

What is spiritual about sexuality? Insights from a wisdom reading of Song of Songs¹

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Abstract

Imaginative variations in hermeneutical approaches to Song of Songs show the interpreters' struggle to understand the presence of this sexual text within the Holy Bible. Even the broad scholarly consensus, labelling the Song's genre as "mere" love poetry signals the perception of an absence of theological meaning. The inability of interpreters to find theological meaning in an Israelite text about sexuality reflects a societal dualism where sexuality is viewed as secular and removed from the realm of spirituality. In this article, a frame of reference is constructed with typical wisdom characteristics and used as a lens with which to explore the meaning of Song of Songs. The frame of reference includes vocabulary, form, rhetoric, metaphors, anthropology, order, the threat of chaos, scepticism, critique, and knowledge of God. Using wisdom as a hermeneutical approach to reading Song of Songs uncovers a sexual theology that claims a Creator-conscious sexuality and a pleasure-affirming spirituality.

Keywords

Sexuality; Song of Songs; spirituality; wisdom; wisdom literature

Introduction

In the intersection between *zeitgeist*, context, ideology and imagination, the history of interpreting Songs of Songs showcases myriad hermeneutical approaches.² At first, the teasing sexual tones and romantic lyrics of Song

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- 1 This article is based on Oosthuizen (2014), "Reading Song of Songs as wisdom literature: An interpretive approach integrating sexuality and spirituality", MTh thesis, Department of Old Testament, University of the Free State.
 - 2 Rowley (1952), Pope (1977), and Murphy (1990) offer comprehensive studies on the earlier interpretations of Song of Songs.

of Songs were muted with allegorical “covers”, whether Jewish-historical (God’s relationship with the nation Israel), Jewish philosophical (union of the active and receptive intellect), Mariological (the bride identified with the Virgin Mary), mystical (God and the soul), or ecclesiological (Christ and his bride, the church). With the Enlightenment, the Song’s sheet music (literary interpretation) was rediscovered, and the Song’s tune slowly changed. The movement away from allegorical interpretations did not yield immediate clarity on the meaning of the lyrical love poems. Scholars explored drama theory,³ wedding songs,⁴ and pagan cultic rituals⁵ as interpretative approaches. While the notes became clearer, the hermeneutical adventure reached a disappointing anti-climax, with the broad scholarly consensus summarised by Murphy (1992:153) as nothing more than “secular love” and by Ausloos (2008:38) as “profane love lyrics”, formulations that point to the absence of theological meaning. Within the broad classification of love poetry, interpretations oscillate between erotic love in marriage (which can include the courtship, the wedding, and after the wedding) or before marriage in an exclusive relationship, and even immoral and pornographic perspectives.

Maybe we will never be sure how to perform the Song with musical originality, and we will continue to enjoy and evaluate performances on the merit of their hermeneutical, ideological, and contextual choices. However, I add my voice to the minority of scholars⁶ who point to unqualified (not tentative)⁷ wisdom lenses as a hermeneutical framework to present the Song with theological meaning relevant to our contemporary context.

3 Examples of scholars who chose the drama theory as a hermeneutical approach are Jacobi (1772), Ewald (1826), Ginsburg (1857), Driver (1891), and Delitzsch (1891).

4 Examples of scholars who contributed to the wedding songs theory as a hermeneutical approach are Wetzstein (1873), Budde (1898), and Eissfeldt (1965).

5 Examples of scholars who explored the cultic and pagan rituals as a hermeneutical approach are Meek (1922/23) and Pope (1977).

6 Examples of scholars who use wisdom themes/lenses as a hermeneutical approach are Audet (1955), Winandy (1960), Sadgrove (1978), Childs (1979), Tromp (1979), Reese (1983), Oosthuizen (2014), and Andruska (2019).

7 Many scholars who acknowledge wisdom links to the Song of Songs do so tentatively and in the light of wisdom editors. In these cases, Song of Songs is treated as a love poem (a single unit or a collection of poems) with limited didactical and theological value. Typical wisdom themes are not explored as part of an interpretational framework.

Reading Song of Songs as wisdom literature allows us to celebrate erotic love while being cognisant of its chaotic and disruptive power. It explores the complexities of human love in a Creator-conscious setting that integrates sexuality and spirituality. It provides a robust framework for enduring questions about love, desire, sex and relationships. Against the wisdom background, Song of Songs is as imaginative as previous interpretations were and offers a fresh field of meaning that can be explored in our contemporary context.

Methodology

To show Song of Songs' alignment with Israelite wisdom literature, a frame of reference (a lens) is constructed, utilising the work of renowned scholars of wisdom literature: Whybray (1974), Perdue (1994), Murphy (2002), Crenshaw (2010), and Bartholomew and O'Dowd (2011). These scholars have been selected because they exclude the Song of Songs from their focus on wisdom literature. The frame of reference identifies typical characteristics that may be used as "lenses" through which to explore Song of Songs. The characteristics include vocabulary, form, rhetoric, metaphors, anthropology, order, the threat of chaos, scepticism, critique, and knowledge of God.

In exploring Song of Songs through wisdom "lenses", insight into the text is derived from scholars who contributed to the understanding of Song of Songs, irrespective of their classification of Song of Songs as wisdom literature.

Vocabulary

While Whybray (1974:155) acknowledges the risk of subjectivism, arbitrariness, and circular argumentation, he studied wisdom vocabulary extensively. He constructed a list of words that can be used to detect the influence of the intellectual tradition in texts outside the accepted wisdom corpus.⁸ While it is no surprise that these words are not present in Song of

8 Whybray's list of words that are exclusive to the intellectual traditions: 1) *bīnā* "understanding", 2) *ba'ar* "stupid", 3) *k'sīl* "stupid", 4) *lēš* "scoffer/arrogant man", 5)

Songs, the project's usefulness should be considered, since five of the nine words identified do not appear in Job, and six do not appear in Qoheleth. Crenshaw (2010:31–33) also discounts vocabulary as an identifier of wisdom literature due to the commonality of language and the risk of circular reasoning.

It is reasonable to question the validity of using wisdom vocabulary to prove that Song of Songs is not wisdom literature. Are sages not able to construct intellectual arguments without these specific words?

It is also important to note a word not considered by Whybray, “craftsman”, appears in Cant 7:1 and Prov 8:30 (NIV). The pericope in Prov 8:22:36 describes the birth and function of Woman Wisdom, the first creative act of the Yahweh (v 22); she is present at the side of the “craftsman” (v 30) and takes delight in humans (v 31). In Cant 7:1, the graceful legs of the female lover are the work of a “craftsman”. Reese (1983:244) finds this word an important linguistic link between Song of Songs and the biblical sages.

Reese (1983:207) also points out that the *hapax legomena* in Song of Songs is more than in any other biblical book. Intellectuals use these words to “make passages difficult to understand and create the type of ambiguity that fosters variety in interpretation” (Reese 1983:207). Murphy (1981:102) also acknowledges the significance of the *hapax legomena* and suggests that it points to “*Kunstdichtung*, poetry produced by an educated class”.

Using vocabulary to identify wisdom literature is reductionistic, however, and does not account for the complexity of literary works. In addition, the word “craftsman” as a reference to the Creator and the *hapax legomena* indicate the hand of a “sage” in the text, and not only in the so-called “wisdom editing” of the refrains and *mashal*.

Form

While many scholars agree that Song of Songs is lyrical love poetry (Barbiero, 2011:19), the content is denoted as “secular love” (Murphy 1992:153) or

leqah “understanding/teaching”, 6) nā ōn “intelligent”, 7) sâ āl “senseless/foolish”, 8) ’ārūm “prudent/shrewd/cunning”, and 9) tūšiyā “wisdom/success” (Whybray 1974:150–155).

“erotic love lyrics” (Schellenberg 2016:405). The classification of the content as erotic love poetry seemingly disqualifies Song of Songs from inclusion in the corpus of wisdom literature, and the incidental occurrences of typical wisdom forms (the refrains and *mashal*) are ascribed to wisdom editors (Dell 2005:15; Schellenberg 2016:404–405). However, such an approach seems unnecessarily limiting, especially considering how wisdom scholars reflect on wisdom forms.

Whybray (1974:73) criticises using form to detect the intellectual tradition outside the accepted wisdom corpus. The admonitions, woe oracles, numerical sayings, rhetorical questions, and comparative sayings belong more to Israel’s common life than to wisdom literature’s classification. Bartholomew and O’Dowd (2011:23) also argue that it is unlikely that Israelite authors distinguished sharply between forms when reading and writing their literature. They note that wisdom is more at home in poetical books “among metaphors, wordplay and more imaginative literature” (Bartholomew & O’Dowd 2011:23), a perspective which does not exclude Song of Songs.

For Crenshaw, a coherence between content and form is an important characteristic of wisdom literature (2010:12). He notes that wisdom themes can also be addressed in non-sapiential contexts, which makes the unique style (form) important. The degree of participation in biblical wisdom depends on the degree of “oneness” between form and content. The ornamental features (form) function as the convincing element. “The more pleasing to the eye or ear, the more persuasive the content” (Crenshaw 1976:15).

The marriage between form and content is exquisite in Song of Songs. What better way to present the reality of sexual love in its fullness than poetic snapshots of the endless cycles of desire and consummation, the vulnerability of longing, the fear of loss, and the risk of pursuing a force as strong as death and as scorching as a flame? The poems, refrains and *mashal* are the forms (containers) that carry the wisdom about the sexual aspect of being human. Even the placements of the poems, refrains, and *mashal* are meaningful. Johnston (2009:297, 305) found that the refrains and parallel panels (e.g., the two episodes of nocturnal quests) are arranged in a cyclic fashion that prevents linear reading and creates an ebb and flow

that imitates the desire/fulfilment experience of the lovers. Fox (1985:218) and Exum (2005:79–80) note the aptness of the *mashal* at the end, speaking about love's power with force and credibility based on the lovers' experiences.

While the claim of wisdom by no means rests on the presence of the refrains and *mashal*, it should be noted that a variety of translation possibilities contests the educational value of the refrains, preferring the admonition not to disturb the lovemaking rather than not to awaken love before love is ready. Andruska (2019:43–61) critically explores the different approaches to translating the refrains. She notes that translating רוע as “do not disturb” is valid but not convincing. There are no instances where רוע is used in the context of sexual desire, but there are instances where the word is used for “waking” a sleeper (Job 14:12). If the lovers are in the act of lovemaking, they cannot be awakened since they are not asleep, nor are they in a state of inactivity. “The word certainly does not mean ‘to disturb’ an act in progress” (Andruska, 2019:50). In addition, the subject is האֶהְבָּהּ (the love) and not the couple. Translating the ה as a possessive (her lovemaking) is questionable for transposing an English expression, “my loving”, onto the text. The anaphoric use of ה is valid, but the referent as lovemaking in the preceding context is unclear and not evident in all the refrains (Cant 3:4). Andruska (2019:59) builds a convincing case for interpreting the refrains as encouragement/advice not to awaken love. She interprets עַד שֶׁתִּהְיֶה as “when love desires to arouse/be present” and points to a certain kind of love: “The refrains then teach that one is not to awaken this love within themselves until this type of love is present; the love in the Song” (Andruska, 2019:59). She then identifies the love in Song of Songs in overly romantic terms as mutual, peaceful, equal, proactive, devoted, desirous, sexual, exclusive, committed, and timeless. This approach partly correlates with Schwab's interpretation (2002) that warns against awakening love, but he indicates the reason to be the dangerous and disruptive power of love comparable to the Leviathan, while Andruska (2019:55) flags this approach as “overly negative”.

Andruska's (2019:59) translation recommendation of אַתָּה וְאַמִּתְעוֹרְרִי as “do not awaken love” checks the linguistic and grammatical boxes and avoids the weaknesses of other approaches pointed out in her study. However, her translation of עַד שֶׁתִּהְיֶה as “when this type of love desires

to be aroused” is not convincing. The phrase can be simplified as “until [love] is pleased”. Do not awaken love until [love] is pleased, meaning that one should not look for love until love can be satiated sexually. With this translation, the wisdom of the refrains aligns with the lovers’ experiences as reflected in the poems and with the elucidation of the power of sexual love in the *mashal*.

Reading the refrain as “do not awaken love until [love] is pleased” also helps us to find the realistic balance between Schwab’s cynicism and Andruska’s romanticisation of love. It is not a stretch of the imagination to see that the refrains appeal to the human pursuit of well-being, preparing the reader, in association with the daughters of Jerusalem, to be ready for the heady ecstasy and disruptive agony of love.

Song of Songs focuses on the nature of love with remarkable rationality, celebrating the exhilaration of romance and sex with an acute awareness of the possible agony in the next cycle of desire. Harding (2008:59) formulates it powerfully:

Perhaps, then, this aspect of the Song, its attentiveness both to the heady intoxications of love, the desperate yearnings of lovers, their exquisite moments of union, and to the simultaneous vulnerabilities they suffer, their crises, their agonising moments of doubt, is the locus of the Song’s endless appeal, for it creates a vision of love that is at once beautiful and exuberant, perceptive, and realistic.

Rhetoric

Is Song of Song “merely” love poetry, or are there signs of skilful and persuasive argumentation? Crenshaw (2010:14) notes that the sages never appealed to God as an external reason for wise living but relied on the human capacity to reason and their sense of self-interest. Perdue (1994:69) also notes that sages use language aesthetically to engage the imagination and transmit beliefs while reflecting on God, the world and human existence.

The argument in Song of Songs focuses on the nature of love and unfolds in the poetic pictures of a sexual relationship between the girl and her lover. Fox (1985:217–218) notes the loose narrative framework. Initially, the girl

expresses frustration with her brothers who force her to tend the vineyard while she is eager to focus on herself, her own vineyard (Cant 1:5–6). The movement in the middle is slow (Fox 1985:217–218), with cyclic patterns reflecting the endless ebb and flow of longing and sexual desire (Johnston 2009: 297,305). In this repetitive pattern of longing/search/fulfilment, the argument focuses on the “all-consuming nature of love” that “can seem restless and incomplete” (Assis, 2009:269). The refrains are strategically placed where they have the most impact on the argument: after episodes of physical contact or closeness (Cant 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4), thus clearly motivating the girl’s admonition to the daughters of Jerusalem. Her advice comes from experience. She was eager to tend her vineyard, and her life changed forever when she did. She experienced both the exhilaration and vulnerability of love and she is forever subjected to the power of love from which she cannot escape “until love is pleased” again and again. The argument’s focus reaches the climax, where the *mashal* (Cant 8:6b–7a) finally clarifies what has been on poetic display: the nature of love. The girl declares that she has discovered “the inexorable power of love” (Fox 1985:217–218). Even the open-ended structure of Song of Songs reinforces the argument about the nature of love. “Closure would mean the end of desiring ... The Song strives to be ongoing, never-ending ... desire that is never sated because it folds back upon itself” (Exum, 2005:86).

With acute rhetorical skill, Song of Songs carries the persuasive argument about the agony and ecstasy of love that should not be awakened until it can be “pleased”.

Metaphors

Perdue (1994:339) contributes to the understanding of metaphors in wisdom literature as linguistic constructs that carry meaning about God, the cosmos and human existence:

Garden

The garden metaphor is linked to divine providence full of life and possibility (Perdue 1994: 338, 330). In Song of Songs, the garden metaphor is prominent on different levels. The garden features as a metaphor for the women. “The woman is a garden whose fruit are ripe for the plucking, and

a vineyard to be tended” (Exum 2005: 27). The metaphors for the male lover’s sexual activities are the entry into the garden, and the gathering, eating, and drinking of the harvest.

Though the venue in Song of Songs changes regularly, the field or garden is frequently the metaphor for the lovers’ tryst. In Cant 1:17, their bed is beneath cedars and firs (NIV). In Cant 2:12–13, the man invites the woman to come and see the flowers, the early figs and blossoming vines, and to hear the doves (NIV). In Cant 6:11, the male lover goes to the grove of nut trees in the valley where vines are budding and pomegranates bloom, and again, in Cant 7:12, he invites her to go to the vineyard (NIV).

There is no reason to exclude divine providence, life, and possibility from the garden metaphors in Song of Songs because the content focuses on human sexuality. Is the ability to procreate and produce life in humans and gardens not after all central to divine providence?

Artistry

In Israelite wisdom literature, artistry is a prominent metaphor for the divine. God is an artisan with the skill to design, build, maintain, and sustain a well-ordered world. Divine activities include weaving humans’ bones and sinews to form humans in the divine image (Perdue 1994:221).

In the rich description of creation described in Song of Songs, the artisan cannot be ignored just because the focus is on sexual love. Indeed, the reference to the craftsman who formed the graceful legs of the female lover (Cant 7:1 NIV) forces us to be equally aware of the hands of the craftsman in the beauty, vibrance and abundance of creation.

Battle and chaos

Perdue (1994:333) states that battle is a prominent metaphor in wisdom literature. Creation was forged when the divine warrior defeated chaos. Chaos continually threatens order.

The *mashal* in Cant 8:6b and 8:7a is written in cosmic language. Love is personified as a pun that refers to the “flame of Yah” and a “most vehement flame”. Mot, the underworld king, is personified as “death”. The danger of the waters in verse 7 refers to the mythical forces of chaos (Reese 1983:

251). Death is an elemental force that pursues humans as long as they live (Murphy 1990: 197).

While potential chaos is explicit in these verses, it is on display in the poems. The battle with the powerful force of love extends to the world of the girl who experiences sexual desire so potently that she risks crossing social boundaries, challenging her oppressive brothers, and facing city guards' violence at night. The poems vividly describe her struggle with love as a cosmic power.

Anthropology

The human search for wisdom is a prominent theme in wisdom literature. Crenshaw's broad definition of wisdom includes "... the reasoned search for specific ways to assure well-being ..." (2010:16). Sages appealed to the capacity to reason and to the sense of self-interest. The pursuit of well-being is clear in Proverbs: Job searches for well-being in the face of trauma, and Qoheleth explores well-being in the face of death. Those who find wisdom find a "good life in all its manifestations: health, wealth, honour, progeny, longevity, remembrance" (Crenshaw 2010:14, 56).

Perdue (1977:139, 227) refers to the search for "anthropological order" as harmony with "the beneficent spheres of world order". He formulates a three-tiered search definition: 1) the search for order in reality, 2) the human's search for meaning and self-understanding, and 3) the quest to master life.

The "search" is also an important theme in Song of Songs. On the surface, the Shulamite searches for union with her lover in different cyclic episodes of desire, longing, and fulfilment or rejection. However, her search for wisdom (self-understanding) is prominent and announced in Cant 1:6b, where she is frustrated because she neglects her own vineyard (NIV). She searched for an understanding of her sexuality in relation to her cult, her patriarchal brothers, and societal constraints. She learned about the ecstasy and agony of love from her eagerness to tend to her garden. She obtained wisdom that she can share with the daughters of Jerusalem: Do not awaken love before the time is ready because sexual love is as strong as death, and passion is like a blazing fire!

She achieved harmony. Peace with herself is reflected in her answer to her brothers when they plan to guard her chastity:

We have a young sister and her breasts are not yet grown. What shall we do for our sister, for the day she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build towers of silver on her. If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar (Cant 8:8–9 NIV).

Then, her confident answer: I am a wall and my breasts are like towers. Thus I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment (Cant 8:10 NIV).

Within her “anthropological order”, she found herself. She alone decided on her purity, and she decided to bring contentment to her lover. To him, she was faithful and steadfast – like a wall. She shared her body with him and her small breasts were like towers for him. Her search was fulfilled, and she obtained wisdom by learning about the creational power embedded in love.

Order and the threat of chaos

Crenshaw (2010:12–14) notes that order is an underlying premise of wisdom. God created a world that was orderly and left clues for human survival. Those who found these secrets and lived accordingly did well, and those who remained ignorant suffered the consequences.

While order is acknowledged as a basic element underlying wisdom literature, it is also true that both Job and Qoheleth seriously question the dogma of retribution of early wisdom. Later wisdom can be described as a quest to re-establish order (Job) or to critique reality without divine order (Qoheleth) (Crenshaw 2010:12–14).

In Song of Songs, the spring setting is the backdrop for creational order (Fox 1985:218; Sadgrove 1978:247). For Sadgrove (1978:247), springtime is a theological self-revealing pattern and example to humans. Springtime represents the “wholesomeness and promise of the male-female relationship, and, implicitly, divine approval” (1978:247). In God’s created order, spring is the time for renewal, for the bearing of fruit, and for procreation. The lovers react with exuberance to the influential example of creation and,

without concern for the restrictions of society or cult, integrate themselves into this created reality. “The parallelism between the awakening of nature and the awakening of love in the human heart is very close” (Barbiero 2011:117).

On the surface, various threats are present in the Song. The Shulamite experiences different personal threats. The threat of patriarchy is present in the form of angry and controlling brothers wanting to protect her purity (Cant 1:6 & 8:8–9 NIV). There is a threat of violence by the city guards for breaking social norms (Cant 5:7 NIV), and in Cant 2:15, the little foxes threaten to ruin the vineyards (NIV). Barbiero (2011:119) argues that this threat must be understood metaphorically as the dangers connected to sexuality – the “foxes” probably represent rivals competing for her affection.

On a deeper level, Song of Songs reveals the created order embedded in sexual love. Inherently, sexual love wants to be pleased and drives towards fulfilment. Love carries within its structure the capacity for both ecstasy and potential chaos linked to permanent cycles of longing and desire for closeness and sexual intimacy. This creational order in the structure of love is displayed in Song of Songs, in the cycles of longing and desire. The refrains reiterate the structure of human love with an appeal to be aware and prepared for the impact of love. Do not awaken love until love can be pleased repeatedly. The *mashal* clarifies the creational order of love: awakened love is as strong as death and passionate as the flame of Yahweh.

Scepticism and critique

Crenshaw (2010:232–242) argues that scepticism was a popular and pervasive phenomenon in Israelite society and that it grew from the incoherence between confessions and reality. The seed of scepticism is rooted in convictions about God. God’s freedom to do as God pleases is the unknown factor that “hovered over every attempt to control fate” (Crenshaw, 2010: 239). At first, this element of surprise was accepted, along with the belief in God’s goodness. In Job grew the awareness that God can be the enemy of believers. In Qoheleth, “God is wholly indifferent to human beings” (Crenshaw 2010: 240), and humans are morally depleted and incapable of understanding the mystery of God and creation.

Crenshaw (2010:209–245) contentiously states that in the wake of growing scepticism, wisdom offers a viable alternative to Yahwism for those who fail to see God’s hand in history and for those who are more religiously tolerant. Wisdom discredited prophecies as God’s voice and pushed revelation back to the moment of creation. Where humans fail to understand creation’s hidden mysteries, Woman Wisdom stepped onto the scene to fill the gap. “Hokmâ is born from God’s passivity” (Crenshaw 2010: 209). She represents “an eternal principle of rationality that exists in an undefinable relationship with the Creator” (Crenshaw 2010: 245). This sapiential view focuses not on past glory or future hope but on the present encounter where the total human experience is stacked with revelatory capacity and where “God’s truth coincided with human insight” (Crenshaw 2010: 245).

While the juxtaposition of Yahwism and wisdom is an interesting but contested hypothesis, Song of Songs aligns with the focus on the present, where the total human experience, including human love and sexuality, is filled with revelatory capacity where human insight can discover God’s truths.

On the level of a subtext, scholars point to the criticism, even satire, against Solomon in Song of Songs. It is quite possible that Song of Songs could be interpreted as satire to mock Solomon’s sexual relationships with multiple women in marriage in contrast to the Shulamite’s exclusive sexual relationship with her lover outside of marriage. Fox (1985:95) points to a possible “mockery” of Solomon in 8:11–12. Noegel and Rendsburg (2009:167:184) are convinced that Song of Songs was written by a gifted author “able to create the most sensual and erotic poetry of his day, all the while incorporating into his work a subtext critical of the Judahite monarchy in general and Solomon in particular”. Barbiero (2011:34) also points to the “hardly veiled” criticism against Solomon in Cant 6:8–9 and 8:11–12.

Aside from the possible subtext critical of Solomon in Song of Songs, Viviers (2006:933–1000) mentions that Song of Songs is a thoroughly subversive text and extremely critical of various accepted norms. In Song of Songs, the lovers celebrate each other’s naked bodies in descriptive poems (*wasfs*), in contrast to Israel’s norm of being fully clothed. The Shulamite challenges the patriarchal system by ignoring her brothers’ rules

and choosing her own lover. She defies the traditional cultic guard of her virginity and refuses women's accepted role. She ventures into the public arena of men, searching for her lover, and she is beaten like a prostitute. Song of Songs also challenges gender hierarchy, specifically in sexual roles, when the woman participates freely. Desire and the joys of sexuality are experienced mutually. The rural focus versus that of the city challenges the class hierarchy as a power bastion. The rural area becomes the backdrop of the lovers' union with each other and with nature. Song of Songs also challenges the ban on premarital sex. Though the Shulamite dreams of a more permanent union, there are no signs of a marital relationship. The absence of a focus on procreation, deemed women's most important function in antiquity, is remarkable (Viviers 2006: 93–100).

Knowledge of God

Creation is the centre and focus of wisdom literature, and also provides the theological thrust. The primary theological assertion of the sages is "God as Creator" (Perdue 1977:137). God created a just and well-integrated order using wisdom principles because God is just and wise. "God's wisdom is the divine capacity to design, form, and order creation, and to rule providentially over what has been brought into being" (Perdue, 1994:326). Crenshaw (2010:222) refers to Psalm 19, where nature declares divine glory without words. The sages believe that nature holds the clues for successful living. They studied natural phenomena and deduced lessons through analogical reasoning. They move from creation to the fear of Yahweh as both the beginning and the pinnacle of knowledge. The fear sometimes culminates in religious duty or dread, but there is always an element of awe (Crenshaw 2010:222). Sadgrove (1978:248) notes that creation theology plays such a powerful role in wisdom literature that the divine name can be dispensed with, and the literature will remain indisputably Yahwistic. Even as perspectives of wisdom changed through history, "creation continues as the centre of the matrix of sapiential theologies produced over eight centuries" (Perdue 2007:326). While not directly mentioned in Song of Songs, Yahweh is present in the imaginative wordplay and the abundance of creation.

Murphy (1990:133), Assis (2009:73), and Zimmerli (1976:324) refer to the similar sounding phrases “by the gazelles or the wild does” in the oath changes in Cant 2:7 and 3:5 and the divine names “Almighty” and “Lord of Hosts”. Barbiero (2011:3) also finds it significant that the term *dôdî* (my beloved) is uttered exactly twenty-six times, a sacred number in Hebrew gematria, denoting the tetragrammaton YHWH. In Cant 7:1, the link of “craftsman” is clear, and in Cant 8:6, the wordplay is in “mighty flame” (NIV).

However, the greatest source of Yahweh’s presence in Song of Songs is not in the poetic wordplay but in the vibrant description of an abundant and dynamic creation. Creation is an overwhelming element of Song of Songs. The beauty and the abundance of creation are described so vibrantly that you can hear the doves cooing; you can smell the lilies and taste the honey. “Its poetry is so sensual that we can almost taste the figs and almonds and smell the fragrant oils” (Robinson 2004:12). Grossberg notes that the poet uses metaphors of creation to evoke human love: “... humanity, nature and love are all budding, blossoming, and ripening into fullness and readiness” (Grossberg 2005:242). Creation is good and beautiful; bodies crafted by the artist’s hands are good and beautiful, and making love is just as good and beautiful.

Creation is also much more than “goodness” in Song of Songs. Creation becomes an additional character that is silently yet abundantly present, witnessing the lovers’ desires and anxieties and the ecstasy of their oneness. Fischer (2011:65) identifies Cant 4:16–5:1 as the theological hub of Song of Songs. He identifies three speakers, the female, the male, and a third voice that invites the lovers: “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk, beloved!” (Fischer 2011:65). He suggests that this is the voice of an omnipresent narrator who is present in this garden of intimacy, addressing the lovers. At a theological level, he identifies this as the voice of God (Fischer 2011:66). Oosthuizen (2014:78) notes that in the Wisdom tradition this might be Lady Wisdom delighting herself in creation and human love.

In the movement from the “mating” creational order in spring to the awakening of the lovers in the presence of the Creator, the lovers, the daughters of Jerusalem, and the readers will discover the power of love in God-conscious sexuality. The divine affirmation of sexual love and the

knowledge about the nature of love is the wisdom humans need to navigate life's choices about love and sexuality.

Why do scholars find it easy to see God's self-revelation in creation in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes but not in Song of Songs? Carr (2003:5) refers to the struggle to bridge the divide between sexuality and spirituality as a symptom of the Hellenistic body-spirit dualism that runs through Western culture. In the same trajectory, Bartholomew, and O'Dowd (2011:33–38) mention the different world views of our modern minds from the ancient way of relating to the world. We orient our experiences through reason and scientific concepts in today's civilisation. When a person today refers seriously to mystery, the transcendent, or the spiritual, he or she seems out of touch with reality. For the ancient mind, human life comprised a personal (I-Thou) and non-scientific relationship with creation. Time was primarily understood in terms of nature's rhythms, and the problem of death did not create the need for medical advances. It was accepted as a mystery, like chaos, darkness, seas/waters, and creatures – like the Leviathan (Bartholomew & O'Dowd 2011:33–37).

The scholarly consensus of dismissing Song of Songs as “merely” or “profane” love poetry may be the consequence of a scientific worldview and the inability to accept the divine as a part of the human sexual experience.

The impact of reading Song of Songs through wisdom lenses

Nelson (1978:16) notes that “we need to move beyond the traditional confines of sexual ethics into sexual theology which takes seriously the human sexual experience in our time and place as an arena for God's continuing self-disclosure at the same time that it takes seriously the implication of Christian faith for our sexual lives”.

Accepting wisdom as a hermeneutical framework for reading Song of Songs offers a clear answer on the question: What is spiritual about sexuality? Song of Songs offers sexual theology that integrates sexuality and spirituality, accepting the Creator's invitation to enjoy what has been created for pleasure. Song of Songs becomes much more than “profane” love poetry. Sexual love becomes part of being joyfully human in the presence of the Creator God. The presence of the divine also becomes the

original “holy” space for sexuality, contrasted with imperfect expressions of marriage as a social norm.

Reading Song of Songs as wisdom literature does not tame erotic desires and sexuality or subdue them to appear calm and pious for a church audience. In true wisdom fashion, sex and desire are depicted realistically. The passionate and urgent search for union, the cyclic patterns of desire and the potential of chaos are all part of the created order embedded in sexual love.

The wisdom in Song of Songs shifts the responsibility for sexual choices from controlling entities (society and culture) to personal responsibility. Knowing the nature of awakened love should empower humans to make good choices or, at the very least, to understand what to expect when love is awakened.

Conclusion

The time has come to bridge the divide between sexuality and spirituality. As skilled interpreters, we can choose an interpretative approach that is imaginative, meaningful, and true to Israelite wisdom perspectives. Choosing a wisdom lens as a hermeneutical framework for Song of Songs may be the symphony where the production team, singers, musicians, and conductor collaborate to offer a performance that is both sexual and profoundly spiritual:

Sexual love is good and beautiful, integral to an abundant, living, and growing creation. Long for it, desire it, relish it – but be aware not to enter these ecstasies too soon! Sexual love awakens emotions as strong as death and blazing like a mighty flame. On awakening sexual love, you become vulnerable and enter an eternal cycle of desire, longing and searching for consummation. You might be rejected; it is even possible that you will be abused. You might need to challenge social boundaries. Take responsibility for your sexuality; it is yours alone to give. When you give it, give all of you, your total being; give erotically and exclusively. Be strong in sexual love – do not look for instant satisfaction but delay the gratification playfully and creatively. When consummating love, know that it is

a deeply spiritual experience. God is there in your capacity to be intimate and omnipresent, enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of humans making love and encouraging them: “Eat, friends, drink and be drunk, beloved!” (Oosthuizen 2014:91).

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