

Clandestine Relationship.
An Approach to the Song of Songs¹
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The activity of thinking theologically in situations of marginalization, the struggle for human rights, the reality of countries burdened by unjust debts that they never sought, exercises us in what we could call the hermeneutics of suspicion. From this perspective one attends to both what is expressed and what is not expressed, one privileges the other side of the text, the semantics of the negative, the voice of the other. Our historical experience helps us be better prepared for bias rather than for systemic clarity, and sets us in motion to seek behind words that which is only expressed in the darkness of the last corner. But this hermeneutics of suspicion is not only applied to the external reality –in this case the biblical text- but also to our own understanding of theology, of meaning. God not only calls us to liberate those things we desire and deserve be liberated, but also those other ones we usually set aside and forget about, that we do not recognise as ours. The Song of Songs invites us to be freed from the hypocrisy in which we have wrapped sexuality, and does this through the voice a woman who does not accept the norms and stereotypes which male society has assigned her. She pronounces the revolutionary phrase:

I am black and beautiful (1:5)²

As from this point she strikes with force against the rigid structure of her time and ours. She wants to liberate women and men from the prejudice and chains so we may meet, touch each other, look straight at the face of the other. This is achieved, if we know how to find, under the dust of the years, the correct key which will open her text³.

To establish a clue for reading is a delicate task, as it supposes that the interpretation that follows will be influenced by this opinion. It is also necessary to mention that it is very difficult for a text to be approached from only one reading clue; this not only refers to the richness of the whole text and its polysemy, but also to the richness of the vital experience – both diverse and contradictory- from which one reads and interprets what lies before us. In the

¹ This essay is to a large extent an extract of our book *Cantar de los Cantares, El fuego y la ternura* (Buenos Aires, Lumen, 1997); in Portuguese: (Petrópolis, Vozes-Sinodal, 1998). A Spanish version of this paper with modifications is in print for *Acta Poética* 31 (2010).

² We adopted in all the texts the translation of NRSV.

³ The contemporary critical thinking on sexuality is never ending. We point to three seminal works we consider express the conflict and the difficulties of the erotic in our life and society: the fourth chapter of *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, by Emmanuel Levinas, titles “Beyond the Face, Pittsburg, 1994; Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, New York 1986; the essay by Paul Ricoeur “La maravilla, lo errático, el enigma” in *La Sexualidad* (Barcelona, Fontanella, 1979). The work of Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh. Sexuality in the Old Testament*, Peabody 2007, is a massive volume with bibliography, for Song of Songs p. 545-632.

Song of Songs we indicate that the text itself suggests four clues for reading which are complementary and illuminating:

- The opposition between the singular and the multiple. This acquires various aspects such as the affirmation of personal love and the rejection of depersonalised sexuality, or preservation of one's own body for the loved one and denial of this body to other people or other possible relations.
- A critique to the Salomonic model of sexuality⁴.
- The value of the loved one as body. This is in contrast with other characters in which possessions that embellish the body, riches and furniture are exalted.
- The need to read the Song of Songs from woman-clue. The linguistic structure of the book itself suggests that the author is a woman and her stamp is present in each of the poems⁵.

Erotic is present in diverse forms in each of the four perspectives.

In her important book on sexuality in the Old Testament, Phyllis Trible⁶ tries to read Song of Songs as an answer to Genesis 2-3. From her perspective in that text creation is described as the development in four stages of Eros. The first one begins with the creation of human beings. The second episode describes the plantation of the garden where human beings will live, in the third animals are created as companions living in the garden. The highlight of the narration is the fourth episode with the creation of sexuality. The expulsion of the first human couple from this erotic place that follows, and the closure of the garden jealously guarded by a cherubim with a threatening sword avoids all access to this original erotica. Trible then understands that the text of Songs redeems this expulsion and once again opens up the way to pleasure and the enjoyment of senses⁷. If the narrative of Genesis 2-3 does not offer any possibility of opening up the garden of sexuality, another garden is constructed –Song of Songs– where Eros will be celebrated. This book by Trible is original and interesting when it later on offers an analysis of the concrete texts that extend these ideas. Though we would like to point to a difficulty. The problem with this interpretation rests not in its logic but rather in the reading of both these works. Neither does Genesis suppose the need –or hidden desire– of a return to that primitive state, nor does Songs give us to understand that it is raising creational questions or restoring that which was lost⁸. Genesis 2:4-4:26 is a unit which we can call the first period of creation and it narrates the history of heavens and earth (cf. 2:4a) where transgressions (“sins”) are part of the “original” every-day living. To pretend God’s attributes (eternity, the right over other people’s life), are not secondary acts in the development of humanity, rather they are understood as inherent to the first and only nature. There is no state of perfection and freedom we can cherish to return to, be it in the realm of justice or sexuality. Even more, this distinct conception is reflected in the translation of the Hebrew word *gan*: a garden is a place for enjoyment of free time and for fun. We prefer to translate *gan* as “orchard”; a place in which we have to work and so enjoy its produce, where the fruit of human labour contributes to the well being and harmony of those who work⁹.

⁴ See our article “Crítica de Salomón en el Cantar de los Cantares”, *Revista Bíblica*, 53 (1991), p. 129-156.

⁵ David Clines questions the role of women in the Songs considering her subordinate to the male. His starting point is that the Songs describes women from the male perspective. Clines *assumes* this but does not substantiate this, which in our understanding makes it lose a large extent of the feminine richness of the text, *Interested Parties: the ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1995), p. 120-121. See our exposition *infra*.

⁶ *God and the rhetoric of sexuality* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978) p. 144-165.

⁷ Id. p. 144.

⁸ Athalya Brenner points to the differences of these texts and shows interesting diverging points, *the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1989), p. 83. Also J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties...* p. 115-116.

⁹ See our commentary “Génesis” in Armando Levoratti (ed.) *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano I*, (Estella, Verbo Divino, 2004) p. 374.

In 7:10 there is an allusion to Gen 3:16 but not as restitution of a time past, rather with the intention to correct the Gen text widening the first reading of those traditions:

I am my beloved's,
And his desire is for me. (7:10)

Contrasting with Gen 3:16

Your desire shall be for your husband
And he shall rule over you.

In this last text the erotic pulsion is established as an inclination of woman to man, needing a man to satisfy her sexual desire¹⁰, which supposes a form of domination and subjection on his part¹¹. This woman condition has its male parallel in the curse on the land and the need to work so as to produce what is necessary for living (v. 17-19); but there is no mention to the parallel of male eroticism. So the sensitivity of the author of Songs *corrects* this idea indicating that man as well needs woman as object of his eroticism, and in consequence he is also subject to her. What is now revealed in Song of Songs is that the erotic pulsion addressed to the other is not exclusive of woman, it also lives in the male directed to woman.

What should be noticed is that while Genesis text is etiological and intends to produce an account of human behaviour via the answer of God when faced with disobedience of the human couple, Songs celebrates this *mutual* pulsion and there is no connotation related to punishment for disobedience or any intention to respond to subjection proper to the human condition. It is a primary act not related with a previous that conditions it. From the perception of sexuality in Songs there is a liberation of pleasure from the bonds to which it has been subjected when considering it a consequence of something else – in this case a stain on conduct-, aggravated by the double and different signification: punishment to woman, guardian of the fulfilment of this punishment to the male.

Let us turn to other cases. The poem of 8:5 is constructed round a brief dialogue between the couple:

HIM: Who is that coming up from the wilderness
leaning upon her beloved?

HER: Under the apple tree I undressed¹² you.
There your mother was in labour with you;
there she who bore you was in labour.

¹⁰ It is a mistake to interpret this passage as if woman's erotic was a punishment for disobedience and a sign for subjection to men. We prefer to interpret it as a sign of human character and bodily diversity of the being of the Gods that the human couple aspired to: disobedience would have as a prize "...you will be like God" (Gen 3:5). George Coats indicates that this unity is not a curse rather it establishes a new relation between man and woman different to the intimate and binding relation of 2: 23-24, *Genesis with an Introduction to narrative literature* (Grand Rapids, Eermans, 1983), p- 56. G. von Rad also rejects the idea of a curse and prefers to talk of the announcement that on woman's life will fall "pains and contradictions", *El libro de Génesis* (Salamanca, Sígueme, 1977) p. 112.

¹¹ See that the man's inclination in Gen 3:16 is placed after and not before the reference to pregnancy and birth giving. This indicates that it is not related to procreation rather to the pulsion of pleasure which generates submission to the loved one. The complementing of 2:23 is now revealed as suffering for woman and as "the will of God". This last statement is what will be responded to by Song of Songs. See Severino Croatto, *Crear y amar en libertad. Estudio de Génesis 2:4-3:24*, (Buenos Aires, La Aurora, 1986) p. 143-144.

¹² NRSV render "awakened".

The words of the man are repeated as a refrain (in 3:6 and 6:10) relating woman with the desert, in this case the symbol of a rare exotic place, attractive because it is enigmatic¹³. Woman's answer refers to a new scene. It indicates that it takes place under an apple tree. The Hebrew verb *'or* has two meanings, the first being "to awake" and is used by most translators. The second means "to undress"¹⁴. The choice between these cannot be a mere statistics game rather it must be the fruit of the literary context of the passage and the work as such. In this unit the conception of the male and the time of his birth are the issue; both these events take place naked, and express central moments of erotic life. If the intention is one of referring to the sexual union, it is more appropriate to translate it as "I undressed you", in this way one emphasizes the central role of the young woman in this activity. It is she who undresses him to enjoy his body.

The absence of any reference to the father – absent in all Song of Songs- again places the accent on the woman perspective, as the author wants to point out. Given this woman perspective it is striking that there is no textual base to think of Songs as relating erotic and sexuality with maternity. In a culture in which fertility was central to the value of life of a woman these poems emerge making it evident that pleasure is justified in itself and estimated as the playing of two bodies and for the tenderness of caresses. It is not the external and consequent element – procreation- which gives sense to the kissing and the pleasure of giving of oneself and receiving of fullness. Conception is only mentioned in one other opportunity (3:4), in this case it is her conception, and this is mentioned to indicate the place where they have already met to make love. In this sense it is a closed place in which sexuality has already been exercised, and where woman erotic is evoked.

Another text is the poem of 2:16-17, which is voiced by the woman:

My beloved is mine and I am his;
he pastures his flock among the lilies.

Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle
or a young stag on the cleft mountains.

The initial stanza is found repeated in 6:3 and 7:11. The first line expresses this exclusive and profound union of the couple. The semantic structure is compressed and demonstrates a high capacity for poetic concision. In the second line lilies are an allusion to woman herself and her sexuality, and for this reason the image of a shepherd –whose task it is to travel over geographical accidents leading the flock- is used to refer to the mutual relation and their love-play.

¹³ A mechanical interpretation of this passage must be avoided, where "desert" is understood as a place of purification, encounter with God or a memory of exodus as some sort of paradigm. This is so in many cases in the OT, but not here, where there are no recurring signs given of the need for purification or the evocation of times past as more benign, see R. Tournay, *Quand Dieu Parles aux Hommes le langage de L'amour* (Paris, Gabalda, 1982), p. 65.

¹⁴ The Hebrew root *ayin vav resh* refers to the concept of "awake", but in some opportunities (see Hab 3:9) has the meaning of "undress" (see also the adjective *'ereia*, "nakedness", "nudity",). This root is also related with the root *ayin resh resh* (see Isa 23:13; 32:11), whose relationship is built on the weakness of their consonants. It is also found in words like *'ariri*, "childless", "undressed of children" (Gen 15:2; Jer 22:30). From the root *ayin resh hei* ("to be naked") comes *'ervah* ("nakedness", usually with a negative meaning of impudicity, see Lam 1:8; Eze 16:37) but the radical *hei* hides a *vav* and becomes *ayin resh vav*, which is close to our proposed translation. Maybe we have to recognize that the text is playing with these ambiguities between "awake/undress".

The second verse is suggestive. It takes place at night where she is alone waiting for him to come back to her bed¹⁵. The clandestineness of the meeting is evident in the need that it should take place while shadows may still hide it. There have been interpretations that the expression “the mountains of Bether” alludes to woman’s pubis, although in Joshua 15:59 (In LXX not in the Hebrew text) there is mention of this as a small village. Faithful to poetic language, we must consider that the correct reading is that both realities are evoked: the mount south of Judah where a gazelle grazes is an image of the long awaited travelling of the man over the woman’s body. This way the poem is an invitation to re-create or to make effective the desire expressed in the first verse. It is not the first time in Songs where hills are mentioned. “Hill of frankincense” (4:6) and “mountain of spices” (8:14) both in singular, images of exotic and aromatic places assimilated to the sexual organs. What complicates this interpretation in 17b is the plural “mountains”, in this way it is possible to extend the text as a reference to places of pleasure. We must not forget that mounts can also be images of the breasts or the repeated curvatures of her body. When one reads love poems it is not necessary that each word find a reference, what is important is that a climate is created and the recurrence of images. A gazelle covering the mounts may well evoke the image of the woman being caressed by her loved one¹⁶.

In another poem (2:3) the woman is referred to in relation to her playing with the body of the man:

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

In the narrative now it is she who covers the man’s body as one who climbs the tree seeking its fruit and delighting in it.

Man is given to express his love in various poems. In 7: 6-9 he does so this way:

How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!

You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,
and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.

In the previous poem 7:1-6, man describes woman when dancing. She danced with her feet and moved to the rhythm of music. In contrast to that poem, on this occasion she is seen static, in one place and within a framework of serenity which is represented as firmly rooted as a palm tree. The passion of man is here expressed comparing her lines to the curvature of

¹⁵ Michael Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 145, suggests that all Songs happens at night and secretly.

¹⁶ In the book by Nicolás de la Carrera, *Amor y erotismo del Cantar de los Cantares* (Madrid, Nueva Utopía, 1998) the author analyses Songs from a psychological and pleasure perspective. Many moments of the book are considered simply as amorous reflections that are justified by their simply and wonderfully being there.

the palm trunk. He climbs to the heights to take hold of the cluster of dates, and this allows the evocation of her breasts. Man searches for her, and as many times before he has climbed trees in search of dates he now is seeking her to taste her lips and breathe. Many are the images evoked in these verses. Man must make the effort to reach her. He must climb, he must collect in his hands the fruits and take them to his mouth. Poetry does not force us to define a concept rather to participate of a climate, in this case the love and eroticisms of both of them.

In this poem she indicates the way she would like to be treated. It must not be read as if all women would like this form of relation, nor as a paradigm for a correct and gentle male. It is a testimony not an archetype. It does not pretend to establish a paradigm of either pleasure for women nor behaviour for men. It simply seeks to establish that she enjoys being desired¹⁷. In Songs, neither man nor woman are stereotypes of people or models to be followed.

She is the author

The reader may have realized already that we refer to the author of Songs as *she*. This would not need any justification if it were not for our own narrow-mindedness which finds it strange to conceive that a woman could be the author of this work in the Bible. As a matter of fact it would need a long justification to explain how a man could have written a collection of poems in which the dominating sensitivity is clearly feminine, and the body exalted is mainly male. Though many commentaries mention the “androcentric” character of Song, without paying much attention that their later analyses contradict this affirmation. We believe that they are entrapped in a certain intellectual inertia and have not gone into a careful reading of the text in relation to the issue.

It is necessary to discard the authorship of Solomon. In 1:1 it says he is the author of the book. Though a series of internal information conspires against this statement:

- In 4:4 David is named in a way difficult to accept that the author would be talking about his father.
- In 8:11 it says “Solomon had a vineyard”, an expression which supposes that the author is not Solomon himself nor contemporary to the king.
- In 8:12 the author rejects Solomon’s riches with harsh words for his own *vineyard*. This form of expression supposes an author different to Solomon, even hostile to the king.
- From a linguistic point of view, the title (1:1) does not correspond to the rest of the work. There the Hebrew form *‘asher* is used, which is foreign to the tongue in which the rest of Songs is written, this indicates an independence from the rest of the text.

The painful reality of this attribution is that along the way the name of the woman author of this text, was lost. This is sustained on the following internal elements:

- In the poems it is the woman’s voice that is the main one.
- She carries the conceptual initiative in the majority of cases.
- She enters in dialogue with the women chorus. He never does.
- The voice of the woman opens and closes the book.

¹⁷ Such is the analysis of much of the excellent work of Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire. Religion, the Erotic and the Songs of Songs* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000).

There are other elements that can be taken into account. In Songs we find the only example in biblical literature in which a woman is spokesperson for herself, that means to say, a woman whose voice is not mediated by any other author¹⁸. The woman in Songs speaks directly in first person:

Let him kiss me... (1:2)

I am black and beautiful... (1:5)

Her feelings, thoughts and actions are not transmitted by another person as is the case in Ruth or Esther; rather it is her own voice that speaks to readers.

To these arguments one must add that in two opportunities the voice of the man is mediated by woman. This means that her voice tells what he says (2:10-14):

My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise my love...

This same scheme is found again in 5:2

I slept, but my heart was awake.
Listen! My beloved is knocking.
“Open to me, my sister, my love...

We need to point out that the inverse case –her voice mediated by man- does not take place in the whole book. We have already mentioned the reference in 7:11 to the sexual desire that leads man to woman and forces him to seek her. Songs responds to that text from a woman perspective. Carey E. Walsh in a recent book points out that “It is, first of all, shocking that an entire biblical book is devoted to women’s desire”, then to consider that as minimum it counter-effects the vast amount of thinking that opposes women’s desire, while as maximum it is definitively a subversive text¹⁹.

To end we should mention that these arguments do not imply we have to affirm an author in the modern sense of the word, that hand wrote each and every one of the poems. In antiquity this was an exception, what was current was that some person would collect previous texts, transmitted by tradition and would group them in the light of a new theological and social situation, generally adding fresh material composed by their own hand. It is in this task that our woman provided Songs with a particular woman touch.

Literary Aspects

A text that possesses the erotic condition as one of its semantic centres cannot avoid reflecting this in its literary aspects. There has been much debate if Songs possess an internal literary structure of if its poems are grouped haphazardly. Both alternatives do not seem to be fully convincing. It is not easy to prove evident structuring elements between the poems. It has been suggested as from some *leit motive* such as “O daughters of Jerusalem” or other such phrases, which are repeated in various poems. The difficulty rests in providing significant

¹⁸ See Renita Weems, “Song of Songs” in Carol Newsome and Sharon Ringe, *The Woman’s Bible Commentary*, (London, Westminster, 1995) p. 156.

¹⁹ *Exquisite Desire...* p. 4.

value to such structures. On the other hand, diversity and the coming-and-going of images do not seem to fit into rigid structures.

Other authors have sustained that the order is quite by chance and simply fits into an anthology which has united poems only by stanzas. There has been an intention to describe the work on a lineal level, quite dramatically, in which a (woman) shepherd in love with of simple (male) shepherd is sought by Solomon, which so creates rivalry between these two men and a contradiction for her, between true love and her duty as subject before her powerful king. In our understanding these options for a narrative structure do not bear fruit and we find it more adequate to discover in the sequence of poems a subtle network of words and themes, which groups one with another²⁰. In some cases one is the answer to the previous one (1: 5-8 relates to 1: 9-17), in other cases they relate by a common word to both (“mother” relates 8:1-4 with 8:5), in other cases they refer to objects and common places (“wine”, “vineyard” in 1:2-4 and 5-8). They can multiply, though the constant element is that there are no strict links, rather a bland succession, which opens up space for imagination and taste²¹. The semantic relations hardly offer a visible structure though they do offer the poetical language coherence with which it has been written. A too rational and rigid structure would have betrayed the spirit of the message. In this sense one can say that erotic has more to do with the pleasure of reading and its references than to a message which is articulate and discernable. What is needed is different level of interpretation where it is possible to postulate that the underlined message is the fact which is being promoted is the right to love and its sexual expression.

The literary genre is part of the erotic of the text. We describe it as the poetry of human love, and this has to be clarified due to the fact that for a long time, this was considered a non-erotic text, or at least re-signified eroticism. A love text between sublimed figures such as the messiah and God, God and his people, the church and the Messiah, etc. It was love, it was erotic and it was human, but not *between* human beings. Though evidence indicates human love, and for this reason during the first centuries it was difficult to understand and justify its belonging to both the Jewish and Christian canon. The problem that arose was to explain the presence of secular and erotic poems in which the name of God is found nowhere, with no allusions to liturgical practice or to the foundation happening of the faith of Israel. Its value was questioned and even its inclusion in the Bible was questioned. In contrast we find that Ecclesiasticus 47:17 (aprox. 220 BCE) refers to Solomon’s “songs”, and the Septuagint include it among its books. When Aquila, Simacus and Theodocius produce their own translations of the Hebrew texts into Greek they include Songs in their work, testifying this way to its acceptance and place in the Jewish canon by the year 180 CE. This discussion has its justification. It is Rabbi Akiva, a leading rabbi of the Jewish community after 70CE who established the prohibition for Jews to use Songs in private festivities and restricts it liturgical and religious use²². For us this leaves in evidence that the poems were known and used outside these circles probably as erotic songs to provoke the sexual excitement of participants. We also believe that this was a primary use and gave origin to the poems. Their ulterior spiritual and allegorical reading saved them from being excluded from the canon though distorted its sense.

Ethics and beauty

²⁰ See our *Cantar de los Cantares. El fuego y la ternura...* passim.

²¹ This is the emphasis of Renite J. Weems, op. cit. p. 157.

²² It part this is explained by the well known words of R. Akiva “He who tunes his voice singing Song of Songs in the place where a party is to be held, and this way turns it into a secular song, will have no place in the coming world” *Tosefta*, Sanhedrin, 12,10; and “No one in Israel can say that Song of Songs stains ones hands. Because all the world is not as valuable as the day in which Song of Songs was given to Israel; because all the Writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies”, *Tosefta*, Yad, 3,5.

In Songs we find an ethic which questions the morals of society of its time –and in many ways of our times- concerning erotic and sexuality. In the poems it creates a tension between the legitimacy of love in the decision of lovers to unite beyond any need of authorizing social sanction, while at the same time it binds a strong link of faithfulness which assures the continuity of the relationship and an mutual exclusive belonging. The couple does not regularly live together, and they meet to make love in hidden or private places, places where they cannot be seen (1:4-.7; 2:4.14; 3:4; 4:8; 5:5; 7:12-13; 8:1). The author indicates that this situation is related to the brothers of the young woman, who hide her and preserve her for marriage with a man who will provide a hefty dowry (see 8:8-9 and how the author despises the act of buying love with money as expressed in 8:7, a reference to the dowry system and the handing over by men of their daughters or sister). This may not be the final reason for their clandestine relationship, but the resource of eloping together is a constant in them:

Come my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields
and lodge in the villages;
...
There I will give you my love. (7:12-13)

Faced with this freedom of feelings and the body, of Eros exposed in its vital potential, it is necessary to oppose an equivalent force which frames and limits it so that it can act positively within the erotic economy, socially constituted and accepted by the other. The author finds a wonderful answer: this force is the exclusiveness of mutual belonging. The love they have for each other is not open to other actors. He calls her “a garden locked” (4:12) for other men. She calls him “my beloved is mine...” (2:16), and when the other women want to share him, she stops this by saying “my beloved has gone down to *his* garden...my beloved is mine” (6: 1-3). This issue reaches its climax in the poem where she says:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm... (8:6-7)

This way claiming to make public what is a hidden relationship, confirming it with a visible and indelible mark.

These poems are, at the same time, a source of esthetical and erotic resources, not seen in much of universal literature. It requires poetical sensitivity to value the more daring images, such as when he compares the woman to “a mare among Pharaoh’s chariots” (1:9), where we must remember that the most beautiful of all mares was chosen for the monarch; or when she says “your nose is like a tower of Lebanon” (7:4), and reminds us that a nose was an important sign of a strong personality, and so this becomes the highest praise, more than mere physical beauty. In Songs we encounter many comparisons with animals: breasts as gazelles (4:5); hair black as a raven (5:11); white teeth as a flock of ewes” (6: 6). The author also refers to landscape to describe love and lovers: the beloved is as an apple tree (2:3), she is a “beautiful city” (6:4); a lily among brambles (the woman condition? 2:2). Neither are smells absent, so she describes her loved one a fruit sweet to my taste (2:3); she is nard giving forth her fragrance for her beloved (1:12-14). In 4:11 he describes her mouth distilling milk and honey. Finally their bodies as exalted with images taken from nature. Her body is at various times compared to a vineyard, a fertile and aromatic land (1:6; 8:12), and with a garden (5:1; 6:2). The body of the man is compared with animals, aromatic spices, stones, tree trunks. Concerning his legs, she evokes “...Lebanon, choice as the cedars” (5:15).

Another resource used by the author is repetition. In various poems she repeats complete or partial phrases such as “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem...” (2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). Again, “my beloved is mine and I am his” (2:16; 6:3; 7:11). If we consider the simple images, we could count dozens of repetitions. Rather than a structure these repetitions express a fundamental intuition concerning love between lovers: that fact that this love must be expressed and constantly renewed. These poems do not respond to a legal logic by which something that has been expressed once remains forever. On the contrary, in these what has been affirmed must be renewed and validated with each encounter and –as happens with each caress- repetition does not tire, rather it is an invitation to claim and expect more, each time.

Theological discourse

Unintelligence and poetical insensibility added to the imperative to find a religious explanation, led many to imagine a hidden theology behind the images and metaphors of Song. This created an allegorical understanding to assure a theology which other wise could not be justified, and which was indispensable for preserving the canonicity of the book. We prefer valuing what is said in the text and feel challenged to understand its significance. There are two theological elements which we would like to point to: in the *first* place the negative role attributed to Solomon. When the author does this she takes sides with an understanding of the history of Israel and of what God blesses and rejects. The model of an impersonal relation, which is nearly slave-driven, founded on polygamy in which the king is the Israelite maximum hero, is denounced in the poems. Solomon is described as a frivolous and aggressive king (3:6-11) in contrast with the love of the couple:

Look it is the litter of Solomon
 Around it are sixty mighty men
 ...
 all equipped with swords
 and expert in war,
 each with his sword at his thigh
 because of alarms by night.
 ...
 King Solomon made himself a palanquin
 ...
 its interior was inlaid with love.
 Daughters of Jerusalem, come out (3:6-11)²³

This poem contrasts with the description of the bodies of the lovers in Songs. Here the king is described as a piece of furniture, of his soldiers, of the number of women that live in his bed. It says nothing about his love, his feelings. For the author of Song, this man could never offer a model of sexuality in common with her ideas. She loves a body and expects her body to be loved, not her possessions. She demands the possibility of deciding not of being pushed to anonymous sex of a man with power but not a face. While the king fears the night for its dangers and alarms and is surrounded by bodyguards, she waits with passion:

Upon my bed at night
 I sought him whom my soul loves... (3:1)

I slept but my heart was awake... (5:2)

²³ In this poem Solomon is not a hero rather he is undervalued when described in his frivolity, his lack of love and in contrast with the simpleness and sensitivity of the young lovers. See our *Cantar de los Cantares, el fuego y la ternura*, (Buenos Aires, Lumen, 1997) p. 96-104.

I *second* place the description of the king in a negative form, allows for a clearer underlining of the positive value of love and sexuality in the couple: they join because they love each other, and that is more important than any form of social or political power. Even more, they challenge the Solomonic model when the denounce in a subtle but explicit way that love can not be bought with money:

If one offered for love
all the wealth of one's house,
it would be utterly scorned. (8:7)

This was common practice in the court society, but not related in this case to prostitution, rather to pay for favours and political agreements, with the handing over of daughters for marriage.

There is a liberating theology in Song of Songs, and we must search for it when taking a stand concerning the social place for truthful and sincere love – in particular the place of women – within the dynamics of a society that represses erotic feelings or at least denaturalises it. Society canalises them in a structure in which women are subject to men through forced marriages or marriages decided by others (8:8-9). This is the same society that sanctions man for wanting to break a relation with woman when she rejects money (8:12). This collection of poems in the Bible denounces that God has another place in life for love and eroticism. It is faced with the face of the other that we begin on this way.