e-ISSN: 2656-7997
p-ISSN: 2775-3425

Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology
Vol. 07, No. 02, August 2025: 191 - 229

Encountering the Lovers in the Song of the Songs (2:1): Reading the Allegory Anew and Imagining Sex Education for the 21st Century

Isodorus Bangkit Susetyo Adi Nugroho [a, *]
Bernadus Dirgaprimawan [b]

[a] Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippine
[b] Universitas Sanata Dharma Yogyakarta, Indonesia

[*] *isodorusbangkitsusetyoadi@student.ateneo.edu*

Submitted: 20-06-2024 | Revision: 12-08-2025 | Accepted: 12-08-2025

Abstracts:

Traditionally, the lovers in the Song of Songs are often seen as an image of the relationship between God and Israel or humans. Assuming this allegorical interpretation might be accurate, the questions remain. Who are the lovers there? How do we make sense of love's lustful and pleasurable dimension as portrayed in detail throughout the book? Benefiting from the historical and literalist readings, this article shows a new understanding of the lovers in this most erotic narrative in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Then, using the conceptual metaphor approach, the author would analyze one of the metaphors used by the female lover: "I am a rose in the Plain of Sharon, a lily in the valleys (2:1)." Through unpacking this solid self-description metaphor, the author will present the mental map of the female lover, the protagonist character in the book, to help the readers understand the original message of the Songs as pedagogical means for the youth in dealing with human sexuality. Thirdly, through the perspective of the Book of Genesis, the author will help the readers situate the theological sense of God's love in the Songs properly, as supported by the elements within the text and its socio-historical context. Finally, drawing insight from the Songs, this article will offer practical wisdom in dealing with our human experience of cybersex in the internet era.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24071/jaot.v7i2.8901
Web: http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/JAOT | E: jaot@usd.ac.id

This work is license under CC BY-SA
Creative Common Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Keywords:

flower, *the wall*, *God's love*, *sex education*, *youth*.

Introduction

Song of Salomon, or Song of Songs, is arguably the most enigmatic book in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Throughout the book, readers will find the intimate conversation between two lovers expressing human sexuality and erotic desire uncensored, such as describing the lover's body parts, the pleasure of love, and other detailed sensual gestures. The fact that this "hot" book is canonized in both the Jewish and Christian Bible under wisdom literature makes it more enigmatic; thus, it catches the attention of scholars and lay audiences throughout history. For instance, Rabbi Akiva, a scholar from Israel in the first century AD, defended the canonization of these songs. He stated, "Whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel for all the Writings are holy, and the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies (*Mishnah Yadayim* 3.5)."[1] Centuries later, in the Christian tradition, Bernard of Clairvaux, a mystic, showed the same deep appreciation. He wrote several sermons solely on the first line, "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."[2] Throughout the centuries, there has been the same curiosity and eagerness to comprehend and interpret the enigmatic contents of this book, which persists even today, especially with the new findings of biblical archaeology and comparative literature study.

Historical surveys of the Songs' biography by Ilana Pardes show that scholars read the Songs allegorically up to the modern era. Only by the

1 Ilana Pardes, *The Song of Songs: A Biography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019): 9, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd58s8r.

2 Pardes, *The Song of Songs*, 102.

age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century did there seem to be a turn to literal reading.[3] The allegorical method examines the story of a man and a woman in the Songs as an image or symbol representing other things. For instance, the woman is interpreted as Israel in the Jewish community, while the man represents God. Their love symbolizes the covenant between God and Israel. This interpretation has also been adopted in the Christian tradition. However, the characters are swapped, and the story represents Christ's love for His people, the Church. Both in Jewish and Christian traditions, the allegorical reading typically concludes that the lovers as the center point in the Songs are an image of the relationship between God and Israel or humans. For centuries, the allegorical interpretations have won favors since this interpretation seems simple and cools down the hot sensual material written in the book. However, while ordinary readers in the ancient and Middle Ages might be satisfied, modern audiences raise critical questions. For instance, who are the lovers there? How do we make sense of love's lustful and pleasurable dimension as portrayed in detail throughout the book? Why is there no mention of God in the text itself? Moreover, new developments in literature criticism led the readers to turn to literalist reading, asking questions that challenged the allegorical interpretation of the Songs.

As Brian Gault summarized, contemporary scholars mainly argue that such allegorical interpretation does not match the intent, inconsistency, and incongruence with the text's literal meaning.[4] First, it is not evident that the Songs were meant to be interpreted as allegories. Usually, Hebrew Bible-conceived allegories will indicate their purpose and signs to anticipate the readers. Secondly, comparing a woman's body to

[3] Pardes, *The Song of Songs*, 136.

[4] Brian P. Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs*, Ancient Israel, and Its Literature, Number 36 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019): 17–18.

religious symbolism is very strange. It's hard to understand the direct, meaningful connection between the erotic depiction of humans and the heavenly realm. Indeed, a lustful relationship between humans seems odd as an analogy for the divine being. It goes against common sense. Third, the allegorical interpretation seems incongruent with the theological notion of God as the active principle both in Jewish and Christian theology. For instance, interpreting the woman as humanity and the man as God implies that humans initiate the relationship. Indeed, theologically, it's not the case.

As we have seen above, the literalist readings of the Songs, an approach that highlighted concern for the accuracy of the text and its plain sense, seem to uncover many serious flaws of the allegorical method. It appears difficult to hold the allegorical reading stance when the book itself shows few clear signs of having been written to depict God's relation with His people or the soul. However, the allegorical interpretation has been valuable to communities, ancient and modern, Jewish and Christian. Many communities in the Middle Ages built a nuptial spirituality based on the image of God as a lover. Many mystics express their intimate relationship with God inspired by an allegorical reading of the Songs. From our current perspective, one of the most valuable things provided by allegorical interpretation is that this approach keeps the texts of both the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God for Christian readers throughout the centuries.[5] Given this, the author believes there is truth in such interpretation, especially when we believe in the holy spirit's guidance in bringing us closer to God. Instead of preferring one interpretation model, the author maintains the tension

[5] P.B. Decock, "Allegorising: The Relevance of an Old Method of Interpretation." *Acta Theologica* 23, no. 1 (2016): 1. https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v1i1.105660.

between the literary and allegorical approaches.[6] Therefore, this article will try to use a dialectic approach to read the allegory of God as a lover in a new way and situate the Songs in our contemporary reality of the 21st Century.

To better understand the Songs, the author will use a conceptual metaphor approach to reconstruct the mental map of the female lover. This will help bring together the literal and allegorical readings and uncover the deeper meaning of the Songs. In achieving this goal, the author divides this article into three parts—first, the departure. Putting aside the allegorical approach, the author will seriously consider the historical-literary reading. Benefiting from the reading of modern scholars, especially Fox's comparative study of the Songs and Egyptian love songs, this article shows a new understanding of the Songs as a unified book. Then, through the historical reconstruction and literary reading, the author will show that the Songs originally intended to shepherd the young Israelites in dealing with Hellenistic cultures and casually nurturing Jewish identity.

Secondly, the bridge. Using the conceptual metaphor approach, the author would analyze one of the metaphors used by the female lover: *"I am a rose in the Plain of Sharon, a lily in the valleys (2:1)."* By analyzing this metaphor, the author will uncover the mental map of the lovers in the Songs to help the readers understand the original message of the Songs as pedagogical means for the youth in dealing with human

[6] Some distinctions will be helpful for readers. The literalist reading here is a term used by Ilana Pardes to describe an approach developed in the 18th century by scholars throughout Protestant Europe. Although it was developed in various modes, such as literalist aesthetics and biblical ethnographies, at its core, this approach emphasizes the concern for the accuracy of the text and the plain sense of scripture. Facing challenges from many scholars, literalist readings evolved into the literary approach to the Bible advocated by Robert Alter, a Hebrew and comparative literature professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1980s. The aim of this approach is not to recover the historical and geographical life-setting of biblical aesthetics but rather to explore the poetics of the Songs as defined in the text itself while comparing it to other modes of biblical poetry. See Ilana Pardes, *The Song of Songs*, 137-161.

sexuality. Furthermore, in this part, the article will also give evidence of the realization of Songs' pedagogical agenda by showing the self-transformation of the female lover. Third, seeing the allegory with a fresh lens. Given the new insights from the approaches above, the author will help the readers situate the theological sense of God's love in the Songs as the allegorical tradition suggested. This section will explore a new perspective on how Christians can see the lovers in Songs as Adam and Eve after the fall. Finally, the new destination of the Songs. Drawing insight from the lover, this article will offer some practical wisdom in dealing with ongoing mainstream conversation concerning the effect of pornography use on youngsters in the age of the internet.

Departure: Taking Account of the Literal, Historical, and Social Setting of the Songs

A literal translation of the title is: 'The song of Songs which is of Solomon.' The title 'The Song of Songs' is Hebrew for expressing a superlative sense. As "holy of holies" means the most sacred space, "the song of songs" also suggests the best song. This work is attributed to King Solomon's authorship from the beginning. This is traditionally the reason why these Songs are considered wisdom literature. However, because of a lack of evidence, most experts reject King Solomon's identification as the author today. They argue that the Songs have just a few references to King Solomon. Nonetheless, in a nutshell, they agree that this work belongs in the category of wisdom literature for two reasons. First, The Songs are very concerned with dealing with life, mainly coping with infatuation and love. Dealing with practical and everyday life issues is particularly common in wisdom literature. Second, while there is no evidence that King Solomon wrote this song, scholars acknowledged the Songs'

intellectual author. The man behind these songs must be sage and skilled.[7]

Literary Reading: The Songs as a Unified Single Book

From the perspective of the form-critical approach, the Songs are widely named under love poetry. For instance, in his study, Horst identified eight distinct poetic forms in the Songs. Particularly striking among the forms identified by Horst is the Descriptive Song, which comprises four out of eight. A *wasf* is an Arabic term translated as 'description.' It is an ancient poetry genre to describe a beloved's physical charms. Although these four *wasfs* bear resemblances to one another, no two of them are alike. For instance, there is a description of a sensual experience, a self-description, a description of admiration, and a descriptive song. Given this finding, the Songs are generally known as descriptive Songs. In terms of content, these love poems are accompanied by five prominent images. In any part of the songs, the author of the Songs uses various powerful imagery words derived from royal court imagery, family life imagery, nature imagery, pictures of space (showing the lovers' closeness or distance), time (mentioning the seasons, day and night), and military imagery. In other words, there seems to be a variety of linguistic usages derived from diverse imaginaries.[8]

Given these rich, various, yet shared features, scholars have debated whether these songs are one- unity of crafted writing, an anthology, or a collection with an editor. Through the development of comparative literature studies since the late 1920s, scholars have recognized that the closest similarities to the Song of Song may be found

[7] Ernest C. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament. Volume 3, A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2003): 176.

[8] Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament,* 186.

in Egyptian love songs.[9] Comparing and contrasting the Songs with the Egyptian love songs has provided many insights to understand the Songs better. Here, the author summarizes the arguments given by Fox, one of the prominent researchers who contended for the unity of the text of the Songs. As Fox notices, scholars have concluded that it was a collection if they had not seen a design or structural concept in a book like The Songs. He acknowledges that there is a lack of structure in the Songs. However, based on his extensive research in comparative literature study, he argues that as the book has come to us as a whole, with no titles or other identifiers dividing songs in the Psalter or Egyptian love song anthologies, the weight of evidence is mainly on those who desire to claim disunity.[10] To put it simply, Fox notices no such contradictory events and facts in these Songs. This fact suggests the weakness of disunity arguments.

In his further literary analysis, Fox shows that there are four most important unifying factors: (1) there is a narrative framework, (2) a network of repetends, (3) associative sequences, and (4) consistency of character portrayal.[11] First, it seems to have a clear and single narrative framework in the Songs. For instance, Fox points out that the Songs are set in the same season throughout spring. Although other seasons, such as the fall harvest, are appropriate settings for love songs, only one season is mentioned in the Songs. This fact supports the argument for the unity of the text. It can be added that the general nuance of the lovers' conversation is consistent throughout. From beginning to end, the lovers explore the idea of leaving the city and going to the countryside.

9 Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament,* 182.

10 Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985): 205.

11 Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs,* 209-218.

Secondly, there is a network of repetends. Repetends means numerous phrases and sentences that appear in several portions of the book in the same or slightly different form. According to Fox, the repetends in the Songs form a network of meaning or shape the unity of the book, although they are not as strong as a refrain that indicates a separation unit. The repeats in the Song are primarily repetends: phrases, verses, or short portions that return at variable intervals, sometimes in different forms. For instance, “My lover is mine, and I am his” (2:16) repeats in the phrase “I belong to my lover and my lover belongs to me” (6:3) and occurs in a slightly different version, “I belong to my lover, and he desires only me” (7:10). Here we can see that the repetends in different places serve as a near paraphrase of "my beloved is mine." Considering many other forms of repetends in the songs, it seems to indicate the network of meaning, which means unity.

Moreover, Fox finds many associative sequences in the Songs. They are clusters of words, phrases, or motifs (they can also be repetends) that appear in the same order even though narrative sequence or logical continuity do not seem to necessitate them. For example, in 2: 8-17, the youth's nocturnal visit is followed by the girl's nightly quest in 3: 1 - 5. These occurrences are not part of the same narrative, yet the two units have an associative link. The boy's visit seems to be associated sequentially with a girl at night and may recall a girl's search for a male at night. According to Fox, these themes are united into a continuous story in 5: 2-6: 3 and are related in the same sequence.

Another factor that can support literary unity is the consistency of character portrayal. Few commentators describe the Songs as having more than two lovers. Furthermore, both the female and male lovers present a consistent performance and personality throughout their dialogue. Fox notes that the girl is straightforward and open about her

feelings and desires. Her partner has these characteristics but with fewer defined personality lines. The lovers' affection and dedication to one another is undeniable and unquestionable. They always praise and call to one another in the same way, express the same wants, and see each other and the world in the same way.

Considering all of those characteristics, Fox argues that the most plausible explanation for such features is that the Songs is a single poem authored, at least initially, by a single poet. The poet may have used older elements, and succeeding singers and scribes may have added revisions, resulting in a cohesive text. What is the implication? It may justify assuming a single vision or intention by saying that the Songs are a single book. This matters for the interpretation of the book as a whole. As the literary view has shed light on these enigmatic Songs, the author will now look at the songs' historical, sociological, and cultural dimensions in the following paragraph. Restructuring the Songs' history and function in its socio-cultural context would help us enrich our literary understanding, thus edifying the aim to figure out its original intention.

Historical background and social function of the Songs

Since there are no allusions to historical events, speculations span from the tenth century B.C., the Solomon era, to the first century B.C. The tenth century before B.C. is based on a questionable supposition about King Solomon's authorship.[12] While dating the first century BC is supported by the discovery of a fragment of the Song of Songs at Qumran. This finding assumes that the Songs were composed and had gained a degree of holiness before the first century BC. While no obvious rhetorical

[12] Gianni Barbiero and Michael Tait, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading* (Boston: Brill, 2011): 25.

intentions point to a specific historical or political setting, language analysis seems the only method to estimate a narrower date, as Fox suggested. He believes the song is postexilic and probably Hellenistic from its linguistic characteristics.[13] The strong indication of dating in postexilic is based on the unique usage of the particle *se-* for *ser-,* which appears only in the title. Indeed, the particle *se-* can be found in the pre-exilic text, including the Song of Deborah (Jud 5:7, twice occurrence). Yet, outside the Songs, only in Qohelet and some irrefutably postexilic text, it's infrequent compared to the thousands of times 'ser' occurs. Indeed, *se-* appears six times in definitely pre-exilic passages, 17 times in ten psalms of uncertain date, and three times in Jonah, which is almost undoubtedly postexilic. To put it simply, Fox believes, "Not the appearance of se-, but its exclusive use indicates the lateness of the language of the Songs."[14]

The clue of dating the Songs in the Hellenistic period is based on the close observation of the usage of several vocabularies, which are very much associated with Graecisms.[15] According to Gianni Barbiero, the most obvious is *appiryôn* (Song 3:9), a name derived from the Greek *phoreion* ('stretcher'). Furthermore, using the preposition *'im* with the value of conjunction ('and'; see Song 4:14-5:1) corresponds to the Greek usage of *Hama*. He adds that the presence of Hellenistic-era practices in the Song of Songs is more decisive.[16] For example, there is mention of the '*triclinium*' (mēsab, 1:12) or reclining at a table around three sides of a room to form a semicircle. It is very much a Graeco-Roman practice and something unknown in ancient Israel. Barbiero lists many other Hellenistic elements in the Songs. Litter usage (3:6-10) is also

13 Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs,* 190.
14 Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs,* 188.
15 Barbiero and Tait, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading,* 31.
16 Barbiero and Tait, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading,* 32.

unthinkable in monarchical Israel, while it was trendy in the Hellenistic period. The same is the case of the bridegroom's coronation (3:11), which is not referenced in ancient Hebrew tradition but was common in Hellenism. The *peripoloi,* or patrols of soldiers with a policing duty who made the rounds of the city to avoid unrest (3:3; 5:7), are a typical Hellenistic institution. The *sentinels* mentioned in Isa 62:6 and Ps 127:1 are completely distinct institutions: they protect against external threats, not to maintain internal order.[17]

Moreover, dating the Songs in the Hellenistic period also matches the cultural parallels between the songs and the book of Qohelet, which is thought to have been composed during the Hellenistic era.[18] Both poems might be interpreted as answers to Hellenistic culture's effect on Israel. Indeed, The Songs has aspects that demonstrate an ambiguous attitude toward Hellenistic civilization. According to Heinevetter, the book accepts and rejects Hellenistic civilization. He notes that while the Song stresses women and emotions and a longing for a simpler life in nature, it retains its own religious and cultural identity, distinguishing itself from others.[19] This notion is proved by the fact that not a few indicators throughout the book point to a strong affirmation of Jewish national identity. Given this, it makes sense when other experts such as Graetz believe that the Songs are moralizing writings with which the Hebrew culture wished to affirm its own identity in the face of the dominating Greek culture, precisely in the field of love.[20]

Despite the difficulty in dating the Song of Songs, placing it in the Hellenistic period seems more plausible than any other option. While

17 Barbiero and Tait, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading,* 32.
18 Barbiero and Tait, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading,* 35.
19 Barbiero and Tait, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading,* 35.
20 Barbiero and Tait, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading,* 34.

assuming a vision of protecting Jewish identity, it is still puzzling how this Song played its function in that context. To answer this question, we can look at Fox, who closely examined the function of Egyptian Songs in their socio-cultural setting. Unlike many other popular theories, Fox contends that the Egyptian Songs were most likely used during festival days. He bases this assumption on studying archaeological artifacts showing murals of banquet scenes with quoted words or phrases of love songs. This finding implies a relationship between Egyptian songs and banquets. Examining some commonly possible occasions related to banquet practices, the use of love songs, and a slight religious dimension, it seems that on certain religious festive occasions, young lovers may meet, walk out alone, and have fun. But then, they would arrange banquets in private houses, where they would eat, drink, enjoy themselves, and be entertained with dancing, instrumental music, and singing, including what could properly be assumed to be love songs. This explains that love songs may have developed a secondary, peripheral relationship to the people's religious life.[21]

Given the very close relationship between Egyptians and the Songs, Fox believes that the Songs were probably entertainment, a song to be enjoyed on any occasion, including religious holidays - when song, dance, or other ordinary diversion were in order.[22] Indeed, as Fox explained, the Egyptian Songs similarity implies that the Songs, too, were a "heart diversion" *(shmh-ib)*. Yet, to refer to the Songs as "entertainment" is not to minimize it.[23] Great music and literature, both ancient and contemporary, have been created with no social or religious purpose other than to entertain audiences. People may be entertained by mixed feelings and

21 Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs,* 246-247.
22 Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs,* 247.
23 Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs,* 247.

complex emotions, engaging their intellects, transmitting fresh insights, and spreading important ideas. Indeed, that's what the Songs are all about. The Songs fill the audience with fragrant, sensual depictions of lovers, their worlds, and heartfelt feelings. As a result, it takes the audience away from their daily worries by encouraging them to enjoy the new, sensual world of the young lovers and their passionate erotic adventures.

Considering the literary analysis and its' socio-historical context, we may justify saying that the Songs were formulated to preserve Jewish identity, particularly Jewish morality, during the Hellenistic era. Therefore, it is plausible that the Songs have a pedagogical purpose, targeting the youth as the audience, with human sexuality as the primary focus of concern, as shown through the characters and central theme present throughout the Songs. With this view in mind, the next part of this article will explore the mental map of the female lover characters.

The Bridge: Mental Map of The Female Lover

The Songs as a Love poem portrays a conversation between a man and a woman and with few between the woman and the ladies of Jerusalem. The two lovers are consistently depicted in lyrical language as being on the doorstep of attaining their enjoyment. The intimate and erotic conversation arises between desire and having, longing and satisfaction. Given this, throughout the Songs, the lovers are on the edge of enjoying their pleasure. As a result, reading this book might immerse the readers in the private erotic conversation of the lovers. At the same time, the poetic metaphors and symbolism used by the lovers enable us to encounter a glimpse of their identity and interiority. Using a conceptual metaphor approach, the following paragraphs will unpack the mental map

of the female lover. It will help the reader to see the realization of the pedagogical intention perceived by the lovers.

Indeed, mind mapping is a metaphor in itself. As mapping involves obtaining location and orientation on a coordinate system, mind mapping in textual analysis utilizes illustrations to visualize one's cognitive process data. In the biblical study, mental mapping is considered a tool for investigating how people of a specific social group and era experience and describe their reality, as there is no possibility of interviewing the writer.[24] In doing this, mental mapping uses a conceptual metaphors approach, meaning that paying close attention to metaphors makes it possible to create a map connecting a source domain to a target domain. This process involves analyzing language and thought, which signify people's perceptions and underlying concepts.

This framework also assumes that people use conceptual metaphors based on intuition and spontaneous reactions, which depend on unconscious cognitive concepts.[25] Given this, people are conditioned to experience, understand, and describe one thing in terms of another. This mental process is manifested in metaphors using element A, which is substituted by an element B that has something in common with it. The substitute, derived from a different context, brings a full range of meanings and connotations. Therefore, in this regard, metaphors are not just a linguistic decoration but a cognitive process that reflects a conceptual phenomenon.[26] Given this, metaphors should be viewed as an argument or concept. This section explores two key metaphors that depict the female lover's transformation as she perceives her interactions with

[24] Stefan Fischer, "Mental Mapping in the Admiration Song in Song of Songs 7:2–7," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (April 23, 2019): 1. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.4998.

[25] Fischer, "Mental Mapping in the Admiration Song in Song of Songs 7:2–7," 1-2.

[26] Fischer, "Mental Mapping in the Admiration Song in Song of Songs 7:2–7," 1.

her lover and other characters in the books. The author contends that the mental transformation presented by the self-description metaphor of the flower at the beginning and the wall metaphor toward the end of the storyline demonstrates the realization of the pedagogical intention of the book.

Understanding the flower metaphor as a self-description

Although the text lacks structure and there is a consistent character portrayal, the dynamic between the female lovers can be viewed through the change of expressions they use. The lovers use similes, metaphors, and other linguistic strategies in many places. However, there appear to be few direct metaphors describing their self-image. One conversation that reveals their self-images is the dialogue employing a metaphor: *"I am a rose in the Plain of Sharon, a lily in the valleys (2:1)."* It is likely a solid symbolic self-description since it indicates both images (flowers) and geographical clues (Sharon). In addition, the flower's metaphor is likely to show the mental disposition of the lovers, such as the other key metaphors: "I am black, yet beautiful" and "I am the wall." As a result, the presence of natural imagery and slight self-description with a geographical association could potentially assist in figuring out the initial mental map behind the lovers, which can be added by other insights taken from other complex metaphors.

First of all, it should be said that the scope of this verse is unknown. Some would combine 2:1-3 with what follows, while others would treat them 2:1-2 as a single entity. In this article, the author will regard it as a unit, 1:15-2:3, a complete section of lover's dialogue because there seems

to be a strong unifying theme: natural images, namely plant imagery.[27] Therefore, the order is as follows: man (1:15), woman (1:16-17), woman (2:1), man (2:2), and woman (2:3). Although this examination is centered on *"I am a rose in the Plain of Sharon, a lily in the valleys (2:1).",* it will be linked to the immediate context and put into the book as a whole.

> **15 M** *How beautiful you are, my friend, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves!* **16**
>
> **W** *How beautiful you are, my lover— handsome indeed! Verdant, indeed, is our couch;*
> **17.** *The beams of our house are cedars, our rafters, and cypresses.*
>
> **1 W** *I am a flower of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.* **2**
>
> **M** *Like a lily among thorns so is my friend among women.***3**
>
> **W** *Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my lover among men. In his shadow, I delight to sit, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.*

The first flower, named in verse 1, is called *chabhatstseleth*. The term appears in the OT only in Isa 35:1, representing the eschatological splendor of the land of Israel. However, the botanical identification is disputed. At any rate, it must be a unique flower associated with the šārôn. The Hebrew term signifies 'plain' and is understood by the LXX and the Vulgate. According to Keil and Delitzsh's Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, the article indicates "the Sharon" as the identification of the lovers with localities characteristic of the land of Israel.[28] The Sharon refers to the coastal plain between Tel Aviv and Mount Carmel. In antiquity, it was a thinly populated area, a countryside of sandy banks and swamps in which the most striking flower was the maritime lily

27 Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament*, 189.

28 "Song of Solomon 2:1," Bible Hub, Keil and Delitzsh's Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Accessed October 28, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/kad/songs/2.htm.

(*pancratium maritimum*). Given this, the English translations of this particular verse are diverse. Some commonly use “roses” or “lilies.” Another version is “spring crocus.” Some other versions use flowers with or without additional qualifications, such as “wildflowers” and “meadow flowers.” Another recent opinion suggested “lotus” or the “blue lotus.”

Granting differing opinions on the matter, the Hebrew word "*chabhatstseleth*," found only in Isaiah 35:1, likely does not refer to a rose. This is because the Greek, Latin, and Aramaic translations of Isaiah 35:1 all translate "*chabhatstseleth*" as "lily." However, given that the word "shôshannâh" is used to describe a lily in the following clause, it is probable that "*chabhatstseleth*" refers to a different type of flower altogether. Some argue that mentioning a rose may be explained by the fact that "*shôshannâh*" describes a red flower: Songs 5:13, “His lips are like lilies.” Therefore, it is possible that "*chabhatstseleth*" refers to the scarlet *Anemone coronaria*, a flower that grows in all types of soil and situations and is called "*Susan*" by the Arabs.[29]

Although it may seem reasonable to assume that the flower is scarlet or rose, which represents beauty, the significance of the word "plain" attached to this flower cannot be ignored. The area known as Sharon is considered a plain located south of Carmel on the Mediterranean coast. It stretches from Caesarea to Joppa. However, the word "Sharon" likely means "a plain" and could be used by people to refer to the inhabitants of any district to the plain in their neighborhood.[30] This is supported by the fact that Eusebius claimed the region between Tabor and the Lake of Gennesaret was called Sharon.[31] Therefore, the first

[29] “Song of Solomon 2:1,” Bible Hub, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, Accessed October 28, 2023, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/songs/2.htm.
[30] Bible Hub, "Song of Solomon 2:1”. Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges.
[31] Bible Hub, "Song of Solomon 2:1”. Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges.

flower mentioned in the verse may not be the *anemone coronaria* as previously thought. Instead, it is more likely to be the "narcissus" derived from the Syriac translation, *Colchicum autumnale*, or *meadow saffron*, a meadow flower. It's like the crocus, with white and violet in color and poisonous corms. This is the most probable of the proposed identifications, as Fox also affirmed in his research comparing the Songs with Egyptian love songs.[32]

What do the crocus and lily signify in this verse? Here, the conceptual metaphor can help unpack that question and hit the mental map of the lover. Approaching this verse using the conceptual metaphor framework assumes that lovers communicate through metaphor. It means that while acknowledging the description of gardens, flowers, fruits, spices, trees, and vineyards may serve as the backdrop for the story, we primarily see the metaphors as vital cognitive elements by which they understand and communicate their world, shape relationships between things such as oneself and others, humanity and nature, and signs and their meanings. Here, metaphors are a cognitive process. Metaphors are intimately connected to people's concrete experience and can structure human thought. As a cognitive device, conceptual metaphor correlates one domain of experience in terms of another. Given this, through their metaphor, we can see the mental map behind the lovers.

The "crocus" and "lily" metaphor is a mental map the lovers use to understand their complex experiences, including abstract thoughts. With this view in mind, this article suggests that the author of the Songs attempts to understand the self-image or the "I" of the female lover at the beginning of the book by correlating it with flowers, specifically crocus, and lily. The mapping goes from the SOURCE domain "Flowers crocus

[32] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 107.

and lily" to the TARGET domain "the female lovers' self-image." The mind can make this connection because there is a common ground between the two, GENERIC SPACE, which describes things and the self. The term GENERIC SPACE here refers to a mental space in the human cognitive process that contains what the two inputs have in common. These three elements then merge into a new mental image, called the "I," or the self-description/image of the female lover, who is the main protagonist character of the Songs.

The image of flowers is a universal human language among those in love. The flower expresses beauty, freshness, and attraction with its shape and scent. While this generic meaning might apply to both crocus and lily, it may be beneficial to pay close attention to each of these specific species. Certain crocus species bloom in late summer and autumn, even during the hot and dry weather. These crocuses are sometimes called "autumn crocus." But people use the same name to refer to *Colchicum*, which is in the lily order *Liliales* and belongs to its own family called *Colchicaceae*. *Colchicum*, also known as meadow saffron, is a toxic plant, unlike true saffron. This botanical fact implies that besides being known for its beauty, typically white and violet in color, the crocus is actually a meadow flower, also known as meadow saffron, and its bulbs are poisonous.

How about the lily? Some may question the consistency of referring to the lover as both flowers: crocus and lily. Additionally, placing two different metaphors of flowers may seem redundant, one right after the other. However, as Ilana Pardes argues, this parallelism is not arbitrary. Love metaphors flow incessantly, one after the other, like love itself.[33] Moreover, the mention of both flowers shows the emphasis since they give the same idea: Lily refers to a water lotus, known for its narcotic

[33] Pardes, *The Song of Songs*, 5.

properties in Egyptian culture.[34] Indeed, most translators have preferred using "lily" instead of "lotus" because they believe Israel did not have water lilies. However, this is incorrect. In fact, lotuses were native to Israel.[35] Even today, we can find the white-water lily (*Nymphaea alba L.),* also familiar in Europe, and the sweet-smelling African blue-water lily *(Nymphaea caerulea Savigny).* It may be plausible that when Sharon was full of swamps, there would have been more water lilies than today. With this in mind, both flowers are equally abundant and are considered common plants.

Based on the botanical insight above, it may justify arguing that the depiction of a flower, whether it be a crocus, lily, or lotus, represents modesty, beauty, and freshness, which connotes an element of attraction tied with the intoxicating assets and toxic bulbs. Furthermore, the specific geographical references to Sharon and Valley should be addressed. It has other significance. As mentioned earlier, "Sharon" likely means "a plain" and could be used by people to refer to the inhabitants of any district. This might bring images of abandonment, simplicity, isolation, and insecurity. How can we attribute these characteristics to the female self-description? We might interpret all of these insights as a self-expression of modesty. She feels attractive, yet she may not be stable due to experiencing the intoxication of love and insecurity, such as low self-worth, slights of inferiority, or, at the very least, feeling ordinary.

This interpretation has justification in its immediate context, in which the male lover affirms her as the special one among other women. As seen in the next verse, "*Like a lily among thorns so is my friend among women."* Fox also notes that the male lover changes her modesty

[34] W Derek Suderman. "Modest or Magnificent? Lotus versus Lily in Canticles." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67, No. 1 (2005), 45-46.

[35] Suderman, "Modest or Magnificent? Lotus versus Lily in Canticles," 48-49.

and praises her highly.[36] Even though the "lily" is not inherently special, it is still viewed more favorably than the other women characterized as thorns. In addition, this interpretation is also in line with some key self-descriptions she mentioned in other parts. For instance, the mixed feeling of being beautiful yet insecure may be comparable with her self-claiming, "I am dark but lovely." Another example is the glimpse of an unstable state, which can be linked to her immaturity, as captured when she describes her status as being supervised by her brother (1:6). Furthermore, the element of intoxication and narcotic properties in the lotus, as she describes her instability due to the experience of infatuation or lovesick may very much match the general flow of the Songs, which is characterized by a “dream zone” where nothing is entirely discernible and everything is deeply felt.[37] As we follow the plot, we move with unparalleled speed from one metaphor to another, from one location to another, with no distinctions between inside and outside, no temporal transitions, and no need for explanation.

Understanding the wall metaphor as a self-transformation

What’s then the meaning of this kind of mental portrayal in the book as a whole? All the coherence above may indicate the depiction of the female lover's mental map at the book's beginning. She feels attractive yet immature and being unstable due to intoxicated with love. However, as we follow her throughout the book, it becomes apparent that her self-descriptive metaphors are transformed towards the end. Drastically, the lover's self-description shifted from feeling like an ordinary flower to describing herself as a wall. What was the transformation? The metaphor

[36] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs,* 107.
[37] Pardes, *The Song of Songs*, 2.

of the "wall" is a mental map that signifies the female lover's transformation. This article suggests that the author of the Songs attempts to capture the self-image or the "I" of the female lover at the end of the book by correlating it with the wall. The mapping goes from the SOURCE domain, "the wall," to the TARGET domain, "the female lovers' self-image."

In determining the self-description/image of the female lover indicated at the end of the book, understanding the image of the wall in Biblical literature is crucial. According to Brian Gault, in the ancient Near East, walls were upright structures erected to enclose, divide, support, or protect. They were a significant part of the overall defense system for cities. In the Hebrew Bible, "חומה," the common term used to refer to this object, most often describes the wall of a city or building (1 Kgs 3:1; Lam 2:7). Yet, this term can be employed figuratively for any dividing barrier. For example, Nabal's servants described David's men as a "wall," shielding them from harm (1 Sam 25:16), while Yahweh promised to be a "wall of fire" in the protection of Jerusalem (Zech 2:9). Given this survey, we can see the concept of a block or inaccessibility in the image of the wall.[38]

How about the wall in the Songs itself? The word wall has four occurrences in the songs. The two first occur earlier in the Songs. In 2:9, the lover comes for his beloved but is stopped outside the wall of her home. In 5:7, the female lover describes the station of the city guards. In both verses, the image of the wall is similar to the idea of psychical inaccessibility, as the previous survey showed. The two other mentions of the wall are metaphorical. In 8:9, her brother says: "If she is a wall, we will build towers of silver on her." While the second metaphorical use

[38] Brian P. Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs*, Ancient Israel, and Its Literature, 75-76.

mentioned by her is self-proclamation, “I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers.” These two lines seem to be interacting with each other. Considering the general biblical imagery and the imagery of the Songs, it seems that the wall in verse 8:9 represents chastity by being inaccessible. This concept is similar to how objects were used as obstacles to the lovers' union in the two earlier occurrences in the songs and the example found in the book of Ezekiel (38:11).[39]

Taking all into account, as we journey with the female lover throughout the book, we find such dramatic changes in her self-description metaphors, from the imaginary flower to the image of the wall. Instead of viewing this radical transformation as a discontinuity, this article regards it as evidence of the realization of the pedagogical intention of the Songs, as discussed in the previous section. The conceptual metaphor analysis shows that the image of a flower may depict the female lover as unstable due to infatuation, immaturity, and such insecurities. However, at the end of the story, the image of the wall might represent her firm position in protecting her chastity, which assumes her growth in maturity and character. Indeed, these two contrasting images are not merely decorations or stylistic devices but are in line with the transformation that is a desirable change willed by the author of the Songs. It signifies the result or fruit of the entire pedagogical process the lover went through: her encounters with other characters in the book and her intimate conversations with her lover.

The female protagonist, who undergoes a love journey from a flower to the wall, transforms from an unstable to a firm and committed person. This transformation aligns with the idea of growth in maturity, as depicted in the general image of the spring season and the image of

[39] Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs*, 76.

ripping fruit throughout the book. With this view in mind, in the following part, this article will offer another way to read the allegorical reading while situating the Songs in the human experience of lust in the internet age.

New Destination of the Songs

For centuries, the Songs have been interpreted allegorically, portraying the female as human and her lover as God. Although it may seem believable, this interpretation appears arbitrary for modern scholars because it makes little reference to the literary devices used within the text. However, the primary reason for appreciating the allegorical method was its usefulness in extracting the complete meaning of texts or its pastoral effectiveness, as reflected in the experience of the early church fathers. In light of the notion that only through Christ can the full significance of scriptural text be discovered, the early fathers developed and endorsed allegorical interpretation to lead people not only to comprehend the scriptures but to live by them as well. In Augustine's words, "What matters is not the meaning discovered but the transformation of the reader."[40]

Furthermore, in the field of theological discourse, allegorical readings have provided the tools for interpreting the Old Testament Christologically, connecting the New and Old Testaments, and, thus, protecting the early Christian Church from the heretical positions of Marcionites and Gnostics.[41] For instance, in his response to Gnostics who see an inferior God in the Old Testament, Irenaeus argued that the imperfection of the Old Testament was part of God's strategy, of His

[40] Decock, "Allegorising: The Relevance of an Old Method of Interpretation," 2 and 11.
[41] Decock, "Allegorising: The Relevance of an Old Method of Interpretation," 2.

economy of salvation. Employing the allegorical method in the Book of Genesis, he interpreted Adam as being created imperfectly, journeying in maturity to the second Adam, a figure of Christ in the New Testament. In this sense, gradually, God brought His creation through Christ to its perfection (1 Cor. 15:44–49). Moreover, allegorical interpretation has also proven to be an effective way for the fathers to link the Scriptures with their cultural context, allowing Christians to connect Scriptural texts with the language and learning of their times. For instance, Origen interpreted the three books of Solomon as corresponding to the three parts of Greek philosophy: Proverbs as ethics, Ecclesiastes as physics, and the Songs as enoptics.[42]

As we see above, the experience of the early Church demonstrated that allegorical interpretation may seem simplistic. Yet, it offers a sense of theological exploration, a flexibility to adjust to particular cultures, and a creative pastoral interpretation. Given this, understandably, as an old approach that employs the interpretation that goes beyond the intentional texture of the text, it kept gaining a place in the Church from the New Testament until the nineteenth century. Aside from its valuable contribution to the Church, this approach is appealing since the mystics use it as a metaphor for their spiritual life, capturing their personal relationship with God. For instance, in the sixteenth century, St. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross contemplated the Songs to capture their mystical encounters with God, who touched their souls intimately. St. Teresa compares the divine-human relationship to a couple who love and understand one another without needing words. She observes, "So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God, in [God's] goodness, to grant [them] some

[42] Decock, "Allegorising: The Relevance of an Old Method of Interpretation," 2.

experience of it."[43] Similarly, St. John of the Cross tells how God satisfies the soul's longing for intimacy, just as the Bridegroom in The Songs shares the Bride's love through passionate embraces and tender kisses. These reflections present a compelling perspective on reading the Songs, emphasizing the healing of God's love for the human soul.[44]

Despite its richness, this spiritual reading ignores the Songs' socio-historical context and literary details, which conceive many symbolic meanings. As we have seen in the previous sections, there appears to be a setting suggesting that the Song is a social strategy to preserve Jewish national identity in general, particularly Jewish morality, during the Hellenistic era. This assumption is in line with the literary analysis of the development of self-description metaphors, showing the realization of pedagogical goals in portraying the protagonist. These findings validate that the Songs are entirely non-religious, romantic poetry focused solely on the narrative of human relationships. In light of this, the author believes that the traditional allegorical and spiritual reading may have taken things too far or, at the very least, have jumped the literature fact to theological speculation. However, the author also acknowledges that the spiritual meaning, as the allegorical reading suggested, embedded in the Songs cannot simply be ignored. To maintain the tension between the spiritual and literary reading, this article will offer another way to reframe the allegory by rereading the key images in the Songs using the lens of the Old Testament, specifically the theology of creation. By doing this, the Songs' significant spiritual or theological meaning can be harmonized with the literary reading.

43 Karen-Marie Yust, "From the Text to Sermon: Song of Songs 2:8–13," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 77, No. 2 (April 2023): 182.

44 Yust, "From the Text to Sermon: Song of Songs 2:8–13," 182.

Reading the allegory anew

Although there is no reference to God in the Songs, from the Old Testament Hebrew perspective, God is not absent from the Songs. Although most of the love expressed in the Songs pertains to the lovers' profane passion, God's love and concern for his creatures are present and vividly portrayed. God's love is clearly demonstrated in the enjoyment and pleasure that the lovers find in each other and their surroundings, which were given to them by God during creation. This theological significance becomes apparent when we read the Songs from the perspective of the book of Genesis. Indeed, several recent studies have firmly proven the close connection between the first chapters of Genesis and the Songs. Figuratively, we can sense that the book of Genesis is about "God's symphony of love," which began in Eden but then turned into chaotic songs after the Fall. With this view in mind, theologically speaking, the Songs are "love's lyrics redeemed."[45]

Phyllis Trible summarizes how the Songs, by variations and reversals, creatively actualize central motifs and themes of the Eden narrative:

> "Female and male are born to mutuality and love. They are naked without shame; they are equal without duplication. They live in gardens where nature joins in celebrating their oneness. Animals remind these couples of their shared superiority in creation and their affinity and responsibility for lesser creatures. Fruits pleasing to the eye and tongue are theirs to enjoy. Living waters replenish their gardens. Both couples are involved in naming; both couples work....

[45] Richard M. Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs," Andrews University Seminary Studies, , Vol. 27, No. 1, (Spring 1989): 5.

> Whatever else it may be, Canticles is a commentary on Gen. 2-3. Paradise Lost is Paradise Regained".[46]

As we see above, the Songs is a love story that creatively reproduces the Garden of Eden. The Paradise Lost in Genesis is turned into Paradise Regained in the Songs.[47] However, the lovers in the Songs differ from the pre-Fall couple in the Garden. Indeed, the Songs show that sin exists in their world and has negative consequences. The lovers have to face challenges such as angry family members, bad weather, the intoxication of love, love sickness, and even the fear of death. Despite these challenges, the lovers in the Songs can overcome them and stay in love. Here, we can see that the Songs depict the ideal of two lovers being in harmony with each other even after the fall of Adam and Eve. Thus, the Song goes beyond a moral, pedagogical, and entertaining story portraying a couple who maintain chastity. In this view, the lovers in the Songs primarily represent humanity in parallel in Genesis 2:24. In other words, Adam and Eve served as humans before the fall; the Song depicts the ideal of a woman and a man in mutual harmony after the fall.

Then, where is God in this reading? Without explicitly mentioning God, the author of the Songs describes the beauty of God's handiwork in the lovers' natural surroundings: brilliant light, fountains and springs, many waters, mountains and hills, pastures and vineyards, trees and flowers, sun and moon, birds, and animals. Given this, it may be justified to say that the underlying theme of the entire Song is the same high doctrine of creation in the book of Genesis. God in the Songs is God the Creator of all the goods. Further reading may suggest that God raises the love between the lovers, which makes the love relationship between them

[46] Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs, 5-6.

[47] Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98, no. 4 (December 1979): 524.

extolled and celebrated. Here, human sexuality is considered to be a creation ordinance granted by God to men and women for their enjoyment. Given this, the voices of the Songs extol and enhance the creation of sexuality in Gen. 2.

In addition to the implicit reference to God, the Songs affirm God as the source of human love, as noted by Richard M. Davidson. The climax of the Songs is reached when it explicitly mentions the flame of Yahweh in Songs 8:6-7. Some scholars have suggested that the most appropriate translation of "*salhebetyah*" in verse 6 is "a flame of Yah(weh)." Therefore, the complete verse would read: "For love is as strong as death, ardent love as relentless as Sheol; the flash of it is a flash of fire, a flame of Yahweh himself." Assuming this interpretation is correct, true human love is explicitly described as originating in God as "a spark off the original flame."[48] Considering this, we may justify saying that human love at its best, as described in the Song, points beyond itself to the God of love. Therefore, in the final analysis, the allegorical interpretation, both the traditional and spiritual reading of the Songs, may be correct in its conclusion that the Song forecasts God's love for humans. However, the conclusion is reached incorrectly.

How can the theological significance of the Songs be reconciled with its cultural and social function as a pedagogical tool that guided the youth during the Hellenistic era? First, the theological vision behind the Songs is an inseparable part of the Jewish identity. As understood by the Zionist interpretation of the Songs, numerous elements within the text enhance Jewish national identity.[49] With this view in mind, just as the Zionist botanical, the beautiful landscape descriptions that symbolized the

48 Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs, 18.

49 Ilana Pardes, Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture, First edition, The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 2013): 16-17.

promised land and the mention of Jerusalem contribute to Jewish national identity, so too does the vivid image of the Garden, which may serve as a reminder of Jewish theological stance. Additionally, as Richard M. Davidson pointed out, the Songs carry the theology of creation in the Hebrew world of view and provide a Jewish stance regarding human sexuality amid Hellenistic practices. Richard identifies various Jewish unique concepts related to sexuality, as demonstrated by the lovers in the Songs. These concepts include the idea that sexuality is good, meant for couples, egalitarian, related to wholeness, a multidimensional relationship, pleasurable, and beautiful.[50]

All in all, the concepts derived from Jewish theology of creation form the basis of the pedagogical agenda and are portrayed through entertaining love poetry featuring two lovers in the shadow of Adam and Eve after the Fall. In terms of practical attitude, as analyzed through conceptual metaphor, the lovers, through their intimate interaction, finally overcome their temptations and choose to abstain from sex before marriage, which contrasts with Hellenistic practices that are more relaxed in terms of sexual morality. In this sense, the Songs have arguably become the most sensual, entertaining, yet theological enlightening, thus reinforcing their place in the canon.

Wisdom for Young Audiences in the 21st Century

How do the Songs reach the modern audience's experience, especially the youth in the 21st century, marked by the rapid growth of the internet? Indeed, the internet benefits humanity, creating economic growth, transferring knowledge, connecting people worldwide, and, in many other ways, making our lives easier. However, there have been

[50] Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs, 6-17.

ongoing worries about the effects of pornography on adolescents, mainly since 80% of the worldwide youth population is online now.[51] Although the Internet does not invent pornography, the wide acceptance of the Internet has reshaped pornography consumption in human history. In line with the rapid growth of the internet, the amount and types of pornographic content reached enormous growth. Many studies have indicated that the quantity of pornography consumers and their level of engagement have increased significantly. Current studies find that people's tendency to use pornography material is relatively high, especially in men (around 60–98%) compared to women (about 30–90%).[52]

In the circle of educators, excessive and problematic pornography use (pornography addiction) is considered a threatening shadow for the future generation. It has often been encompassed under the general term of "cybersex addiction." By definition, cybersex addiction is a "maladaptive pattern of online sexual behavior, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress."[53] Some proposals identify the following symptoms of cybersex addiction: (a) excessive time/effort spent on OSA; (b) impaired self-control; (c) failure to fulfill family, social, or work responsibilities; and (d) persistence in the sexual behavior despite its consequences. Further study indicates that the prevalence of this clinical condition ranges from 0.8 to 8% of cybersex users (including porn users) who have signs and symptoms of this clinical condition.[54] Given this ongoing complex and threatening reality, what remains constant is the critical role of supportive parents and educators in equipping young

51 Mozilla Foundation, *Internet Health Report 2019*, 1st ed. (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2019), 83.

52 Rafael Ballester-Arnal et al., "Pornography Consumption in People of Different Age Groups: An Analysis Based on Gender, Contents, and Consequences," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 20, no. 2 (June 2023): 766–767.

53 Ballester-Arnal, "Pornography Consumption in People of Different Age Groups: An Analysis Based on Gender, Contents, and Consequences," 768.

54 Ballester-Arnal, "Pornography Consumption in People of Different Age Groups: An Analysis Based on Gender, Contents, and Consequences," 768.

persons with the knowledge and awareness necessary for a positive understanding of sexuality and healthy relationships. In this regard, the Songs may have found a new purpose. It can serve as both an insight and a strategy to help young people navigate their bright future in the shadow of excessive and problematic pornography use. Here are three key takeaways from the Songs for sex education in the 21st Century.

First, what we see today in the internet age is the extension of what historians call the sex revolution in the past century. Underlying the rampant practice of cybersex and any excessive sexual behaviors is the idea that separate sex and its procreation function. In Peter Kreeft's words, "It is like separating food from nutrition, or eyes from seeing, or ice makers from ice, or churches from saints."[55] That separation has reduced the rich dimension of human sexuality into a source of pleasure. In contrast to this view, even though the Songs acknowledges pleasure and beauty as part of human sexuality, it still offers sexuality as a wholeness. The Songs promote a perspective of sexuality that encompasses humans' somatic, psychological, spiritual, and reproductive functions as wholeness. This concept is apparent throughout the book. As the story goes, physical closeness is crucial as the lovers speak and cling to each other: "His left hand is under my head, and his right arm embraces me" (2:6; 8:3). The woman feels unsettled whenever she finds her lover disappear. As she seeks her lover, we may see that the Songs emphasize the meaning of presence. Both lovers desire one another to be complete. In the Songs, man and woman emerge as individuals capable of being self-sufficient while also becoming "bone of one's bone, flesh of one's flesh." For sure, this intimacy is far deeper from understanding sexuality as merely a source of pleasure.

[55] Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Jesus* (South Bend, Ind: St. Augustine's Press, 2007): 135.

Second, the songs remind us of the true nature of love. Besides affirming human love positively as a spark of the flame of God, the Songs also, in many ways, stress love, particularly its pleasurable dimension or sexual attraction, as an unsurpassable force that can lead to destruction. Readers might be familiar with the verse saying love is as strong as death. However, many more metaphors in the Songs illustrate how the power of love possibly will drive the lover into unexpected things. Stefan Fischer notes that the final phrase, 'a king is held captive in the tresses, ' marks the culmination of the similes and metaphors describing the strength of love. According to him, the point of this metaphor is that as a king is powerful, the woman's beauty becomes even more powerful.[56] As captivity is often associated with war, it is also associated with violence. That is how the Songs try to communicate the very nature of love. Love is too powerful, even explosive, yet it is also very sweet and alluring; thus, it's like a trap that attracts us in such a way that we may lose control. This warning becomes even more pertinent when we consider the problem of pornographic use, which leads to cybersex addiction that diminishes human free will. All of the images in the Songs that show a warning, such as a trap, death, military imaginaries, solid architectures, fortress, wall, wine, or a captive king, should be taken seriously when it comes to human desire or passion, especially in the minds of the massive sexual content available on the internet. None of those images are ever obsolete. Don't underestimate the power of human passion; otherwise, it will consume you.

Third, on a practical level, the Songs provide a powerful message on the significance of intimate conversation in human maturation, especially regarding human sexuality. The book centers around the pivotal

[56] Fischer, "Mental Mapping in the Admiration Song in Song of Songs 7:2–7," 6.

theme of an honest and intimate conversation between two lovers in their journey toward maturity. In a modern sense, the Songs can be seen as a journey towards growth in psychosexual-spiritual maturity through intimate conversation. This message may refer to the promotion of having counseling sessions, undergoing life mentorship, or simply having a supportive circle of peer friends. From the perspective of spirituality, the presence of companions in the journey to maturity who provide intimate relationships may be interpreted as well as the image of God, the loving partner. In addition, as the Songs go, it emphasizes openness, especially regarding human sexuality. Put in a negative statement; the Songs warns us that keeping sexuality a secret can be harmful, as the nature of love is powerful and cunning; thus, it can make people act irrationally. It means a statement to normalize conversation on human sexuality. An honest and intimate conversation on human sexuality may prevent us from being fooled by the experience of love. Notably, since women are the active agents, the Songs also advocate and empower women to speak up about sexuality. Reading the Songs, either in groups or private, can be the best starting point to enter an intimate and honest conversation about human sexuality.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Songs are an entertaining and enlightening book. By maintaining the tension between literary and allegorical readings and close reading using a conceptual metaphor approach, this article helps the readers understand its wisdom. The Songs are embedded in a historical context, serving as a social strategy for nurturing Jewish identity in the face of Hellenistic culture. The vulgar sexuality, as celebrated in the Songs, has a firm reference in the theology of creation in the book of Genesis. In this light, the lovers in the Songs,

like Adam and Eve, represent humanity in search of maturity. God is present in the lovers' natural surroundings, intimate companions, and the flame of love that sparks their passion. While this interpretation might be debatable, it has proven to carry a relevant message to the young audience in the 21st century in dealing with the bombardment of pornographic content on the internet. Keeping sexuality in its whole meaning, never underestimating the powerful nature of human lust, and nurturing intimate conversation are practical wisdom that the Songs communicate to modern audiences.

Bibliography

Ballester-Arnal, Rafael, Marta García-Barba, Jesús Castro-Calvo, Cristina Giménez-García, and Maria Dolores Gil-Llario. “Pornography Consumption in People of Different Age Groups: An Analysis Based on Gender, Contents, and Consequences.” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 20, no. 2 (June 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00720-z.

Barbiero, Gianni, and Michael Tait. *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*. Boston: Brill, 2011.

Bible Hub. "Song of Salomon 2:1." Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, accessed October 28, 2023, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/songs/2.htm.

Bible Hub. "Song of Salomon 2:1." Keil and Delitzsh's Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, accessed October 28, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/kad/songs/2.htm.

Decock, P.B. "Allegorising: The Relevance of an Old Method of Interpretation." *Acta Theologica* 23, no. 1 (2016). https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v1i1.105660.

Fischer, Stefan. "Mental Mapping in the Admiration Song in Song of Songs 7:2–7." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (April 23, 2019). https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.4998.

Fox, Michael V. *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1: A-C*. 1 edition. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Gault, Brian P. *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs*. Ancient Israel and Its Literature, Number 36. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019.

Jenni, Ernst, and Claus Westermann. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1997.

Kreeft, Peter. The Philosophy of Jesus. South Bend, Ind: St. Augustine's Press, 2007.

Landy, Francis. "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98, no. 4 (1979). https://doi.org/10.2307/3265666.

Lucas, Ernest C. *Exploring the Old Testament. Volume 3, A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2003.

McKenzie, Steven L., ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Mozilla Foundation. *Internet Health Report 2019*. 1st ed. Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2019. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839449462.

Nelstrop, Louise. "Erotic and Nuptial Imagery." In *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, by Louise Nelstrop, 327–46. edited by Edward Howells and Mark A. McIntosh. Oxford University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198722380.013.17.

NP Bratois, Ish – Ishshah, in Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament 1. Edited by G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H. J. Fabry. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, pgs. 222-237, 1997.

Pardes, Ilana. *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture*. First edition. The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies. Seattle ; London: University of Washington Press, 2013. Schellenberg, Annette, ed. *The Song of Songs through the Ages*. Studies of the Bible and Its Reception. Boston: De Gruyter, 2023.

Pardes, Ilana. *The Song of Songs: A Biography*. Vol. 46. Princeton University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd58s8r.

Robinson, Timothy H., ed. *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, volume 98. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2021.

Suderman, W. Derek. "Modest or Magnificent? Lotus versus Lily in Canticles." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2005). http://www.jstor.org/stable/43725391.

Van Der Merwe, Dirk G. "Erotic Fantasy, Spirituality and Song of Songs." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 2 (January 30, 2017). https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i2.1610.

Yust, Karen-Marie. "From the Text to Sermon: Song of Songs 2:8–13." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 77, no. 2 (April 2023). https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643221148484.