhorst-Schönberger distinguishes five different aspects of context: (1) the context of *language*; (2) the *situational* context; (3) *culture*; (4) *discourse*, and (5) *cognition* or *mentality*. The exegetical school of the history of religions is especially interested in the *cultural* context of the Song. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, however, points to the aspects of the *discursive* and the *mental* context. At this point, he touches on what is probably the most important interpretive dimension

for presenting the topic of love in the Song. In commentaries, we do not often find directions of the sort Schwienhorst-Schönberger approaches in his paper. He asks the important question: »Does the Song wish to deconstruct prophetic sexual metaphors subversively, or develop them affirmatively?« (29) Then he expresses his directions of understanding of the *mental* context in relation to »the source and target domains«:

»The understanding of a text depends, among other things, on the degree to which its recipients have personal and experience-based access to these interacting domains. It also particularly depends on the nature of their experiences of these worlds or domains. In the light of these reflections, it might become obvious that the sometimes energetic exchanges on the question whether the Song should be understood sexually-erotically or mystically-spiritually *also* depend on the question whether the recipients have access to these worlds of meaning and if yes what the quality of their access might be.« (29)

This definition helps us go a step further, as Annette Schellenberg does. She overcomes the heated nature of the discussion about the alternatives (,sexual' or ,spiritual') in the Song by rectifying both alternatives, namely, by acknowledging the elemental force of human sensuality playing a central role in both directions of interpretation. In „The Sensuality of the Song of Songs“ (2016), she rightly recognizes that nobody interprets the Song literally, once she or he agrees that the poem is a »highly poetic text, full of metaphors, which would be completely misunderstood if taken at face value« (Schellenberg 2016, 103). All the more she is obliged to contest the ,overall' allegorical interpretation of the Song: »What makes allegorical interpretations allegorical is the overall interpretation of the Song in a figurative way, namely, the conviction that ultimately it is not about the erotic love between a man and a woman but about something else.« (2015, 103)

Schellenberg rightly points to many people who »experience erotic love and sexuality as transcendent, even ,divine'. /.../ Love is probably the deepest feeling that a human can have, and erotic love especially has an overwhelming power. Thus, it is only natural that humans use the language and imagery of love to describe the intensity and depth of their relationship with the divine.« (107–108) The most obvious argument for insisting on the great value of human love in the Song is this: »the Song does not identify (one of) the lovers as divine.« (111) Therefore, »the Song's sensuality requires attention« (113). She is obviously right also in arguing »that not all allegorical interpreters read the Song allegorically to get rid of its eroticism. On the contrary, many are attracted to the Song precisely *because* of its eroticism, because for them intimacy and sensuality are essential part of the divine-human relationship.« (120) She concludes:

»The relevant point for the exegetical debate on literal versus allegorical interpretations of the Song is the acknowledgment that not all allegorical interpretations are anti-carnal and that it is possible to read the Song in

reference to the divine-human relationship and still do justice to its sensuality and eroticism. In fact, when it comes to the Song's sensuality, allegorical interpretations in the mystical tradition are often more sensitive to the text than many of the literal ones.« (123)

In her book, *Wise and Foolish Love in the Song of Songs* (2019), Jennifer Andruska refers to Fox's study, but with more focus on the dialogical structure of Song of Songs:

»Collections like the Egyptian love songs differ in their *purpose* from the Song of Songs. The Egyptian love songs give different and often incompatible pictures of what love is like, in order to study the full spectrum of *emotions that occur in various types of situations*. In one song, love may be mutual and in another it is unrequited. Yet the Song of Songs presents one consistent picture of its lovers, their personalities, and their relationship throughout. Love is never presented as unrequited or non-exclusive. These are not pictures of love that the Song wishes to demonstrate. It is very intentional in its presentation of love, consistently, as mutual, peaceful, equal, proactive, devoted, desirous, erotic, exclusive, committed, and timeless. This is because the Song of Songs is concerned to present *a particular vision of love displayed in a particular type of love relationship between particular types of lovers*.« (Andruska 2019, 152)

According to Andruska, the goal of the literary presentation of love in the Song is the positive transformation of the readers' lives: »The Song of Songs seeks to transform its readers' perceptions, intentions, emotions, desires and virtue as lovers. It brings the mind and heart, reason and desire together in the transformation process, enabling readers to become lovers like the characters in the Song, with the desire and ability to discern and pursue wise love in their own lives.« (171) The transformative perspective of love, as presented in the Song, helps us to understand Rabbi Akiba's point when he declares the following in *Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5: »For all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.«

In fact, the entire Bible is based on 'two ways' (cf. Psalm 1, or Prov 9, etc.), and interpreting the Song of Songs means having to choose between the hardness of heart or transformation. Saint Paul gives the unsurpassable definition of love as a transformative force, which by definition stands in opposition with the potential of subversion of love: »Love (*hē agápē*) is patient; love (*hē agápē*) is kind; love (*hē agápē*) is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist in its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.« (1 Cor 13:4-7)

## 5. Conclusion

---

The survey of the use of the vocabulary of love in the original Hebrew text of the Song of Songs and in its ancient translations helps us to understand the directions of the history of interpretation only to some degree. Love, after all, is a word that is ever ambiguous. Even an extensive vocabulary and a thorough knowledge of different languages does not guarantee communicative clarity – lexical acuity does not, for example, free one from using ambiguous, meaningless and misleading words in the span ranging from lust or desire to unrequited parental or spiritual love. As is well known, there were at least three words for love in ancient Greece: *éros*, ‚love‘, usually sexual passion; *philia*, ‚affectionate regard‘, ‚friendship among equals‘; or *agápē*, ‚love as charity‘, especially brotherly love, the love of God for man and of man for God. Love is profound, irresistible, unchosen, unchoosable, entailing attraction and attachment to another person. Spiritual love is an action that springs from a deep affection for something or someone without regard to consequences that are ‚out of time‘.

The Song of Songs is a poem written as a dialogue between a woman and a man that takes place, furthermore, within the context of a dialogue with the surrounding world. The poetic structure of the poem reveals all the dimensions of its reality, namely, in the span of longing, seeking, fulfilling, being alienated and seeking anew. The poetic-literary structure of the poem expresses the existential possibilities that no other mode of representation could express so convincingly. The theme of the Song of Songs and the remarkable plurality of interpretations in Judaism and Christianity in religious and secular circles confirms the correctness of a ‚holistic‘ literary approach to interpreting the poem. The literary representations of the main themes, which concern the emotional and rational worlds of our being, express with utter concreteness the possibilities of man for universal meaning in a world of opposites.

The theme of the Song of Songs and its rich plurality of interpretations in Judaism and Christianity confirm the suitability of a ‚holistic‘ and comprehensive as well as comparative literary examination in the interpretation of the poem. The ‚close reading‘ method may best reveal the splendid range of semantic gradients embedded within the love theme, as concerns their fundamental literary descriptions of love. Special attention has been paid to the use of vocabulary denoting ‚love‘ in the Hebrew original, in the Greek (Septuagint) version and in the Vulgate in order to see how the very use of vocabulary establishes directions of interpretation in the early period of Jewish and Christian interpretation.

## References

- Andruska, Jennifer L.** 2019. *Wise and Foolish Love in the Song of Songs*. Boston: Brill.
- Barbiero, Gianni.** 2011. *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*. Translated by Michael Tait. Boston: Brill.
- Childs, Brevard S.** 1979. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM Press.
- Couey, J. Blake, and Elaine T. James, eds.** 2018. *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crain, Jeanie C.** 2010. *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Boston: Polity.
- Foster, John L., and Susan Tower Hollis.** 1995. *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Fox, Michael V.** 1985. *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- . 1997. Love Poems. In: William W. Hallo, ed. *The Context of Scripture*. Vol. 1, 125–130. Köln: Brill.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von.** 1998. *West-östlicher Divan*. In: Erich Trunz, ed. *Goethes Werke*. Vol. 2, 7–270. Munich: C. H. Beck.
- Graves, Michael.** 2007. *Jerome's Hebrew Philology: A Study Based on His Commentary on Jeremiah*. Boston: Brill.
- Hollis, Susan Tower, ed.** 1995. *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry*. Translated by John L. Foster. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Krašovec, Jože.** 2020. Od simbola besede v Svetem pismu do teologije o opravičenju [From the Symbol of the Word in the Bible to the Theology of Justification]. *Bogoslovni vestnik* 80, no. 1:49–61. <https://doi.org/10.34291/bv2020/01/krasovec>
- Kraus, Matthew A.** 2017. *Jewish, Christian and Classical Exegetical Traditions in Jerome's Translation of the Book of Exodus: Translation Technique and the Vulgate*. Boston: Brill.
- Linafelt, Tod.** 2018. Structure, Sound, and Sense: A Close Reading of Chapter One of the Song of Songs. In: J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James, eds. *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, 113–130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, Roland E.** 1979. The Unity of the Song of Songs. *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 4:436–443. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853379x00463>
- Origen.** 1956. *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*. Translated by Ruth Penelope Lawson. New York: The Newman Press.
- . 2016. *Die Homilien und Fragmente zum Hohelied*. Translated by Alfons Fürst and Holger Strutwolf. Boston: De Gruyter.
- Osredkar, Mari Jože.** 2018. V začetku je bil dialog [In the Beginning there Was Dialogue]. *Bogoslovni vestnik* 78, no. 1:17–31.
- Pope, Marvin H.** 1977. *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Schellenberg, Annette.** 2016. The Sensuality of the Song of Songs: Another Criterion to Be Considered when Assessing (So-called) Literal and Allegorical Interpretations of the Song. In: Annette Schellenberg and Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, eds. *Interpreting the Song of Songs – Literal or Allegorical?*, 103–129. Bristol: Peeters.
- Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Ludger.** 2016. The Song of Songs as Allegory: Methodological and Hermeneutical Considerations. In: Annette Schellenberg and Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, eds. *Interpreting the Song of Songs – Literal or Allegorical?*, 1–50. Bristol: Peeters.
- Sumerian Love-Song.** 1969. Translated by Samuel Noah Kramer. In: James B Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 637–645. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Turnšek, Marjan.** 2018. Nežnost: nekoliko zapostavljena krepost [Tenderness: A Somewhat Neglected Virtue]. *Bogoslovni vestnik* 78, no. 1:185–208.
- Wilson, John A.** 1969. Egyptian Secular Songs and Poems: Love Songs. In: James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 467–469. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zhang, Sarah.** 2018. How Is a Love Poem (Song 4:1-7) Like the Beloved? The Importance Emotion in Reading Biblical Poetry. In: J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James, eds. *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, 131–146. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.