

'YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL MY LOVE':
THE SONG OF SONGS OF WOMEN*

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Preliminary Remarks

'Do you notice feelings of spring?' With this question, in the spring of 1995, we extended an invitation to an 'Awareness Day' for women. The idea arose out of our co-operation between biblical and practical theology at the university level. We wanted to offer a day in which women could discover a bit of the Bible and thereby become aware of their own selves. It was intended to be 'A day I grant myself.'

The primary texts chosen for the day were Song of Songs 4.1-7 and 4.12-5.1. The following report about the day consists of: brief interpretations of the two texts, as used in the study day (sections 1 and 2); a description of the participants (section 3); a report of the procedure as divided into morning and afternoon activities (section 4); and concluding reflections (section 5).

1. *Song of Songs 4.1-7*

You are beautiful, my love; you are beautiful.
Your eyes: doves through your veil.
Your hair: like a flock of goats
That are drawn down the mountain of Gilead.
Your teeth: like a flock of sheep ready to be shorn
That climb from their washing—
All bear twins and none is barren among them.
As a cord of scarlet: your lips
And your mouth is lovely.
Like the tear of a pomegranate:
Your gums behind your veil.

* First published as "Schön bist du, meine Freundin": Das Hohe Lied der Frauen', *BL* 70.2 (1997), pp. 136-42 (trans. Lillian R. Klein and by the authors).

Like David's tower: your neck,
 Built as a bulwark
 Hung with a thousand bucklers
 All shields of mighty men.
 Your breasts: like two fawns,
 Twins of a gazelle,
 Feeding among the lotus.
 Until the day breathes
 And the shadows become long
 I will go to the myrrh mountain
 And to the frankincense hill.
 You are altogether beautiful, my love,
 And there is no flaw in you.

This so-called Song of Description (*waṣf*) reflects the male lover's view of his female beloved. Parts of the body are recognized and described through images from nature. For contemporary readers, many of these images sound foreign and beyond comprehension.

Understanding the metaphors offers a key to understanding the text: you have to clarify the terms of comparison.¹ The parts of the body are not praised for their perfect physical form but because the lover sees in them the wonderful possibilities and devotion of his beloved. Each body part leads him anew to his beloved, and brings the wonder of the whole world to his senses.² The pictures of nature must not be interpreted in their superficial meaning; they have a 'deeper' meaning—one that, admittedly, is not readily apparent to contemporary readers because the 'deeper' meaning originates in the ancient oriental world.

With the first comparison, of eyes to doves, the 'eyes' refer to the beloved's glances. In the iconography of the old oriental world, doves belong to the sphere of the Love Goddess. One could translate the first comparison into 'Your glances tell me of your love'.³ The metaphor associated with the hair recalls the story of Samson (Jdg. 16) as an image of uncountability and implies unusual power and energy. The image of the goat flock (עדר עיזים) strengthens the allusions to 'numerous, uncountable', and adds a fresh lust for life.⁴ The rows of teeth (שניך), perfect and intact, like a procession of white sheep (4.2 קצובות, cf. 6.6, רחלים), lead the lover into a solemn mood and he

1. Cf. O. Keel, *Das Hohelied* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986), pp. 35-39.

2. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 33-34.

3. In the interpretation of the metaphors, we follow Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 129-44; for the first metaphor cf. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 130-32.

4. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 132-33.

recognizes the complete beauty of his beloved.⁵ The lips (שפתותיך) and mouth (מַדְבַּרְךָ) capture the world of words and language; this remains comprehensible. The 'red cord' (חוט השני) refers not only to the appearance of the lips, but also can be considered a signal of the invitation to love, much like the red cord on the house of the prostitute Rahab (Jos. 2.10).⁶ The Hebrew word that is translated as 'gum[s]', רִקְתֶּךָ, is often understood as 'temple[s]', since a 'veil' (צַמְתֶּךָ) is mentioned. A tear in the pomegranate (פֶּלֶחַ הַרְמוֹן), however, gives a view into the soft interior, which makes רִקְתֶּךָ more appropriate as 'your gums'. The pomegranate, a recognized symbol of life and fertility, is also attributed aphrodisiac properties in the entire ancient Near Eastern world. The image thus invokes also the disturbing fascination of the beloved.⁷ If the woman's neck is compared to David's Tower, then the lover discerns an attitude of confident pride in his beloved.⁸ That her breasts with their 'nourishing' and live energy are associated with goat kids, conveys security. The image of lotus blossoms (שׁוֹשַׁנִּים) interweaves a further aspect of the renewal of life.⁹ This superlative glorification of the beloved is reinforced with the closing lines (vv. 6-7).¹⁰

2. *Song of Songs* 4.12–5.1

A locked garden: my Sister-Bride
 A locked garden, a sealed Source!
 Your watercourses: a pomegranate grove
 With costly fragrances (fruits)
 Of shrubs of henna and nard
 From nard and saffron, ginger-grass and cinnamon
 Together with all incense plants
 From myrrh and aloe
 Together with all the best balsam saplings;
 You: a garden fountain
 A well of flower water
 Like the water streams from Lebanon.

 Awaken, North Wind, and come, South Wind!
 Let my garden disperse its fragrance!
 The aroma of her Balsam saplings should flow.
 My beloved shall come into his garden,
 He shall eat from his precious fruits.

5. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, p. 133.
6. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, p. 134.
7. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 134-35.
8. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 136-38.
9. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 138-40.
10. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 140, 144.

I come into my garden, my sister, bride
 I pluck my myrrh and my balsam.
 I eat my honeycomb with my honey.
 I drink my wine with my milk.

Eat friends, drink and intoxicate yourselves with love.

The text compares the loving woman to a garden. The first passage describes the garden; in the second, she invites her lover to enter her garden. He answers that he wishes to enjoy the fruits of the garden.¹¹

The picture of the garden should not be confused with a nature idyll. Rather, the imagery suggests a carefully laid out and nurtured park.¹² The park's preciousness is suggested by the collection of rare and exotic plants to be found in it. Fascinating plants are present in excess.¹³ All of the five senses are accosted; not only by the fruit of the trees but also by fragrant plants and flowers. In such a garden, water—especially valuable in a dry climate such as that of Syria-Palestine—is in great abundance too.

As the fragrance of the garden, caught by the wind, invites the lover, so does the beloved invite her lover with words. Her lover should come to her, into this wonder garden. In his assent, the language of eating and drinking, of honey, wine and milk, strongly suggests an intimate union.¹⁴

The fascination of and joy in the garden, as presented in this text from the Song of Songs, show themselves to be especially powerful when read, with Phyllis Trible, as a midrash on the narratives of Genesis 2-3.¹⁵

In Genesis 2 a garden in which plants grow (v. 16) and water flows (vv. 10-14) is laid out (v. 8). A wonderful park emerges; however, it is a garden whose meaning will be changed by the very different intention of the so-called 'Fall of Man' Story. The garden 'locates the tragedy of disobedience in Genesis 2-3. But the garden itself signals delight, not disaster.'¹⁶ As result of this human disobedience, cherubim guard the closed entrance to the garden. In contrast, the garden

11. This interpretation, too, is motivated by Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 156-73.

12. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 158-62, where there are also pictures of contemporary gardens.

13. These plants, in Israel, are imported articles. For readers of that time they had exotic connotations too.

14. Keel, *Das Hohelied*, pp. 169-73.

15. P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978).

16. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 152.

poem of the Song of Songs invites entrance (SoS 4.16). In this garden there is no forbidden tree among all the plants; instead, everyone is encouraged to eat and drink (cf. SoS 5.1). Cherubim keep outside the garden 'those who lust, moralize, legislate, or exploit. They also turn away. But at all time they welcome lovers to romp and roam in the joys of eroticism.'¹⁷

3. *The Participants*

The Diocese's Women's Spiritual Welfare offered a one-day event with the title, "'You are Beautiful, My Love": Love Lyrics from the Bible'. That would, so we thought, appeal to women between the ages of 30 and 60, who wish to 'do something', beyond everyday life, for themselves. This assumes that the women have brought the different aspects of their lives (purchasing, partnership, family responsibilities, honorary engagements) into relative harmony. Admittedly, this does not preclude that some individuals were conscious of disquiet or faced change.¹⁸

Our offer consciously sought to convey the positive impulse 'to do something for one's self'. The day was not intended as a source of information or education for any special aspect of life.¹⁹ Instead, it focused on the individual identity of the women attending.

The texts of the Song of Songs are considered suitable for initiating a discussion with one's own self. Arising from the experience of mutual love, the songs speak of seeing and being seen, of beauty and passion, of joy and desire.

From the multiple aspects of the songs and from the likewise multiple possibilities to discuss individual identity and personhood, we selected several main points, bearing in mind the life situation of women and aspects of unveiling feminine identity.

Gender-specific socialization determines not only role behaviour but also self awareness. Consequently, socializing authorities exert a powerful influence over the feminine body through the power of definition. As a result, girls and women may have great difficulty in becoming aware of their own bodies and their potential, of feeling

17. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 162.

18. Cf. T. Faltermaier et al., *Entwicklungspsychologie des Erwachsenenalters* (Grundrisse der Psychologie, 14; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), pp. 58-71, 116-37.

19. The day was not planned as professional education nor as reflexion about love relations or experiences of partnership.

comfortable in their own bodies and free to communicate with and through them.²⁰ The social ideals of feminine beauty are unattainable; therefore every woman thinks she is not beautiful (enough) by comparison to the perfection of women's bodies as seen on posters and television: These conjure up unavoidable images of the self as too fat, too wrinkled and so on. If one were to believe the headlines of the cosmetic industry, the feminine body consists, from head to toe, of 'problem areas' only.

The goal of this Bible Day was to stimulate self-awareness. Working together, in the protective environment of a small group, the women were encouraged to risk observing themselves. Accordingly, the discussion about the Song of Description (4.1-7) aimed at the experience of body language. The Garden Song (4.12-15) was shown to create awareness of one's own capacities and to strengthen joy in them. Personal experiences of lust and love in partnership, which the participants possibly brought with them, were not the central issue. The day with the Song of Songs sought to provide an open forum for everyone present.

In any case, the women who come to such an event are strongly motivated. For most, it is not easy to find a Saturday free of the responsibilities of work and family. These women came with the expectation of a day for themselves, a day in which they could experience something different, in which they could join other women and just enjoy their lives. This indicates, on the one hand, strong motivations; on the other hand, it limits the participants' readiness to engage in difficult, uncomfortable or strenuous tasks. It should be noted that the group—the women who join in this single day—offers the protection of relative anonymity, thus enabling the participants to speak, react and explore with more openness and freedom. At the same time, a frank exchange about personal experiences of body and desire demands delicacy and consideration.

20. Cf. Helga Bilden, 'Geschlechtsspezifische Sozialisation', in K. Hurrelmann and D. Ulrich (eds.), *Neues Handbuch der Sozialforschung* (Weinheim/Basel: Beltz, 1991), pp. 279-301; Karin Flaake, "'zuerst, toll! Jetzt bin ich endlich 'ne Frau. Aber jetzt geht's mir auf die Nerven!": Weibliche Adoleszenz, Körperlichkeit und Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten von Mädchen', in S. Becker and I. Nord (eds.), *Religiöse Sozialisation von Mädchen und Frauen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995), pp. 23-34.

5. *The Procedure*

The following is intended to sketch our day with the Song of Songs. The goals identified above—to discover a text from the Hebrew Bible and, through this medium, to discover aspects of our own identities—provide a methodological guideline. First, the text orientation demands that the biblical verses must be understood as independent, without being used or twisted to accommodate other purposes, and interpreted in accordance to their original meaning. Second, the participant orientation also requires respect for the experiences, needs and even the resistance of the women, integration of all aspects in the process and the creation of a space for new experiences. The *Threestep* method, developed by the *Deutsches Katholisches Bibelwerk* for group work on biblical texts, serves as a methodological-didactic model.²¹

The *Threestep* consists of:

1. A projective phase—an approach to the biblical text;
2. an analytical phase—understanding the biblical text; and
3. an appropriation phase—going forward from the text.

The morning and afternoon of the conference were shaped in accordance with this *Threestep* program.

The Morning: Song of Songs 4.1-7

The Introduction round immediately thrusts the women into the middle of Song of Songs landscape: the participants are directed to select one picture from an array of garden pictures. The selected picture should have a special appeal to the participant who selects it, and she describes this picture and herself in the Introduction round.

Then, by a meditative Body Exercise, the participants are directed to the theme of the Description Song: They are to imagine their own faces: not as seen in a mirror, but from inward—as if they were wearing it like a mask.

After a brief introduction to the Song of Songs as part of the Hebrew Bible, the group leader reads the text (4.1-7) aloud. As an example, the leader explains the kind of metaphors in the first image (see above).

In work groups, the participants can develop the other images of the text and understand their meaning. To this end, they receive cards that are prepared in four colours. Four different colours belong together in a set. These colours represent:

21. Cf. Katholisches Bibelwerk (eds.), *Grundkurs Bibel Altes Testament: Werkbuch für die Bibelarbeit mit Erwachsenen* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1993).

1. parts of the human body;
2. images from nature;
3. human capacities; and
4. meaning of nature.

The participants are asked to attempt and create an order in the cards. Human body parts and images of nature are provided in the text; the deeper dimensions are exposed when the intended meanings and human capacities are introduced. If the original images are then taken away, a new level of poetry is revealed, reflecting the characteristics, fascinations and powers of the beloved person. Focusing on this, the analysis is concerned with the dialogical aspects of identity. From these concepts, the participants are requested to write a new poem.²²

As a conclusion of the unit, the participants are invited to return once more to the Body Exercise. The original biblical text of the Song of Description is read aloud. The participants try to be conscious of the feelings that are now awakened by hearing the text. They can note these experiences for themselves and, if wished, present them to the group.

The Afternoon: Song of Songs 4.12–5.1

The entrance into the new work unit is accompanied by afternoon fatigue. The participants are stimulated into wakefulness of mind and body with a 'tree dance'. The participants are challenged with the idea that they imagine themselves as trees, move as trees, experience winter and summer, grow and die as trees. This exercise leads to a later exercise in identification with the garden.

After reading the text of 4.12–5.1, the women try to perceive its meaning in work groups. The participants consider jointly questions such as the following: Who is speaking in this song? To whom is the speech addressed? Is there an alternation of speaking voices?

The participants underline all the nouns in the text with a coloured pen: What does the garden consist of? With a second pen of a different colour, they identify all the activities and movements (especially in the second half of the song): What happens in the garden? Who acts? The results are exchanged among the group.

After this textual exploration, the participants have time (at least 45 minutes) and space to pursue for themselves the symbol of the garden in order to paint a garden picture. A variety of art and craft materials

22. See Appendix.

are available to them. After the general introduction to the individual self-work, each participant receives a page with 'impulse' questions. These questions are intended to stimulate the participants' personal images and impressions. If I am a garden, what grows in me? Which situations or places do I know where I can really have pleasure? When and where is life a festivity? What gives colour to my life? In which situations do I feel that I offer something beautiful and valuable? What gives me the sensation that I radiate something special? When and where do I feel that I am something special? What are the sources of my life? Is there something in my life that is so valuable and holy that I do not allow everybody to see it?

The work that is done separately, individually, follows a conversational and exchange period, either with a partner or in a small group. In the group as a whole, the pictures the participants have painted are exhibited along with the original presentation of garden pictures, without commentary.

In the conclusion to the day we return to the dance with which the afternoon session began, and read a meditative text.

6. In Conclusion: Some Reflections

The women experienced great joy in writing and painting, despite their initial fears over their limited capacities. Their astonishment over what they had hidden in themselves, and what they can do was, perhaps, amplified by their initial doubts. They became ready to elaborate on themes about their own self-awareness and to talk about them. The course of the day showed the adequacy of the concepts and methods we had used.

The garden as a metaphor for the individual, for an individual life, revealed itself as very fruitful. Many women approached the images spontaneously, almost all had (mostly positive) experiences with their own gardens at home. We thus learnt that gardens offer a very intimate, positive and open image.

Hence, the day came to a close with the realization of the goals we had in mind. The participants could discover a bit of the Bible and a bit about themselves, and they enjoyed the day! We, the leaders of the day, were touched by amazement and joy at this experience.

APPENDIX:
TWO POEMS BY THE PARTICIPANTS

1

You are for me the most beautiful one!
I love you.
If I look into your eyes, I see,
That you love me as well.
Your boundless temper is contagious—
You give me new power to live.
When you laugh, the sun rises.
Your lips invite me to kiss,
What you say, tells of love.
When you kiss me, the world around me disappears.
You incline to me, and I feel only happiness.
I admire your sincereness.
I feel secure with you,
Near to you I gain power.
You are super.

2

You are beautiful, my beloved
I like you.
When you look at me,
I burn.
Your joy of life is contagious.
It makes me strong.
When I look at you and your beauty,
I feel bewitched.
When you talk to me,
My desire for you increases—
And I feel that you return my love.
Your intimacy is mysterious for me
And gives me wings.
I am fascinated by your bearing.
It shows me, how proud and self-aware you are.
I feel secure with you.