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# PRAISING GOD OR SINGING OF LOVE? FROM THEOLOGICAL TO EROTIC ALLEGORISATION IN THE INTERPRETATION OF CANTICLES

## ABSTRACT

In the history of the interpretation of Canticles, one generally distinguishes two tendencies, which can also be identified in the interpretation history of the rest of the Old Testament literature. Alongside a literal reading of the text, there is also the possibility of an allegorical interpretation, which was often, consciously or otherwise, a reaction against a literal reading of the Bible. Although this contrast between the terms 'literal' and 'allegorical' appears frequently in the literature on Canticles, the present article argues that this terminology seems to be inadequate for Canticles at any rate: reading Canticles either 'literally' or 'allegorically' is an expression of a false dilemma with respect to this book. After all, being love poetry, the book sings about love as a transcendent, even 'divine' reality. Against this background, this contribution will argue that the so-called 'literal' — anthropological — reading, according to which Canticles praises the love between two persons, is, in the case of many authors, at least as allegorical as the so-called theological-allegorical reading, according to which Canticles is supposed to speak about the relationship between God and Israel, or Christ and the Church. Therefore, in the first part of this contribution, we shall briefly consider the background of the theological-allegorical reading of Canticles. Then, we shall examine the anthropological interpretation, which has received renewed attention, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, and which has rapidly developed into an anthropological-allegorical interpretation. In the third part, the evolution outlined in the previous two parts will be illustrated in an analysis of Canticles 2:16.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that the book of Canticles has a special place in the canon of the TeNaK or the Old Testament. The fact alone that it is one of the few biblical books that nowhere mentions the name of God speaks for itself.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, everyone who reads Canticles for the first time, with an open mind and free of prejudice, will at the very least be astonished by the fact that a book singing the praises of the corporeal love between a boy and a girl constitutes part of the biblical literature, in which one would expect to read about the relationship between God and human beings.

Nevertheless, the book is part of the Jewish and Christian Bible. As such, it has captivated countless believers, as well as scholars and artists, over the centuries.<sup>2</sup> In the history of the interpretation of Canticles, in the broadest sense, one generally distinguishes two tendencies, which, incidentally, can also be identified in the interpretation history of the rest of the Old Testament literature. Both are also very old. They can be traced back to the disputes between the so-called Alexandrian and Antiochene schools in the second and third centuries. Thus, alongside a literal reading of the text, there is also the possibility of an allegorical interpretation. The latter was often, consciously or otherwise, a reaction against a literal reading of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

These two terms — ‘allegorical’ and ‘literal’ — have defined and given essential form to the history of the interpretation of Canticles — more than for any other book in the Bible. Furthermore, both interpretations are often seen as the other’s opposite: either Canticles — literally — sings the praises of the earthly love between a boy and girl, or this love relationship must be an allegory for the relationship between God and Israel or — in the Christian tradition — the intimate bond between Christ and the Church. Although this contrast between the terms ‘literal’ and ‘allegorical’ frequently appears in the literature on Canticles, this terminology still seems to be inadequate, for Canticles at any rate. In addition, reading Canticles either ‘literally’ or ‘allegorically’ is an expression of a false dilemma with respect to this book. After all, as love poetry — and this is in our view the ‘origin’ of Canticles — the book sings the praises of love as a transcendent, even ‘divine’ reality. Canticles contains poems that sing the

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1 See, however, the discussion concerning the term *שלהבתיה* in Canticles 8:6. A quick look at a few recent Bible translations makes the problem of the interpretation of this *hapax legomenon* clear. Compare, for example, the New Revised Standard Version (“a raging flame”) and the Revised English Bible (“fiercer than any flame”) with the New American Standard Bible (“The very flame of the Lord”). With respect to the *hapax legomena* in Canticles, see Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2008a:43-61).

2 In this regard, see Ausloos & Bossuyt (2008) who examine the effect of Canticles on visual arts, Western literature, and music.

3 For an overview, see Siegert (1996:130-198) and Hidal (1996:543-568).

praises of love as an existential human reality, so deep and intense that it simultaneously goes well beyond the human being. What's more, the decision, in the Christian canon, to put Canticles with the wisdom books — whatever the reasons for doing so may have been — implies that one, from a canonical point of view, cannot just read the text as profane love literature.<sup>4</sup> In the biblical wisdom books, 'God' always plays a prominent role, even if he is not always explicitly mentioned by name. After all, 'savoir vivre' and 'fear of the Lord' are inextricably bound to one another in the Old Testament Wisdom literature.

In order to be able to talk about love itself as that which transcends human beings, and about love for one another, images and metaphors are indispensable. A 'literal' reading of Canticles is therefore, based on the very nature of the text, impossible.<sup>5</sup> It would be absurd to take the girl's description of the boy's body — "His head is the finest gold" (דִּישׁוֹ כְּתָם — Cant 5:11) — literally. But the term 'allegorical', at least as far as Canticles is concerned, has also become problematic since the beginning of the twentieth century. Whereas, in the traditional allegorical reading of Canticles, the text is usually allegorised religiously, one can see how this religious allegory has gradually had to make way for a new sort of allegory. Namely, this contribution will argue that the so-called 'literal' — anthropological — reading, according to which Canticles praises the love between two people, is, in the case of many authors, at least as allegorical as the theological-allegorical reading, according to which Canticles is supposed to tell about the relationship between God and Israel, or Christ and the Church.

Obviously, related to this issue is the question of whether the allegorical — in this case the theological-allegorical — interpretation preceded Canticles' inclusion in the canon. Or indeed, the question of whether Canticles itself was originally conceived as allegory, or whether Canticles instead owes its theological-allegorical reading to an attempt to justify the fact that an anthology of love poems found its way into the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Whatever the case may be — the whole issue seems to be a variation on the enigma of 'the chicken or the egg' — it is sobering to observe that the dominant line of interpretation of Canticles over the last twenty centuries has been characterised by a profusion of theological-allegorical interpretations, whereby the value of Canticles as a collection of love poems has been sold seriously short. Othmar Keel even goes so far as to speak of "the Song's captivity under the capricious rule of a spiritualistic Babylon" (Keel 1994:11).

In light of the aforementioned considerations, to us it seems that it would be better if, in the case of Canticles, we were no longer to play the allegorical and literal readings off against one another, but instead to talk about a theological

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4 In this regard see Childs (1979:573-575).

5 Cf. Corney (1998:494-516). See also Pelletier (1989; 1999:185-200; 2002:75-101) and Berder (2002:103-128).

and an anthropological reading.<sup>6</sup> After all, both the theological and the anthropological readings of Canticles can be allegorical. Moreover, both components, due to the essence of love itself, appear to be closely interwoven, even in the original context. As something that transcends the human being (*anthropos*), love is divine (*theos*). These two facets, which are inextricably connected to one another, were only one-sidedly detached from one another in the history of the exegesis of Canticles.

This contribution consists of three parts. (1) In the first part, we shall briefly consider the background to the theological-allegorical reading of Canticles. (2) Then, we shall examine the anthropological interpretation, which has received renewed attention, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, and which has rapidly developed into an anthropological-allegorical interpretation. (3) In the third part, the evolution outlined in the previous two parts will be illustrated using an analysis of Canticles 2:16.

## 2. CANTICLES AS THEOLOGICAL ALLEGORY

A lot has already been written on the history of the exegesis of Canticles.<sup>7</sup> Without wanting to go into the question of whether Canticles was composed as a profane or as a religious text,<sup>8</sup> the history of Biblical scholarship teaches us that Judaism, as well as the Christian interpretations indebted to it, has long interpreted Canticles as a theological allegory. This view holds that Canticles deals with the intimate (marital) relationship between God and Israel (or in the Christian tradition, between Christ and the Church). It should, however, be noted that in Canticles itself there is not a single indication that one should identify the unidentified boy with God and the unidentified girl with Israel. This religious interpretation of the love relationship is based on the presupposition that the love relationship must be interpreted as a marital relationship. In the Hebrew text of Canticles itself, however, there is no indication that the boy and the girl address each other as 'bridegroom' and 'bride' in the context of a marriage. There is no mention of an institutionalised marital relationship in Canticles.<sup>9</sup> The identification of the characters in Canticles with a marital couple is undoubtedly connected to the prophetic literature. It is especially here that the metaphor of a love relationship — and particularly of a love relationship sealed

6 Pelletier (1999:186) chooses to talk about 'mystical' versus 'anthropological' interpretation of Canticles.

7 Cf., among others, Ohly (1958) and De Simone (2000). See also the extensive overview by Pope (1977: 89-229) and Garrett (2004:13-121).

8 See, in this regard, Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2008b:35-48).

9 It is possible that the reference to Solomon's wedding in Cant 3:11, as well as the fact that the girl is called 'bride' (כַּלִּיָּה) in Cant 4:8.9.10.11.12; 5:1, may have played a role in this.

by marriage — or the corruption thereof is expressly used in order to express the (damaged) relationship between God and the people of Israel.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, this interpretation has made a deep impression, which is apparent in the countless translations in which the girl is characterised as the 'bride' and the boy as the 'bridegroom'.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the theme of the (failed) marriage as a metaphor for the (failed) relationship between God and Israel, the motif of the vineyard, which is given an important place in Canticles, also undoubtedly contributed to the theological-allegorical interpretation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.<sup>12</sup> The prophetic literature has also had a definitive influence in this respect. After all, in this corpus, the motif of the vineyard is among the images that represent the people of Israel, for whom God, as the vineyard keeper, cares. In particular, Isaiah 5, in which the prophet sings the song about his friend and his vineyard, where Israel is clearly described as the vineyard, and God as its guardian, most certainly encouraged the theological-allegorical interpretation of Canticles. But the vineyard is also used as a symbol for Israel in other books.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, in relation to this motif too, it ought to be emphasised that Canticles itself gives no indication that the motif of the vineyard should be interpreted as an allegory for Israel.

The above comments make it clear that only a 'canonical' reading of Canticles, for which one needs to strongly orient oneself towards the prophetic literature, can inspire a theological-anthropological reading of the book. Moreover, the fact that Canticles, in both the Palestinian and the Alexandrian canons, is not part of the prophetic literature but of the Writings (Jewish canon) or the Wisdom Literature (Christian canon), in which the marriage metaphor is not really the order of the day, at the very least suggests that the love relationship and the vineyard perhaps did not play a role in the formation of the canon. The fact that Canticles has ended up in the Wisdom Literature in the Christian canon is undoubtedly largely connected with the author to whom the book has been attributed, namely, King Solomon, who is considered, in the Old Testament tradition, to be the 'wise one' par excellence.

It is beyond the scope of this contribution to provide an overview of the various ways in which Canticles has been read theologically-allegorically. We shall confine ourselves to mentioning a few key points of interest. It was undoubtedly Rabbi Akiba (+135 A.D.) who gave important impetus to the allegorical reading,

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10 In this regard see, for example, Isa 1:21; 54:4-6; 62:4-5; Jer 2:2-3; Ezek 16; Hos 1-3.

11 See, for example, the New American Standard Bible and the English Standard Version, which, whether in the designation of the speaker, or whether in the sub-headings, indicate that the 'bride' and 'bridegroom' are speaking to each other.

12 See Cant 1:6(2x).14; 2:15; 7:13; 8:11.

13 See, for example, Ps 80. Cf. in this regard Riede (2004:39-64).

in a commentary on Exodus 15:2, by identifying the boy in Canticles with God and the girl with Israel. It is possible that Rabbi Akiba was thereby representing an older tradition. Indeed, 4 Ezra (first century A.D.) also clearly applied the bucolic terminology of Canticles to the people of Israel:

O sovereign Lord, from every forest of the earth and from all its trees you have chosen one vine, and from all the lands of the world you have chosen for yourself one region, and from all the flowers of the world you have chosen for yourself one lily, (...) and from all the birds that have been created you hast named for yourself one dove (4 Ezra 5:24.26) (Metzger 1983:517-559).

The Christian interpretation of Canticles continued to build on the Jewish theological-allegorical reading. Usually, Hippolyte of Rome (+235), who appears to interpret Canticles as a dialogue between Christ and the synagogue, which is called upon to believe and repent, is considered to be the earliest evidence of the Christian theological-allegorical reading of Canticles. However, the actual founder of the tendency in which Canticles is read as being about a the love relationship between Christ and the Church is undeniably Origen (+254). At the same time, this Church Father signalled the start of a mystical interpretation of Canticles in which the mysticism of the bride is given an important role. In this vision, Canticles sings the praises of the supernatural love between Jesus as the divine bridegroom and the Church as his bride, which, despite threats and even the temporary absence of the bridegroom, nevertheless remains unshakably faithful to Jesus. Later, Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries) in particular will provide a significant boost to the mystical reading of Canticles. Ambrose (339-397), on the other hand, is seen as the father of the Mariological reading, which was primarily further elaborated by Jerome (347-420).

At the end of this section, a brief reference should still be made, regarding the origin of the theological-allegorical reading, to the recent proposition by J. Barton, which he defended in the context of an analysis of the well-known Jewish treatise *Mishna Jadajjim* about the “texts that make the hands unclean.” Barton argues:

There is no evidence at all that any serious interpreters in antiquity ever read the Song ‘literally’ anyway. Even if it was composed as a set of erotic lyrics, no ancient interpreter for whom we have any attestation ever read it so. Always it was read as an allegory of the love of God for Israel, or, in Christian texts, for the Church (Barton 2005:1-8, esp. 5).

This thesis is at the very least nuanced or even contradicted by the observation that in the oldest translation of the book — the Septuagint — there is not a single identifiable trace of a theological-allegorical reading. On the contrary,

the Greek translation seems to strengthen the original anthropological-erotic interpretation of the text.<sup>14</sup>

The above, extremely concise survey of the interpretation of Canticles plainly demonstrates that the reading of Canticles is primarily theological-allegorical, certainly until well into the eighteenth century. The more one delves into this theological-allegorical exegesis, the more difficult it becomes to discern a constant pattern of exegesis therein. We conclude with Keel's laconic remark: "If two allegorizers ever agree on the interpretation of a verse it is only because one has copied from the other."<sup>15</sup>

### 3. FROM THEOLOGICAL TO ANTHROPOLOGICAL ALLEGORY

Nowadays, the theological-allegorical reading — be it with a mystical, ecclesiological or mariological slant — has been almost completely abandoned in the scientific study of the Bible. It has had to make way for an anthropological reading: the boy and the girl are characters of flesh and blood and do not respectively refer to God or Christ and Israel or the Church.

Although Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) already considered Canticles to be a profane love song (cf. Auwers 2002:129-157), this reading nevertheless found little favour — perhaps also as a result of the condemnation of Theodore. During the long period of the middle ages, it only surfaces very sporadically.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it usually led to doubts about the proper place of Canticles in the Bible. It is only at the end of the eighteenth century that, from a Jewish as well as from a Christian standpoint, and galvanised by Enlightenment thinking, special attention is paid to the 'worldly' meaning of Canticles. In the Christian world, the commentary by Johann Gottfried Herder in 1778 was groundbreaking. He took the anthropological significance of Canticles seriously, which he considered to be an anthology of Solomonic love songs.<sup>17</sup> From this moment on, the scholarly world largely began to distance itself from the theological-

14 Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2008b:35-48). Compare with Auwers (2006:161-168 and 2008:49-56). With regard to the translation technique of LXX Canticles, see Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2008a:43-61).

15 Keel (1994:8). A positive approach to this multiplicity of interpretations can be seen, for example, in Ben Joseph Saadia's commentary on Canticles: "Know, my brother, that you will find great differences in interpretation of the Song of Songs. In truth they differ because the Song of Songs resembles locks to which the keys have been lost" (cited by Pope 1977:89).

16 For an overview, see Pope (1977:112-229).

17 Herder (1778). Cf. Gaier (2005:317-337).

allegorical reading,<sup>18</sup> and *Canticles* was investigated from a literary perspective — not least under the influence of comparisons with Egyptian and Mesopotamian love literature — as a literary, poetic work of unprecedented magnificence.<sup>19</sup> In current research into *Canticles*, more Bible scholars accept that *Canticles* is, first and foremost, a poetic description of the experience of human love, in which an erotic use of language is not avoided. Even just the so-called descriptive songs, in which the boy and the girl sing the praises of each other's body speak for themselves (4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:4-7; 7:2-8).<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, in the anthropological reading different approaches also arise. Whereas some scholars interpret human love 'religiously', and relate it to God's creation — the reciprocal love between man and woman is seen as a return to 'Paradise Lost' —,<sup>21</sup> others interpret *Canticles* purely anthropologically. However, even the latter category of authors seldom read *Canticles* 'literally'.

Within the anthropological reading too, *Canticles* is often approached allegorically, albeit no longer theological-allegorically but anthropological-allegorically. Indeed, undoubtedly inspired by the conviction that *Canticles* is love poetry in which a boy and a girl sing of their erotic love for one another, since the beginning of the twentieth century, a new sort of allegory is apparent. Whereas the theological-allegorical reading thought it could point to an underlying religious meaning for almost every term in *Canticles*, the anthropological-allegorical reading goes in search of allusions to human genitalia and sexual behaviour. In this respect, referring to the commentary on *Canticles* by Robert, Pope speaks of a "l'école voluptueuse."<sup>22</sup> Such erotic-allegorical interpretations seem to complete the circle. Just as there are no indications in *Canticles* that the text should be read theologically-allegorically, so too in the anthropological/erotic-allegorical interpretation one must give free reign to one's imagination. This shall be clearly demonstrated by the example we shall discuss in the next part, namely *Canticles* 2:16. For both the theological-allegorical and the anthropological-allegorical interpretations, there appears to be a fine line between exegesis — the interpretation of texts — and eisegesis — imposing one's own vision on the text.

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18 Nevertheless, works continued to appear that interpreted *Canticles* in a theological-allegorical way. See, for example, Robert & Tournay (1963).

19 At the same time, this attentiveness to the Egyptian and Babylonian literature fuelled a new sort of theological allegory, namely, the cultic reading of *Canticles*. See, in this respect, for example, the studies by Meek (1924:48-79) and Wittekindt (1925).

20 Although this renewed anthropological reading of *Canticles* since the eighteenth century, unlike in the early Church, has never led to the canonicity of the book being called into question, it has nevertheless generated renewed attention to the issue of the admission of *Canticles* to the canon. Cf. among others, Barton (2005:1-8).

21 See, for example, Lys (1968:38): "Dans sa sexualité même (...) le Cantique est révélation de Dieu".

22 Pope (1977:405). See, for example, Robert & Tournay (1963:125).

#### 4. “MY BELOVED IS MINE, AND I AM HIS” (CANT 2:16)

At the end of the so-called ‘Springtime Rhapsody’ (Cant 2:8-17), the girl says the following: דודי לי ואני לו הרעה בשושנים.<sup>23</sup> A variation thereof appears again in Canticles 6:3 (אני לדודי ודודי לי). In Canticles 7:11 one again finds the first part of the formula (אני לדודי).

The ‘literal’ meaning of the first part of Canticles 2:16, which Feuillet characterises as a “formula of mutual belonging” (Feuillet 1961:5-38), is fairly clear: “My beloved is mine and I am his.” The second part of the verse is more difficult, however. The participle הרעה can, after all, have both a transitive and an intransitive meaning. Taken as a transitive, the translation reads, “[he, who is] pasturing [his flock] among the lilies.” But with an intransitive meaning, the boy himself is the subject, “[he, who is] grazing among the lilies.” Besides the participle, in the second part of the verse, the form בשושנים is also open to interpretation. It is, after all, unclear whether the noun שושנים (the flowers) denotes the object that is eaten (*nota obiecti*), or the location where the grazing takes place (“among”) (Stoop-van Paridon 2005:137 n. 97).

From a grammatical point of view, this part of the verse could be translated in four different ways. If one takes the verb form to be transitive, then the possible interpretations are: (1) [he, who is] feeding [his flock] [on something] among the lilies; (2) [he, who is] feeding [his flock] on the flowers. If one takes the verb form to be intransitive, then the following translations are possible: (3) [he, who is] feeding [on something] among the flowers; (4) [he, who is] feeding on the flowers.

The Septuagint offers no solution either with regard to the meaning of the participle הרעה: ἀδελφιδός μου ἐμοί κάγω αὐτῷ ὁ ποιμαίνων ἐν τοῖς κρίνοις (NETS: “My brotherkin is mine, and I am his, who pastures his flock among the lilies”). The fact that the translators of NETS have added an object (“his flock”) already makes the problem clear.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the verb ποιμαίνω is normally followed by an accusative designating the object being eating. This seems to corroborate Pope’s position:

A survey of the uses of the verb r’y (...) shows that a strong case can be made for each line of interpretation, and that, in the final analysis, the choice is determined by predilection. (...) There seems to be no way to decide the matter on grammatical grounds (Pope 1977:406).

<sup>23</sup> That Canticles 2,16 is said by the girl is clear from the pronominal suffix 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular in the form לו. A brilliant literary analysis of the ‘springtime rhapsody’ can be found in Fokkelman (2001:189-206).

<sup>24</sup> See also Brenton (1851): “My kinsman is mine, and I am his: he feeds *his flock* among the lilies”.

Likewise, the exact meaning of the noun שושן is also not uncontested. Based primarily on the Septuagint translation (κρίνον), this term is mostly translated as 'lily' — which usually is considered referring to the *Lilium candidum*. Sometimes it is argued that the term שושן is related to the number 'six' (שש), and that it therefore alludes to the fact that the lily has six sepals (Hepper 1992:46). According to Keel, however, the term is borrowed from Egyptian, and refers to the lotus (*Nymphaea alba* or *Nymphaea caerulea*) (Keel 1994:78). He bases his claim on the depiction of the 'bronze sea,' which, according to 1 Kings 7:26, was in the shape of a שושן, and the fact that in Egypt and Palestine plates have been found in the form of a lotus but not of a lily. It is also said that the capitals of the pillars of Solomon's temple were made in the form of a שושן (1 Kings 7:19.22). Here too, Keel points to the lotus capitals that have been found in different variations, while capitals in the form of a lily are evidently not available. That the Septuagint translates the Hebrew term as 'lily' is, according to Keel, attributable to the fact that the translator wants to adapt the text to the Greek conceptual universe. To support this, Keel refers to Herodotos: "When the river is in flood and overflows the plains, many lilies, which the Egyptians call lotus, grow in the water" (Histories 2,92) (Keel 1994:78). By interpreting the term שושן as lotus, and not as 'little lily', Keel rejects what is according to him a pietistic-patriarchal interpretation of Canticles that particularly seeks to depict the girl, who presents herself as שושן in Canticles 2:1, as modest and chaste. In contrast, according to Keel, "the lotus flowers stand for the woman's charms. Like the flowers, the woman brings forth renewed vivacity and vitality." (Keel 1994:114). Thus, Keel sees the lotus as a symbol of life and the triumph over death. He supports his thesis by referring to the iconographical depiction from Lachish. Here, a naked goddess stands atop a warhorse. She holds two enormous lotus flowers in her hands. Keel argues that the charger is a representation of the aggressive and destructive side of the goddess, while the lotus flowers are intended to represent her life-giving capacities.

The above analysis has shown that it is not easy to retrieve the 'literal' meaning of Canticles 2:16. The allegorical interpretations that have been given to this verse, however, testify to an entirely different approach; they create the impression that one can indeed arrive at a univocal meaning for this verse. And this is true for the theological-allegorical as well as the anthropological-allegorical readings, from both Jewish and Christian perspectives.

In line with the assumption that the boy and the girl are metaphors for God and Israel, Midrash Rabbah relates Canticles 2:16 to other Old Testament passages in which the relationship between God and Israel is central.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes God is presented as the father, and Israel as the child. At other

25 Midrash Rabbah refers to Exod 4:22; 20:2; Deut 14:1, Isa 5:7; 51:4; 63:16; Jer 31:9; Ezek 34:31; Ps 80:2; 121:4.

times, God is depicted as a shepherd and Israel as the flock that he feeds. And still other pericopes simply talk about God who remains ever watchful over Israel. Thus, Midrash Rabbah reads the first part of Canticles 2:16 (“My beloved is mine and I am his”) as an expression of Israel’s belonging to  $\gamma\eta\omega\eta$ :  $\gamma\eta\omega\eta$  stands up for Israel against all who threaten it, and Israel shall/must fight for  $\gamma\eta\omega\eta$  against all who challenge God.

In the Christian tradition too, we find traces of this interpretation in which the relationship between the boy and the girl is allegorically interpreted as referring to the relationship between God and Israel. Moreover, it is remarkable that, in the theological-allegorical interpretation, the verb form  $\text{הרעה}$  can be read both transitively and intransitively. Joüon interprets the verb form  $\text{הרעה}$  intransitively: according to him the Israelites are the lilies among which the shepherd pastures his flock.<sup>26</sup> The first part of Canticles 2:16 is, according to Joüon, a poetic expression of a formula frequently found in the Old Testament: “I shall be their God, and they shall be my people” (see for example Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23). In contrast to Joüon, Robert translates the verb form  $\text{הרעה}$  transitively: “Mon Bien-aimé est à moi, et moi à lui. Il paît (son troupeau) parmi les lis.” Like Joüon, Robert argues that the first part of Canticles 2:16 is based on the prophetic formula that Israel is God’s people, and that  $\gamma\eta\omega\eta$  is Israel’s God.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this author refers to the changing order of sequence in the prophetic literature. In Deuteronomy 26:17-18; Hosea 2:24; Jeremiah 7:23; 31:33,  $\gamma\eta\omega\eta$  is named first, while in the other passages, Israel is first. Robert points out that in Canticles too, the order is sometimes reversed (compare  $\text{לִי דודי}$  in Cant 2:16 with  $\text{אני לדודי}$  in Cant 6:33; 7:11). According to this author, the changing order reflects a change in who is taking the initiative.

The Church Fathers also generally read Canticles 2:16 allegorically, albeit then mainly from a Christological or mystical perspective. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, considered

the brevity and incoherence of the Bride’s words as an indication of her emotion. She is too fervent and eager to be altogether silent, but too deeply and inexpressibly happy to say much (...). The lilies were understood as pure souls who retain the whiteness of chastity and impart a fragrance to all who are near (Pope 1977:407).

It goes without saying that, in the Christian history of interpretation, the participle  $\text{רעה}$  was also seen as a reference to Christ as the ‘good shepherd’ who pastures his sheep in the meadows of the divine mysteries (cf. John 9:11-15).

26 Joüon (1909:169): “Jéhovah, pasteur d’Israël, paît parmi son peuple, des Israélites”.

27 Robert & Tournay (1963:125). He refers to Deuteronomy 26:17-18; 29:12; Hosea 2:24; Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 31:33; Ezek 34:30-31; 36:28; 37:23.27.

With the growing attention for Canticles as a collection of love poems, this theological-allegorical reading found itself being quickly pushed to the background. Nevertheless, almost immediately, a new sort of allegory appeared that was no more founded on the text of Canticles, and would appear to have been just as arbitrary. Whereas theological allegory was particularly interested in the mutual relationship between the lovers found in the first part of the verse, this new, erotic allegory seemed to be particularly interested in the second part of the verse, in which the theme of the lotus flower is central. And what was true for theological allegory is also applicable to anthropological, erotic allegory, namely, that practically every author offers his own interpretation of the concept.

Various authors see a connection between the pastures among/with the lotus flowers in Canticles and the so-called lotus-eaters (λωτοφάγοι) in Homer's *Odyssey*, where the lotus flowers clearly have an intoxicating effect.<sup>28</sup> In the ninth book, Odysseus says the following:

Thence for nine days' time I was borne by savage winds over the fish-filled sea; but on the tenth we set foot on the land of the Lotus-eaters, who eat a flowery food. There we went on shore and drew water, and without further ado my comrades took their meal by the swift ships. But when we had tasted food and drink, I sent out some of my comrades to go and learn who the men were, who here ate bread upon the earth; two men I chose, sending with them a third as herald. They departed at once and mingled with the Lotus-eaters; nor did the Lotus-eaters think of killing my comrades, but gave them lotus to eat. And whoever of them ate the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus had no longer any wish to bring back word or return, but there they wished to remain among the Lotus-eaters, champing on the lotus, and to forget their homecoming. These men I myself brought back to the ships under compulsion, weeping, and dragged them beneath the benches and bound them fast in the hollow ships; and I bade the rest of my trusty comrades to embark with speed on the swift ships, for fear that perchance anyone should eat the lotus and forget his homecoming. So they went on board quickly and sat down upon the benches, and sitting well in order struck the gray sea with their oars (Murray 1995:323).

Whereas Keel tries to retrieve the symbolic and metaphoric significance and scope of the lotus flower, other authors read the term in a very allegorical way in an anthropological reading. Karl Budde's interpretation is a textbook example of this.<sup>29</sup> Referring to Canticles 5:13, a passage in which the lips of the boy are compared to lotus flowers (שפתיו שושנים), Budde concludes that in Canticles 2:16 the lotus flowers are the object of the verb רעה: the beloved grazes on the

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28 See, for example, Haupt 1902:29.

29 Budde (1898:12): "Sind vollends die Lippen des Bräutigams in 5:13 Lilien, so gibt sich das Weiden auf den Lippen der Braut (...) als nächstliegende Deutung von selbst".

lips of his girl. The Old Testament scholar Haupt goes even further (1902:29). His translation of Canticles 2:16 reads as follows: “My dearest is mine, and his am I, who feeds on the (dark purple) lilies.” For him, the dark purple lilies — the reader is nowhere told just why Haupt colours the lilies purple — are an allegory for the hair on the *mons Veneris*. And referring to Leviticus 18:6-18, the expression “to feed on the lilies” is in his view a synonym for “to uncover the nakedness.”

According to Pope too, it is not unlikely that the flowers are sexual symbols. In order to support this position, he refers to Indian culture in which the lotus, as a symbol for the female genitalia, has pronounced sexual connotations. Moreover, in Sanskrit, lotophagi supposedly stands for cunnilingus. However, the connection between Canticles and Indian culture is nothing more than a vague hypothesis.<sup>30</sup>

Like the theological-allegorical interpretation, the sexual-allegorical interpretation seems to overlook the ‘literal’ meaning of the text. After all, as yet, there is not a single demonstrable clue that justifies connecting the verb רעה with sexual relationships between people.<sup>31</sup> On this point, then, the conclusion of Stoop-van Paridon, an author who generally tends to read Canticles as heavily erotically coloured, also looks plausible:

The relative present participle with the article (הרעה) (...) and the location (בשורשים) refer in my opinion directly to the life situation of the beloved shepherd outside in nature, in this case without any erotic-sexual insinuation (Stoop-van Paridon 2005:139).

Moreover, there is also no certainty with regard to the precise meaning of the term שושן (cf. Schmoldt 1993:1205-1207). In any case, there appears to be no indication that the term has an erotic connotation in the rest of the Old Testament literature. Neither in the description of Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 7:19.22.26; 2 Chron 4:5), nor in Hosea 14:6, where the term represents Israel’s revival, nor in the headings of the Psalms, does the noun have an erotic undertone. In addition, an erotic interpretation of the term in Canticles 2:16 is at odds with other passages in Canticles where the lilies are mentioned. In Canticles 4:5, the

30 It goes without saying that the reproach levelled at the proponents of the erotic-allegorical reading by the proponents of the theological-allegorical reading leaves little to the imagination. Regarding Haupt’s approach to Canticles 2:16, Joüon (1909:169), writes, “L’explication obscène de P. Haupt, ainsi que l’interprétation qu’il donne (...) sont un bon spécimen de fantaisie dévergondée”. Robert & Tournay (1963:125) calls Haupt’s approach “francehement obscène”. On the other hand, the authors, who read Canticles erotically, reproach the theological-allegorical readings for being ‘prudish’. In this regard, see, for example, Fokkelman (2001).

31 So too, Stoop-van Paridon (2005:139 n. 102).

girl's breasts are compared to the fawns of a gazelle that feed among the lilies (הרועים בשושנים). In this passage, the lilies can hardly be meant as an allegory for the female genitalia. Pope also senses that Canticles 4:5 threatens his interpretation of Canticles 2:16. The solution that he proposes is, however, anything but an example of scholarly exegesis. Without any textual basis, he corrects the Hebrew text: "It seems likely, therefore, that the allusion to lotus-eating should be deleted here, as mistakenly introduced from the cliché referring to the male lover" (Pope 1977:470). Finally, Canticles 5:13 also opposes the interpretation of the lily as an allegory for the female genitalia. In this verse, after all, the lips of the boy are compared to lilies: שפתותיו שושנים (His lips [are] lilies).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Canticles is a collection of poetic love poems that sings the praises of interpersonal love. Due to the very nature of the subject — love as a reality that transcends the human being — the authors had to use metaphorical language.<sup>32</sup> The oft-raised contrast between 'literal' and 'allegorical' readings, therefore, does not hold water with regard to Canticles. As poetic literature, most of Canticles cannot and may not be read literally. Canticles, after all, is full of metaphors. A correct exegesis of this biblical book must then also always try to grasp the meaning of these metaphors. And in this respect both biblical and extra-biblical literature can be helpful. Nevertheless, as we have illustrated using Canticles 2:16, this 'original' meaning of Canticles is often miles away from the countless allegorical interpretations that have defined the interpretation of Canticles in past centuries. And this applies to both the theological-allegorical interpretation that defined the Judaeo-Christian history of interpretation for ages, and as well as to the anthropological-allegorical interpretation that has found favour in recent decades. Both do not do justice to Canticles as a collection of love songs, in which interpersonal love — including its corporeality — is praised.

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32 Keel (1984) succeeds brilliantly in interpreting Canticles from this perspective.

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