THE SONG OF SONGS IN SECULAR AND SACRAL CONTEXTS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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Summary The *Song of Songs* uses rich imagery, loaded with symbolism and wordplay, to convey intimate feelings and attitudes, full of passion and longing, love and sadness, in the simple form of dialogue between lover and beloved by exchanging most refined expressions of love. Goethe perceived it as "the most tender, inimitable expression of passionate, graceful love that has been transmitted to us" (GOETHE 2010, p. 177). The picturesque style of the *Song of Songs* is rich in metaphors from the nature (for instance 2:8-17; 7:11-13), images of plants, fruits, produces of the field and animals that emphasize the originality of the song, reveal the beauty of nature and a genuine sense of the natural. The words, selected from the 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. Among the great collections of parallel love poetry from great cultures and ages, the literatures of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt are the most pertinent for comparison with the *Song of Songs*. They constitute completely religious love poems reserving a special place in the heart for ordinary human creatures.

The collections of ancient and more modern love poetry, speaking of the universal pleasures and pains of love in relation to deities and humans, manifest the same literary genres and an elevate style in uniquely expressing delicate emotions. Striking similarities between the old and the new literary creations within a common cultural space justify theories of mutual influence of traditions. The similarities between the *Song of Songs* and the love poetry from Southeast Asia and India are, however, evidence of the common experience of love, rather than of mutual influence. The reality of love and its opposites inspires commonplaces in love experience and love language. *Song of Songs* lies in the love experience itself. Given the universal reality of love and the plurality of moral and literary perceptions throughout ages, both under anthropological and sacral aspects, the history of interpretation provides "an archaeology of the emotions" and illuminates many of the attitudes of peoples and individual interpreters to the experience of longing and love fulfilment.

Keywords: *Song of Songs*, dialogue structure, reality of love experience, truth in moral attitudes, similarity in literary creations, tradition and innovation.

The *Song of Songs* (SONG) is a unique work in terms of content, literary form and the history of its interpretation; it is a song in the full sense of the word, because, in a

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simple, sensual and passionate way, it is about love – the most universal and most powerful capacity of the human nature. Its content, its folk literary form and its place in the biblical canon account for the reason why no other literary work has given rise to so many different views. Sometimes these views are complementary, sometimes they are mutually exclusive. In early 2nd century A.D., the famous Jewish scholar Rabbi Akiba called it the "holy of holies" (*qódeš qōdāšîm*).[1] (Its sensuality, on the one hand, and its place in the canon of Scripture, on the other, are factors that stoked a conflict of views within between the autonomous secular eroticism in the "literal sense" and the allegorical interpretation of Jewish and Christian religious traditions.

1. Lyrical Unity of Composition and Aspects of Interpretation

The eight chapters of the song have the basic structure of a dialogue between two lovers; occasionally, this dialogue includes an assembly of young girls. The man and woman long for each other, they praise each other, and they seek each other. This theme and basic dialogue form guarantee the unity and internal coherence of the poems. The content and form allow for this breakdown, which is more or less reliable:

1:2-6	the introduction, which expresses 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 to the "daughters of Jerusalem" her seeking of her
3:6-11	lover;
4:1-5:1	a description of a wedding procession;
5:2-6:4	the bridegroom praises the bride's beauty;
6:5-12	a dialogue between the woman and the "daughters of Jerusalem";
7:1-8:4	the bridegroom admires the bride;
8:5-14	the bridegroom admires the bride's beauty;
	separate units: lines 5:6-7, 8-10, 11-12, 13-14.[2]

The interpretation of the SONG has passed through many phases. The point of departure is the question whether the structure of the Song is in some sense or another a real unity. Childs (1979: 576) recognizes "a unity of composition" and argues:

> The two voices of the male and female lover are introduced, sometimes in dialogue, often in monologue. There is considerable repetition of lines (2:17; 8:14) and a refrain

[1] *Cf. Mishnah*, *Yadaim* 3, 5, in Herbert Danby's *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 782: "God forbid! – no man in Israel ever disputed about the *Song of Songs* [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the *Song of Songs* was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the *Song of Songs* is the Holy of Holies."

[2] Though all of the commentators mentioned here devote much space to the structure of the text, this does not reduce the number of open questions.

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> (1:7; 3:5; 5:8), but there does not seem to be any clear movement and certainly not a plot. Rather, the one topic of sexual love is dealt with from a variety of perspectives, particularly the longing before union and the satisfaction of mutual surrender.

Fox (1985: 226) focuses on the question of unity of the SONG as the key to understanding the meaning of the poem. He argues: "To compensate for the looseness of structure, the poem achieves unity through coherence of thematic and verbal texture." The entire history of interpretation of the SONG in Judaism and Christianity is marked by the allegorical interpretation which is more typical of the Jewish than of the Christian religious tradition. More recently, however, a "literal" interpretation in the primary or "natural" sense has asserted itself. The worst possible outcome of this would be a search for contradictions rather than reciprocity between a "literal" and an "allegorical" interpretation.

The vast literature testifying to the most varied attempts to base an interpretation merely on linguistic and literary analyses bears witness to a repetition of more or less the same positions. These positions cannot even answer the question of why the SONG assumes such an important place in the canon of the Scripture and in the religious interpretations of Judaism and Christianity, let alone the question of how, at the experiential level, the "literal" erotic is linked to the "allegorical" or, better said, "spiritual" or "metaphorical" meaning, which is more or less linked to the literary elements of the poem. Also, the assessment that the Song of Songs does not attain its proper basis for understanding its theological meaning unless it is placed in the entire religious and theological context of the Bible does not imply an answer to this fundamental existential question: to what extent do the "literal" or secular and the "metaphorical" or spiritual stand? It is true that the SONG is ordered into the history of the revelation of God's love "as a whole" (*als Ganzes*), as Ringgren (1981: 256) notes, but that does not mean that we have determined how love is manifested in the relation between God and man and between human individuals. Is there, between "divine" and "human" love, an abyss or harmony? Is love an event among events which unfolds according to some logical sequence, or is it the secret of all secrets, which rises up to unimaginable heights, while threatening to fall into the murky depths?

The key to a somewhat satisfactory answer to this question is offered only by those commentators whose point of departure is the fundamental anthropological experience of love, which is consistent with the biblical position that man, having been created in God's image (*Gen* 1:27), is therefore in essence a spiritual being, full of longing for love. The fundamental experience at anthropological and spiritual level is that longing for a meeting with a loved one in earthly conditions can never be sufficiently realized. The essence of the experience of love is that in its orientation towards the absolute it always requires more than man's limited capacities can provide for. This aspect of the experience of love, however, entails that, in the

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sublimity and happiness of love, there is also inevitably hidden a germ of the tragic experience that under earthly conditions we can never achieve it, or that we, in the web of circumstances, might quickly lose it. Human love is by nature contrastive, for it is not always a matter of "to be or not to be." It is the rare interpreter who transcends impersonal analysis of the tests in the entirety of its structure of a dialogue and its composing elements, which is why there is all the more reason to highlight such structures.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe deserves special attention, for he explicitly rejects the legitimacy of searching for linear logic of interpreting the SONG in the sense of escalation to some sort of peak and recognizes that its advantages and true value lie in its existential contrasts, which manifest themselves in the contrastive relation between seeking and finding, attracting and repelling. The essence of longing in love is this: no obstacle can stop it. Goethe's description of how he views and understands the SONG is relatively brief, but in his description he says all that is essential: the baselessness of seeking meaning in "logicality" and the advantage of the SONG in the contrasting of the poet's representation of love in the dialogue between the two lovers. When in his *West-East Divan* he writes about literature among the Hebrews, he describes the nature of the *Cant*:

> Next, I will dwell for a moment on the Song of Songs, the most tender, inimitable expression of passionate, graceful love that has been transmitted to us. Certainly, we deplore the fact that poems thrown together as fragments and piled one on top of the other afford us no full, pure enjoyment. But we still take pleasure in transporting ourselves into the circumstances of the poets' life. A mild breeze of the loveliest region of Canaan wafts through the work – intimate rustic settings, wine production, garden plants and spices, something of urban constriction, but then a royal court with splendors in the background. The main theme, though, is still the ardent affection of youthful hearts that seek, find, repel, and attract each other, in a variety of very simple circumstances.
>
> Several times I thought of singling out a few things from this lovely confusion and arranging them. But it is precisely the enigmatic, inscrutable nature of these few pages that lends them grace and distinction. How often have well-thinking, orderly minds been enticed to formulate or impose some kind of plausible organizing plan, while the next reader is still confronted with the same task (GOETHE 2010, p. 177).

Among more recent researchers, the dominant interpretative approach to the *Cant* is that which Goethe convincingly rejects (there are, of course, exceptions). Landy (1987), writing on the literary peculiarities of the SONG, summarizes the findings of previous researchers and notes that the SONG is among the most outstanding of the biblical books – it reflects the supreme and most universal value of human relationships through the use of the dialogue structure and the metaphorical role of vocabulary, grammar and literary forms to form a coherent literary whole with a coherent message. The song as a whole is a unified discourse of love which is linked to the world through the use of words for objects, plants, animals and

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geographical conditions as metaphors for the coming-together of two people in love. The words are selected from the literary tradition, stemming from common experience and containing an internal relation towards the objects they designate; they evoke a combination of sensory quality and sound lovely within the rhetorical structure of a poetic discourse in the form of a dialogue. Words, images and metaphors stand for associations that are beyond speech within the harmonious whole of contexts that are bearers of meaning.

The main centre of the poem is the transition point between two completely different moments: the arrival of the lover in the garden, when he is "drunk with love" (5:1), and the scene of rejection and humiliation (5:2-6), when the two individuals' intense desire for union in love reaches the limits of language – the violence of actions in the surroundings of the world and the separation which lies in the innermost feelings of the lovers – a turnaround in the SONG results. The lovers' meeting and discourse testifies both to expectations and to disenchantment. Their hopes will never be satiated, because the lovers alternately draw nearer and retreat for no rational reason (Landy 1987: 316-317). The last song (8:5-14) represents the peak of the whole poem; here the poet confesses a view of love in the voice of the woman (v. 6-7):

> Set me as a seal upon your heart,
> as a seal upon your arm;
> for love is strong as death,
> passion fierce as the grave.
> Its flashes are flashes of fire,
> a raging flame.
> 7 Many waters cannot quench love,
> neither can floods drown it.
> If one offered for love
> all the wealth of one's house,
> it would be utterly scorned.

The structure of the text and the poem's rich symbolism evokes in some ways the place of love in the Bible and in other cultures. The indefinite use of and the approach of the subjects in the song has given rise to very different interpretations which are primarily based on an exclusively literal or a predominantly allegorical reading, or which connect both. An important starting point for the interpretation is the question of whether the song is constructed as a dialogue solely between a boy and a girl or whether a third person does indeed appear. The medieval Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra put forth the thesis that the natural environment of the poem is pastoral, and that the boy and girl are thus a shepherd and a shepherdess, but that, in addition to them, a third person appears. Ginsburg (1970: 12) builds on that theory and sees in the third person King Solomon, who wants to lure the

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beautiful shepherdess from the wild, idyllic and ethically unstained environment and into his harem. Therefore, he sees the main focus of the song in the glorification of the woman's fidelity. In his view, the significance of the book lies in the fact that it "records an example of virtue in a humble individual, who had passed successfully through unparalleled temptations [...]. The individual who passes through the extraordinary temptations recorded in this Song, and remains faithful is *a woman*." In the song, he also sees the "language of seduction" (*idem*: 123) and therefore sees not just two but three main characters: "That the poem speaks of three individuals, a shepherd, a shepherdess, and a king, and that the shepherd, and not the king, is the object of the maiden's affections, will be evident to every unbiassed reader of the book, and has been recognised by some of the Rabbins of the middle ages" (*idem*: 123).

Ginsburg's interpretative starting point is his insistence on the literal sense, for in terms of the sources of love he sees its sublimity and natural unity: "Granting that the design of the book was simply to describe *love*, we deny that it would have been deemed unworthy of a place in the sacred canon. Why should the pleasures of chaste love be considered less worthy of record in the sacred books than the sorrow for bereaved friendship, in *2 Sam.* 17, etc.? [...] God is the author of the human constitution as well as of the Bible; and he has in all respects adapted his revelation to the nature of the beings for whom it was designed" (Ginsburg 1970: 103-104). Equally convincing is Ginsburg's judgement of the harmony between the truth of the description of the natural environment and the truth of the bride's nature: "If the poet is so charming in his style, so exquisite and true in his picture of nature, surely it is but reasonable to give him credit for understanding his art, that he was acquainted with the manners and habits of the women of his age, and that he would be as true to *nature* in the description of the bride as he is in depicting nature herself" (*idem*: 107).

The reasons for the extraordinary plurality of views on the SONG can only be properly judged by simultaneously considering both the characteristics of the SONG in itself and its place in the broad context of the Bible and Judeo-Christian civilization. The SONG is a lyric poem of exceptional beauty, full of sensual symbols which for the most part we do not encounter elsewhere. It is composed as a dialogue among lovers who passionately seek each other and engender dramatic effects. Though there is a noticeable repetition of certain symbols, figures and statements, the song does not have a structure that traces the development of events to some sort of resolution. In the contemporary literary form it is secular, since nowhere do moral and religious elements or connotations appear. The exchanges between the individuals who appear do not make it entirely clear whether two or three main protagonists are at the centre of events. Those in favour of two characters see the scene as being occupied by King Solomon and the beautiful girl Shulamith, whereas

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those in favour of three characters, see Solomon, Shulamith, who is forced by King Solomon to leave her natural pastoral surroundings, and the shepherd, whom Shulamith had to abandon but whom she passionately seeks, thus expressing her unwavering fidelity to him. If there are two characters, then at the forefront there is the view of marital love in the assumption that the SONG is a folk collection of wedding songs; if there are three, then the Song concerns itself with the loyalty of an original love. The lyrical, impressionistic and mystical inspiration of the Song does not allow for a reliable identification of the individuals, but in any case the SONG bears equally-convincing witness to love being "strong as death" (8:6). This fundamental theme makes for an impression of the Song's unity.

2. *The Song of Songs* in the Literary Context of the Ancient Near East and its Proper Context

The long history of cultures in the ancient Near East and the use of ancient motifs and metaphors of love in later periods and up to today is very rich in love literature which in some ways is reminiscent of the SONG. On an existential level, similar motifs appear in the presentation of love between a boy and a girl in the form of dialogues, monologues, while the main theme is the longing for a coming together and union. The motif of beauty is, in various subtle variations, shown in relation to the beauty of the girl, which is why the similarities are particularly noticeable in the use of metaphors of the beauty of nature: the night, stars, the sun and the moon, hills and valleys, the wind and weather conditions, flower gardens, orchards, springs, plants and animals. The universal experience of love is depicted in the relationship between people from the area of the pantheon, between human individuals of a higher social rank among individuals in a Bedouin environment. In some love poems the lovers refer to each other as "my brother" or "my sister." From the status of lovers, from the circumstances of the genesis of the SONG, and from its purpose, the relation between the reality of the expression from existential experience and between the conventionality of expressing love for political and entertainment purposes is evident.

In more recent interpretations of the SONG, the most comparative collection of material is that evinced in Pope's (1977: 54-229) commentary. He refers to the particularly well-known songs from Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian and later Arab literature. Also, worth mentioning is the medieval Indian poem *Gita Govindam* (12th century), sometimes referred to as the *Indian Song of Songs*. One of the oldest is the partly-preserved Sumerian love song dedicated to Shu-Suen, the fourth ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur, dating back to around 2000 B.C. It seems that the song was made by a female, goddess Inanna. She returned to the king as a god and spoke in the third person about her charms in order to arouse a passion in the divine king for a sexual union in the sacred ritual of marriage (Kramer 1969: 496). In another

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song, goddess Inanna attempts to inspire love in Damuzi (*idem*: 637-638). In another one, goddess Inanna expresses in two soliloquys her gentle and passionate love for her lover Damuzi (*idem*: 639-640). In yet another ecstatic love song Inanna and Damuzi passionately converse as "brother" and "sister" (*idem*: 645). A Sumerian-Akkadian hymn celebrates the goddess Ishtar as a queen among women that is attired in passion and love (*idem*: 383).

There is a very rich tradition of Egyptian love poetry from the 19th Dynasty (c. 1305-1200 B.C.) and the early 20th Dynasty (c. 1200-1150 B.C.). The song is sometimes called an "AMUSEMENT," literally "CHEERFUL HEART." In these songs a boy and a girl appear, still under the supervision of their parents (Foster/ Hollis 1995: 162-171; Fox 1997: 125-130). In contrast to the religious traditions of Mesopotamian love songs in the relationship between gods and people of royal origins, the Egyptian songs are secular and sing about love between a boy and a girl, sometimes between a man and a woman, without specifying a hierarchical status. In the introduction to their edition of Egyptian songs, Foster/ Hollis (1995: 162) state: "These songs are a precious inheritance from the lyric poetry of ancient Egypt since they give the modern reader a glimpse of the intimate feelings and attitudes of young lives full of passion and longing, intrigue and duplicity, love and sadness. [...] The ancient Egyptian could love the gods and the king while reserving a special place in the heart for one or more human creatures."

Egyptian love poems express a strong yearning for fulfilment in love, which is expressed through a carefully constructed literary form. Specific characteristics of the literary form are the switching between the male and female speaker, the convention of using "my brother" and "my sister" as pet-names, the use of rich metaphors from the natural and social environments, and seeking out forms of wordplay. The ancient Egyptians had a refined sense for creating literary forms. In form they saw a unique manner of raising the style in which feelings and thoughts were expressed. The songs are composed in free rhythm and in plain language that is intelligible to all. A popular motif is that of obstacles that must be overcome in order for the lovers to meet, such as the River Nile filled with crocodiles. The lover expresses a will to traverse the river – in spite of all dangers – and to unite with his chosen one on the other side of the river. The boy and girl promise faithful and continuous happiness in their union.

The deliberately constructed lyric Sanskrit poem *Gita Govinda* (or *Song of Govinda*) is the work of the 12th century poet Jayadeva (Jayadeva 2000). The song is constructed as a lyrical dance drama in twelve chapters, each of which contains twenty-four eight-line poems. The poem focuses on god Krishna's love for the milkmaid Radha. Krishna had a special relationship with milkmaids and married several, but a special love grew out of his relationship with Radha. The main theme of this poetic drama is suffering in separation and the joy then felt when Radha and Krishna, who have

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divine characteristics, unite. According to a mystical interpretation of this idyll, which is a pastoral drama, Krishna represents the human soul which is torn between earthly and heavenly beauty. Krishna, who is both divine and human, is attracted by the sensual joys represented by milkmaids, and is thus linked to their illusory world. Radha, who represents the spirit of intellectual and moral beauty, wants to free him from those errant ways by inspiring a wish for her own gentleness.

It seems odd that the love between Radha and Krishna, whose purpose is to promote human union with God, is shown to be so explicitly sensual in the relation to the milkmaids, who sing and dance for him, and especially for Radha, who from the divine sphere approaches earthly reality. The love between Krishna and Radha indicates essentially a physical rather than a mental relationship. The poet extols the joy of Krishna and wishes that he might always he happy in his union with Radha; Radha, meanwhile, is introduced as the "queen of nature," who always tends towards a union with God, because only in complete love for God does the soul attain perfection. Krishna is divine in his essence and therefore above nature, which is why Radha is in essence an immaculate goddess. Radha is the power with which the god creates, but she herself remains beyond what the god creates after her. The poet's drama is therefore created as the path to a spiritual engagement between lovers.

Among more recent comparative studies on the SONG in the context of the Ancient Near East, there is a study by Fox (1985: xxiii): *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*. His intention is explicitly comparative.[3] In the Introduction he writes:

> It is not, however, the discovery of similarities alone that justifies literary comparison. Differences are no less important. Often the value of literary comparison is to offer a contrast, showing us where the work at hand diverges from similar works. [...] Discovery of sources and parallels is, therefore, not the end of comparative criticism but an aid to deeper interpretation, for we can best understand the individuality of a text by discovering where it diverges from the works it most resembles. This is so even when we compare texts where there can be no question of influence of the one on the other.

Fox (1985: 204) deals primarily with similarities and differences between the *Egyptian Praise Songs* and the SONG, but in many places he also deals with other ancient Near Eastern love poetry. The starting point of his comparison is the fact "that ancient Near Eastern love poetry consisted of short poems that were often collected in anthologies" but "these collections show nothing like the uniformity of style and frequency of repetitions that characterize Canticles." The main purpose of

[3] In the *Introduction to his study* we find statements: "Though poets can talk to us across eras and cultures about love, we must appreciate the variety no less than the commonality of human experience. Cultures, and for that matter individuals, differ in their perceptions of love as well as in their modes of expression" (Fox 1985: xix).

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Fox's (*idem*: 237) exhaustive study of the subject is his attempt to interpret the SONG as a generic unity in terms of coherence of thematic and verbal texture, expressing "the equality of the lovers and the quality of their love." Fox thinks that "the concept of love we find in most love songs is more likely and ideal of love than a reality" (*idem*: 297). A remarkable difference is that all Egyptian love songs are monologues showing the experience of individuals in love, whereas the SONG shows lovers interacting in speech in a true dialogue which establishes the reciprocity of their communication. Love's power is shown as paradoxical: "It is mainly the presence or absence of the beloved, or the expectation of that presence, that determines what effects love will work" (*idem*: 323).

The main theme of the SONG is to show how the lovers see each other and the way the lovers view the world in their immediate experience. Comparative analysis brings Fox (1985: 326) to conclude:

> Here then is a significant difference between the Song of Songs and the Egyptian love songs: the inward orientation characteristic of the Egyptian lovers contrasts with the basically outward orientation of their counterparts in Canticles. The Egyptian poets, fascinated by what goes on inside a lover's heart, have the lovers try to tell us what this is. The poet of the Song, on the other hand, has the lovers concentrate on each other rather than on their emotions.

In the SONG, lovers see each other as unique. Their eroticism transcends physical beauty:

> The sexual egalitarianism of the Song thus reflects a metaphysics of love rather than a social reality or even a social ideal. For the Egyptian poets, love was primarily a way of feeling, well represented by images of harmony and pleasantness. It was a feeling inspired by a lover but remaining within the confines of the individual soul. Thus, it was that monologue could fully convey its quality. Love in Canticles, on the other hand, is not only feeling: it is also a confluence of souls, best expressed by tightly interlocking dialogue: and it is a mode of perception, best communicated through the imagery of praise. This presentation of discourse and use of imagery thus reinforce each other in conveying a concept of love: love is a communion in which lovers look at each other with an intensely concentrated vision that broadens to elicit a world of its own. For *Canticles*, love is a way of seeing – and creating – a world, a private, idyllic universe (Fox 1985: 330).

The traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation sees in the SONG an allegory teaching about God's relationship with Israel, or in Christian interpretation Christ's relationship with the Church. In commentaries, we hardly find any reflective attempts to transcend the contrast between the tradition of allegorical interpretation of Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity and between various kinds of modern views that the SONG is a collection of secular love songs. One problematic theory is the view holding that the original function of the SONG was ritual or cultic in close

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analogy to the Babylonian Tammuz festival or the Baal cycles of Canaanite myth (Pope 1977, etc.). But to seek to place the SONG from its place in the biblical theological context into the context of ancient Near Eastern mythology disregards the function of biblical canon.

It is remarkable that interpreters did not pay much attention to the place of the SONG in the biblical canon as part of the wisdom literature. Recently, Leithart (2013: 452) points directly to this fact and argues:

> The Song of Songs is an erotic poem yet traditionally grouped with Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs as part of the sapiential literature. As we follow the (English) canonical order of the wisdom books attributed to Solomon, we see a progression from the early exhortation "Choose the right woman" to the quaint domesticity of *Prov* 31 to the passionate mutual delight of the Song.

The wisdom context of the SONG was treated already by Rad (1970), and later by Childs (1979). The wisdom context shows that the Song of Songs has its proper meaning of love which cannot be compared with "parallels" in the literal sense from the Ancient Near East. There are many passages in the wisdom literature where wisdom is connected with the topic of love. In the book of *Prov* 4:6 the wisdom teacher urges: "Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you." In *Prov* 4:8 the exhortation runs: "Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honour you if you embrace her." *Prov* 7:4 presents wisdom as "sister" to be loved: "Say to wisdom, «You are my sister» and call insight your intimate friend." We note that the beloved woman in the SONG is often referred to as "sister" (4:9-10, 12; 5:1; 8:8). In *Prov* 8:17 we find: "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me." The connection of wisdom with love is especially striking in the book of *Sir* (4:15; 6:26; 15:2; 14:20-27; 51:13, 19, 26-27) and *Wis* (6:12-16; 8:2). In *Wis* 8:2 the lover of wisdom confesses: "I loved her and sought her from my youth; I desired to take her for my bride, and became enamored of her beauty."

The language of love in wisdom literature is for Rad (1970: 218) an indication that the imagination of Israel is specific also in relation to Egyptian literary sources.[4] Among the successful attempts to make clear the exact nature of the hermeneutical problems at stake is the canonical principle of Childs (1979: 571), who thinks that the issue at stake is to determine the particular context from which the interpreter seeks to understand the text. He states: "In sum, the disagreement among the various theories is extreme and results in radically differing understandings of almost every passage. Lying at the basis of the disagreement is the confusion regarding

[4] See his statement: "Ohne diese religionsgeschichtlichen Querverbindungen zu bestreiten, interessieren wir uns hier für die Vorstellungen Israels, die auch gegenüber den ägyptischen ihr eigenes Gepräge haben."

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proper context" (*idem*: 573). What is the proper context of the SONG? Childs assumes behind the song wisdom reflection rather than the prophetic distinction between the sacral and profane domains and ethical confrontation. He also argues:

> As a minimal statement of a complex and varied phenomenon, wisdom sought to understand through reflection the nature of the world of human experience in relation to divine reality. The function of wisdom within Israel was essentially didactic and not philosophical. [...] The polarity of "secular and sacred" is alien from the start to the categories of Hebrew wisdom. Rather, reflection on human experience without resort to the religious language of Israel's traditional institutions of law, cult, and prophecy is characteristic of wisdom, and is by no means a sign of secular origin (Childs 1979: 574).

The foundation of this direction of interpretation is the recognition that "the wisdom context never functioned to shift the semantic level of human love to become a metaphor, but rather it sought to probe the mystery of human love within the creative order" (*idem*: 576). Childs (1979: 578-579) concludes with an explanation which provides the key to understanding the essence of the message of the SONG:

> The canonical concerns were highly theological, but expressed in such a way that the profane and sacred dimensions of life were never separated. The wisdom framework served to maintain the Song's integrity as a phenomenon of human experience reflecting the divine order which the community of faith continued to enjoy.

3. Conclusion

The dialogue of love in the *Song of Songs* takes place under the sign of dialogue with the world, which is represented by the metaphor of nature in the literary structure of the poem. Love is shown in all the dimensions of its reality, in the span from longing, seeking, fulfilling, being alienated and seeking anew. The poetic literary form expresses the existential possibilities which no other manner of presentation could do so convincingly. The theme of *Song of Songs* and the remarkable plurality of interpretations in Judaism and Christianity in religious and secular circles confirm the correctness of a "holistic" literary approach to interpreting the poem. The literary presentations of the main themes, which concern the emotional and the rational world of our being, express man's possibilities of universal meaning in a world of opposites in all concreteness.

Literary texts reveal the dimensions of the real world, which tends to reconciliation within conflict situations of external and internal impulses of individuals within the community that surrounds them. The literary characters determine the course of events when a work of art reveals their purpose; in the present it is marked by memories of past events and it suggests what might happen in the future. In this general orientation, literary texts are regarded as a privileged space of forming and disseminating universal values. Literary dialogues are guided by the hidden desire for appeasement; that is

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how the full truth about the reality of life and about the meaning of a literary representation unveils itself. Insisting on careful reading of texts in their own linguistic and literary structure and in relation to similar literary representations expands the space of literary interpretation within the internal, personal and intimate world and the external context at the local and global levels.

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