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How Mystics Hear the Song

BY W. DENNIS TUCKER, JR.

Mystics illustrate the power of the Song of Songs to shape our understanding of life with God. Can our languishing love be transformed into radical eros—a deep yearning that knows only the language of intimate communion, the song of the Bridegroom and his Bride?

The language of the Song of Songs—so replete with sexual imagery and not so subtle innuendos that it leaves modern readers struggling with the text's value (much less its status as Scripture)—proved theologically rich for the patristic and medieval interpreters of the book. Rather than avoiding the difficult imagery present in the Song, they deemed it to be suggestive for a spiritual reading of the biblical text.

In the Middle Ages, more "commentaries" were written on the Song of Songs than any other book in the Old Testament. Some thirty works were completed on the Song in the twelfth century alone.[1] This tells us something about the medieval method of exegesis. Following the lead of earlier interpreters, the medieval exegetes believed the Bible had spiritual meaning as well as a literal meaning. From this they developed a method of interpretation to uncover the "fourfold meaning of Scripture": the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the mystical.[2] Medieval interpreters pressed beyond the literal meaning to discover additional levels of meaning.

A MONASTIC APPROACH

Before we look at how three great mystics in the Christian tradition—Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross—made use of the Song, let's consider a larger issue: Why did the Song generate such personally intense reflections in the works of the mystics?

The form and focus of "monastic commentaries" in the medieval period was well suited for a spiritual reading of the Song. The writers tended to prefer an individual, personal interpretation of a text instead of a collective

interpretation.[3] Thus, monastic commentaries on the Song concentrated on the relationship between Christ (the Bridegroom) and the soul (the Bride), rather than Christ and the church universal.[4] In addition, the love of God was a primary theme in these commentaries, surpassing notions of faith or revealed truth. The graphic content of the Song as a "love song" was a rich source for reflecting on this theme. Yet in the medieval commentaries the emphasis usually was on the human response to divine love, not on divine love alone. God's love was assumed while our response to such love became the subject of intense reflection.

Perhaps the Song of Songs received significant attention precisely because it is a wedding song. For medieval interpreters the wedding day represented a liminal state, a threshold between betrothal and sexual union that mirrored their existence as monastics. As Denys Turner explains, they sensed that their "life of partial withdrawal from the world situated them at a point of intersection between this world and the next, between time and eternity, between dark and light, between anticipation and fulfillment."[5] Thus the wedding day envisioned in the Song became symbolic of the monastic life. All of life is a liminal moment—living in this world, yet longing for the next. The language of anticipation and fulfillment in the Song was an ideal vehicle for expressing the monastic perspective. Its imagery is fluid enough to convey the tension between the "now" and the "not yet" of the spiritual life.

Contemporary readers of the Song are plagued by modern ideas of the erotic. For the monastic writers, however, *eros* had a richer meaning, that of yearning. Even as the Bridegroom longs for his bride, so too did these writers yearn for the "kisses of his mouth" (Song of Songs 1:2). Indeed they welcomed the language of *eros*, of yearning, as an apt way to describe the human response to God's love.

Bernard of Clairvaux and Teresa of Avila reflected on the Song in the style and manner just described, in order to illuminate the fundamental aspects of the spiritual life. Although John of the Cross did not write a commentary on the Song, he allowed its language and imagery to mingle freely with his own prayers to the Beloved.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Bernard, who became an abbot at the young age of twenty-four, composed eighty-six sermons on the Song over a period of eighteen years to instruct his order, a twelfth-century Benedictine reform movement known as the Cistercians of Clairvaux.[6] As we might expect in a commentary in the monastic tradition, his sermons are not exegetical but are in the tradition of *lectio divina* (or divine reading)—a careful listening to Scripture "with the ear of our hearts" as Benedict says in the Rule for these communities. Bernard notes the original setting of the Song and concludes, "here too are expressed the mounting desires of the soul, its marriage song, an exultation of spirit poured forth in figurative language pregnant with delight" (*Ser-*

mon 4:8). The setting as well as the text of the Song become occasions for thinking about the love of God and, hence, for devotional reflection.

The primary task for Bernard was not so much "to explain words as it is to influence hearts" (*Sermon* 16:1). He did not try to write an exegesis of the text or a theological synthesis (in the manner of the Scholastic theologians), but "to teach thirsting souls how to seek the one by whom they themselves are sought" (*Sermon* 84:7). Without dismissing either the literal or allegorical methods of interpretation, Bernard explored the benefits of a moral reading of the Song.

Reading the Song, Bernard of Clairvaux suggests, can lead the "thirsting soul" to rediscover the power of love—redirecting our love back to God and restoring (with God's grace) our ability to love generously.

A careful and reflective reading of the Song, he suggests, can lead the "thirsting soul" to rediscover the power of love. Through this programmatic reading, Bernard seeks to redirect our love back to God and restore with the aid of God's grace our ability to love generously. "What a great thing is love, provided always that it returns back to its origin," he writes; "flowing back again into its source, it acquires fresh strength to pour itself forth once again" (*Sermon* 83:4). Thus, union with God is a homecoming of sorts, as one's languishing and desiccated spirit returns home to find new life in the deep waters of God's great love. But, he notes, just when we think we are the ones who have made this homecoming journey, we discover that it is not us at all—it is God:

> I could not perceive the exact moment of his arrival. He did not enter by the senses, but whence did he come? Perhaps he did not enter at all.... But I found him closer to me that I to myself. How can I perceive his presence within me? It is full of life and efficacy and no sooner has he entered than my sluggish soul is awakened. He moves, and warms, and wounds my heart, hard and stony and sick though it be. It is solely by the movement of my heart that I understand that he is there and I realize the power of his action. (*Sermon* 74:6)

Through reflection on the Song, we discover that the journey to God's love does not consist in finding a path, as much as in being found on the path by the Bridegroom who passionately seeks his bride.

Like many of the medieval mystics, Bernard proffers a vision of the soul's ascent to experience God. His point of departure is the bold proclamation that opens the bride's *epithalamium*, or love song: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (Song of Songs 1:2). For Bernard, the bride is

the "thirsting soul," and the kiss is a metaphor for union with God. Yet to receive the kiss, he suggests, we must approach the Bridegroom in appropriate fashion:

> It is my belief that to a person so disposed, God will not refuse that most intimate kiss of all, a mystery of supreme generosity and ineffable sweetness. You have seen the way that we must follow, the order of the procedure: first, we cast ourselves at his feet, we weep before the Lord who made us, deploring the evil we have done. Then we reach out for the hand that will lift us up, that will steady our trembling knees. And finally, when we shall have obtained these favors through many prayers and tears, we humbly dare to raise our eyes to his mouth, so divinely beautiful, not merely to gaze upon it, but—I say with fear and trembling—to receive its kiss. (*Sermon* 3:5)

Though the path to the divine kiss is a slow and arduous journey, it begins and ends in God's presence. The moment of ascent to the face of God is anticipated by numerous moments of "prayer and tears," yet the humble and penitent spirit is steadied by the guiding hand of the Bridegroom who raises the bride to stand before him face to face. Finally at the moment of the kiss, when the soul experiences the face of God, the soul becomes "one spirit with him" (*Sermon* 3:5).

This union with the Divine generates a love bathed in action. "Then once again, having tasted the inebriation of contemplative love," writes Bernard, "[the soul] strives to win souls with its habitual fire and renewed courage" (*Sermon* 58:1). He explains that "love reveals itself, not by words or phrases, but by action and experience" (*Sermon* 70:1). Thus Bernard's moral reflection on the Song is not merely an exercise in our personal experience of God. Such contemplation, no matter how exalted, is never complete unless it leads us to love our neighbors.

TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa of Avila's brief *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, written to her "sisters" and "daughters in the Lord," was the first treatment of this biblical book by a woman before the twentieth century.[7] Apparently her confessor at the time gave Teresa permission to record her reflections on the Song. Yet her later confessor and a theologian of the Inquisition, Diego de Yanguas, read *Meditations on the Song of Songs* and ordered it burned. She complied, but by this time the nuns had made additional copies that were preserved.

Teresa limits her comments to just a few texts—Song of Songs 1:2; 1:2b; and 2:3-5. Her object, like Bernard's, is not to grasp the literal meaning of the text, but to be seized by the text itself. To this end, she avoids any discussion of the literal context of the book. "I interpret the passage in my own way," she explains, "even though my understanding of it may not be

in accord with what is meant" (*Meditations* 1:8). While Teresa did not believe her instruction supplanted the meanings that the "learned men" and "doctors" had provided, she was certain that the understanding she had received from God would provide "delight and consolation" to the sisters. This two-fold approach to Scripture characterized by humility and delight guides the writing of Teresa throughout her treatment of the Song. As Carole Slade observes, "According to Teresa, women usually advance toward union more quickly than men because education in rational analysis of Scripture, an education available only to men, inhibits rather than enables the enjoyment of Scripture."[8] Thus, Teresa invites us not to explain but to enjoy Scripture as it leads toward divine union.

The love of God is central to the entire work, for Teresa laments that we "practice so poorly the love of God" (*Meditations* 1:5). For her then, the Song requires a moral reading—one that will lead us back from a lack of love, to love most fully realized:

> Along how many paths, in how many ways, by how many methods You show us love! ...[Not] only with [Your] deeds do You show this love, but with words so capable of wounding the soul in love with You that You say them in this Song of Songs and *teach the soul what to say to You*. (*Meditations* 3:14, italics added)

The Song is not merely for our instruction in truth, but it is the pathway to Truth itself. We desperately need to learn the language of love, for "we, inexperienced in loving [God], esteem this love so poorly" (*Meditations* 1:4).

Following Origen and Bernard, Teresa interprets the kiss in Song of Songs 1:2 as a mystical union with God, but she develops this theme in terms of friendship. The kiss of God awakens the soul from its slumber (*Meditations* 5:8) and allows it to enjoy the peace and friendship of the Divine Bridegroom. Because numerous types of false peace may attempt to deceive the soul, Teresa encourages us to remain fervent in prayer, penance, and humility, for the friendship of God will come to those "who beg the Lord for it with continual tears and desires" (*Meditations* 2:30).

Teresa often employs sensory language, particularly the words associated with taste.[9] She sometimes reverses the assumed gender of the Bridegroom in order to attribute maternal characteristics to him (e.g., when she reads Song of Songs 1:2, "your breasts are better than wine"). This extended metaphor illustrates how she shifts the sensory language:

> It seems to the soul it is left suspended in those divine arms, leaning on that sacred side and those divine breasts. It does not know how to do anything more than rejoice, sustained by the divine milk with which its Spouse is nourishing it and making it better.... When it awakens from that sleep and that heavenly inebriation, it remains as though stupefied and dazed and with a holy madness. (*Meditations* 4:4)

Teresa frequently commingles marital and maternal metaphors to express the ecstasy of the soul's union with the Divine. Her sensory language echoes the highly sensual language of the Song itself, suggesting its influence on her and other interpreters who "taste all the words" of the Song (*Meditations* 5:2).

Like Bernard, Teresa sees that divine union must be linked with obedient action. Drawing on the contrast in Song of Songs 2:5, "Sustain me with raisins, / refresh me with apples; / for I am faint with love," she reflects on the relationship between the contemplative life and the active life epitomized by Mary and Martha:

> Martha and Mary never fail to work almost together when the soul is in this state. For in the active—and seemingly exterior—work the soul is working interiorly. And when the active works rise from this interior root, they become lovely and very fragrant flowers…. The fragrance from these flowers spreads to the benefit of many. (*Meditations* 7:4)

This "exteriority" of faith comes to a focus in the final chapter of *Meditations*. Only disciples who both pray with fervent desire and care for their neighbors "imitate the laborious life that Christ lived" (*Meditations* 7:8).

The impassioned language of the Song, suggests Teresa, kindles our emotions when we read it, generating within us a desire for the fullness of experience associated with divine union. And in loving God so intimately, we discover our true life in the peace and friendship of the Divine Bridegroom.

JOHN OF THE CROSS

John of the Cross, who was trained as a poet at the University of Salamanca, offers a third way of reading the Song. Instead of writing a long commentary like Bernard's or a brief meditation on the text like Teresa's, John appropriates the language and imagery of the Song in his own poetry, most notably *The Spiritual Canticle*.[10]

Many images in the *Canticle* (e.g., wine, water, springs, flowers, gardens, mountains, stages, oils, vineyards, and fruits) mirror the metaphors of the Song. The *Canticle's* overt structure of a dialogue between a Bride and Bridegroom mimics the implied structure of the Song. And similar to the Song, the Bride and Bridegroom are found hiding, fleeting, wounding, seeking, finding, and embracing. John invokes many physical aspects of the lovers' bodies—eyes, heart, hair, breasts, blackness of

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skin, neck, and arms—to recapture their sense of *eros* or yearning. This excerpt of canticles 34-39 illustrates the nature of John's work:

Bridegroom

The small white dove
has brought back the branch to the Ark;
and now the turtle-dove
has found the mate of her longing
on the river's green banks.

She lived alone,
in solitude she made her nest;
in solitude he guided her,
his loved one, he alone,
he, too, wounded by a lonely love.

Bride

Rejoice with me, my love
come, see us both one in your beauty,
come to the mountain slope and hill,
where pure waters flow,
with me wend deep in the woods.

Then on to the caverns we press,
hidden so high among the rocks
so well concealed;
there we will enter it
and taste the pomegranate's juice.

There you will let me see
what my soul has longed for;
there you will give me,
there, you, my life,
what you told me of that day.

The air's breathing,
the sweet nightingale's song,
the grove in its loveliness,
in the calm of night,
with a flame that fires without pain.

In poetic form the *Canticle* resembles the Song, but its imagery is recast as an overt love song between the soul and God. No longer just a lyrical ode to a human bride and bridegroom, it employs the language of love to express our longing for divine union and the ecstasy of God's embrace.

THE SONG RECONSIDERED

The mystics Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross, each in their way, illustrate the power of the Song to shape our un-

derstanding of life with God. Their writings continue to offer insight to modern readers.

Bernard and Teresa demonstrate the significance of the biblical text for shaping their vision of spiritual union. Employing *lectio divina*, or spiritual reading, they open themselves to hear a word *from* God as they seek to consider the Word *of* God. Contrast this to the approach to Scripture in modern biblical studies, which remain firmly entrenched in historical and critical methods. Though these methods provide helpful information, they tend toward an *informational* reading of Scripture rather than a *formational* reading. The mystics believe that while the informational reading of Scripture (or what Origen called an historical or literal reading) is helpful, only the formational reading of Scripture can yield the insights necessary for spiritual transformation. They challenge us to release our grip on an Enlightenment mentality and to lean into the "divine breast," that we might be nourished, "completely drenched in the countless grandeurs of God."[11]

The sexually explicit language of the Song (which can be so problematic for modern readers) allowed the mystics to express their personal yearning for the Divine and to inspire a love of God in those under their care. Only the Song's language of intense and intimate love could convey their longing for and separation from the Divine Bridegroom. Our own expressions of a longing for, and love of, the Divine Bridegroom frequently falters. Our language lacks the intensity and intimacy expressed by the Song and invoked by the writers. While our love of God may not be any less than theirs, our ability to articulate such love has surely suffered from our neglect of such rich images. The mystics remind us that what is on our lips most surely expresses what is in our hearts.

In John of the Cross we see the benefits of the three-fold emphasis in Benedictine spirituality on reading Scripture, prayer, and "holy reading" (or reading spiritual writings that transform us by the work of the Spirit).[12] So shaped is he by this spirituality, that in the *Canticle* John weaves together the words of Scripture with the words from previous Christian writers into a powerful prayer that expresses the intensity of his love for God. The mystics remind us of the need to find our place within the long history of sisters and brothers who have gone before us—to learn from those who have yearned with the *eros* of the Song, to reflect on those who have ached with the passion of Teresa, and to rejoice with those who have discovered their own song like John. As we dwell with these sisters and brothers, we will find our own voice in this journey toward love.

On the path to faithful living and the journey to divine union, we will discover a "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12) has walked this same path. And in that we may take great hope. Our languishing love someday will be transformed into radical *eros*—a deep, abiding yearning that knows only the language of intimate and intense communion, the song of the Bridegroom and his Bride.

NOTES

1 For a brief overview of the history of interpretation related to the Songs of Songs, see Roland Murphy, "Patristic and Medieval Exegesis—Help or Hindrance?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981): 505-516. For an extended treatment, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1990).

2 The four meanings of Scripture are also called historical, typological, tropological, and anagogical. For example, beyond its primary historical reference, the Exodus story could be interpreted as (2) an allegory of our redemption through Christ, (3) an injunction for us to turn from sin and to accept God's grace, and (4) our passage from slavery to sin in this world to eternal glory with God. On the nature of medieval exegesis, see the definitive work of Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture, Vol. 1*, translated by M. Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

3 On the nature of the medieval commentary, see Jean Leclercq, "Le commentaire de Gilbert de Stanford sur le Cantique de Cantiques," *Analecta* 1 (1948): 205-238.

4 Earlier interpreters, including Origen, preferred the collective interpretation in reading the Song: the two lovers depicted in the text were understood as Christ and the Church. See R. P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957).

5 Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1995), 20.

6 Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Songs of Songs,* volumes 1-4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1971-1980).

7 Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, volume 2, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980). Her more familiar works, *The Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*, merit sustained attention as well.

8 Carole Slade, "Saint Teresa's *Meditaciones Sobre Los Canteres*: The Hermeneutic of Humility and Enjoyment," *Religion and Literature* 18:1 (Spring 1986), 32.

9 Language associated with the sense of smell appears frequently as well. Teresa writes that during prayer "in the interior of the soul a sweetness is felt so great that the soul feels clearly the nearness of its Lord…. It is as though there were poured into the marrow of one's bones a sweet ointment with a powerful fragrance" (*Meditations* 4:2).

10 John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, revised edition, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

11 Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works*, 4:4.

12 For a helpful presentation of the Benedictine approach, see Joan Chittester, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

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