

St Teresa of Jesus and the Song of Songs --

The Friendship the Bride Desires

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The Hebrew title for the Book which we quite often refer to by the title: Song of Songs, is: Shir Hashirim. Many are those biblical scholars who in these two Hebrew words, are able to see and attest to the greatness of this book.

Rabbi Akiba declared: "Heaven forbid that any person in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs is holy. For the whole world is not worthy of the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Mishnah Yadayim 3.5).

Many are those biblical scholars who, in their interpretation of the Song of Songs, are not reluctant to adhere to the famous expression used by Hudson Taylor, where he said: "The book of the Song of Songs is a Book of union and communion with Christ. Having said this, I venture to add in saying that the Song of Songs, in its superlative meaning: the Song of Songs, that is, the best of Songs, is a poem of the history of love in an excellent relationship. Yes, it is a romance of the highest standard. In this short reflection, entitled: The friendship the Bride desires: St. Teresa of Jesus and the Song of Songs, I ask you to never lose sight of the fact that the entire Bible is a romance, a love story, of God "falling in love" with man.

To live the Carmelite way is to be plunged into the mystery of Mary, Our Mother. Mary's reaction in front of the Word of God, which manifests itself in our daily events, ought to be the reaction of every Christian, and in a very particular way, of every Carmelite: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2.10). St. Teresa of Jesus has captured very well the meaning of these words. In the Book of the Foundations and in the Book of the Interior Castle, St. Teresa makes it clear that the secret of our communion with God does not lie in thinking much, but in loving much. (F 5.2; Interior:1.7). It does not take much time and energy from the reader of St. Teresa to discover her profound love for the Scriptures. In her writings she quotes the Holy Scriptures more than six hundred times. This alone speaks volumes, especially when we take into consideration the fact that most probably St. Teresa was never in possession of a complete Bible, and for sure she was never in possession of a Bible in the vernacular. In the Book of her Life, she expressed clearly her love for Holy Scripture: "I would die a thousand deaths for the faith or for any truth of Sacred Scripture." (Life 33.5). In the same Book she wrote that it was revealed to her in prayer that "all the harm that comes to the world comes from its not knowing the truths of Scripture in clarity and truth" (Life 40.1)

In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation entitled "Dei Verbum", in paragraph 2, we encounter this powerful statement: "the invisible God (cf Col 1.15; 1 Tim 1.17), from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends (cf Ex 33.11; Jn 15.14-15), and moves among them (Bar 3.38), in order to invite and receive them into his company." Again, in the same document of Vatican II (18 November 1965) paragraph 23 we read: "The spouse of the incarnate Word, which is the Church, is taught by the Holy Spirit. She strives to reach day by day a more profound understanding of Sacred Scriptures in order to provide her children with food from the divine words."

St. Teresa, in her Meditations on the Song of Songs, exactly in paragraph 2 of Chapter 1 tells us: "One word of His will contain within itself a thousand mysteries, and thus our understanding is only very elementary." The reaction of St. Teresa in front the Word of God is clearly stated in paragraph 8 of Chapter 1 of her Meditations: "these words must contain great things and mysteries since they are of such value that when I asked learned men to explain what the Holy Spirit meant by them and what the true meaning was, they answered that the doctors wrote many commentaries and yet never finished explaining the words fully." These words of St. Teresa remind me of the disciple who asked his Rabbi why each volume of the Talmud starts with page 2. All other books start with page 1. The answer of the Rabbi was: My son, each volume of the Talmud starts with page 2 so that each volume will remind you that even if you were to know the whole Talmud by heart, yet you do not know the interpretation of page one of the Bible. It is no wonder, brothers and sisters, that when we come to the interpretation of the Song of Songs we have to be on guard. St. Teresa has this serious exhortation in her book of Meditations: "It will seem to you that there are some words in the Song of Songs that could have been said in another style. In light of our dullness such an opinion doesn't surprise me. I have heard some persons say that they avoid listening to them. Oh, God help me, how great is our misery! Just as poisonous creatures turn everything they eat into poison, so do we ..." "O my Lord, how poorly we profit from the blessing you grant us! You seek ways and means and you devise plans to show your love for us; we inexperienced in loving you, esteem this love so poorly that our minds, little exercised in love go where they always go and cease to think of the great mysteries this language, spoken by the Holy Spirit, contains within itself. What more was necessary than this language in order to enkindle us in His love and make us realize that not without good reason did He choose this style." (Meditations 1.3-4). These words of the Saint remind me of what St. Jerome, a great Biblical Scholar, had to say when he was asked in which order ought we to read the Bible. His response was that we should start with the Book of Psalms and end with the Book of the Song of Songs, because, he said, only after we have trained ourselves in the language of love, will we be in a position to have a glimpse of the great love of God expressed in the Song of Songs! It is by no means a surprise to read what Vatican II has to say when in chapter 6 of the Dei Verbum it says: "In the Sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life." (D.V. 6.21).

Christian mystics like St. Bernard of Clairvoux in the twelfth century, or St. Teresa of Jesus and the great poet and saint, St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century, contemplating the love of God and

the soul, found in the Song of Songs a source and an inspiration for their ecstatic spirituality. St. Bernard, who wrote eighty-six sermons on the first two chapters of the Song, set the tone: "O strong and burning love, O love urgent and impetuous, which does not allow me to think of anything but you ... You laugh at all considerations of fitness, reason, modesty and prudence, and tread them underfoot." (Sermon 79).

For twenty centuries, the Song of Songs was almost universally read as a religious or historical allegory. The allegorical interpretation found its first great champion in Rabbi Akiba, who taught that the Song of Songs was about the love of God and the people of Israel, an interpretation elaborated in various ways by Jewish commentators such as Rashi (d. 1105) and Iben Ezra (d. 1168). The Fathers of the Church, following Origen (d. 254), applied this reading to the relations between Christ and his Bride the Church, or as St. Teresa of Jesus indicates, Christ and the soul of the believer. An interesting observation is how St. Teresa, in Chapter 14, paragraph 9 of the Book of her life writes: "It was a great delight for me to consider my soul as a garden, and reflect that the Lord was taking His walk in it. I begged Him to increase the fragrance of the little flowers of virtue that were beginning to bloom, so it seemed, and that they might give Him glory and He might sustain them." (Life 14.9) There is no doubt that the symbolic language of the Song of Songs defies all imagination: we all stand there stupefied in front of words that baffle us with their pregnant meaning. As we stand there in awe, St. Teresa's advice in paragraph one of Chapter 1 of the Meditations is worth a ton of gold. She says: "Thus I highly recommend that when you read some book or hear a sermon or think about the mysteries of our sacred faith you avoid tiring yourselves or wasting your thoughts in subtle reasoning about what you cannot properly understand. Many things are not meant for women to understand, nor even for men." (M. 1.1)

One of the Fathers of the Church tells us that when we read the Scriptures and do not understand everything that the text in front of us is telling us, we ought not to be discouraged: what we understand is our possession, what we do not understand is our inheritance; with perseverance, our inheritance will become also our possession. I repeat, what we understand is our possession, what we do not understand is our inheritance; with perseverance, our inheritance will become also our possession.

To continue on the same line of thought, the Saint in her Meditations in paragraph 7 of Chapter one tells us: "I conclude this matter by saying that you should never dwell on what you do not understand in Sacred Scripture or the mysteries of our faith more than I have said, nor should you be startled by the lofty words that take place between God and the Soul." (M1.7). An example of this are the words that come from the mouth of the Lover towards his bride:

You are altogether beautiful,

my love;  
there is no flaw in you.  
Come with me from Lebanon,  
my bride;  
come with me from Lebanon.  
Depart from the peak of Amana,  
from the peak of Senir and Hermon  
from the dens of lions,  
from the mountains of leopards.  
You have ravished my heart, my  
sister, my bride,  
you have ravished my heart  
with a glance of your eyes,  
with one jewel of your necklace,  
How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride!  
How much better is your love  
than wine

To look at the one who is addressing his bride in these lofty words is to take St. Teresa's advice which we encounter in the Way of Perfection chapter 26: "behold Him on the way to the garden ... Or behold Him bound to the column ... or behold Him burdened with the cross ... He will look at you with those eyes so beautiful and compassionate ... merely because you turn your head to look at Him" (WP 26.5). These words that come forth from the pen of St. Teresa, remind us of what the Saint has to say in the Meditations where she comes forward with an amazing interpretation on the meaning of the symbol of the "apple tree".

In the Song of Songs, chapter 8, verse 5 we read:

"Who is she that comes from the desert,

leaning upon her beloved?

Under the apple tree I roused you;

It was there that your mother conceived you,

There she who bore you conceived you."

In the Jewish tradition this verse refers to the experience that the Jewish mothers went through in the time when they were in Egypt. Because Pharaoh had ordered that all male babies were to be killed as soon as they were born, the Jewish mothers, when they came to deliver their babies, would go into hiding among the apple trees, the orchards in Egypt, and give birth while hiding under the apple trees. Thus, it could rightly be said that God gave birth to his people Israel under the apple tree. But the Saint, in a very mystical manner, in her *Meditations*, in chapter 7, paragraph 8 says: "From these flowers comes the fruit, the apples of which the bride then says: Surround me with apples. Give me trials Lord; give me persecutions." In the same paragraph, further down she tells us: "By the 'apple tree', I understand the tree of the Cross because it is said in another verse in the Song of Songs (Song of Songs 8.5): under the apple tree I raised you up. And a soul that is surrounded by crosses, trials, and persecutions has a powerful remedy against often continuing in the delight of contemplation." ( M 7.8). This interpretation is very particular, but not a strange one if we were to take into consideration the Hebrew translation of Chapter 2.5 of the Song of Songs. There we read "Refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love."

The Saint expressed many times, the delight that she experienced in being in the presence of her beloved. This does not come to us as a surprise! The Talmud tells us that "there is no sadness in God's presence", and in the Gospel of John 15.11 Jesus told us: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." In writing her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (it is worth remembering that she reflected on only very few verses from the Book) apart from telling us twice that she is doing so under obedience from her confessor, in the prologue. She does not hesitate to communicate to us her experience of delight in the following words: "For a number of years now the Lord has given me great delight each time I hear or read some words from Solomon's Song of Songs. The delight is so great that without understanding the vernacular meaning of the Latin, my soul is stirred and recollected more than by devotional books written in the language I understand." (M prologue, paragraph 1). It was the purpose of the Saint to share with her sisters, and with each one of us, a little of the delight she experienced in lingering with the Lord in his words. Speaking about these words, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians calls them: "the Gospel of peace" (Eph 6.15).

It is no surprise that the first petition that the Bride utters in the Song is: "Oh, give me of the kisses of your mouth, For your love is more delightful than wine." (Song of Songs 1.1.). Here, brothers and sisters, lies the secret of the friendship that the Bride desires. In paragraph 12 of chapter 1 of the *Meditations*, the Saint has these words to say: "And my Lord, if the kiss signifies peace and friendship

why should not souls ask you for this kiss? What better thing can we ask for than what I ask you for, my Lord; that You give me this peace 'with the kiss of your mouth'? This, daughters, is a lofty petition, as I shall show you afterward." Further on the Saint tells us in unequivocal terms the kind of friendship that the Bride desires:

"O Holy Bride, let us turn to what you ask for: that holy peace which makes the soul, while remaining itself completely secure and tranquil, venture out to war against all worldly kinds of peace." (M.3.1).

The Word of God comes to our rescue in our struggle against false kisses, false peace, peace that comes from financial securities, from worldly pleasures, from the flattering of the ego, from lack of war.

The soul that is in search of the true friendship that the Bride seeks, in its struggles, begins to become conscious that life comes to us only by dying, dying out of love in serving the Lord. In this process of dying, the Bride begins to notice and to discover the meaning of the symbols and signs; looking around, there is the smell of spring, and this season evokes the first stirring of life, the fragrance of the flowers: Flowers are appearing on the earth ... The fig tree is forming its first figs and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance (Song of Songs 2.12-13). Life comes by love, a love that Scripture says about it: "Greater love no one has, than to lay down his life for his friends". In being united with the one who loved us first, we are empowered with the grace to lay down our life in the service for others: following the footsteps of our Lord, we constantly carry his words in our hearts:

"You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set for you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (Jn 13.13-15)

This short reflection would be incomplete if I do not make the prayer of the Bride my own. I do not hesitate to dare to say that the prayer of every follower of St. Teresa, should make her prayer his or her own. The prayer which I am referring to is found in Chapter 3, paragraph 15 of the Meditations. It reads:

"My Lord, I do not ask You for anything else in life but that You kiss me with the kiss of Your mouth, and that You do so in such a way that although I may want to withdraw from this friendship and union, my will may always, Lord of my life, be subject to Your will and not depart from it; that there be nothing to impede me from being able to say: My God and my Glory, indeed Your breasts are better and more delightful than wine."