



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

ANTHONY R. CERESKO, O.S.F.S.

*The Interpretation of the Song of Songs  
in St. Francis de Sales:  
How a Saint Learned “The Lessons of Love”*

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originally published in

*Salesianum*

66 (2004): 31-50

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St. Francis de Sales represents only one of many important figures in the history of Christian spirituality whose writings show the influence of the Song of Songs.<sup>1</sup> Men and women, lovers young and old, saints and mystics before and after Francis have sat at the feet of the sage of the Song to listen closely to her enchanting lyrics and to learn her “lessons of love.”<sup>2</sup> Francis not only learned from her; he also made abundant use of the glowing words, phrases, and images of her Song to teach lessons about love to his own followers and disciples.

This central place of the language and imagery of the Song in the writings of Francis may explain his remarkable ability as a spiritual mentor and guide for women of his time. As Wendy Wright observes, “...[T]he bishop had a certain gift for directing women. It was not merely his graceful language, amiable to the sensibilities of French aristocratic womanhood. He understood women and possessed insight into their perception of things.”<sup>3</sup>

Modern scholars have pointed out how the prominence of the woman partner in the Song sets it apart from other biblical books.<sup>4</sup> No other work in the scriptures gives such importance to the thoughts and yearnings, the words and imagination of a woman.<sup>5</sup> I would suggest that Francis’ immersion in the world of the Song of Songs, its language and perspective, opened him to woman’s voice as a source of religious insight. It sensitized him and enabled him to develop his

gifts and capacities for advising and guiding the women who came to him for counsel and direction.

Further, the Song's celebration of love helped Francis to uncover love's manifold dimensions. The words, images, and expressions of the work provided a means of probing and analyzing his own and others' experience.<sup>6</sup> He created a "universe of meaning"<sup>7</sup> out of the Song's language in order to attract and motivate his reader or listener to pursue the path he pointed out: to love God and neighbor as the highest and noblest achievement possible to human creatures.

I begin with a summary of relevant research on the Song and its interpretation. I then describe the place of the Song in the thought and writings of Francis. I show how renewed attention to the "traditional interpretation" of the Song as expressive of divine-human love calls for a reappraisal of Francis' abundant use of this biblical book. I end with a return to the question of the Song and Francis' interaction with women.

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## MODERN CRITICAL STUDY OF THE SONG OF SONGS

The Song represents one of the briefest yet most popular works in the Bible. Its 117 verses divide into just eight short chapters. Yet, during the Middle Ages, more commentaries were written about the Song than almost any other book in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup>

Modern biblical scholarship has achieved a certain consensus on key issues regarding the Song. Commentators in general accept its literary unity.<sup>9</sup> The book probably originated as perhaps thirty or so separate poems or songs.<sup>10</sup> But the biblical author responsible for the present work has woven these poems into a unity by the use of various literary devices - inclusions, refrains, repetition of key words and phrases, for example. Roland Murphy notes that portions of the Song may have been used in ancient Israelite wedding festivities.<sup>11</sup> But in general, "They are love poems that can be uttered in the innumerable settings which are associated with the relationship of lovers."<sup>12</sup>

The songs taken individually celebrate the mutual love of man and woman in poetry that is rich in imagery and erotic power. The two lovers describe their experience of love and elaborate on the joys and pleasures of the physical expression of that love without any shame or apology:

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride,  
you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes,  
with one jewel of your necklace.

How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride!  
how much better is your love than wine,

and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!

Your lips distill nectar, my bride;

honey and milk are under your tongue;

the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.

(Cant 4:9-11; see also 5:2-6)<sup>13</sup>

The individual poems that make up the Song may derive from a diversity of sources. But a number of factors point to this final collection as the work of Israel's sages.<sup>14</sup> First among these factors is the "homily on wisdom"<sup>15</sup> in 8:6b-7:

For love is strong as death,

passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,

a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,

neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love

all the wealth of his house,

it would be utterly scorned.

This sequence of proverbs that make related statements about love "point to a wisdom writer as the one who put the Song into its final form."<sup>16</sup> Murphy refers to this passage as "the sages' own generalizing, self-consciously didactic signature."<sup>17</sup> And Brevard Childs affirms, "These verses [8:6b-7] are unique in the book because they represent a clear example of reflective generalization, which is characteristic of wisdom literature."<sup>18</sup>

A second reason for linking the book with the wisdom tradition lies in the interest of the sages in the world of nature. They were trained observers of the world of God's creation and sought to understand it. In this love poetry of the Song, they recognized "a powerful affirmation of human sexual love, compatible with their intellectual curiosity about natural phenomena (cf. Prov 30:18-19)."<sup>19</sup>

Third, the poems offer a perspective on love and marriage not found elsewhere in the scriptures. Other biblical books deal with marriage and relations between the sexes in the larger context of

community and society - bonds between families, descendants, and questions of property and inheritance. By contrast, the poetry of the Song focuses on fidelity and mutuality in the love between the sexes. These latter concerns formed part of the wisdom teaching and figured prominently in the training of youth. Murphy comments, "There is a growing tendency to recognize the Israelite sages as the preservers and tradents of the Song because they recognized the powerful contribution which these poems would make to the ideals which they tried to nurture (cf. Prov 5:15-19)."<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the sages make use of language and imagery drawn from the experience of human love to describe their own pursuit of personified Wisdom, "the Wisdom Woman." This also serves as a link between Israel's wisdom movement and the Song. Murphy remarks, "The ardent 'search' for and possession of personified Wisdom is depicted with erotic overtones, e.g., in Wis 6:12-20; 7:8-14; 8:2-21; Sir 51:13-22; and Bar 3:15-4:4."<sup>21</sup>

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## **TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG AND MODERN INTERPRETATION: CONFLICTING OR COMPLEMENTARY?**

Tod Linafelt notes, "...[T]he eroticism of the Song of Songs offers an uncommonly compelling way of expressing the relationship between God and humanity."<sup>22</sup> It is no wonder, then, that Jewish and Christian tradition have consistently read the Song of Songs as a dialogue of love between God and human beings. In this traditional, pre-critical interpretation, divine-human love takes on different forms - the love between God and his people, Christ's love for the Church, the relationship of love between God and the individual person. Most of the commentaries and religious writings since the early centuries of the common era, including St. Francis de Sales, follow one of these directions in their reading of the text.

Only in recent years with the rise of historical criticism, has the ground shifted. The most prevalent approach among commentators today understands the text as a celebration of the physical expression of human love. For these commentators, this interpretation represents the original or "literal sense" of the text.<sup>23</sup> They focus on the human love aspect and scarcely mention the "traditional interpretation" of the Song as reflective of divine-human love. Indeed, a tendency to ignore or disparage the traditional or "allegorical" interpretation of previous centuries has manifested itself.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, important voices have called for a renewed attention to this long history of interpretation of the Song as expressive of divine-human love. I will examine five commentators in particular whose approach to the Song demonstrates openness to the traditional interpretation. The first is David Carr, who notes, "... [I]t would be easy for specialists to renounce comment on the history of interpretation altogether. Yet to do so would be to cut biblical scholarship from a crucial dimension of the reality of the texts under study."<sup>25</sup> He points out that:

... [T]he push in much modern biblical scholarship to distinguish sharply ancient interpretation and modern critical interpretation says more about modern interpreters than about the dynamics

of the Song and its ancient interpretation. For the ancient Israelites, the jump from human male-female gender to divine-human gender was smaller than it is for us.<sup>26</sup>

Carr's study focuses on the function of the Song in the canon of scriptures. The prophetic texts image divine-human relations in terms of what Carr calls a "theological marriage matrix": "... the believing community is depicted as the female spouse of the male god - called on to love that God with the exclusive love of a wife and punished for failure to do so."<sup>27</sup> Early Jewish midrash and Christian interpreters of the Song took their cue from this "theological marriage matrix" as a way of depicting the love between God and his people found in the prophetic texts. However, these writers recognized in the Song another description of a human love relationship, a mutually passionate one expressed in less violent and hierarchical terms. "The poetic vision of the Song of Songs images an alternative to both human and divine patriarchy, both male possession of women and images of divine gendered power over Israel."<sup>28</sup> Carr continues:

Just as Hosea, the Deuteronomists, Isaiah, or Ezekiel could apply human gender categories to a picture of human infidelity to the divine, it was but a small step to take the radically different picture of love in the Song of Songs and use it to depict that same divine-human love relationship differently. What seems to be a big jump to modern readers, may have been a much smaller one to ancient ones.<sup>29</sup>

Carey Ellen Walsh represents a second important contributor to the discussion on the Song. She accepts the work as primarily a celebration of the physical expression of human love. But for Walsh, the Song reveals above all the power of desire: "It lays bare desire's impact on the individual and probes its complexity as a force of life."<sup>30</sup>

"Desire" represents a wider category encompassing other aspects of human life besides simply the physical. According to Walsh, the focus on desire explains the openness of the Song's language and imagery to the whole range of levels that desire takes in, including the spiritual and the desire for the divine: "Spiritual desire is within the metaphoric range of meanings, since the Song is about a search for a loved one who is not present."<sup>31</sup> Thus, even though the writer may not have intended a spiritual dimension to the Song, "... because it lands in the Bible and is a search for an absent loved one, spiritual meanings come alive."<sup>32</sup>

The presence of the Song in the Hebrew Bible highlights this motif of desire, "the total unabashed devotion to desire [that] erupts in this Song." Walsh thus describes how the Song can function in this context, for example, as a lens through which to read the Great Commandment: "The woman [of the Song] gives a demonstration of what loving head, soul, and might would look like. And this would come in handy when practicing the command to start loving God that way (Deut 6:5)."<sup>33</sup>

Roland Murphy has also written extensively on this question of the relationship between the traditional interpretation of the Song and modern critical scholarship. He notes, for instance, "...[T]he history of exegesis presents in the main a fairly uniform picture (God's love for his people), in contrast to the currently accepted view (love between a man and a woman)."<sup>34</sup> He thus frames the question:

The point to be insisted upon is the basic unity of the interpretation in the history of Judaism and Christianity: the Song deals with the love of God for human beings, and vice versa. Is this remarkable unanimity merely a brilliant faux pas, or does it supply an added dimension to our understanding of the Song?<sup>35</sup>

Murphy is particularly concerned to ground the "traditional interpretation" in the "literal sense" of the text, as understood by exegetes today. He argues for a link between the historical-critical interpretation (love between man and woman) and the traditional understanding (divine-human love). And he concludes, "... [T]he traditional interpretation enriches and deepens the literal meaning of the text."<sup>36</sup>

Murphy takes Bernard of Clairvaux's reading of the Song as an example. Bernard was a pre-critical interpreter who approached the Song as an expression of the love between God and the individual person. Nonetheless, Bernard "often captured the literal meaning of a passage on the level of experience":<sup>37</sup>

Anyone who knows about love can identify with the love poetry; subjects and objects of love can be shifted around. The bonding element in the whole complex is the presence of certain perennial aspects of love, and the very experience of love: affirmations of yearning and admiration, the agony and ecstasy caused by presence and absence, the description of the beloved's beauty, the effects upon the senses of seeing, touching, hearing - in short the common topics of love language.<sup>38</sup>

A further, more crucial question arises, however, for the modern exegete. A sensitive and insightful interpreter such as Bernard can indeed penetrate to the "literal sense" of the text through his sympathetic reading and ability to identify with the different voices in the text. But can we ground this traditional approach in the text itself? Does the biblical book offer any clear warrants for a broader framework of interpretation beyond its primary meaning as expressive of the passionate love between a man and a woman? Murphy points to two, "both of them based on historical-critical scholarship": "The first is the vitality of the symbol of the love relationship (or if you will, marriage) between man and woman, and the second is the presence of 8:6 in the Song."<sup>39</sup>

Israel's prophets effectively employed the love relationship between a man and a woman as a symbol of the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people.<sup>40</sup> As Murphy notes, "The God of Israel transcended sex, but Israelite theology dared to use themes of human sexual love and marriage as metaphors in portraying the covenant relationship."<sup>41</sup> The Song's theme of the love between man and woman fits into this larger biblical pattern.

The "signature" of the sages in 8:6b provides a second warrant for linking the primary meaning of the Song as expressive of love between man and woman with divine-human love. This verse constitutes a concrete textual basis for recognizing the openness of the Song to a broader interpretation. All along until this verse the theme has apparently been the love of man and woman. But with this verse the link is made, subtly yet clearly, between human and divine love:

For love is strong as death,  
passion fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.

The Hebrew word here is a combination of the word for “flame” and an abbreviated form of the divine name. The NRSV understands this addition of the abbreviated form of the divine name as a way of expressing the superlative: not just “flame,” but “a raging flame.”

Murphy admits that this is one possible interpretation. But he emphasizes the ambiguity of the text. The phrase is open to another meaning. It could also be translated “flame of Yah[weh].” In other words, it is affirming a link between human love and divine love: “Human love has or resembles the flame of divine love; both can be compared in intensity (and perhaps origin, in the sense of 1 John 4:7?).”<sup>42</sup>

In her approach to the Song, Renita Weems presents a more open-ended understanding of the “literal sense.” She describes the book as a “collection of meditations from a woman’s heart,” her “private, journal-like reflections.”<sup>43</sup> “Deeply personal and gripping in its intensity,”<sup>44</sup> the work chronicles the woman’s “continuous struggle to fulfill her desire to be loved and to retain her dignity as a woman.”<sup>45</sup>

Weems concurs with the contemporary interpretation of the Song as “a collection of love lyrics that captures the joys and sufferings of intimate relationships and of sensual love.” Beyond that, however, “it teaches us about the power and politics of human love.”<sup>46</sup> The word “teach” here is crucial. Weems builds on the consensus of modern scholars that the Song represents a product of Israel’s wisdom tradition. For her, the work offers a parade example of the skill of the ancient sage to probe and analyze human experience by way of poetry, paradox, and the play of language:

Whereas the sages who stand behind books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes use aphorisms and irony to impart such hard-earned wisdom, the sage behind the Song of Songs uses love lyrics to ponder the lessons of human experience.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, this product of Israel’s wisdom tradition provides lessons on love, an education of the human heart on how to understand and appreciate the most powerful and universal experience possible for human beings. Approaching the Song from this perspective helps to explain the amazing variety of interpretations it has yielded through the ages. Its language would be adaptable to almost any experience of love, whether it be the love between woman and man or between God and the human creature.

Finally, Tod Linafelt discusses the Song from the perspective of its poetry. As poetry, “the question of what it means . . . resists a definitive answer”:

To say that the poetry resists a definitive answer is not to say, however, that we are absolved from the work of interpretation. Quite the contrary, for the function of metaphor is to force the reader to explore the possibilities of meaning making that it provides.<sup>48</sup>

Medieval Christian interpreters explored those “possibilities of meaning making” especially in the eroticism of the Song’s language and found it most appropriate for reflecting on “the mystery of the union between the individual soul and the divine.”<sup>49</sup>

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## ST. FRANCIS DE SALES AND THE SONG OF SONGS

St. Francis de Sales represents one of the more notable examples of those who discovered in the Song’s language and imagery the appropriate medium for reflecting on the experience of love. Reading his Treatise on the Love of God, for instance, we appreciate how well he learned “lessons of love” from the Sage of the Song.<sup>50</sup> We marvel at how his gentle guidance led others to drink deeply of that love as well.

Francis' introduction to the Song, indeed his introduction to theology, came in 1584, when he was barely seventeen years old. His father had sent him to Paris to complete his university studies in preparation for taking a doctorate in civil and canon law at Padua, in Italy. Although his father foresaw a career in politics and public service for him, Francis harbored in his heart the desire to serve the Church as a priest. He had persuaded his father to allow him to receive tonsure when he was twelve. And in Paris, in addition to his classes in the humanities, he also attended lectures in theology.

The first such course he followed was the series of lectures on the Song of Songs given in 1584 by the celebrated Benedictine, Gilbert Genebrard, professor of Hebrew at the Royal College.<sup>51</sup> Both the lectures and Genebrard himself made a profound impression on the youthful student. Lajeunie notes, "Francis found both in the sacred text and in the commentary, inspiration for his whole life, the theme for his masterpiece [the Treatise on the Love of God], and the first and best source of his optimism."<sup>52</sup> For Genebrard, the Cantic is "a dramatic love story composed in bucolic style." The effect of Genebrard's interpretation of the Song on Francis was immediate: "The history of the world and its salvation was therefore a love story. And the young student was carried away by the idea."<sup>53</sup>

Francis gives a clue to his life-long love affair with the Song in the more than seven hundred citations of the Song listed in the "Index" to the twenty-seven volumes of his collected works.<sup>54</sup> Further, the three verses of the Bible that Francis most often quotes also come from the Song: 1:3 ("Draw me and I will run in the odor of your ointments"), 8:6 ("Love is strong as death, jealousy as firm as hell"), and 1:1 ("Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth, for better than wine are your breasts").<sup>55</sup> John K. Ryan, the author of a popular translation of the Treatise, comments:

All but a few books of both the Old and New Testament are quoted by him, and in most instances, not once but many times.... But the books he uses most are the Psalms and the

Canticle of Canticles. Out of the 106 verses that make up the Canticle, 63 are quoted and some of them so often as to make a total of 179 references.<sup>56</sup>

In some ways it is providential that Francis, at the age of seventeen, "entered theology by the royal portal" of Genebrard's lectures on the Song.<sup>57</sup> As his knowledge of theology grew and deepened, it seems that Francis realized instinctively the immense value of this small book of scripture. The words, images, and expressions of the work offered him the means for probing and analyzing his own and others' experience. Its deeply personal character and the intensity of its diction provided him with the expressions and images for voicing his own insights and understanding of love.

In an earlier work, "Mystical Exposition of the Canticle of Canticles," Francis had attempted a more systematic, "allegorical" reading of the Song as a narrative of one's progress in prayer.<sup>58</sup> But with the Treatise, he makes use of the Song's poetry with great freedom. He had so taken possession of the text that its words and images mingle easily with his own.

Francis' use of the Song of Songs 1:2 in Book I, chapter 9 of the Treatise on the Love of God can serve as an example: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" In these beginning chapters of the Treatise, Francis is developing some basic ideas about the love between God and humans. He entitles this chapter 9, "That Love Strives for Union." Note how Francis begins, as Murphy would say, with "the literal historical meaning." A kiss is a most appropriate physical expression of love and the desire for union: "Thus in a kiss one mouth is put to another as testimony to the desire to pour each soul into the other and unite them in perfect union."<sup>59</sup> Thus Francis affirms, "The end then, of love is simply the union of lover and thing loved."<sup>60</sup> And this love and desire for union is expressed outwardly by the kiss. Francis then employs this symbol of the kiss to describe the relationship between the individual, represented by "the spouse," and God:

Hence the spouse, whose sole aim in all her acts is to be united to her beloved, says, "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth...." "When will it be that I can pour my soul into his heart, that he will pour his heart into my soul, and that thus happily united we shall live without separation?"<sup>61</sup>

We see here how Francis exploits "the possibilities of meaning making" that the symbol of the kiss provides and makes use of it to give voice to the mystic's yearning for union with the divine.

Another example that demonstrates how Francis takes "the literal historical meaning" of the Song as his starting point and then moves beyond it comes in book two, chapter fifteen, "Concerning the Great Sentiment of Love We Receive by Holy Love." Francis' use of terms such as "inner anxiety" and "constant unrest" shows that he is in touch with "the total unabashed devotion to desire" that underlies the drama of the Song.<sup>62</sup> Again, he exploits the polyvalence of the poetry as he weaves the words and images of the Song into his discussion:

Now we have a natural inclination towards the supreme good, in consequence of which our heart has a certain inner anxiety and constant unrest, since it is able in no way either to calm itself or to cease to testify that it lacks perfect satisfaction and solid content. But when our holy faith has shown to our mind this fair object of its natural inclination, then, Theotimus, as God is true! what

ease, what pleasure, what a thrill follows throughout our whole soul! Then, as though in complete surprise at the sight of such surpassing beauty, it cries out in love: "Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, ah, you are beautiful!"<sup>63</sup>

Developing this topic, Francis quotes also the Song of Songs 3:4 further on in this same chapter:

The human heart tends to God by its own natural inclination without fully knowing what he is. When it finds him at the fountain of faith, and sees that he is so good, so beautiful, so gentle, and so gracious toward all men, so well disposed to give himself as the supreme good to all who desire him, O God, what contentment, what sacred movements are there in the soul to unite itself forever to this goodness so supremely lovable. "At last I have found," says the soul thus affected, "I have found what I desired, and now I am at rest!"<sup>64</sup>

In these examples, Francis is not interpreting the Song as if it were an allegory. What Wendy Wright says of St. Bernard and his homilies on the Song can also be said of Francis and the Treatise. They take from the Song of Songs "their poetic vocabulary."<sup>65</sup> They mine that vocabulary's openness and ambiguity, allowing it still to speak of love, not human love but divine-human love. The same language obviously "fits" for both.

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## "EXPERIENCE" AS THE BASIS OF FRANCIS' DOCTRINE OF LOVE AND HIS USE OF THE SONG OF SONGS

Another aspect of Francis' interpretation of the Song is its rootedness in experience. Murphy notes St. Bernard's description of the Song as "the book of experience,"<sup>66</sup> and a brief look at the origin and writing of the Treatise testifies to this experiential dimension of the "love" that Francis describes and analyzes. First, Francis admits that the inspiration for the Treatise came from his encounter with a pious woman whom he had met on one of his episcopal visitations. Her name was Pernelle Boutey and Francis regarded her as "a great friend of God." Both the example of her life and his discussions with her moved him to begin the work that eventually became the Treatise.<sup>67</sup>

The experiences of St. Jane de Chantal and the first nuns of the Visitation Order provided a second source for Francis. He remarks this in his "Preface" to the Treatise: "A large part of what I now share with you I owe to this blessed community,"<sup>68</sup> and Ravier testifies, "There is solid documentary evidence to prove the affirmation that Mother de Chantal and the Founding Mothers of the Order of the Visitation served as models for the most mystical passages in Saint François de Sales' Treatise on the Love of God."<sup>69</sup>

Francis' friendship with Pernelle Boutey constituted the early inspiration for the Treatise and the experience of growth in prayer and love of God among the first Visitandines provided him with further material. But one must consider Francis himself, his own experience as pastor and as a saint. The translator into English of the Treatise, J. K. Ryan, explains: "His own character, mind, and experiences in life," represented also an important element in the writing of this spiritual classic:

Because of what he had read and thought and because of what he had done and experienced, both outwardly and inwardly in his own spiritual life, St. Francis would write a work made up of twelve separate books or parts, divided into 188 chapters, which from beginning to end is one long exegesis of the text, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with your whole mind, and with your whole strength."<sup>70</sup>

To analyze, order, and give expression to this sum of experiences, Francis draws on a variety of sources: the scriptures, the ancient Christian writers and theologians, lives of the saints.<sup>71</sup> Ravier points out that Francis made use of examples of human love, "the most tender, most human images and comparisons in the Bible: the mother who carries or 'nurses' her infant, the fiancés, the wife and husband." But the decisive source is "above all, the most affective book of the Old Testament, the Canticle of Canticles":

Francis had heard long ago, in Paris, the spiritual commentary of Genebrard concerning this song of human love, and he never forgot it. He made of it the support of his own spiritual life, and he knew from experience the force of its fervor.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, Francis recognized in the images and expressions of the Song a means for analyzing and understanding his own experience. Further, he found its "emotionally powerful language"<sup>73</sup> to be an effective medium for communicating his insights.

He did not need the artificiality of allegory to uncover the Song's meaning. He occasionally "allegorizes" brief passages. But in general his interpretations in the Treatise follow what Murphy calls the "traditional interpretation":

I insist on calling this the "traditional" interpretation, not "allegorical." It is true that the traditional interpretation had recourse to allegory as an explanation of many passages. But the allegorical approach, it can be argued, is not essential to it.<sup>74</sup>

Following this traditional approach, Francis makes use of the love lyrics of the Song "to ponder the lessons of human experience"<sup>75</sup> and to tell of "the power of love as God's supreme gift to creation":<sup>76</sup>

God as lover is the moving power of love in the universe, the desire for unity with all the beloved, the passionate embrace that spins the "living pulsing earth" around, sends the "blood through our veins," and "draws us into one another's arms."<sup>77</sup>

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## **FRANCIS DE SALES, WOMEN, AND THE WOMAN OF THE SONG OF SONGS**

Despite the examples in his writings of his society's bias against women, Francis demonstrates a remarkable respect and sympathy with them. Early on he gained a reputation as a spiritual guide and director of both men and women from all walks of life and classes of society. But, as Wendy Wright observes:

He understood women and possessed insight into their perceptions of things. In all of his writing he made abundant use of metaphors drawn from feminine experience. Pregnancy, birth, lactation, child-rearing, all of these he utilized in his descriptions of the devout life. And his usage suggests not an abstract comprehension of these female experiences, but an intimate familiarity and sympathy with them. After all, he was the eldest of a large family.<sup>78</sup>

The extensive correspondence between Francis and his close friend and collaborator, St. Jane de Chantal, provides clear evidence of the sensitivity and wisdom of Francis in dealing with women. Again, the remarks of Wright describe this interaction and the "liberating" dimensions of Francis' guidance:

... [T]he prelate from Annecy exhibited a remarkable insight into the spiritual struggles unique to women. Something of this has been shown in his dealings with Jeanne [de Chantal]. While he encouraged what might be called her feminine flexibility and capacity for surrender, at the same time he instilled in her a firm sense of her own self-direction and her capacity for independent thought and action. This he seemed to do quite instinctively, drawing out the qualities, both "feminine" and "masculine," necessary for her authentic realization of the spiritual life.<sup>79</sup>

The prominence of the woman in the Song sets it apart from other biblical books. The majority of verses are spoken by the woman partner.<sup>80</sup> Further, nowhere else in the scriptures are the thoughts and yearnings, the words and imagination of a woman given such importance as in the Song.<sup>81</sup> This dominance of the female voice has even led a number of commentators to suggest that the author may have been a woman.<sup>82</sup>

One could ask, then, to what extent Francis' intimate familiarity with this book affected his attitude and dealings with women. Did the book play a role in opening him to their spiritual and religious potential? It is said that he "understood women and possessed insight into their perceptions of things," and that he demonstrated a "familiarity and sympathy" for female experiences. Perhaps it was his immersion in the perspective and language of the Song that taught Francis to appreciate and value the voice of women as a source of religious insight. It sensitized him and helped him to develop his unique gifts in advising the women who sought his guidance.

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## CONCLUSION

Recent years have witnessed an intense interest among biblical scholars in the Song of Songs, including a renewed appreciation for the "traditional interpretation." They have pointed out how the woman whose voice holds sway reflects on experience by means of the enchanting love lyrics of the Song. As we attend to her words we discover thought-provoking insights into the meaning of love, both human and divine. Francis de Sales' openness to that voice and willingness to learn those "lessons of love" offers a powerful example to the Christian community today. We have much yet to learn from the Sage of the Song, and from her sisters in today's Church.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Serouet notes, "The Cantic of Canticles has particularly marked the mystical doctrine of the saint.... In his writings, taken as a whole, there is not a single verse of the Cantic that he has not cited. This influence of the Cantic appears particularly strong in the final chapters of Book Six of the Treatise on the Love of God" ("François de Sales [saint]," in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité 5 [Paris: Beauchesne, 1964) cols. 1057-1097, at 1090). See also E. J. Lajeunie, O. P., Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence, 2 vols., trans. Rory O'Sullivan (Bangalore, India: S. F. S. Publications, 1986) 1.63; "Translator's Introduction" to On the Love of God, Translated, with an Introduction and Notes by J. K. Ryan, 2 vols. (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Image Books, 1963) 1.22.

A recently reprinted biography offers a lively study of the life, times, and writings of this popular saint: Michael de la Bedoyere, SaintMaker: The Remarkable Life of Francis de Sales, Shepherd of Kings and Commoners, Saints and Sinners (Manchester, N.J.: Sophia Institute, 1998; originally published as Saint François de Sales [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960]). See also André Ravier, Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint, trans. Joseph D. Bowler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Renita J. Weems, "The Song of Songs: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in The New Interpreter's Bible, 12 vols., ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 5.430. For further discussion of Weems' approach to the Song, see below.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy M. Wright, Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and Francis de Sales, New Enhanced Edition (Stella Niagara, N.Y.: De Sales Resource Center, 2001; original edition, New York: Paulist, 1985) 134. See also, Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction, Translated by Péronne Marie Thibert, Selected and Introduced by Wendy M. Wright and Joseph F. Power, Preface by Henri J. M. Nouwen, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1988) 66-7, 88-9; Th. Schueller, La Femme et le saint: La femme et ses problèmes d'après saint François de Sales (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Roland E. Murphy points out, "It is the female protagonist, rather than the male, who speaks the majority of the lines, and she reveals her feelings more fully than he does" (The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or Song of Songs, ed. S. D. McBride, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990] 70). Further, G. Lloyd Carr claims, "Nearly twice as many verses are from her lips than from his" (The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1984] 54).

<sup>5</sup> Renita J. Weems, "The Song of Songs," in The Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition, ed. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 164-68, at 164.

<sup>6</sup> As Weems affirms, "... [T]he sage behind the Song of Songs uses love lyrics to ponder the lessons of human experience" (New Interpreter's Bible 5.430).

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, The Song of Songs 26.

<sup>8</sup> Roland E. Murphy, "Patristic and Medieval Exegesis - Help or Hindrance?" Catholic Biblical Quarterly 43 (1981) 514.

<sup>9</sup> Brevard S. Childs notes, "Various parts of the book can be distinguished, but they all circle around one subject. In a loose sense one can speak of unity of composition" (Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979] 576) See also R. E. Murphy, The Song of Songs 67; J. M. Reese, The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs, Old Testament Message 20 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983) 206.

<sup>10</sup> Dianne Bergant comments, "The number [of individual songs] has ranged from twelve to fifty-two, the median being about thirty" (Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997] 125,

citing Mary Timothy Elliot, The Literary Unity of the Canticle, European University Studies 20 [Bern: Peter Lang, 1989] 20). As Weems notes, "The exact number (14, 18, 28, or 31?) depends on the literary criteria used to divide the book into units" (The Women's Bible Commentary 165).

<sup>11</sup> The Song of Songs 60.

<sup>12</sup> Roland E. Murphy, Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Forms of Old Testament Literature 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 103. See also R. Gordis (The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary, Revised and Augmented Edition [New York: Ktav, 1974] 17-18). Murphy remarks elsewhere, "Today there is a practical consensus that these eight chapters contain love poems. They embrace a wide range of topics, both the obvious and the subtle, which mark sexual relationships" ("History of Exegesis as a Hermeneutical Tool" 88).

<sup>13</sup> Translations of biblical passages follow the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>14</sup> J.-P. Audet, "Le sens du Cantique des Cantiques," Revue biblique 62 (1955) 216; M. Sadgrove, "The Song of Songs as Wisdom Literature," Studia Biblica 1978, 1: Papers on the Old Testament and Related Themes, ed. E. A. Livingstone, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements 11 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1979) 245-48; Leo Krinetetzki, Das Hohe Lied: Kommentar zu Gestalt und Kerygma eines alttestamentliches Liebeslied, Kommentare und Beiträge zum Alten und Neuen Testament (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1964) 42-45; Murphy, The Song of Songs 99. Weems goes so far as to say, "One can see from both the striking amount of female speech and the decidedly female angle of vision of the book how easy it is to imagine that a female sage is responsible for the stirring meditations contained in Song of Songs" (The New Interpreter's Bible 5.365).

<sup>15</sup> Weems, *ibid.* 437.

<sup>16</sup> Reese, The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs 250.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy, The Song of Songs 99.

<sup>18</sup> Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture 578.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, The Song of Songs 99.

<sup>20</sup> Murphy, "History of Exegesis as a Hermeneutical Tool" 88-89.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, The Song of Songs 99 n. 387. See also Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture 576.

<sup>22</sup> Tod Linafelt, "Biblical Love Poetry (... and God)," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 70 (2002) 335.

<sup>23</sup> As Roland E. Murphy affirms, "Current scholarly opinion holds that the literal sense of Cant[icles] is the expression of human sexual love. Whatever be the differences of opinion concerning the number of characters, or the structure, or dramatic nature of the work, there is wide consensus on this point. It seems to be the obvious meaning of the language" ("Canticle of Canticles," in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. Raymond E. Brown et al. [Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990] 462-65, at 463). See also *idem*, The Song of Songs 41; Dianne Bergant, Song of Songs: The Love Poetry of Scripture, Spiritual Commentaries (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1998) 10.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Marvin H. Pope's comments (Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Bible 7C [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977] 114). Pope is particularly harsh on St. Bernard of Clairvaux (123-34). Murphy takes issue with such views, describing them as "unfortunately one-

dimensional" (The Song of Songs 16). See also David Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation," Journal of Biblical Literature 119 (2000) 233-48, especially 233-35.

<sup>25</sup> Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire" 247.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 239.

<sup>28</sup> David M. Carr, "Ancient Sexuality and Divine Eros: Rereading the Bible through the Lens of the Song of Songs," Union Seminary Quarterly Review 50 (2000) 1-18, at 16.

<sup>29</sup> "Gender and the Shaping of Desire" 244-45.

<sup>30</sup> Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 212.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> "History of Exegesis as a Hermeneutical Tool" 88.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 89 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Similarly, Weems, The New Interpreter's Bible 5.372.

<sup>39</sup> "History of Exegesis as a Hermeneutical Tool" 90.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> The Song of Songs 104. See also Abraham Heschel (The Prophets, 2 vols. [New York: Harper and Row, 1962] 1.50, especially n. 7).

<sup>42</sup> The Song of Songs 197. Weems concurs: "The last part of v. 6 is perhaps deliberately multivalent. Human passion is compared to 'a mighty/raging flame' or 'a flame of fire from Yahweh/God.' Human love can be as intense as divine love...." (The New Interpreter's Bible 5.430). See also Walsh (Exquisite Desire 204-7) and Linafelt ("Biblical Love Poetry" 332).

<sup>43</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible 5.364.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 367.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 371.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 430.

<sup>48</sup> Linafelt, "Biblical Love Poetry" 333.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 339.

<sup>50</sup> Antanas Liuima has produced an in-depth study of the sources on which Francis drew in writing the Treatise, including Francis' use of scripture (Aux sources de Traité de l'Amour de Dieu, 2 vols., Collectanea Spiritualia 5 [Rome: l'Université Grégorienne, 1959]). His approach and conclusions differ considerably from mine. Note also Thomas F. Dailey, "A Song of Prayer: Reading the Canticle of Canticles with St. Francis de Sales," in Salesian Insights, ed. William C. Marceau (Bangalore, India: S.F.S. Publications, 1999) 72-97; James S. Langelaan, "Der Schriftgebrauch bei Franz von Sales in der Abhandlung über die Gottesliebe," Jahrbuch für salesianische Studien 18 (Eichstätt: Franz-Sales-Verlag, 1981) 81-9.

<sup>51</sup> Lajeunie, Saint Francis de Sales 1.62.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 1.63.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Saint Francis de Sales, Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales. Édition complète d'après les autographes et les éditions originales, Par les soins des religieuses de la Visitation du Premier Monastère d'Annecy, 27 vols. (Annecy: Religieuses de la Visitation, 1892-1964). See vol. 27 for the "Index" of scripture passages.

<sup>55</sup> Liuima, Aux sources 2.567. Francis is following the Vulgate version for these verses.

<sup>56</sup> Ryan, "Translator's Introduction" to On the Love of God 1: 22.

<sup>57</sup> In using the phrase "royal portal," Lajeunie is playing on the fact that Genebrard was professor at the Royal College in the University of Paris (Saint Francis de Sales 1.62).

<sup>58</sup> Oeuvres 26.10-19. An English translation is available in St. Francis de Sales and the Canticle of Canticles, ed. André Brix, trans. Thomas Dailey (Bangalore, India: SFS Publications, 1989) 113-46.

<sup>59</sup> On the Love of God 1.74 (Oeuvres 4.52).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 1.75 (Oeuvres 4.53).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 1.74-5 (Oeuvres 4.52-3).

<sup>62</sup> Exquisite Desire 212. Wright traces this "language of desire" among spiritual writers to Gregory the Great in the late sixth century (540-604 A.D.) (Bond of Perfection 110). See, for example, Jean Leclerc, "St. Gregory, Doctor of Desire," chap. 2 in Love of Learning and the Desire for God (New York: Fordham University, 1961).

<sup>63</sup> On the Love of God 1.141 (Oeuvres 4.136-37). See the Song of Songs 1:15 and 4:1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 1.141-42 (Oeuvres 4.137).

<sup>65</sup> Bond of Perfection 113.

<sup>66</sup> "History of Exegesis as Hermeneutical Tool" 89.

<sup>67</sup> Ravier, Francis de Sales 253-54; Lajeunie, Saint Francis de Sales 2.352.

<sup>68</sup> On the Love of God 1.48 (Oeuvres 4.20).

<sup>69</sup> André Ravier, Saint Jeanne de Chantal: Noble Lady, Holy Woman, trans. Mary Emily Hamilton (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989) 213. Wright observes, “Book nine [of the Treatise] can be said to be a portrait (at least in part) of Jeanne’s own spiritual life” (Bond of Perfection 144).

<sup>70</sup> Ryan, “Translator’s Introduction” to *On the Love of God* 1.22.

<sup>71</sup> Lajeunie, Saint Francis de Sales 2.356-62.

<sup>72</sup> Ravier, Francis de Sales 204 (emphasis added).

<sup>73</sup> E. Ann Matter, “Eulogium Sponsi de Sponsa: Canons, Monks, and the Song of Songs,” The Thomist 49 (1985) 551-74, at 557.

<sup>74</sup> “History of Exegesis as a Hermeneutical Tool” 89.

<sup>75</sup> Weems, The New Interpreter’s Bible 5.430.

<sup>76</sup> Reese, The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs 207.

<sup>77</sup> Sallie McFague, Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), from chap. 5 “God as Lover,” 130.

<sup>78</sup> Bond of Perfection 134.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 135.

<sup>80</sup> Murphy, The Song of Songs 70; Carr, The Song of Solomon 54.

<sup>81</sup> Weems, The Women’s Bible Commentary 164.

<sup>82</sup> Murphy, The Song of Songs 70. See also the comments of Weems, The New Interpreter’s Bible 5.365.

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