The Song is a poem. Do not at first try to understand: let the text take hold and it will open up a universe to us.

The Song awakens our own experience, going straight to our heart since it is about the Lover and the Beloved. It is a poem about a love encounter. The author let this encounter happen as in a dream in order to unveil its mystery; the call of love comes from elsewhere. Search, meeting, flight are enchanting and are true inasmuch as they reveal a mystery: Someone else draws us. This explains the title of the book: The Song of Songs. In Hebrew, it is one of the forms of the superlative: The Song par excellence or The Sublime Song.

The Song is both the intuition and the experience of the search for the unique beyond every veil. He too is likewise fascinated searching for him or her whom he has chosen— one who is all for him and irreplaceable, this discovery of Yahweh, the fierce God as the spouse, is not entirely new in the Bible. The prophets relied on their conjugal experience to speak about the covenant of God with his people (Hos 1:2). Rather, they used the words of human love to express their special relationship with God. One day, this relationship was to be offered to all Israel.

While he lets the dream of love to unfold, the author of the Song relives the hope of the chosen people. God’s beloved is Israel with its land. Just like the most fervent minority in Israel, the author-poet waits for the coming of the Beloved as Messiah-King and Spouse of the chosen community. This background of the Song explains the use of comparisons which would seem strange in the case of ordinary engaged couples, but which are in fact allusions to the past in Israel, to its Temple and its land.

We must admit that, in seeing the connections between the Song and the love songs of the Middle East, today many biblicists think that the Song was at first one of them and that an image of God’s love for his people was only seen there at a later time. This hypothesis may sound reasonable, but it just seems that way. Unfortunately, it leaves nothing but platitudes or incoherence, precisely where we suspect that the clues of the poem are to be found.

Therefore, we have to go back to what tradition has always discerned: in the Song, just as in the great prophets, although with different words, the experience of God-Love is what inspired the entire dream and what invited human images. The Song is not a song about human love which was put in the bible after having received a religious interpretation: Jewish tradition considered it to be the song of divine love from the beginning. The fact that God is not mentioned is intentional: he is present from beginning to end, but this One Alone at the same time Love and Lover is far different from the “God” of human religions.
The Author of the Song

The Song is presented as being the work of Solomon: it is only a borrowed name as is the case with other books in the Bible. The author was a “spiritual” and a sage of the third century before Christ, one of those who wrote the “Wisdom Books” of the Bible.

In Israel as in many countries, the marriage ritual included “the bridegroom’s song” and “the bride’s song” (Jer 7:34; 16:9; Rev 18:22). We know, for example, the Egyptian love poetry; but in Israel nothing remains of the popular songs of love. In fact, our author has done what the great musicians do in using popular melodies for the composition of their great works of art. The Song used expressions and even settings from traditional love songs in order to say what these did not say. Yet in speaking about Love the words used shed light on human love.

The Song in Christian Countries

In Christian countries, the monks took possession of the Song. They who had given up human love passed over the mystery of the love encounter in ordinary life. They saw the song as an allegory, a picture of spiritual experience. The expressions of carnal love in no way embarrassed them: it helped them to understand how strong the love relationship with the One Alone can be, how heady and devouring.

In fact they were to give back to Christianity a treasure they had found. In the twelfth century in Europe there appeared the first signs of a recognition of human love which had been ignored during the barbaric centuries. It was then that the spiritual experience of a few great monks and hermits was decisive. The Song reread and commented by them gave rise to an awareness of the mystery of love. The love songs and stories, fairly crude in the beginning, were gradually replaced by the literature of “courtly love.” From then on, century after century, the primacy of married love would be affirmed.

At times, it is said rather cynically that love ends in marriage and that is what movies and television never cease to repeat whenever a decadent culture only acknowledges love when it promises what it will not fulfill. The song put at the center of longings the aspiration to true love: this always irradiates from God and, like himself, is faithful until death and beyond.
I am sunburned yet lovely. The beloved represents the Jewish community, poor and fervent, returning home after the exile, when Israel had lost its reputation and its independence. She is the one who admits: I failed to tend my vineyard, namely, my land, Palestine.

And the King, the Lover, is the Lord. This first love poem is the dream of the beloved in which she already enjoys the day of her return to the king and tells herself the longed-for dialogue that they will have “on that day.” The choir shows her the place, which she already knows, where she will find the lover: The Shepherds’ Tent, an expression designating Mount Zion, the Holy City, where the descendants of David – the King-Shepherd – ruled.

At the end of this poem (2:7) we will find the Lord’s answer to those asking: “When would this dream be fulfilled?” Don’t arouse or stir up love before her time has come. God is looking toward a true love experience; all the delays for his coming are due to the fact that our heart is not yet really ready.

I am sunburned yet lovely. She was chosen and looked upon in spite of her tanned face – and perhaps precisely because she had been marked by suffering, errors and deception. She gained in no longer counting for anything in her own eyes and this humility had more value before God than many good works. She was already burnt perhaps by the regard of the one who wanted her for himself.

She

Shower me with kisses of your mouth: your love is more delicious than wine.

Your oil smells sweeter than any perfume, your name spreads out like balm; no wonder the maidens long for you.

Lure me to you, let us fly! Bring me, O king, into your room, and be our joy, our excitement. We will praise your caresses more than wine, how rightly are you loved.

I am sunburned yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark as the tents of Kedar, as the tent curtains of Solomon.

Stare not at my dark complexion; it is the sun that has darkened me. My mother’s sons were angry with me and made me work in the vineyards; for I had failed to tend my own.

Tell me, my soul’s beloved, where do you graze your flock, where do you rest your sheep at noon? Why must I be wandering beside the flocks of your companions?

Chorus

If you do not know yourself, most beautiful woman, follow the tracks of the flock and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds’ tents.

He

To a mare in Pharaoh’s chariot would I liken you, my love.

Your cheeks look lovely between pendants, your neck beautiful with strings of beads.

We will make you earrings of gold and necklaces of silver.

She and he

While the king rests on his couch, my perfume gives forth its fragrance.

My lover is for me a sachet of myrrh lying between my breasts.
2.8 A springtime of annunciation: love comes to seek the beloved. Finished are the trials that seemed to have no end and no sense. The lover is pleased to sing the beauty of his beloved.

Here faith is required of the reader: we have just closed a paper telling us of millions of galaxies blown like a bubble of soap fifteen thousand million years ago, and then the Song speaks of Him seeking a love among the innumerable descendants of the little "homo habilis." Is it true? Possible? These hundreds of thousands of centuries and suns are perhaps but a cloud of smoke which hides at a different depth the mystery of the Supreme Person, the source of love. A love that is not only human, for while experiencing it himself, at the same time his Spirit lights its flame in us.

We have said that this text has the sound of its time. The verse 2:15 is surely an allusion to the difficulties of a community unable to give itself, as it would wish, in its search for its God. Are we ever able to find a peaceful place, where at least, there are no mosquitoes, and more than insects, preventing us from enjoying the presence of God?

14 My lover is for me a cluster of henna from the vineyards of Engedi.
15 How beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves!
16 How handsome you are, my love, how handsome! Our bed is ever green!
17 The beams of our house are cedar, our rafters are fir.

2 I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley.
2 As a lily among thorns, so is my love among women.

She

3 As an apple tree in a forest, so is my lover among men.
I sought his shade, there I sat; his fruit is sweet to my taste.
4 He has taken me to the winestore; his banner over me reads: "Love."
5 Oh, strengthen me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, for love makes me sick!
6 His left hand is under my head; his right arm embraces me.

He

7 I beg you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the field, not to arouse or stir up love before her time has come.

She

8 The voice of my lover! Behold he comes, springing across the mountains, jumping over the hills, like a gazelle or a young stag.
Now he stands behind our wall, looking through the windows, peering through the lattice.
10 My lover speaks to me,

He

"Arise, my love, my beautiful one!
11 Come, the winter is gone, the rains are over.
12 Flowers have appeared on earth; the season of singing has come;
• 3.1 On my bed at night I looked for the one I love. Love keeps us awake. Mary Magdalen goes through the entire city looking for Jesus and, for the first time, passersby laugh at her. She comes into the house without seeing the porter and he does not dare stop her; she knew that she would reach Jesus. I held him and would not let him go, but one day Jesus will say to her: “Do not hold on to me” (Jn 20:17).

• 6. Who is this coming from the wilderness? We probably have here an evocation of God coming up from the desert to his Temple – Solomon’s Temple. Through Solomon, it is God himself with his Messiah whose coming is awaited. At the time of Moses Yahweh accompanied his people, hidden in a cloud of smoke.

Again the lover sings the praises of his beloved. Most probably this passage uses traditional couplets that the newly-weds sang during the wedding feast, each praising the other.

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride. How can we speak well of God, and of a God-Lover? Perhaps it is this aspect of God that is the most difficult for us to discover. Yet how do we understand that the whole Bible speaks of election, of the chosen people, and the elect? Would it be because some are not chosen and are condemned, or rather because God’s love is always at the same time the love of a father and of a lover? Because of that he came in the person of his Son, the “Spouse,” as he calls himself.

Notice the last verse of 3:11 which like 6:8 is similar to psalm 45.

Today throughout the world, men and women seek to attain, beyond the polluted and materialist world, something or someone transcendent. The ways are not lacking and the “oriental” doctrines, more often their imitations, have droves of readers. We shall not believe that God has not revealed himself beyond Christian revelation; however confusion should be avoided. Even if the same words are used: mystic, contemplation, spirituality, the meaning is often different, and the Song shows us, just as do the Letters of John, what is proper to Christian mysticism:

– the Christian search for God the cooing of doves is heard.

13 The fig tree forms its early fruit, the vines in blossom are fragrant. Arise, my beautiful one, come with me, my love, come.

14 O my dove in the rocky cleft, in the secret places of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice. Your face – how lovely! Your voice – how sweet!”

15 Capture the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, our vineyards in flower.

16 My lover is mine and I am his; he shepherds his flock among the lilies.

17 Before the dusk blows and shadows flee, return, my lover, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the rugged hills.

She

3 I On my bed at night I looked for the one I love, I sought him without finding him; I called him and he did not answer. I will rise and go about the city, through the streets and the squares; I will seek the love of my heart...

3 I sought him without finding him; the watchmen came upon me, those who patrol the city. “Have you seen the love of my heart?”

4 As soon as I left them, I found the love of my heart. I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother’s house to the room of her who conceived me.

He

5 I beg you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the field, not to arouse or stir up love before her time has come.

Chorus

• 6 Who is this coming from the wilderness? There seems to be a pillar of smoke, with fumes of myrrh and frankincense. Look, it is Solomon’s carriage!
is not first of all to “experiment,”
but to love another;
— this search is not for “something”
to be attained at the end of
a long period of ascetic discipline,
but for someone who gives and
will give himself when he wishes;
— if we speak of spirituality it is
a question of the Spirit of God at
work in us. He leads us, perhaps,
by very diverse ways, but always
leads to union with Christ on the
cross;
— our ultimate experience of
God will always be that of an
authentic marriage where the two
become one, where the human
person is transformed, becoming
all that God is, without ceasing to
be oneself. This experience has
had innumerable witnesses, and
these know, or know, that no
other way of wisdom can give
them what they have become.

Ps 91:5  Ps 10:18  Is 61:10  Is 62:3

SONG OF SONGS 3

sixty warriors escort him,
the strongest of Israel,
all girded with swords,
all seasoned in battle;
each is ready with sword at his side,
each prepared for the terrors of the night.

King Solomon has made for himself
a carriage of wood from Lebanon,
it columns of silver,
it back of gold,
it seat of purple cloth,
it framework inlaid with ivory.

Come, daughters of Zion,
see King Solomon wearing the diadem
with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
on the day his heart rejoiced.

He

4  \footnote{1}{You are beautiful, my love,
oh, how beautiful you are!}
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
streaming down the heights of Gilead.

Your teeth are like sheep newly shorn,
coming in droves from the washing,
each one opposing its twin,
not one has been left alone.

Your lips are like a thread scarlet;
your voice is enchanting;
your cheeks behind your veil
are like halves of a pomegranate.

Your neck is the tower of David,
a display of trophies
a thousand bucklers hang on it,
all of them worn by heroes of war.

Your breasts are like twin fawns
of a gazelle feeding among the lilies.

Before the dawn breaks and shadows flee,
I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh,
to the hill of frankincense.

You are wholly beautiful, my love,
perfect and unblemished.

Come from Lebanon, my bride,
come with me from Lebanon.
Come down from the summit of Amana,
from the crest of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
from the mountain haunts of leopards.
9 You have ravished my heart,
my sister, my bride;
you have ravished my heart
with one of your glances,
with one bead of your necklace.
10 How sweet is your love,
my sister, my bride!
How delicious is your love more than wine,
and the fragrance of your perfume,
than any spice!
11 Your lips distill nectar, my bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.
Your garments have the scent of Lebanon.

Let my lover come to his garden
and eat its choicest fruits.

He

1 I have come to my garden,
my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with spices,
I have eaten my honey and my honeycomb,
I have drunk my milk and my wine.
Friends, eat and drink!
Drink your fill, my dearest ones!
She

2 I slept, but my heart kept vigil.
I heard the knock of my beloved.
“Open to me, my sister, my love,
my perfect one, my dove!
My head is wet with dew,
my hair with the drops of the night.”

3 I have taken off my robe;
must I put it on again?
I have washed my feet;
must I soil them again?

4 My lover thrust his hand
through the lock opening
and my heart thrilled for him.

5 I rose to open the door.
Myrrh from my hands dripped
on the handle of the lock.

6 I opened to my lover
but he had turned and gone –
my soul went after him!
I sought him but did not find him;
I called him but he did not answer.

7 The watchmen came upon me
those who patrol the city;
they beat me and wounded me;
they took away my mantle –
oh, those guardians of the walls!

8 I beg you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
if you ever find my lover –
Oh, what will you tell him?
Tell him that love makes me sick.

Chorus

9 How is your lover better than others,
most beautiful woman?
How is your lover better than others,
that you do so beg us?

She

10 Radiant and ruddy, my lover
stands out among thousands.
11 Pure gold is his head,
palm fronds are his hair,
glossy black like the raven.
12 His eyes are doves
beside running waters,
bathed in milk
and set like jewels.
• 6.1 My lover is mine, and I am his. How far we are from Moses after ten centuries of salvation history! (For Deuteronomy which also speaks of love, attributes to Moses more than he actually said.) Here we find the message of the great prophets. Let us remember, however, that for them, the bride-to-be, the spouse, is always the collective Israel. Only in the Christian community (but already in certain psalms), the Bible will be read as the history of the personal love of God for his people: those he has known beforehand and sanctified.

If God reveals himself as Love and Lover, it is not a way of speaking; he tells us what is his very nature. God's eternity is a feast of love, with its constant creativity from which proceed the Persons of the Son and the Spirit constantly reabsorbed into the joy of this union. Often we hesitate to think and to express it, so obsessed are we by the idea that if God is infinitely great, he must be, to begin with, a gentleman according to our fixed ideas, a great scholar, of course, and a great engineer as well.

Compare 6:8-9 with psalm 45. This psalm was probably not written on the occasion of a king's marriage, but, with the imagery of a royal wedding, it spoke of the inauguration of the Messiah's reign. The Queens and the favorites are the pagan nations who submit to the Messiah-King; in no way will they prevent Israel from remaining unique.

• 8. But my dove, my perfect one, is unique (v. 9). Fitting for Israel and fitting also for whoever has received marks of God's special love. All are loved “in Christ” and some infinitely more than others who have received only one talent. Each one, however, is loved with a unique love which makes that person feel he/she is special, as if ignoring what others might have received even if they be Apostles or Our Lady. Love cannot but be jealous, even if there is no place for jealousy in the kingdom of God.

13 His fragrant cheeks are like beds of spice; his lips like lilies dripping with myrrh.
14 His hands are rods of gold adorned with jewels; his body is polished ivory covered with sapphires, set upon bases of gold; his legs are pillars of alabaster. He has the stature of Lebanon, excelling like the cedars.
16 His mouth is sweetness itself; he is most worthy of desire. O daughters of Jerusalem, such is my friend and lover.

Chorus

6 • 1 Where has your lover gone, most beautiful woman? Where has your lover turned, that we may help you look for him?

She

2 My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the garden and to gather lilies.
3 My lover is mine, and I am his; he shepherds his flock among the lilies.

He

4 My love, you are lovely as Tirzah, beautiful as Jerusalem, majestic as bannered troops.
5 Turn your eyes away from me for they bewitch me. Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down the heights of Gilead.
6 Your teeth are like sheep coming in droves from the washing, each one opposing its twin, not one has been left alone.
7 Your cheeks behind your veil are like halves of a pomegranate.

• 8 Sixty queens, eighty concubines, virgins beyond number –
9 but my dove, my perfect one,
is unique, the only daughter and favorite of her mother.

She was called blessed by the virgins and praised by queens and concubines:

10 “Who is this coming like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as bannered troops?”

11 I went to the nut orchard to look over the valley in bloom, to see if the vines had flowered, or if the pomegranates had blossomed.

12 Before I became aware of it, my desire had set me on the chariot with the daughter of the prince.

Chorus

1 Return, return, O Shulammite, return, that we may look at you!

2 Why would you look at the Shulammite, as dancing between two rows?

2 How beautiful are your feet in sandals, daughter of the prince!
Your shapely thighs are like jewels, the work of a master artist.

3 Your navel is a bowl well-rounded, never lacking exquisitely blended wine.
Your belly is a mound of wheat with lilies around it.

4 Your breasts are two fawns, twins of a gazelle.

5 Your neck is an ivory tower.
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim;
your nose, the tower of Lebanon looking towards Damascus.

6 Your crowned head is Mount Carmel;
your flowing hair is royal purple, which holds a king captive in its tresses.

7 How beautiful you are, how lovely, my beloved, in your delights!

8 Like a palm tree, you are stately and like its clusters are your breasts.

9 I said, “I will climb the palm tree and take hold of its fruits.”
May your breasts be clusters of the vine,
your breath sweet-scented as apples,
and your mouth like the best wine.

She

May the wine flow straight to my lover,
flowing over from my lips.

I am my lover's
but it is he who depends on me.

Come, my love,
let us go to the countryside,
and pass the night in the villages.

Let us go early to the vineyards
to see if the vines have flowered,
if the buds have opened,
and the pomegranates have blossomed.
There I will give you my love.

The mandrakes yield their fragrance;
at our doors are the rarest fruits;
both new and old I have stored
for you, my love.

She

If only you were my brother,
nursed at my mother's breasts,
I could kiss you outside if we met,
without anyone despising me for it.

I would lead and bring you
into the house of my mother,
and you would teach me there.

I would give you wine with spice
and the juice of my pomegranates.

His left hand is under my head;
his right arm embraces me.

I beg you, daughters of Jerusalem,
by the powers of nature,
not to arouse or stir up love
before her time has come.

Who is this coming from the wilderness
leaning upon her lover?

I woke you under the apple tree,
where you were conceived by your mother,
where she who bore you was in travail.
6. Love is strong as death…

The Song ends with the promise of the eternal union of the Lord with his people. The love of the jealous God is strong, and strong also is the love that he puts in the heart of his children: who will separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom 8:35).

Love – as it is here expressed whether divine or human is the same if it is sincere – is far removed from what our society knows. The love of man and woman has been freed from the constraints of social life, and has overcome little by little the secular prejudices of masculine domination, thus becoming the privileged place for communication between persons, at the same time seen as an increased fear of “losing one’s own life” in binding oneself totally to another person. Many try to combine what is contradictory: a love that leads to the fullness of joy and the fullness of self, and a secret decision to break as soon as one sees the possibility of finding something better.

Here the biblical text gives priority not to happiness but to love. The Song is the will to know love at whatever cost, and the Gospel tells us the price. Marriage will be restored in such a way: people marry to respond together to a call, and happiness here below will be a free gift in the way God wishes to give it.

8. The last verses of the Song of Songs, from 8:8, were possibly phrases added to the poem later; they make political references. The fact that they have been inserted here is quite significant: it seems to confirm that what people read in the song were the aspirational hopes of the Israeli community and its will not to turn away from its hopes.

* 6

Set me as a seal on your heart,
set me as a seal on your arm.
For love is strong as death;
its jealousy lasting as the power of death,
it burns like a blazing fire,
it blazes like a mighty flame.

7

No flood can extinguish love
nor river submerge it.
If a man were to buy love
with all the wealth of his house,
contempt is all he would purchase.

* 8

We have a little sister
with her breasts yet unformed.
What shall we do for her
when her courtship is begun?

9

If she were a rampart,
we would build towers of silver on it.
If she were a gate,
we would enclose it with panels of cedar.

She

10

I am a rampart
and my breasts are towers;
thus I have become, in his eyes,
like one who brings peace.

11

At Baal-hamon Solomon had a vineyard,
which he gave over to caretakers;
for its fruit, each had to pay:
a thousand pieces of silver.

12

But my vineyard is mine and I myself keep it.
You, Solomon, may have the thousand,
and the fruit keepers two hundred pieces.

13

You who dwell in the gardens,
with your friends in attendance,
let me hear your utterance.

14

Make haste, my love;
be like a gazelle or a young stag
on the spice-laden hills!