

# Reading the Song of Songs through a spiritual direction lens

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Research on the use of the Song of Songs in spiritual direction is rare; yet, the Song of Songs (or Canticle of Canticles) is a highly conducive case as it provides *in nuce* the poetics, lyrics, erotics, and aesthetics of human and divine love which is found nowhere else in Scripture. This article draws on these unique features, integrates the biblical and the experiential, and offers a poetics-praxis paradigm for use in contemporary spiritual praxis. With the poem's metaphorical *vineyard* (a figurative term for the beloved *herself*) serving as hermeneutical key, the beloved's experience of love is interpreted through a multifaceted reading that is intrinsic to the poem, namely: *eros* [yearning]; *mythos* [searching]; *mustikos* [finding]; and *kosmos* [birthing]. In following the inner dynamism and dramatic tensions across the eight chapters of the Song, the fourfold reading traces the beloved's transformation from a neglected vineyard (Can 1:6) to a generative vineyard (Can 8:12). The article concludes that transformation in love is a journey from depletion (the *giving away* of self) towards deification (the *giving of* self in love), and suggests *tending one's own vineyard* as a living testament to divine love and a living sacrament in the world.

## Introduction

The use of the Song of Songs in spiritual direction is a significant research topic for two reasons: firstly, both the biblical love song and the practice of spiritual direction are rooted in ancient traditions; and secondly, the Song of Songs remains one of the most disputed, marginalised, and neglected of biblical texts. This article, by way of background, elucidates four aspects that underscore the value of an ancient poem for a contemporary practice, namely: (1) the Song of Songs tradition, (2) a recovery of the Song's spiritual vocation, (3) essentials of spiritual direction, and (4) presuppositions for a poetics-praxis amalgam. On the merits of these contributions, the primary purpose of this article is to suggest a '*spiritual direction lens*' to the Song of Songs that is intended for spiritual praxis. While the focus is on the human subject rather than on the text as object,<sup>1</sup> and is underpinned by *experiential exegesis*, the following literary aspects are deemed crucial in a spiritual direction reading: firstly, the Song of Songs is 'the hermeneutic key' to interpreting the Scriptures (Kingsmill 2009:10) in spite of the fact that it poses 'the exegetical challenge par excellence' (LaCocque 1998a:38); secondly, the Song's leitmotif of love is central as underscored by the following summation: 'Love is the core of revelation; all the rest is commentary' (LaCocque 1998a:38); thirdly, the mystical aptitude of the Song is deeply embedded in the text as poetry 'mimics reality in the hypothetical mode of fiction' (Ricoeur 1995:240); and, fourthly, as 'iconographic text' that serves as 'a window opening between two worlds', the Song 'witnesses to our fragmentations and yet offers glimpses of a higher unity' (Davis 2006:176–177).

With respect to ancient traditions, both the Song of Songs and spiritual direction are inextricably linked to the Christian mystical and Western monastic traditions, as this article will highlight.<sup>2</sup> The Christian mystical interpretation of the Song stems as far back as Origen's commentary *On the Song of Songs* in the 3rd century CE, which is also considered 'the first great work of Christian

1. A spiritual direction reading of the Song of Songs is not exegetical or theological *per se*; therefore, aspects of authorship, authorial intent, historical background, compositional history which are pertinent to historical/critical studies are beyond the scope of this article. Biblical scholars such as Alter (1985), Bekkenkamp (2000), Brenner (1989, 2000), Carr (2003), Davidson (1989, 2007), Davis (2000, 2006), Elliott (1989), Exum (2005, 2007), Falk (1990), Kingsmill (2009), LaCocque (1998a, 1998b), Landy (1983), Murphy (1990), Ricoeur (1998), and Trible (1978) have admirably taken up these extrinsic factors, as well as the literal-spiritual debate on the Song. Their insights inform this article, while several methodologies are reviewed elsewhere (Lam 2012:13–26). Pertinent to the present approach is Ricoeur's emphasis on 'reception of the text' which allows for a broader interpretative framework than 'the arguments of the older quarrel' (1998:303).

2. *Mysticism* is given particular attention in the present article, an ancient theme which has been 'largely ignored in the republic of theology'; and 'particularly in its attentiveness to the inarticulate and absent – seems to have been largely banished with the artists from this discourse' (Burrows 2005:346). Noteworthy is Johnston's provocative question: 'Is it not possible to elaborate a theological method which would put greater emphasis on *reflection on mystical experience*?' ([1978]1997:58).

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mysticism' (Johnston 1995:17, citing Lawson 1957:265). Spiritual direction, as a formal one-to-one practice, was founded on a monastic tradition, and is traced as far back as the 4th century CE, to solitary monks who lived in the Egyptian desert, notably Saint Anthony the Great (c. 250–355), the 'father of monks' (Tam 2007:11, 39–67). In classic mystical literature on the Song, of particular significance is John of the Cross (1542–1591) – Spanish poet, Carmelite monk, mystic and spiritual director – whose *Dark Night*, *Spiritual Canticle*, and *Living Flame of Love* (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991) exemplify the kinship between the Song of Songs and spiritual direction. The term '*transformation in love*', one of the key features of the proposed lens, is credited to John of the Cross.

Contemporary literature on the Song of Songs as darling text for Christian (love) mysticism is prolific; however, only a few works can be cited in this limited space: Arminjon (1983), Matter (1992), Johnston (1995), Turner (1995), Davis (2000, 2006), Norris (2003), McGinn (2006), and Kingsmill (2009). With regard to Christian mysticism and contemporary spiritual direction, it suffices to mention two points: firstly, that spiritual directors need to be familiar with the rich traditions of love mysticism in order to accompany directees whose religious experience is characterised by love mysticism (Ruffing 2000:97–100); secondly, *The canticle of spiritual direction: A transformative approach to the Song of Songs* (Lam 2012)<sup>3</sup> brings together the Song of Songs, Christian mysticism, spirituality, and spiritual direction in a kind of contemplative symphony.

## The Song of Songs tradition

The *Song of Songs tradition* highlights various Judaeo-Christian perspectives that contribute to a contemporary spiritual direction lens, namely: the sexual, the religious, the symbolic, and the mystical. Firstly, as an ancient Israelite love poem, the Song of Songs was sung in Israel as folk songs; in particular, as songs of 'love and love-making between heterosexual humans' (Brenner 2000:162). In the Song, human sexual love 'is given its highest acclamation' and thus, for a theology of sexuality, the Song of Songs is 'the supreme statement on the nature of sexuality in the OT'. Moreover, human love in the Song 'typifies the divine' and '*typologically* points beyond itself to the Lover in the Song's climax (8:6)' (Davidson 1989:18–19). Secondly, on a religious level, the Song of Songs is associated with the ancient Jewish expression of divine presence, the *Shekinah*, the inner sanctum of the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It serves as a redemptive analogy for the Israelite exodus from Egypt and is thus read at the Jewish Passover, a tradition that continues to this day in certain communities (Brenner 1989:95–96). Thirdly, on a symbolic level, the Song of Songs is the 'holy of holies' text. Rabbi Akiba (c. 50–135 CE) counteracted a profane use of the Song by contending that, '[a]ll the Scriptures are holy; but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies' (Davis 2000:240). After the Roman destruction of

the Temple in Jerusalem, the Song of Songs became a focal point for prayer and pilgrimage and 'worthy to replace the Temple as a means of access to God' (Davis 2000:239–240). Fourthly, on a mystical level, the Song of Songs was 'the mystical book par excellence' for Christian and Jewish mystics, as they found in the Song 'the supreme expression of the love of God for his community and for each person within it' (McGinn 2006:4). Influenced by Akiba, Origen's allegorical approach lies at the root of all later Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs (Norris 2003:xix). Astoundingly, nearly one hundred extant commentaries and homilies on the Song of Songs were written between the sixth and fifteenth centuries (Matter 1992:3), a major factor being the flourishing of allegorical interpretations during the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages.

## Recovery of the Song's spiritual vocation

Theological readings of the Song of Songs have traditionally been categorised under two broad streams, namely, the sexual (*literal*) and the spiritual (*allegorical*). Although the *spiritual* interpretation has been the dominant interpretation, a 'minority' of Jewish and Christian exegetes have admitted the 'secular nature' preserved in the Song's love lyrics, subverting notions of a 'higher' or 'transformed meaning' (Brenner 1989:75–76). In favour of the spiritual, Christian allegorists 'rejected the Song's literal sense altogether', and influenced by 'Greek philosophies (i.e., Platonic dualism, stoicism, and the Hellenistic-Roman cults)' they posited a dichotomy between body and soul, flesh and spirit, associating purity with sexual renunciation and the denial of bodily pleasures (Davidson 1989:2).

The 16th century saw a significant turning point, when the boom in biblical studies brought with it 'disdain for what was increasingly seen as the artifice of medieval allegory' (Matter 1992:5). Notably, the historical-critical method that divested the Song of its ancient credibility paved the way for exegetical and anti-authoritarian arguments and discredited the allegorical interpretation as 'contingent and arbitrary' (Ricoeur 1998:265). After the Lutheran Reformation, the evaluation of sexuality as an expression of meaningful human relations became a 'major cultural factor', calling people to live out their faith within the setting of a 'worldly vocation – of work and marriage'. This cultural shift took away from the Song 'its monastic paradigmatic character and its privileged setting for a correct reading of the Song of Songs' (Ricoeur 1998:293–294), resulting in a preference for literal, erotic, and naturalistic interpretations.

Hermeneutical scholars have recently questioned one-sided interpretations that over-emphasise sexuality to the demise of the Song's spiritual dimension. Ricoeur (1998:265–303), for example, proposes a plurality of interpretations 'set within the framework of a theory of reception of the text', and suggests readings that produce new 'uses' or the 'reuse' of texts that do not make claims to an original meaning or authorial intention of the Song. Towards the end of the 20th century

<sup>3</sup>The full text is available online at the following site: <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/8103>

a few authors 'joined the chorus' rejecting the dichotomy of sexuality and spirituality; consequently, a 'cross over' of the sexual-spiritual divide is now 'in the air' (Carr 2003:145). Reader-response theories and feminist approaches have also generated autobiographical readings with innovative, more nuanced, interpretive flexibility in critical work on the Song of Songs (Brenner & Fontaine 2000).

Within the contemporary milieu of spirituality studies, several examples point to a resurgence of interest in the Song of Songs and a recovery of its spiritual vocation, namely: (1) the role of the Song of Songs in 'naming God in the present' as well as the recovery of the great mystics, especially the apophatic tradition, to speak once again (Tracy 1994:44–45, 16–18); (2) synchronic approaches in biblical interpretation that favour the use of metaphor, myth and symbols which include a mystical lens for reading Scripture (Kourie 1998); (3) the focus on the 'spiritual life as experience' as enhanced by interdisciplinary, intercultural, and interfaith factors (Schneiders 2005a); (4) the suggestion that medieval insights be revisited and reclaimed 'in grounding spirituality as a discipline in its own right' (Frohlich 2005:65–78); (5) the need for 'contemplative attention' and 'contemplative engagement' in critical methodology, and the value of *lectio divina* in appropriate methods (Sheldrake 2006:2–30); and (6) 'allegorising' as an old, yet relevant, method of interpretation and more nuanced approaches to the Bible, including 'poetic means rather than precise, technical language' (Decock 2008:1–19). A spiritual direction lens is aptly located within a contemporary context of multiple, integrative, and contemplative approaches to Scripture.

## Essentials of spiritual direction

'*Spiritual direction*' encompasses three essential components, namely: discernment, guidance, and accompaniment. *Spiritual* refers to the divine-human relation as the locus of the practice, a relationship that impacts on the whole person within the totality of her or his life experience. *Direction* implies the movement of the Spirit along a transformative path, commonly referred to as a 'spiritual itinerary'. The practice is not prescriptive or controlling; rather, from a Carmelite perspective, the objective is 'to guide persons to a deeper union with God by helping them listen to the Spirit who is the Chief Director of us all' (Culligan 1983:9). To help people discern God's 'inworking' on the soul is no straightforward task, as the spiritual journey is perilous (Waaajman 2002:874, 888). Therefore, the ministry of spiritual direction needs to be explicated in terms of timely facilitation, particular charisms, and wise cautions.

Green (1932–2009), a Jesuit who served mainly in the Philippines, observes 'two moments' on our journey when spiritual direction is particularly necessary: 'when we are just beginning, and when we move into the strange world of the dry well or dark night' (Green 2000:78). In the early stages of the journey, he recommends Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual exercises*, because Ignatius 'is a master in the laying of a good foundation' (Green 2000:91). A particular characteristic of the

Jesuit tradition is that it 'focuses on experience and expects that people will be able to encounter God there' (Barry 2004:3; Barry & Connolly 1983). The major role then of the spiritual director is 'to help directees pay attention to their experience as the locus of their encounter with God' (Barry 2004:35). The second moment, which Green refers to as 'prayer beyond the beginnings', and when a person 'wishes to grow in the love of God', he recommends John of the Cross, an 'authority on the mature stage of contemplative prayer' (2000:71, 91). Positing John the Baptist (friend of the bridegroom, Jn 3:27–30) as 'the ideal model for a good spiritual director' because he recognised his subordinate role as 'the voice but not the Word', Green considers John of the Cross a 'friend of the bridegroom' and 'kindred spirit' to John the Baptist (2000:10, 91–111). Given the resonance with the Song of Songs, the essentials of spiritual direction are described in *sanjuanist* terms, that is, according to and pertaining to John of the Cross.

Viewing contemplation as 'the core of the Carmelite life', John's experiential insights on 'the essence of contemplation' and his 'spiritual reading of Scripture and reflection' have but one purpose: 'arriving at an understanding of the transformative action of God in the human soul' (Blommestijn, Huls & Waaajman 2000:7). The crux of *sanjuanist* spiritual direction is that 'God is the principal agent' in drawing the soul, and 'if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more' (LFOL,<sup>4</sup> Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:684). John places paramount importance on the person of Jesus, as follows: 'we must be guided humanly and visibly in all by the law of Christ, who is human ... Any departure from this road is not only curiosity but extraordinary boldness'; thus, with the incarnation of Christ as paradigm, he asserts: 'God is so pleased that the ... direction of humans be through other humans' (Ascent,<sup>5</sup> Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:232–233). At the same time, he cautions that people 'take care into whose hands they entrust themselves' and be aware of 'three blind guides who can draw [*the soul*] off the road: the spiritual director, the devil, and the soul itself' (LFOL, Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:684–685). Admonishing a rough and rude, as well as prideful and presumptuous approach to spiritual direction, John uses metaphors such as 'the little foxes that destroy the flourishing of the vineyard', a 'blacksmith who hammers and pounds with the faculties', and a blind guide who 'tyrannizes souls' and 'deprives them of their freedom' – referring to those who refuse to trust that 'God leads each one along different paths' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:690–697). In sum, John's contemplative approach involves an understanding of 'true and pure spirit', a loving and gentle disposition, 'great tact and open eyes' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:696), and requires three essential spiritual direction skills, namely: 'discretion, knowledge, and experience' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:684–685); hence the inference to spiritual discernment, guidance, and accompaniment.

4. Throughout the article 'LFOL' will refer to John of the Cross's poem, 'Living Flame of Love' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991).

5. Ascent' refers to John of the Cross's prose work, *The ascent of Mount Carmel* (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991).



## Presuppositions for a poetics-praxis amalgam

With regard to interpreting poetics for spiritual praxis, a spiritual direction reading of the Song of Songs rests on three key presuppositions, namely: *experiential* in nature, *hermeneutical* in method, and *incarnational* in application. The Song, a 'non-religious' text that does not explicitly mention God, is essentially a *poem of experience*. The 'religious dimension of human experience' is therefore explored on the twofold assumption that 'any human experience can have a religious dimension' and 'can be an encounter with God' (Barry 2004:21), and God is 'the deepest dimension of all experience' (Fischer 1988:3). Since encounter is relational, the 'religious dimension is supplied by the believing and seeking person and by the Mystery encountered' (Barry 2004:25). Thus, in a spiritual direction lens, the revelatory nature of human experience takes into account the whole person: body and soul, sexuality and spirituality, the ordinary and the numinous, et cetera.

In terms of methodology, a spiritual direction reading of the Song of Songs is *hermeneutical*. According to Ricoeur (1991), the task of hermeneutics is twofold:

to reconstruct the internal dynamic of the text, and to restore to the work its ability to project itself outside itself in the representation of a world that I could inhabit. (p. 18)

On the Song of Songs, Ricoeur's emphasis is on *reading* rather than the writing of the text, an *analogical* approach that augments the meaning of the text through 'new uses and reuses of the text without claiming that the analogical meaning was preexistent in the text' (Ricoeur 1998:277); in this sense, 'analogical transference' refers to 'a second movement' stemming from the *use* of the text and not first of all from its explication (Ricoeur 1998:278). Similarly, as in the use of an allegory, which 'reads off' the typological sense from the literal (Turner 1995:107, 133), a spiritual direction lens 'reads off' existential meanings from the play of metaphor, mythological motifs, and mystical symbols. As the language of the Song 'exhales another level to the one who has experienced that other level' (Kingsmill 2009:5), this particular synchronic approach is not a reading *into* the poem, but rather a reading *off* the poem, and in no way alters its original content and historical context.

A spiritual direction lens is *incarnational* as it is intended for a lived experience of the Song of Songs. In this regard, Schneiders's focus on the study of the spiritual life as 'concrete and embodied experience', and her explication of the *material object* and *formal object* (2005a:50–51), underscore the vineyard as existential or life project. The *material object* or subject matter refers to 'the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives' (Schneiders 2005b:6), while the *formal object* seeks to understand experience 'as it actually occurs, as it actually transforms its subject toward the fullness of life in Christ'

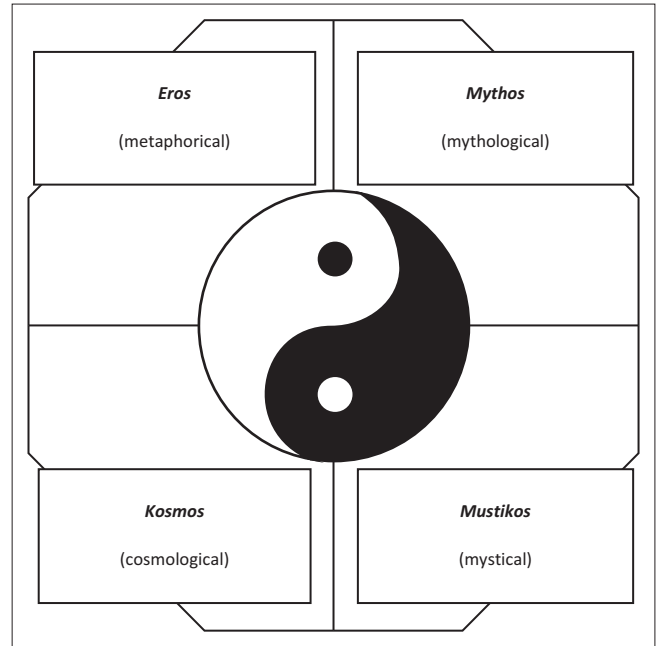


FIGURE 1: Diagram of a fourfold reading of the Song of Songs.

(Schneiders 2005b:6). In the proposed spiritual direction lens, the *material object* is identified as the beloved's metaphorical vineyard (the concrete and embodied), while the *formal object* refers to transformation in love (the process).

## A fourfold reading of the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs is prism-like in the way it refracts multiple aspects of its leitmotif of love. As illustrated in Figure 1, four aspects pertain to a spiritual direction reading, namely: *eros*, the primordial language of love (in its organic and erotic use of metaphor); *mythos*, the yearning for a transcendent love (its use of mythological motifs and biblical myths); *mustikos*, the mystique of divine-human love (symbolic inferences to mystical union and communion); and *kosmos*,<sup>6</sup> the continuing-incarnation of divine love (generativity and sacramentality of creation).

Intrinsic to the poem is the 'phenomenon of inner transformation' (Matter 1992:8): feelings of 'longing' and a sense of 'fulfillment *anticipated*' which express 'the tensions of *eros* itself', and the interplay of paradoxical elements that are 'the structuring polarities of erotic love itself' (Turner 1995: 84–85). To depict these dynamics, the yin-yang symbol is placed at the core of the diagram as it aptly represents mutation rather than stasis. Through the alternation of night and day, dark and light, stillness and movement, this dynamic effects transformation in the created order. On the level of spiritual praxis, inner and outer harmony may be facilitated by the practice of meditation and *tai chi*, contemplation and action, et cetera. Co-existence and complementarity in the yin-yang symbol imply that 'a part of one is found in the other and

<sup>6</sup>. *Kosmos* refers to the whole and is borrowed from Koester's work on symbolism in the Fourth Gospel (1995:249). In the present context it refers to the whole person and to the whole of creation, and in relation to human transformation is applied to personality integration and psychic wholeness.

that one exists in relation to the other' (Liu 1986:6–7) – an interconnecting principle which is holding yet moving. The poem's symbolic play and transformative dynamics generate a fourfold spiritual direction reading of the Song of Songs, which may be encountered as a deepening spiralling experience and as a developmental process, as elaborated in the following section.

### Eros – the metaphorical dimension

The entry level to the Song of Songs is through the plain and obvious sense of the text: the level of *eros*. As the poem is erotic and sensual, not *about* eroticism and sensuality (Bekkenkamp 2000:86), it is posited that the Song of Songs retains the primordial language of love (*eros*). The poet uses a 'live metaphor' to organically connect multiple dimensions, invests the vineyard with *eros*, and depicts the beloved as nexus of the Song. The *vineyard* which is commonly used in biblical imagery for its transformative and generative aptitude, is interpreted in the Song as the beloved *herself* (Murphy 1990:78), her *body* (LaCocque 1998a:185), or *female sexuality* (Falk 1990:155). By implication, the vineyard represents the beloved's bodily self in its entirety, extolling her sexuality and spirituality. As LaCocque asserts, the purpose of the Song's metaphorical language (with religious connotations) is to 'praise *eros*' (1998b:249); therefore, the intellectual assent of a 'disembodied agape' is not entertained, as the erotic in the Song of Songs is 'not a mere rhetorical vehicle with the tenor sanctified by an aloofness of spirituality' (1998:252). With its aromatic and exuberant embodiment, the poem evokes all the senses, calls forth a full play of emotions, and activates the imagination, the body, and the spirit. Its playful use of metaphor teases and entices, exuding the vitality and flamboyance of *eros* – the gift of God for concrete and embodied experience, and for loving and passionate relationships.

The Song of Songs is 'untypical of biblical verse' as it gives no instruction or exhortation (Alter 1985:185–186), and is devoid of religion, dogma, and commandment. Instead, *eros* identifies closely with human experience and is sexually evocative – also profoundly provocative as biblical love poem. *Eros* awakens human desire, entices through subtle *invitation*, and woos and draws the reader to yearn for 'the one my soul loves'. Significantly then, the beloved is depicted not only as 'a speaking subject' but as 'an amorous subject' (Kristeva 1987), simultaneously invoking body and soul, and constituting fecund ground for sexual and spiritual love. Presupposing the *eros* of God as the transformative agent in the Song, the presence of the divine lover is also inferred in the use of vineyard imagery – for example, the connection between *herself* and the imagery of vines and vineyards, implicit in her description of the lover as 'a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi'; his 'going down to see if the vines had budded'; her invitation for them to 'go early to the vineyards'; and 'their vineyards that are in bloom' but threatened by foxes (Murphy 1990:78).

Given the divine-human inferences, the vineyard is an effective 'live metaphor' with the aptitude to serve as a conscious project of life-integration through a self-transcending love. Applied to spiritual direction, the existential predicament of the *neglected vineyard*<sup>7</sup> is manifested on multiple levels of body, soul and psyche. Personal neglect, physical exhaustion, emotional deprivation, mental fatigue, and spiritual impoverishment, are real factors which exacerbate the need for love/God. Invariably, it is at this particular juncture that people seek spiritual direction (and/or professional psychological services). Spiritual direction provides a sacred space for rest and replenishment, and through conversation and inner listening helps people to discern personal and collective causes of depletion that vary according to individual story, personality, temperament, and socio-cultural-religious formation. Where necessary, negative voices that militate against self-care are identified and abuse and injustice confronted. As emotional wellbeing is restored, and people begin to recognise that they are 'dark, yet lovely', self-betrayal gradually gives way to reclaiming what rightfully belongs, and personal responsibility for 'my own vineyard' becomes imperative. Through a birth of consciousness and deepening awareness of God/love/self/other, the search for a life-giving path intensifies. Spiritual direction accompanies people on this inner journey, and guides the way of individuation towards the unveiling of my *true self* in God.

Often unbeknown to the seeker, God is present even in the pain and predicament of the neglected vineyard. It is the gentle task of the spiritual director to tap into that dark mystery and with tact and discretion to discern the person's images and experiences of God. Especially with those who have suppressed their longing and denigrated their desire, human *eros* is evoked, as *eros* is the fire that ignites the raw material, names the painful emotions, uncovers hidden beauty, and mobilises the emergence of the undiscovered self. Moreover, the release of deep desire allows for an experience of the divine desiring within. Ruffing states that, in spiritual practice, desire when uncovered, expressed, and recognised, 'all lead to the Divine Beloved at the core' (2000:11, 111). Along the inner journey towards self-discovery in God, human *eros* is not piously negated or religiously sanitised, but is purified and transformed by the *eros* of God (as the following section will elucidate). The rehabilitation of *eros* is therefore an essential ingredient in the transformation of the vineyard from a neglected self to a generative *authentic self*.

### Mythos – the mythological dimension

Lacking in story, specific plot, historical setting, and specific identities, the Song of Songs is 'pure signification', that is, 'pure lyric without a didactic spelling out of historical referents' (Fisch [1988] 1990:86). This 'pure signification' is embedded with mythic quality and archetypal lovers.

<sup>7</sup>This metaphor is highly conducive to an understanding of human transformation in divine love, and is explored through a fivefold transformative paradigm based on the Song of Songs, as follows: desire, discernment, descent, delight, and detachment (Lam 2012:48–85).



As Ricoeur states: 'Poetry is mimetic because it is mythic' (1995:58); thus, through the interplay of arousal and anonymity, and eroticism and audacity, the poem magnifies the beloved and intensifies the *search* for 'the one my heart loves'. Employing the mythological motif of *search*, the poet draws on the theme of 'seeking and finding, or not finding, of calling and being answered, or not being answered' which occurs in many biblical texts, and, in relation to God, is mostly found in Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (Kingsmill 2009:213). *Mythos* therefore necessitates an intertextual search beyond the framework of the Song of Songs.

According to Ricoeur (1998:301), the power of metaphor gives birth to 'a double *seeing as*' – the Old Testament prophets *see* the divine-human relationship of love as conjugal love, and the erotic bond in the Song is *seen as like* the love of God for the creature/creation. The *seeing as* is 'the organon of every metaphorical process, whether it works in one direction or the other'. On this basis, the vineyard is not only a 'live metaphor', but an 'intersecting metaphor' that renders the beloved's vineyard as embodiment of *eros* and *mythos*. One 'effect of reading' intertextually is that it 'generates theological readings and creates sparks of new meaning, points of intersection among the biblical texts' (Ricoeur 1998:295). This insight is pertinent to a spiritual direction lens, in particular when exploring the *mythos* of 'my own vineyard'. For example, the return to the 'mother's house' is cited several times in the Song of Songs as a poetic inference to birth, belonging, and becoming. It also refers to origins, a return to the womb, and maternal wisdom. *Mythos* serves as an invitation to revisit the YHWH-Israel relation in Isaiah's two songs of the vineyard (Is 5:1–7; 27:2–6), where Israel is poeticised as a choice vineyard, designed by the divine imagination, fertile in its origin, and set apart for divine-human collaboration. However, after Israel's heinous crimes, YHWH removes divine protection and abandons the vineyard – a dark chapter in the *mythos* of the vineyard. Isaiah's second song presents redemptive features, depicting the restoration of Israel to a 'beloved vineyard' through divine watering and care.

A mythological reading of the vineyard is paradigmatic for spiritual direction.<sup>8</sup> Given the symbolic interplay of the Genesis garden and the Song of Songs garden, where mythical motifs are employed to reinvest primordial symbolic function, the vineyard is viewed from Isaiah's song of the vineyard for an understanding of its original intention and spiritual designation. On the level of spiritual direction praxis, *mythos* is explored through personal story, collective history, family of origin, spiritual heritage, punitive images of God, hurtful experiences of love, et cetera, and, to a certain extent, uncovers psychic wounds and psychological complexes. It is necessary to correct distorted perception and illusion (of God, self, others, and the world) through a deconstruction of false images. Although painful, the process is liberating. With reference to Isaiah's restoration of the

8.A transformative paradigm based on Isaiah's songs of the vineyard provides a comparison of transformation in love in the collective context (Israel) and the individual vineyard in the Song of Songs (Lam 2012:86–109).

vineyard as *beloved*, the unearthing of *mythos* is effective in reclaiming one's identity as the beloved of God.

The Song of Songs is embedded with the mythological motif of presence/absence, and thus sustains the yearning for a transcendent love. In the ardent *seeking* of 'the one my soul loves', the spiritual director treats the pain of purification with the utmost care, attentive to the divine initiative in the transformation of human *eros*. Transformation is effected on various levels of psyche and spirit. As the unconscious erupts, the person begins to confront shadow, and encounters the transcendent in their depths. John of the Cross's teaching on the two nights of purgation informs a mythological reading at this 'dark' stage. The first night, or *night of the senses*, is common to many people and is located at the stage of beginners (Welch 1990:72). It refers to a purgation of the sensory part of the soul (sensible appetites for the external things of the world, the delights of the flesh, and the gratifications of the will). Its purpose is to bring the senses into harmony with the spirit (Welch 1990:95), and to direct one's appetites towards giving honour and glory to God. The second night, or *night of the spirit*, is much more difficult and happens to a few people (Welch 1990:95). John states that it is the Holy Spirit who 'wounds the soul by destroying and consuming the imperfections of its bad habits'; yet also cures it (LFOL, Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:648). Paradoxically, 'the more wounded the lover, the healthier the lover is', which John views as 'completely healthy in love' for in this way a person 'is transformed in love' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:660).<sup>9</sup> In sum, strong purgation in the second night effectively prepares a person for 'the highest degree of union' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:651).

In preparation for union with God, the soul needs solitude and silence so as to be passive with a simple, loving attention to God (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:683, 686). The invitation is to loosen one's grip, let go of the reliance on or attachment to the intellect, and give God access to one's depths. In disposing oneself to the loving inflow of God – or 'loving knowledge' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:685–686) – a person must prepare to terminate discursive reflection and the activity of the senses so as not to be tied to any particular knowledge, satisfaction, pleasure or apprehension, while the spiritual director should 'strive to disencumber the soul and bring it into solitude and idleness' so that God would speak 'secretly to the solitary and silent soul' (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:690–691).

## Mustikos – the mystical dimension

The vulnerability of pure faith is fortified by extreme mortification, nakedness of soul, and stripping of all that is not God and is an essential threshold in *finding* the one my heart loves. Experienced as an epiphany, mystical experience in the Song of Songs refers to a 'mutual possession of the lovers' (Ricoeur 1998:292), as evident in the phrase: 'My

9.The transformative principles in John of the Cross's works are enriched by input from the psychological sciences (May 2004), and particularly Jung's depth psychology (Welch 1990).



beloved is mine and I am his.' On this basis, the Song of Songs maintains the mystique of *experiencing* mystical union, and of *finding* that I am desired by the divine lover (*mustikos*). It is important to recognise with regard to the experience of divine *eros* that the source of the experience 'is not in human psychology but in the gift of God' (Kingsmill 2009:203). Thus, the human desire for union and communion is itself a gift. Since it is God who desires union with creation, the experiential realisation brings ecstatic delight and intimate belonging, as felt on the levels of body and soul, sexuality and spirituality: 'I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me' (Can 7:8). John of the Cross distinguishes between 'union in love' on two levels: 'actual union' which is 'always a passing phenomenon' and 'habitual union of love' which 'is compatible with everyday life, less intense in form' (LFOl, Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:635) – a distinction that is applicable to both the sexual and the spiritual realms. Elsewhere he speaks of a 'union with an inflaming love' (1991:647), which is exemplified by the flamboyant eroticism and consuming passion of the Song of Songs.

Ingeniously, the poem captures the intimacy of a lover-beloved relationship in mystico-erotic terms, which renders the Song of Songs *mystical text par excellence*. The power of the Song's mystical symbols in trying to capture the ineffable cannot be underestimated. In fact, without it, 'mystical experience would remain mute'; hence, the language of the Song of Songs is 'irreplaceable' (Ricoeur 1998:284). The ingenuity of the language is its use of sexual imagery with allusions to spirituality, in this way making it possible for sexual desire to be sublimated – as opposed to 'acting out' – by directing human *eros* towards its ultimate fulfilment in divine *eros*. The beloved's garden, for example, is described in sensual and sexual terms, bringing delicious pleasure to her lover. Yet, the poem makes 'no reference to the procreative function of sexuality' which suggests that lovemaking in the Song is 'for the sake of love, not procreation' (Davidson 1989:16). By implication, the magnificence of the Song of Songs is its pure love, which is not to be exploited for utilitarian purposes. Thus, through sublimation, the mystic can swoon in ecstasy when the lover's heart is 'stolen', and contemplation can be overwhelmed by unspeakable beauty and rapturous wonder. In a mystical reading, both mature sexuality and erotic spirituality are evident in explicit vineyard imagery: 'May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.' Eroticism therefore incites awe and wonder at God's intention for creatures to be wholly loved and to love fully.

A mystical reading is a mature reading that supersedes the language of metaphor and myth, and, like contemplation, involves a 'supra-consciousness', a 'third level of consciousness', or Origen's purified 'spiritual senses' (Kingsmill 2009:202). A mystical reading requires, as Kourie (1998:8) suggests, 'a mystical hermeneutic of scripture' which is one in which 'a direct experience of God, or Ultimate Reality, or the One is the end result'. This type of contact

or encounter is transformative and effects transmutation of character and behaviour; therefore, the 'transformative power of scripture is central in mystical interpretation' (Kourie 1998:9). With God as the source, mystical experience is a pregnant gift that gives birth to a mystical life, that is, a heightened awareness of the divine in present reality and the grace to live the divine life in one's own body. 'God is primarily the *mysterium* in virtue of God's self-bestowal, not in terms of particular or partial knowledge we may have of God' nor through the intellect, but through 'the dynamic of experiencing and living the *mysterium*' (Perrin 2007:241). The mystical life includes deepening transformation and self-transcendence within the *mysterium* of daily life, and, as one becomes more embodied in love, *mustikos* effects a union of *eros* and *agape*, as evident in the following section.

### Kosmos – the cosmological dimension

The vineyard as project of life-integration through a self-transcending love is the *incarnational* focus in this fourth and final reading of the Song of Songs. As the beloved returns to the community of angry and protective brothers (Can 1:6; 8:8–9), leaning on her lover and burning with the unquenchable 'flame of Yah' (LaCocque 1998a:176), to what extent has her vineyard been restored and what are the incarnational implications for ongoing life-integration and self-transcendence?

The poem facilitates 'a kind of self transcendence of *double entente*' where the beloved *herself* is not only represented as, but becomes a 'real garden' (Alter 1985:202) which, in incarnational terms, embellishes the vineyard metaphor. The garden of love in the Song exudes the original delight of the Genesis garden, and reverberates with the joy that was originally intended for man and woman (Trible 1978:152). In the redeemed garden of sexuality the lovers 'neither escape nor exploit sex; they embrace and enjoy it'. Moreover, in the Song there is 'no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex', which suggests that 'their love is truly bone of bone and flesh of flesh, and this image of God male and female is indeed very good' (Trible 1978:161). The resonance with Eden reopens the enclave of primordial love, recounts the myth of original blessing, and sings of an ongoing rebirth at the very heart of ordinary, everyday existence (Ricoeur 1998:299). Read intertextually, both the *garden* and *vineyard* in the Song of Songs evince the essence of love, the fullness of life, and the goodness of creation. Their original intention and spiritual designation suggest that transformation in love is oriented towards loving union and life-giving communion, gender equality, the beauty of sexuality, psychological wholeness, and cosmic harmony. Thus, in treating of 'the sacramentality of all of nature', sexuality is viewed as 'a sacrament of God, a sacred locus where we discover ourselves, other persons and all of creation in God' (Dreyer 1994:129–131). With the erotic effulgence and superlative beauty called forth in the Song, sacramentality is therefore applied incarnationally to divine-human

intimacy, loving human relationships, and ecological responsibility. A cosmological reading is vivified by the understanding that 'eroticism is not confined to the human or even to the human-divine sphere of relationality but lies close to the heart of creativity and thus of cosmology' (Burrus & Keller 2006:xx). It would be correct to infer then, in the spirit of Wisdom literature (and divine *Sophia*), that the Song of Songs embodies 'the cosmological, feminist vision of creation spirituality' (Fox 1991:14).

Through her transformation in love, the beloved becomes a 'real vineyard', bringing delight to the lover: 'I have become in his eyes as one who brings contentment'. The vineyard, 'her own self (*šelli*)', is a stark contrast to 'Solomon's vineyard' which is described in utilitarian and monetary terms (Murphy 1990:79). Given its pertinence on an existential level, Can 8:12 – 'But my own vineyard is mine to give' – is identified as the key to the poem's *raison-d'être*. Here her composite beauty is depicted as 'shalom', of being a peaceful presence in the community, providing textual evidence that the Song of Songs contains the conditions for the continuing-incarnation of love in the world (*kosmos*). In this final reading then, the vineyard becomes a living sacrament in the world and a living testament to divine love. Moreover, the beloved is posited as biblical archetype in the search for a renewed *birthing* of our original blessing (*imago dei*), and in the creative *becoming* who I am in union with the divine *I AM*, towards a congruent *giving* of the self in love.

As the poem contains a yearning for consummation and is structured as a continuum, the archetypal search points typologically to the incarnation, thereby providing a direction of hope and regeneration. Its forward movement is a 'sustained lyric force, unified and powered' by an intense quality of yearning, and moving towards some culmination; in fact, the intrinsic yearning is 'the poem itself seeking its final meaning, its epiphany' (Fisch [1988] 1990:86). Culminating in Jesus: the embodiment of divine *eros* and the overflow of Trinitarian *ekstasis* (McIntosh 1998:49), the intense yearning for union and communion finds fruition in the True Vine (Jn 15:1–17); consequently, the imperative to 'remain in me' and 'remain in my love' infers a mystical intimacy with the divine friend and lover whose unconditional self-giving love culminates in *agape*.

## Conclusion

The Song of Songs, as an ancient Israelite love poem, is embedded with spiritual allusions that are continuous with the biblical tradition, yet expand the interpretative horizon for new uses and reuses of the poem. This article suggests a new use of the Song of Songs in spiritual direction and a reuse in love mysticism. The new use is a poetics-praxis amalgam that is experiential in nature, hermeneutical in method, and incarnational in application. The reuse in love mysticism is informed by the multivalence of the Song's leitmotif of love, as explored in the *vineyard* as a live metaphor (*eros*), an intersecting metaphor (*mythos*), a unitive metaphor

(*mustikos*), and an expansive metaphor (*kosmos*). On the basis of these interfacing dimensions, a fourfold spiritual direction reading is formulated as follows: metaphorical, mythological, mystical and cosmological.

This article interprets the transformation of the vineyard from an initial state of depletion to a mature stage of deification, thereby offering an interpretive framework for transformation in love. Appropriate also to interpreting one's own story within a biblical framework, the narrative of 'my own vineyard' may be described progressively in terms of the immediate (a living metaphor), the past (myths and mythological motifs), and epiphany (mystical symbols), towards a vision of cosmic harmony as glimpsed in present reality. Although the journey towards deification spans a lifetime, in the Song of Songs it is condensed into eight chapters; yet, day by day, the wheel of transformation is felt as a rhythmic reality within the ebb and flow of experience, shaping us mysteriously and calling us to 'participate in the divine nature' (2 Pt 1:4).

Positing the beloved's mature statement 'my own vineyard is mine to give' as the *raison d'être* of the poem, the value of the Song of Songs for spiritual praxis is that it emboldens the vineyard as a sacrament of God's presence in the world and a catalyst for divine action. In effect, as a unique embodiment of divine love, one's existential project becomes an authentic gift to the human family. The generative impact of giving oneself in love involves sharing with others about the 'universal vocation' of mysticism: that 'all are called to be in love with God in an experiential way' (Johnston 1995:255). The theme of universality is consonant with the spirit of Wisdom literature which focuses on 'the whole of God's creation and is more *cosmopolitan* and *ecumenical* than the story of Israel's salvation history that dominates the Law and the Prophets' (Bowe 2004:38). Since Wisdom literature speaks to the human condition, spiritual direction finds a timeless appeal in the Song of Songs. Exum states correctly that closure to the poem would mean 'the end of desiring, the silence of the text, the death of love' (2005:85, 79).

The timeless and non-religious Song of Songs invites appropriation and contextualisation in every generation. This article highlights an integration of spiritual direction training, academic research, and intercultural insights. An example is the yin-yang symbol within a four seasons paradigm which depicts the poem's transformative principle and its attendant tension of opposites, embrace of paradox, polarities of light/dark, masculine/feminine, movement/stillness, action/contemplation, et cetera. Input has also been collated from my Song of Songs retreats in Hong Kong, China and South Africa, where the biblical love song has impacted a wide spectrum of men and women of different age groups, ethnicity, culture, religious traditions, and socio-economic strata over several years. A spiritual direction reading of the Song of Songs is therefore consonant with the spirit of Wisdom literature and, given its interdisciplinary and intercultural approach, it is hoped that this article will





offer fresh perspectives on the value of ancient wisdom for contemporary spiritual praxis.

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