

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX'S READING OF THE SONG OF SONGS 2:4–5: WOUNDED BY LOVE – PUTTING ORDER IN LOVE

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ABSTRACT

Before focusing on the two important verses, this article first considers Bernard's monastic approach to the reading of the Song of Songs and the sources of this approach in Origen's commentary and sermons. Bernard like Origen presupposes that the main theme of the book is the transformation of the readers into deeper love. The image of "being wounded by love" and the theme of the "ordering of love" are taken from tradition and Bernard presents these in his own way in view of his primary audience, which are the monks of his monastery. This growth in love presupposes the self-knowledge of having been created in the image and likeness of God by which human perfection was seen as a sharing in God's way of seeing and relating: to oneself, to one's neighbours, and to the whole of created reality.

INTRODUCTION

... if the Song provided the mediaeval commentator with abundant material for very varied theological reflections, why is it that not one mediaeval Song commentator makes anything at all of the theological topic the text throws in the commentator's face: the theology of sexuality and marriage? (Turner 1995:40)¹

The answer to Turner's question is complex and requires an understanding of the way the mediaeval readers, and Bernard in particular, approached the biblical texts and, in

¹ "My claims are more limited than those of proof: neo-platonic eroticism *was* a powerful influence upon many aspects of mediaeval theology, even if only relatively indirectly upon the monastic tradition; the monk *did* read his Bible from within an eschatological hermeneutic which, as we will see, can very well explain his receptiveness to a neo-platonic model of love as *eros*; and if the monk was unlikely to have been much influenced by speculative neo-platonising theology, he could nonetheless receive the model more happily from a biblical source - and he found it in the Song of Songs. If not for proof, my case is that there is evidence at least for very strong plausibility" (Turner 1995:43).

this case more specifically, the Song of Songs.² Furthermore, we need to pay attention to the addressees of these biblical interpretations, the monks, and to their expectations. This study will not focus on our contemporary expectations and responses to the Song of Songs and the particular questions raised by this passage, but will explore the particular approach of Bernard.

BERNARD'S MONASTIC READING OF THE SONG OF SONGS

Bernard's interpretation of the Song of Songs stands in a long tradition which has been decisively shaped by Origen's reading of this work. For his general approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures Origen himself drew much inspiration from Hellenistic Judaism and particularly from Philo, whose writings have been preserved for us largely due to Origen's profound appreciation of these works.³ In this tradition interpreting a text was not merely a movement of regression to some original meaning but a forward movement, drawing on the interpretations of the past, in order to discover the wisdom of the Word for the present readers expressed in the "earthen treasures of paltry language".⁴ Furthermore, the ultimate aim was not to extract abstract teaching from these texts but to read one's own life in the light of the text. By reading the text in the light of their own experience they discovered a "deeper"

² Jean Leclercq is still one of the most important specialists of Bernard (see among many other works Leclercq 1979 and 2005). The work of Bernard McGinn is also most helpful; see, for instance, McGinn (1992; 1996).

³ In fact, Origen was instrumental in transmitting the Philonic heritage to later history not only through his own writings but because the manuscript tradition of the majority of the works of Philo has its ultimate source in the collection of manuscripts which Origen had brought with him to Caesarea. After his death they were preserved and copied there together with his own and many other works (see Runia 1993:16–31). "It must be concluded, therefore, that Origen is directly and personally responsible for the fact that we can still read Philo's writings today" (Runia 2004:171).

⁴ "How great, then, must be our understanding, that we may be able to understand in a worthy manner the word which is stored in the earthen treasures of paltry language, whose written character is read by all who happen upon it, and whose sound is heard by all who present their physical ears? What also must we say? For who will understand these matters accurately must say truthfully, 'But we have the mind of Christ, that we may know the graces that have been given us by God' " (*Comm. Jo.* 1.24; Heine 1989:38).

meaning of the text, God's word addressed to the reader.⁵ In this way reading texts was an exercise of personal transformation. This approach of Origen, like that of Philo, was shaped by the "philosophical" tradition of reading common in his time in the sense of a search for wisdom, a search for true happiness, for personal transformation towards a fuller humanity. As Pierre Hadot has shown, Hellenistic philosophers were not merely "grammarians" who focussed only on "notions" about the good life but persons who aimed to realise in their lives and experience the "realities" to which these notions point. What is important is to learn to live "a life according to Intellect" by means of spiritual training (Hadot 1995:29).⁶ Philo of Alexandria had already developed such a philosophical reading in dialogue with the philosophers of his time. Origen's philosophical or spiritual reading of biblical texts was inspired by this tradition and developed it (Ramelli 2008; Ramelli 2012). Hadot has pointed out how in the course of Western history philosophy was stripped of this crucial aim and reduced to providing theology with "conceptual – and hence purely theoretical – material" (Hadot 1995:107). As a result, the original aim of philosophy was taken over by theology and later on by a specific branch of theology, spirituality. The "philosophical" approach to the reading of the Scriptures in Philo and Origen could therefore best be called a "spiritual" approach. This was the approach which we see continued in Bernard's reading of the Song of Songs.

Origen read the Scriptures in view of human transformation, and the Song of Songs occupied a special place in his understanding of human progress and growth. His basic model of spiritual development was linked to an understanding of the three books of Solomon, Proverbs, Qohelet and Song of Songs. In Origen's view these three books correspond to the three main topics in philosophical education: ethics, physics

⁵ "L'action sanctifiante de Dieu que nous lisons dans l'Écriture, nous la voyons se dérouler en nous. Bien mieux, c'est en découvrant cette action en nous, c'est en lisant dans notre expérience personnelle, que nous découvrons l'intelligence vraie de l'Écriture" (Bodard 1953:45).

⁶ It is significant that the subtitle of the English edition of a collection of his essays is entitled *Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. It is one thing to be able to articulate knowledge about the good, it is another thing to experience it. The way to such experience is that of "the spiritual exercises of purification, of the practice of the virtues, of putting ourselves in order" (Davidson 1995:28).

and enoptics (*Princ.* 4:2,4; *Comm. Cant.* Prologue 3).⁷ The Song of Songs is understood as expressing the highest stage of human growth, that is, to be kindled with a saving love:

If, then, a man has completed his course in the first subject, as taught in Proverbs, by amending his behaviour and keeping the commandments, and thereafter, having seen how empty is the world and realized the brittleness of transitory things, has come to renounce the world and all that is therein, he will follow on from that point to contemplate and to desire the things that are not seen and that are eternal. To attain to these, however, we need God's mercy: so that having beheld the beauty of the word of God, we may be kindled with a saving love for him, and he himself may deign to love the soul, whose longing for himself he has perceived. (Lawson 1957:45–46: Prologue 3)⁸

This is precisely the perspective within which Bernard comments on the book; the sermons are addressed to his monks who are ready for higher teaching on love.⁹ At the beginning of his first sermon on the Song of Songs he states:

The instructions that I address to you, my brothers, will differ from those I should deliver to people in the world, at least the manner will be different. The preacher who desires to follow St Paul's method of teaching will give them milk to drink rather than solid food, and will serve a more nourishing diet to those who are spiritually enlightened.¹⁰

⁷ This division was typical for Neoplatonism but had started already from the beginning of the first century C.E. (see Ingetraut Hadot 1987:117).

⁸ See also Origen's commentary on Song of Songs 2:5 (*Comm. Cant.* 3:8; Lawson 1957:198–199).

⁹ In John's narrative of the encounter between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene the Song of Song may have been evoked (John 20:15 and Song 3:1–4). In any case, the text was regularly understood within the framework of transition and spiritual progress. For instance, at the time of Ambrose and Augustine, the Song of Songs was particularly important for the preparation of the catechumens for baptism. Augustine himself evokes it in his Confessions (9:2, 3) when he describes the experiences leading up to his conversion (see Heidl 2003:219–221).

¹⁰ All English translations from the Sermons on the Song of Songs are taken from

Furthermore, he continues by referring to the first two books of Solomon as the necessary preparation for the Song of Songs:

Now, unless I am mistaken, by the grace of God you have understood quite well from the book of Ecclesiastes how to recognize and have done with the false promise of this world. And then the book of Proverbs – has not your life and your conduct been sufficiently amended and enlightened by the doctrine it inculcates? These are two loaves of which it has been your pleasure to taste, loaves you have welcomed as coming from the cupboard of a friend. Now approach for this third loaf that, if possible, you may always recognize what is best. Since there are two evils that comprise the only, or at least the main, enemies of the soul: a misguided love of the world and an excessive love of self, the two books previously mentioned can provide an antidote to each of these infections. One uproots pernicious habits of mind and body with the hoe of self-control. The other, by the use of enlightened reason, quickly perceives a delusive tinge in all that the world holds glorious, truly distinguishing between it and deeper truth. Moreover, it causes the fear of God and the observance of his commandments to be preferred to all human pursuits and worldly desires. And rightly so, for the former is the beginning of wisdom, the latter its culmination, for there is no true and consummate wisdom other than the avoidance of evil and the doing of good, no one can successfully shun evil without the fear of God, and no work is good without the observance of the commandments.

Taking it then these two evils have been warded off by the reading of choice books, we may suitably proceed with this holy and contemplative discourse which, as the fruit of the other two, may be delivered only to well prepared ears and minds. (*Sermo* 1:2–3)

GROWTH IN LOVE AS THE MAIN THEME OF THE SONG OF SONGS

The main theme of the book is obviously that of love. In a Christian context this immediately finds a correspondence in the greatest commandment in the teaching of Jesus, drawing on his Jewish tradition, that love of God and love of neighbour are the two main commandments (e.g., Matt 22:37–39). Origen, in the second part of the Prologue to his Commentary on the Song of Songs points out that “Among the Greeks, indeed, many of the sages, desiring to pursue the search for truth in regard to the nature of love, produced a great variety of writings in this dialogue form (as the Song of Songs) ...” (Lawson 1957:23). What Origen extracts from these sages about this “difficult and even dangerous” subject is “that the power of love is none other than that which leads the soul from the earth to the lofty heights of heaven, and that the highest beatitude can only be attained under the stimulus of love’s desire” (Lawson 1957:23–24). Love, therefore, is seen as a power in the form of a desire or dynamism moving persons to the highest beatitude.¹¹ This power of desire can be observed in every person who has reached the age of puberty (Lawson 1957:36). However, Origen continues, the original and true object of this desire is not material items or bodily pleasures but God:

All the same, you must understand that everyone who loves money or any of the things of corruptible substance that the world contains, is debasing the power of charity, which is of God, to earthly and perishable objects, and is misusing the things of God by making them serve purposes that are not his; for God gave the things to men to be used, not to be loved. (Lawson 1957:35)

What is clearly needed therefore is the proper development or ordering of this

¹¹ This is also well expressed in Augustine, Exposition 2 of Psalm 31:5: “without it [*amor*] one is sluggish, dead loathsome, unhappy ...” (Rotelle 2000:367). Augustine uses *amor* as the most basic form corresponding to *eros*; it is a dynamism which needs to be shaped and directed by every person. The same thinking is expressed in his well-known statement at the beginning of the *Confessions*: “because you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you”; “quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te”.

dynamism towards its true goal.¹² However, this ordering of the desire is not merely to possess God but to imitate God, who is love:

... that man received the honor of God's image in the first creation, whereas the perfection of God's likeness was reserved for him at the consummation. The purpose for this was that Man should acquire it for himself, by his own earnest efforts to imitate God. In this way, while the possibility of attaining perfection was given to Man in the beginning through the honor of the 'image,' even so he should, in the end, obtain for himself the 'perfect likeness' by the accomplishment of these works. (Origen, *Princ.* 3.6.1)

In Prologue 2 of his Commentary on the Song of Songs Origen then concludes that not only is it difficult to understand the nature of love, but that the subject is simply beyond human grasp, just as it is impossible to comprehend God, who is personally that very love (1 John 4:8). However, it is the work of the Spirit to go in search "trying to find souls worthy and able to receive the greatness of this charity, that is of God, that he desires to reveal to them" (Lawson 1957:39).

What is important here is that Origen makes no distinction between ἀγάπη and ἔρως (Lawson 1957:35). In other words these words refer to the one dynamism which has been implanted in the soul but needs to be educated and transformed by directing it to its proper object, God, and from there to all reality in accordance with God's own view of everything. Therefore, it is by imitating God, in other words, by learning to see as God sees, that the right relationship to every created object is developed, whether material or spiritual. The body and the whole material aspect of this created universe is good, even very good:

This would be true because the purpose (=logos) of being is clear to those

¹² *Eros* remains a positive force. Even if it is temporarily debased and misused it retains its positive potential to be set in order by the Word; this is linked to the distinction between the image and the likeness (of God) in human beings. This is also the view of Bernard of Clairvaux, which he inherits from Origen: "Cependant si nous voulons mieux comprendre l'action transformante de la présence du Verbe, il nous faut d'abord considérer que l'exil dans la région de la dissemblance n'a pas aliéné définitivement la ressemblance de l'âme au Verbe; ainsi demeurent des structures d'accueil qui permettent à la présence du Verbe de déployer son dynamisme" (Bernard 1994:41).

who, being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, have assumed a likeness of those eyes that have seen how each of the things that have been made was good. For the declaration concerning each of the created things, 'God saw that it was good,' means this: God perceived good in the purposes of each thing, and saw how each of the created things is good in relation to the purposes for which it had come to be. (*Comm. Jo.* 13:280; Heine 1993:126)

Bernard, as we saw above, also understood that the basic dynamism of love was infected by a misguided love of the world and an excessive love of self. The challenge for the human person is to follow a progressive course of transformation, through four degrees of love of God. He explains these four degrees in Chapter 15 of *De Diligendo Deo*:

Nevertheless, since we are carnal and are born of the lust of the flesh, it must be that our desire and our love shall have its beginning in the flesh. But rightly guided by the grace of God through these degrees, it will have its consummation in the spirit: for that was not first which is spiritual but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. And we must bear the image of the earthy first, before we can bear the image of the heavenly. At first, man loves himself for his own sake. That is the flesh, which can appreciate nothing beyond itself. Next, he perceives that he cannot exist by himself, and so begins by faith to seek after God, and to love Him as something necessary to his own welfare. That is the second degree, to love God, not for God's sake, but selfishly. But when he has learned to worship God and to seek Him aright, meditating on God, reading God's Word, praying and obeying His commandments, he comes gradually to know what God is, and finds Him altogether lovely. So, having tasted and seen how gracious the Lord is, he advances to the third degree, when he loves God, not merely as his benefactor but as God. Surely he must remain long in this state; and I know not whether it would be possible to make further progress in this life to that fourth degree and perfect condition wherein man loves himself

solely for God's sake. Let any who have attained so far bear record; I confess it seems beyond my powers.

This brings us to two crucial verses of the Song of Songs: 2:4–5 (LXX). The Greek text gave rise to the important theme of the ordering of love (verse 4) and the image of being wounded by love (verse 5).

SONG 2:4-5 IN *SERMO* 49 - 50 - 51

Bernard normally reads the Vulgate, but the Latin translations of both Rufinus and Jerome differ from the Vulgate and Bernard at times refers to these different versions.

2:4b: ordinavit in me caritatem (Vg.)

ordinate in me caritatem (Origen, *Comm. Cant.* 3:7 Transl. Rufinus)

2:5b: quia amore langueo (Vg.)

vulnerata caritatis ego sum (Origen, *Comm. Cant.* 3:8 Transl. Rufinus)¹³

In other words, the image of “being wounded” does not appear in the Vulgate, the text which Bernard normally uses, but occurs in the translations of Origen’s commentary and sermons. In order to understand the way Bernard reads the verses it will be important to remember that he is focussing on the issue of progress in love and that he is addressing the monks whom he expects are persons who are already well on the way, but who encounter special challenges.

Sermo 49: Introduxit me rex¹⁴ in cellam vinariam, ordinavit in me caritatem (2:4Vg.)

Reading this verse Bernard immediately recalls the theme of “sober drunkenness”, which is linked with the fullness of knowledge and enjoyment of God in the Kingdom. As we read in *De Diligendo Deo* 11:33:

¹³ In both verses Jerome in his translation follows exactly the same translation, except that he omits *sum* (*Hom. Cant.* 2:8).

¹⁴ As can be seen from the 1957 critical edition of the Vulgate text of the Canticum Cantorum a number of the known manuscripts of the Vulgate include “rex” at this point (*Biblia Sacra* 1957); Bernard used a manuscript similar to these.

Here indeed is appeasement without weariness: here never-quenched thirst for knowledge, without distress; here eternal and infinite desire which knows no want; here, finally, is that sober inebriation which comes not from drinking new wine but from enjoying God. The fourth degree of love is attained for ever when we love God only and supremely, when we do not even love ourselves except for God's sake; so that he himself is the reward of them that love him, the everlasting reward of an everlasting love.¹⁵

In *Sermo* 49, Bernard, after discussing briefly the literal meaning, recalls the experience of Pentecost by the Early Church, where the apostles appeared to outsiders to be drunk. However, his interest is in his own context; the wine cellar becomes the place of prayer of the monks, as we can read in 49:4:

But if anyone obtains, while praying, the grace of going forth in spirit into the mystery of God, and then returns in a glowing ardor of divine love, overflowing with zeal for righteousness, fervent beyond measure in all spiritual studies and duties, so that he can say: 'My heart became hot within me; as I mused the fire burned',¹⁶ since the abundance of love shows he has clearly begun to live in that state of good and salutary intoxication, he is not unjustly said to have entered the wine-cellar. For as holy contemplation has two forms of ecstasy, one in the intellect, the other in the will; one of enlightenment, the other of fervor; one of knowledge, the other of devotion [unus in lumine, alter in fervore; unus in agnitione alter in devotione]: so a tender affection of heart glowing with love, the infusion of holy ardor, and

¹⁵ The theme already appears in the works of Philo; see, of course, Philo's discussion in *De Ebrietate*. Furthermore, we read in *Fug.* 166: "To this order belongs every self-taught and self-instructed wise man; for such an one has not been improved by consideration, and care, and labor, but from the first moment of his birth he has found wisdom ready prepared and showered upon him from above from heaven, of which he drinks an unmixed draught and on which he feasts, and continues being intoxicated with a sober intoxication with correctness of reason."

¹⁶ The Latin text expresses this very beautifully: "... unde mox redeat divino amore vehementissime flagrans et aestuans iustitiae zelo, necnon et in cunctis spiritualibus studiis atque officiis pernium fervens, ita ut possit dicere: 'Concaluit cor meum intra me, et in meditatione mea exardescit ignis'."

the vigor of a spirit filled with zeal, are obviously not acquired from any place other than the wine-cellar. And everyone to whom it is granted to rise up from prayer with an abundance of these can truly say: 'the king led me into the wine-cellar.'

There are two excesses of this contemplation, the one in the intellect, the other in the emotions. However, what is very much needed in such a state of excitement is discernment, which Bernard in 49:5 described as:

the moderator and charioteer of the virtues [moderatrix et aurigo virtutum]
the one bringing order in the feelings [ordinatrixque affectuum] and as the instructor of behaviour [et morum doctrix].

He continues:

Take away discernment and virtue becomes vice and the natural affection will be changed into disorder and even into the destruction of nature (49:5).

Here again, Bernard has his own context in mind. He first points to the structures of the Church set up by Jesus and then considers his own personal challenges. There the order of charity is commanded by one's duties but tension arises when one sees other needs and is tempted to reach out to these too. Bernard indicates that he is torn between his responsibilities in the monastery on the one hand and the other many challenges in the wider church and world. The answer he sees is to be effectively involved in the limited responsibilities called for by duty and to be affectively involved in the greater issues, while also appreciating the great things others do.

The ordering of charity is a never fully achieved but it is a matter of the will to advance, to strain forward to what lies ahead. What matters is to keep "going" in our march towards an ordered charity.

Sermon 50: Ordinavit in me caritatem

Bernard begins by recalling the distinction between effective love (right actions) and affective love (right feelings). Effective love is fulfilling God's commandments through right action, while the perfect ordering of affective love in which full affection

goes to God and from God to all created reality, will only be fully realised in heaven. Therefore, effective love is commanded “ad meritum” while affective love is given “in praemium” (50:2).

Bernard stresses that the law of love concerns effective love (50:3), but this does not mean that we should be without affection and let our hands be involved in good action while our hearts remain dry (50:4). To be without affection is one of the great evils of humanity (Romans 1:31 Vg.). This then leads Bernard to the question of the affections: he distinguishes three states in our affections. The decisive issue is how the affections are managed: one kind is engendered by the flesh, another one is governed by reason, and a third one is seasoned by wisdom (50:4). The first one is briefly qualified by referring to Romans 8:7 (*sapientia carnis*), which suggests that the problem is with the “flesh” which is unable to submit to God’s will. The second one, which corresponds to effective love, he qualifies as dry but strong; the third one, corresponding to affective love, is “*pinguis et suavis*” (juicy and delightful). This third one abolishes the first one and rewards the dry one. Bernard is interested here again in the issue of spiritual progress. The second form of love prepares for the third one and lights a strong fire of desire for it.¹⁷ The third one extinguishes the first one: it is a question of process and progress.

The sermon then moves to the issue of the differences and tensions between these two affections (50:5). As a man with much practical sense he points out that effective charity gives priority to earthly realities, while affective charity to heavenly realities.¹⁸ Affective love has its own order of priorities: God above all else, good people before weak people, the soul before the body ... However, in well-ordered action in concrete life, we will, even always, pay first attention to earthly matters before spiritual ones, to the weak before the perfect, to the body before the soul, to the harvesting of the fields before prayer and mass, to the peace on earth before the glory of heaven. “It does not

¹⁷ “burns ardently with love for love itself” – “*amore tamen amoris ipsius vehementer accendit*” (50:4).

¹⁸ “Let us, he said, love in deed and in truth: that is, that we be moved to do good more by the impulse of the truth full of life than by the feeling of that prudent love” – “*Opere, inquit, diligamus et veritate* [1 John 3:18]: quod videlicet moveamur ad bene operandum magis quodam vividae veritatis impulsu, quam sapidae illius caritatis affectu” (50:5).

measure the value of things but the needs of people" (50:5). For effective love the criterion of order is human need (*veritas caritatis*); for affective love the criterion of order is the love of truth (*veritatis caritas*) (50:6).

Sermo 51: Wounded by love [vulnerata caritatis (Rufinus)] – Languish or sick with love [amore languet (Vg.)]

In this sermon Bernard reflects on verse 5: "Prop me up with flowers, encompass me with apples, because I languish with love." He understands the flowers of the fruit tree as faith and the apples as the good works which are the fruits of the flowers. The languishing is understood as the feeling of "weariness of impatient desire" when the loved one is absent, when one does not experience the happiness and joy of contemplation. When one experiences such periods of dryness and suffers because of feelings of the absence of God, one needs to be sustained by perseverance in good works:

Hence there is neither fruit without a flower nor a good work without faith. But then, faith without good works is dead, just as a flower seems vain where no fruit follows. 'PROP ME UP WITH FLOWERS, ENCOMPASS ME WITH APPLES, BECAUSE I LANGUISH WITH LOVE.' Therefore the mind accustomed to quietude receives consolation from good works rooted in a sincere faith whenever, as often happens, the light of contemplation is withdrawn. For who can enjoy the light of contemplation – I do not say continually but even for long – while she remains in the body? But, as I said, as often as she falls away from contemplation she takes refuge in action, from which she will surely return to the former state as from an adjoining place, with greater intimacy, since these two are comrades and live together: for Martha is sister to Mary. And though she loses the light of contemplation, she does not permit herself to fall into the darkness of sin or the idleness of sloth, but holds herself within the light of good works (51:2).

'PROP ME UP WITH FLOWERS, ENCOMPASS ME WITH APPLES, BECAUSE I LANGUISH WITH LOVE.' When that which is loved is at hand, love thrives;

when absent it languishes. This is simply the weariness of impatient desire by which the mind of the ardent lover is necessarily afflicted when the loved one is absent; wholly absorbed in expectation, she reckons even any haste to be slow. And therefore she asks for an assortment of the fruits of good works made fragrant by faith in which she may rest while the bridegroom tarries. I am telling you of what comes within my own experience (51:3).

In his other work, *De Diligendo Deo*, Bernard gives a different interpretation; here he does not focus on the pain of absence but on the effect of an experience of extraordinary self-sacrificing love. It is interesting to note, therefore, that before quoting the version of the Vulgate (*amore langueo*) he inserts the version of the text of Origen (as translated by both Rufinus and Jerome): *vulnerata charitate ego sum*:

Facile proinde plus diligunt, qui se amplius dilectos intelligunt: cui autem minus donatum est, minus diligit. Judaeus sane, sive paganus, nequaquam talibus aculeis incitatur amoris, quales Ecclesia experitur, quae ait, *Vulnerata charitate ego sum*: et rursum, *Fulcite me floribus, stipate me malis, quia amore langueo* (Cantic. II, 4, 5). Cernit regem Salomonem in diademate, quo coronavit eum mater sua (Cant. III, 11); cernit Unicum Patris, crucem sibi bajulantem; cernit caesum et consputum Dominum majestatis; cernit auctorem vitae et gloriae confixum clavis, percussum lancea, opprobrii saturatum, tandem illam dilectam animam suam ponere pro amicis suis. Cernit haec, et suam magis ipsius animam gladius amoris transverberat, et dicit: *Fulcite me floribus, stipate me malis, quia amore langueo* (ch 3; nr 7)

This English translation of this passage used here simply omits the quote from the Latin of Origen's texts, which Bernard was clearly using; note how this English translation in quoting only the Vulgate version reduces the experience to mere sickness instead of the more dramatic woundedness:

They love all the more, because they know themselves to be loved so exceedingly; but they to whom little is given, loves little. Neither Jew nor pagan is incited by pangs of love such as the Church feels, which says,

[omitted in this translation: I am wounded with love, and again] ‘Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples; for I am sick with love.’ She beholds King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him; she sees the Only-begotten of the Father carrying the cross for himself; she sees the Lord of majesty bruised and spat upon, the author of life and glory transfixed with nails, smitten by the lance, overwhelmed with mockery, and finally laying down his beloved life for his friends. She beholds this, the sword of love pierces through her own soul also, and she cries aloud, ‘Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples; for I am sick with love.’¹⁹

Clearly the image of woundedness is more appropriate here than the image of mere sickness as found in the Vulgate text, particularly as Bernard speaks of the “sword of love” in the final sentence of the quote. The “wound of love” is seen as an experience of being struck as by a sword at the realisation of the extraordinary depth of the self-sacrificing love of the Lord, which is a crucial moment in one’s spiritual progress.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Bernard reads the Song contextually; he addresses his own situation and the main challenge of his community, which is to continue growing in love. His method of reading has been called allegorical, but there is a danger of taking refuge in a label which is rather difficult to pin down.

The approach to reading sacred texts transmitted from Philo through Origen to Bernard, focuses on the interaction between the text and the reader in the present.

¹⁹ Compare Origen’s comment: “If there is ever anyone who at any time has burned with this faithful love for the Word of God; if there is anyone who, as the Prophet says, has received the sweet wound of him who is the ‘chosen dart’; if there is anyone who has been pierced with the lovable spear of his knowledge, so that he sighs and longs for him day and night, is able to speak of nothing else, wishes to hear of nothing else, can think of nothing else, and is not disposed to desire, seek, or hope for anything other than him; then such a soul truly says, ‘I have been wounded by love.’” Origen had paid considerable attention to the theme of being wounded by love, in his Prologue to his Commentary (Lawson 1957:29–32), in the commentary itself (*Comm. Cant.* 3:8; Lawson 1957:198–200), and in his homilies (*Hom. Cant.* 2:8; Lawson 1957:297); see also Lawson 1957:315–316, notes 33–34.

Such a reading is understood as an actual encounter with God in which previous readings are helpful, particularly the spiritual readings, but not determining, because the task is to explore with all possible means how the text enlightens the existence of a specific community of *present readers*. Ultimately, it is a question of allowing God to shed light on the readers' life through the words of the biblical texts and so to bring about the much desired personal transformation. Great effort is required on part of the readers to keep their whole lives attuned to God by daily obedience so that they may attend to the words of the texts with the right attitude of heart. The actual result is ultimately God's work.²⁰

In Bernard's monastic tradition the Song of Songs was not seen as merely a book of human love songs. It was understood as a book for mature persons striving arduously for the perfection of human love. It presupposed in the readers a sound self-knowledge which enabled them to recognise in themselves the stirrings of a "misguided love of the world" or an "excessive love of self". Furthermore, it presupposed a self-knowledge as created in the image and likeness of God by which human perfection was understood as a sharing in God's way of seeing and relating: to oneself, to one's neighbours, and to the whole of created reality.²¹ We can agree therefore with Burrows when he writes:

Far from proposing a rejection of the body or an eclipse of the 'letter', Bernard's exegesis focuses on the somatic texture of this erotic biblical narrative, the Song of Songs, in order to 'touch' it - in this case, on its surface (*littera*) which is the place of its greatest strength - and so 'taste' it slowly and deliberately in its most pleasurable dimensions. (Burrows 2004:136)

²⁰ See Casey (1994). *Sermo* 50 ends, therefore, appropriately as follows: "Direct our actions as our temporal necessity demands, and manage our affections as your eternal truth requires, so that each one of us may safely glory in you and say that he put order in my love" - "Dirige actus nostros, prout nostra temporalis necessitas poscit, et dispone affectus nostros, prout tua veritas aeterna requirit, ut possit unusquisque nostrum secure in te gloriari et dicere, quia ordinavit in me caritatem." On the discontinuity between human efforts and divine enlightenment, see Philo, *Fug.* 132-136, 166.

²¹ On the importance of self-knowledge, see *Sermo* 36:5-7; 37:2 with reference to Hos 10:1-2 (different from Vg.!). For a history of this theme, see Courcelle (1974).

For Bernard, the problem is not with the body and the letter but with the human “heart” not yet being sufficiently attuned to God’s way of looking, appreciating and loving.

In the tradition of spiritual reading originating with Philo and Origen the human experience of *eros* received careful attention. Love was interpreted as a gift from God in the act of creation as an image of God. This act of creation was the starting point for created beings to share in God’s love and God’s being. The reflection on *eros* was indeed developed by means of interaction with Platonic philosophical traditions of that time; however, in this interaction the Christian tradition was not merely on the receiving end but it came “to play an important role in the way in which Christian theologians understood God and the universe” (McGinn 1996:209). It is quite ironical that Nygren could argue that the early Christian interpretation of *agape* in terms of *eros* was a move which was too earthly and too human.²²

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²² “The whole structure of the Medieval view of love recalls a Gothic cathedral, where the massive stone rests firmly on the earth and yet everything seems to aspire upwards. The foundation of this view of love is something as earthly and human, far too human, as natural self-love” (Nygren 1953:650; also on p. 664).

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