COMMENTARY ON
THE SONG OF SONGS

Translated with an Introduction by
Casimir McCambley OCSO

Preface by
Panagiotes Chrestou

HELLENIC COLLEGE PRESS
Prologue

Greetings in the Lord, to the most worthy Olympias, from Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa.

I have learned as befitting your noble life and pure soul your concern for the Song of Songs which you have expressed to me both in person and by your letters. By an appropriate contemplation of the text, the philosophy hidden in its words become manifest, once the literal meaning has been purified by a correct understanding. Therefore, I have eagerly accepted your solicitude regarding this task. I do not offer you anything that would benefit your conduct, for I am persuaded that your soul's eye is pure from every passionate, unclean thought, and that it looks without hinderance at God's grace by means of these divine words of the Song. However, I hope that my commentary will be a guide for the more fleshly-minded, since the wisdom hidden [in the Song of Songs] leads to a spiritual state of the soul.

Because some members of the Church always think it right to follow the letter of holy scripture and do not take into account the symbolic and allegorical meanings, we must answer those who accuse us of doing so [that is, of using allegory]: there is nothing unusual in searching the divinely inspired scriptures with every means at our disposal. Thus if the literal sense, as it is called, should be of any use, we will readily have the object of our search. But if anything in the hidden, symbolic sense cannot be of use with regard to the literal

35
sense, we will, as the Word teaches and as Proverbs says [1.6], understand the passage either as a parable, a dark saying, an utterance of wise men, or as a riddle. With regards to analogy, it makes no difference what we call it — tropology or allegory — as long as we grasp the meaning of [scripture's] words.

The great Apostle [Paul] says that the Law is spiritual [Rom 7.14]. He includes under the name of Law the historical narratives, since all the inspired scriptures is Law for those who read them. They teach not only through precepts but through the historical narratives: both lead to knowledge of the mysteries and to a pure way of life for those who have diligent minds. Paul uses exegesis with an eye to what is useful and best for him; he is not concerned about the word necessary to designate the form of his exposition. However, Paul says that the name changes when he is about to transfer the meaning of the historical sense for showing the dispensation of the two Testaments. After mentioning the two children of Abraham—one born of a slave woman and the other from a free woman—Paul calls his consideration of them allegory [Gal 4.24]. In another place, after having related certain details of a story, he says, “These things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction” [1 Cor 10.11]. And again, after using the expression “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain” [1 Cor 9.9-10], he added, “God does not care about oxen,” but “clearly it has been written for our benefit.” Paul calls a mirror and a riddle [1 Cor 13.12] that which is understood obscurely.

Yet Paul somewhere calls the shift from the corporeal to the spiritual “a turning to the Lord and the removal of a veil” [2 Cor 3.16]. In all these different expressions and names of contemplation Paul is teaching us an important lesson: we must pass to a spiritual and intelligent investigation of scripture so that considerations of the merely human element might be changed into something perceived by the mind once the more fleshy sense of the words has been shaken off like dust. For this reason Paul says, “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” [2 Cor 3.6]. If we stay only with the mere facts of the text, the historical narratives [of scripture] do not offer us examples of a good life. For what benefit to virtuous living can we obtain from the prophet Osee [Os 1.2.], or from Isaiah having intercourse with a prophetess [Is 8.3], unless something else lies beyond the mere letter? Or how do the stories regarding David, his terrible act of adultery and murder, pertain to virtuous living? If anyone argues that these stories are reprehensible, then the saying of the Apostle will certainly be true: “the letter kills”—for its examples of evil conduct, and “the spirit gives life.” For the apparent, reprehensible sense is changed into something having a divine meaning.

We know that even the Word himself, who is adored by all creation, passed on the divine mysteries when he had assumed the likeness of a man. He reveals to us the meaning of the Law, saying that the two persons whose testimony is true consists of himself and of his Father [Jn 8.14]. The bronze serpent elevated on high which protected the people from the serpent’s deadly stings was transformed for us into the dispensation of the Cross [Num 21.8; Jn 3.14]. Christ trained his disciples’ minds through sayings veiled and hidden in parables, images, obscure words, and terse sayings in riddles. Sometimes he gave an explanation which removed their obscurity [Mt 13.13]. But if the disciples occasionally did not grasp the intent of his words, Christ rebuked their slowness and lack of understanding. For example, he ordered the disciples to stay away from the leaven of the Pharisees [Mt 16.6], yet they were unhappy because their purses had no bread. Christ then upbraided them for failing to understand that leaven had symbolized their teaching. Again, when his disciples were preparing a table, Christ responded, “I have food to eat of which you do not know” [Jn 4.32]. When they supposed he was speaking of bodily food which had been brought to him from elsewhere, Christ explained his own words, that the food proper to him is the fulfillment of the Father’s salvific will.

We can present many examples from the Gospel where the literal meaning differs from the text’s intention. For example, the water he promised to the thirsty by which those who believe became springs of rivers; the bread that comes down from heaven; the temple which is destroyed and rebuilt after three days; the way; the gate; the stone rejected by the builders and fit as the capstone; the two people in one bed; the mill stone; the woman grinding with one taken and the one
left behind; the body; the eagles; and the fig tree which becomes tender and puts forth buds. All these and similar examples should serve to remind us of the necessity of searching the divine words, of reading them, and of tracing in every way possible how something more sublime might be found which leads us to that which is divine and incorporeal instead of the literal sense. Because of this, we believe that the tree from which it was prohibited to eat was not the fig tree as some have maintained, nor any other fruit tree. If the fig was then deadly, neither would it be edible now. At the same time, we have learned from our Lord, “It is not what goes into the mouth which can defile a man” [Mt 15.11]. But we seek another meaning in this statement which is worthy of the lawgiver’s majesty. If we hear that paradise was planted by God and that the tree of life is in the center of paradise, we seek to learn from the One who reveals the hidden mysteries of which plants is the Father both the husbandman and the dresser, and how it is possible that there are two trees in the middle of paradise, one of salvation and the other of destruction. For the exact center as in the drawing of a circle has only one point. However, if another center is somehow placed beside or added to that first one, it is necessary that another circle be added for that center so that the former one is no longer in the middle.

There was only one paradise. How, then, does the text say that each tree is to be considered separately while both are in the middle? And the text, which reveals that all of God’s works are exceedingly beautiful, implies that the deadly tree is different from God’s [Gen 1.31]. How is this so? Unless a person contemplates the truth through philosophy, what the text says here will be either inconsistent or a fable.

It would take a long time to recount what each of the prophets have uttered. With regard to the last days, Micah says that a mountain will become visible on the peaks of other mountains [Mic 4.1]. He is referring to the mystery of piety which is being revealed for the destruction of the opposing powers. Other examples are as follows: The sublime Isaiah says that a rod will rise up [from Jesse] and a flower from the root, thus revealing the Lord’s manifestation in the flesh [Is 11.1]; the mountain swollen with pride of which David speaks, whose meaning becomes clear in the letter of the text [Ps 67.16]; the ten thousand chariots; the gathering of bulls with the heifers of the nations; the foot washed in blood; the dog’s tongues; and Lebanon of the cedars jumping like a calf. Many such examples could be gathered from other prophecies to teach us the necessity of contemplating the words according to their deeper meaning. If this contemplation is rejected as some would like to do, it seems to me that it would be like offering wheat for human consumption without having ground the corn; or having divided the seeds from the chaff by winnowing; or having cleaned the grain of husks for flour; or having prepared the bread in the proper way. Therefore, just as food not worked over is fit for beasts and not for man, so one could say that the inspired words, when not worked over by a more subtle contemplation, are food for irrational beasts rather than for rational men. And not only does this apply to the Old Testament, but also to many of the Gospel’s teachings: the winnowing fan which cleanses the threshing floor; the chaff which is removed; the grain which remains on the feet of those winnowing it; the unquenchable fire; the good granary; the tree bearing bad fruit; the threat of the axe which shows its terrible edge to the tree; and stones used as metaphors for men.

Let what I have just mentioned stand as my defense against those who advise us to look for nothing more in the divine words than their literal meaning. Although Origen laboriously applied himself to the Song of Songs, we too have desired to publish our efforts. Let no one accuse us by referring to the Apostle’s words, “Each one shall receive his wages according to his labor” [1 Cor 3.8]. To me, however, this treatise on the Song of Songs is not written for display, because out of love for knowledge, some of our associates have reported to us many of the things said in the church. I have taken some and have added others where necessary. I have composed my commentary in the form of homilies following the text of the Song of Songs, insofar as the season and my occupation have allowed me leisure for this due to the days of the fast. We have zealously exerted ourselves so that the people might hear this treatise. If God, who dispenses us life, should grant enough life and a time of peace, perhaps we will pursue the rest of our task, for our investigation have proceeded up to the half-way point of the Song of Songs. May
THE SONG OF SONGS

the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you forever and ever. Amen.

The Song of Songs, 1.1-4

1. The Song of Songs which is Solomon's.

2. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your breasts are better than wine.

3. And the scent of your ointments is better than all spices.
   Your name is ointment poured forth.
   Therefore have the young maidens loved you.

4. They have drawn you.
   We will run after you toward the scent of your ointments.
   The king has brought me into his chamber.
   Let us rejoice and be glad in you.
   Let us love your breasts more than wine.
   Righteousness has loved you.
Those of you who, according to the advice of St. Paul, have stripped off the old man with his deeds and desires as you would a filthy garment and have wrapped yourselves by the purity of your lives in the bright garments of the Lord which he displayed upon the mount of transfiguration; you who have put on the Lord Jesus Christ with his holy robe and have been transformed with him into a state which is free from passion and more divine, listen to the mysteries of the Song of Songs. Enter the inner chamber of the chaste bridegroom and clothe yourselves with the white garments of pure, chaste thoughts. Let no one bring passionate, fleshly thoughts or a garment of conscience unsuitable for the divine nuptials. Let no one be bound up in his own thoughts, or drag the pure words of the bridegroom and the bride down into earthly, irrational passions. Anyone who entertains such shameful illusions should be cast out from the company of those who share the nuptial joys to the place of weeping [Mt 22.10-13]. I issue this warning before entering upon the mystical contemplation of the Song of Songs. Through the words of the Song the soul is escorted to an incorporeal, spiritual, and pure union with God. For God, who “wishes all to be saved and to come to the recognition of the truth” [1 Tim 2.4], shows the most perfect and blessed way of salvation here—I mean the way of love. For some there is salvation by fear; we contemplate the threat of punishment in hell and so avoid evil. Further, there are those who, because of the hope of the
reward held out for a life piously lived, conduct themselves virtuously. They do not possess the good out of love but by the expectation of a recompense. On the other hand, the person who is hastening to spiritual perfection rejects fear. (Such a disposition is servile, and the person with this disposition does not remain with the master out of love. He does not run away out of fear of being scourged.) Rather, the person seeking perfection dains even rewards: he does not want to give the impression that he prefers the gift to the one who bestows it. He loves “with his whole heart and soul and strength” [Dt 6:5] not any of the things that come from God, but him who is the source of all good things. This, then, is the attitude which he commands to the souls of all who listen to him, for he summons us to share his own life.

The one who establishes this law is Solomon [3 Kg or 1 Kg 3:12; 5:9-14]. According to the divine testimony, his wisdom has no measure. It has no comparison with respect to both all who preceded him and all who are to come after him. Nothing escapes his notice. Do not suppose that I mean the same Solomon from Bersabee who offered upon the mountains the sacrifice of a thousand victims [3 Kg or 1 Kg 11:6-8], who sinned by following the counsel of a Sidonian woman [3 Kg or 1 Kg 11:1-2]. No, another Solomon [Christ] is signified here: one who is also descended from the seed of David according to the flesh, one whose name means peace, the true king of Israel and builder of God’s temple. This other Solomon comprehends the knowledge of all things. His wisdom is infinite and his very essence is wisdom, truth, as well as every exalted, divine name and thought. [Christ] used Solomon as an instrument and speaks to us through his voice first in Proverbs and then in Ecclesiastes. After these two books he speaks in the philosophy set forth in the Song of Songs and shows us the ascent to perfection in an orderly fashion.

Not all periods of life according to the flesh are capable of every natural operation; nor do our lives advance in the same way at different periods. (The infant has no share of adult activities, nor is an adult taken up in its nurse’s arms, but each time of life has its own proper activity.) So too one can see in the soul an analogy to the body’s growth where there is a certain order and sequence leading to a life in accord with virtue.

For this reason, Proverbs teaches in one way and Ecclesiastes in another; the philosophy of the Song of Songs transcends both by its loftier teaching. The instruction in Proverbs provides words fit for the person who is still young, adapting its words of admonition to that period of life. “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and reject not your mother’s teaching” [Pr 1:8]. You see here that the soul is at a stage of life where it is tender and easily formed. Moreover, it still needs maternal instruction and paternal admonition. In order that the infant may listen more willingly to his parents and be more careful in his lessons, he is promised childish trinkets. Such trinkets are the gold chain shining around his neck and the crown entwined with pretty flowers. It is necessary to understand these things fully if the symbol’s intent is to point to something better. Thus Proverbs begins the description of wisdom to the child in several different ways and expounds the ineffable beauty so as not to inspire any fear or constraint; rather, it draws the child by yearning and desire to participate in the good. The description of beauty somehow attracts the desire of the young to what is shown, fanning their desire for a participation in beauty.

In order that our affections may be further intensified after having changed our material inclinations to an immaterial state, Solomon adorns the beauty of wisdom with praise. Not only does he present its loveliness with words, but he also states the wealth contained in wisdom, whose Lord will surely dwell with us. The wealth is then seen in the showy adornments of wisdom. The adornment of her right hand is all the ages, since the Word says: “Length of existence and years of life are in her right hand” [Pr 3:16]. And on her left hand she wears the precious wealth of the virtues together with the splendor of glory; “And on her left hand are wealth and glory” [3:16]. Then Solomon speaks of the fragrance from the bride’s mouth which breathes the good odor of righteousness: “From her mouth comes forth righteousness” [3:16].

In place of the natural redness of the bride’s lips, he says, law and mercy blossom. In order that beauty might be fully attributed to such a bride, her gait is also praised: “In the
having reproached in and after showing that the attitudes towards external appearances and virtuous conduct had increased. Having showed this manifestation of the soul towards external matters, the Song of Songs initiates the soul into the divine sanctuary by means of the Song of Solomons. It is depicted there as a marriage, for what is understood is the union of the human soul with God.

Because of this, the one in Proverbs is named a bride, and the wisdom that is present in the Song of Songs is also described as a bride. Solomon elevates above every other invisible beauty the beauty of wisdom, which he connects to the beauty of a bride whose beauty is unchanging. The Song of Songs describes the beauty of wisdom, which is the beauty of the bride, as being as pure and free from passion and as pure in mind as a flower, and as being as beautiful as she can be with your whole heart. The bride of wisdom is described as being one of the purest and most beautiful things in the world. By being one with wisdom, one becomes one with the bride, and one becomes one with the most beautiful things in the world.

Wisdom enters into the soul of the soul of the wise virgins through the Son of God. The Son of God, who is the Word of God, gives wisdom to the wise virgins. Wisdom gives them knowledge, understanding, and discretion. Wisdom teaches them to know the way of wisdom, which is the way of the bride. The wise virgins learn from wisdom to love and to be loved. They learn to love the bride and to be loved by the bride. The wise virgins are described as being as beautiful as the bride, and as being as pure and free from passion and as pure in mind as the bride.

The bride of wisdom is said to be as beautiful as she can be with your whole heart. The bride of wisdom is described as being one of the purest and most beautiful things in the world. By being one with wisdom, one becomes one with the bride, and one becomes one with the most beautiful things in the world.

Wisdom enters into the soul of the soul of the wise virgins through the Son of God. The Son of God, who is the Word of God, gives wisdom to the wise virgins. Wisdom gives them knowledge, understanding, and discretion. Wisdom teaches them to know the way of wisdom, which is the way of the bride. The wise virgins learn from wisdom to love and to be loved. They learn to love the bride and to be loved by the bride. The wise virgins are described as being as beautiful as the bride, and as being as pure and free from passion and as pure in mind as the bride.

The bride of wisdom is said to be as beautiful as she can be with your whole heart. The bride of wisdom is described as being one of the purest and most beautiful things in the world. By being one with wisdom, one becomes one with the bride, and one becomes one with the most beautiful things in the world.

Wisdom enters into the soul of the soul of the wise virgins through the Son of God. The Son of God, who is the Word of God, gives wisdom to the wise virgins. Wisdom gives them knowledge, understanding, and discretion. Wisdom teaches them to know the way of wisdom, which is the way of the bride. The wise virgins learn from wisdom to love and to be loved. They learn to love the bride and to be loved by the bride. The wise virgins are described as being as beautiful as the bride, and as being as pure and free from passion and as pure in mind as the bride.

The bride of wisdom is said to be as beautiful as she can be with your whole heart. The bride of wisdom is described as being one of the purest and most beautiful things in the world. By being one with wisdom, one becomes one with the bride, and one becomes one with the most beautiful things in the world.

Wisdom enters into the soul of the soul of the wise virgins through the Son of God. The Son of God, who is the Word of God, gives wisdom to the wise virgins. Wisdom gives them knowledge, understanding, and discretion. Wisdom teaches them to know the way of wisdom, which is the way of the bride. The wise virgins learn from wisdom to love and to be loved. They learn to love the bride and to be loved by the bride. The wise virgins are described as being as beautiful as the bride, and as being as pure and free from passion and as pure in mind as the bride.

The bride of wisdom is said to be as beautiful as she can be with your whole heart. The bride of wisdom is described as being one of the purest and most beautiful things in the world. By being one with wisdom, one becomes one with the bride, and one becomes one with the most beautiful things in the world.
both confesses her desire and hastens to enjoy the favor of the beauty of the One she so eagerly desires. The virgin's attendants and associates hear her and spur her on to an even greater desire. The bridegroom then arrives leading a chorus of his friends and well-wishers. These represent either the ministering spirits by whom men are saved or the holy prophets. Hearing the bride's voice, they exult and rejoice [Jn 3.29] at the consummation of the pure union by which the soul that clings to the Lord becomes one Spirit with Him, as the Apostle says [1 Cor 6.17].

I will take up again what I said at the start of this homily (cf. J 14-15 above): let no one who is passionate, fleshly and still smelling of the soul odor of the old man [2 Cor 2.16] drag down the significance of the divine thoughts and words to beastly, irrational thoughts. Rather, let each person go out of himself and out of the material world. Let him ascend into paradise through detachment, having become like God through purity. Then let him enter into the inner sanctuary of the mysteries revealed in this book (the Song of Songs). If the soul is unprepared to hear this, let it listen to Moses who forbids us to ascend the spiritual mountain before washing the garments of our hearts and before purifying our souls with the fitting aspersions of our thoughts. As we apply ourselves to this contemplation, we must put aside thoughts of marriage as Moses commanded [Ex 19.15] when he ordered those being initiated to cleanse themselves from marriage. We must follow his prescriptions when we are about to approach the spiritual mountain of the knowledge of God: thoughts about women, along with material goods, are left with the life below. If any irrational notion should be seen around this mountain, it is destroyed with firmer thoughts as by stones. Otherwise, we would hardly be able to hear the sound of that trumpet reverberating with great and awesome sound which is beyond the capacity of those who hear it. This sound comes from the dark obscurity where God is and who burns with fire every material thing upon this mountain.

Now let us enter the Holy of Holies, Song of Songs. In the expression "Holy of Holies" we are taught a certain superabundance and exaggeration of holiness. Through the title Song of Songs the noble text also promises to teach us the mystery of mysteries. To be sure, there are many songs in the divinely inspired teaching by which we acquire great knowledge about God from David, Isaiah, Moses, and many others. However, we learn from the title Song of Songs that just as the songs of the saints surpass the wisdom of profane songs, so does the mystery contained here surpass the songs of the saints. Indeed, human understanding left to its own resources could neither discover nor absorb the Song's mystery. The most acute physical pleasure (I mean erotic passion) is used as a symbol in the exposition of this doctrine on love. It teaches us of the need for the soul to reach out to the divine nature's invisible beauty and to love it as much as the body is inclined to love what is akin to itself. The soul must transform passion into passionlessness so that when every corporeal affection has been quenched, our mind may seethe with passion for the spirit alone and be warmed by that fire which the Lord came to cast upon the earth [Lk 12.49].

I have said enough about how those who hear these mystical words should have their souls disposed. Now the time has come to begin our interpretation of the divine words of the Song of Songs. First let us consider the significance of the title. It is not accidental, I think, that the book is ascribed to Solomon. This serves as an indication to readers to expect something great and divine. Solomon's reputation for wisdom is unexcelled, and everyone is impressed by it. Therefore, the mention of his name at the outset raises the reader's expectation to find something great and worthy of such a reputation.

In the art of painting different colors combine to represent the subject portrayed. However, the person looking at the image created by the skillful use of colors does not linger over the colors painted on the tablet; he beholds instead only the form which the artist has shown. Thus it is with the present scripture: we should not look at the material of the colors [i.e. the words]; rather, we should consider the image of the king expressed by them in the chaste concepts. For white, yellow, black, red, blue, or any other color, are these words in their obvious meanings—mouth, kiss, myrrh, wire, bodily limbs, bed, maidens, and so forth. The form constituted by these terms is blessedness, detachment, union with God, alienation from evil, and likeness to what is truly beautiful and good. These concepts testify that Solomon's wisdom surpassed
the boundaries of human wisdom. What could be more paradoxical than to make nature purify itself of its own passions and teach detachment (ἀνδρεία) in words normally suggesting passion (νάρδος)? Solomon does not speak of the necessity of being outside of the flesh’s impulses or of mortifying our bodily limbs on earth, or of cleansing our mouths of talk of passion; rather, he disposes the soul to be attentive to purity through words which seem to indicate the complete opposite, and he indicates a pure meaning through the use of sensuous language.

The text should teach us one thing by its introductory words: those introduced into the hidden mysteries of this book are no longer men, but they have been transformed in their nature through the Lord’s teaching into something more divine. The Word testified to his disciples that they were more than men. He differentiated them from other men when he said to them: “Who do men say that I am?” [Mk 8.27]? The Song’s text readily employs words whose obvious meaning indicates the enjoyment of carnal passion. Yet it does not fall into any improper meaning but leads us to the philosophy of divine things by means of chaste concepts. It shows that we are no longer to be men with a nature of flesh and blood; rather, it points to the life we hope for at the resurrection of the saints, an angelic life free from all passion.

After the resurrection, the body which has been transformed into incorruptibility, will again be joined to the soul. The passions now disturbing us because of the flesh will not be restored with those bodies; rather, we shall become tranquil. No longer will the flesh’s prudence dispute with the soul. No longer will there be civil war with the passions set against the mind’s law, where the soul is overcome and taken captive by sin. Nature will then be cleansed from all such things, and one spirit will be in both, (I mean both in the flesh and in the spirit), and every corporeal disposition will be banished from human nature. Thus the text of the Song exhorts us, even if we now live in the flesh, not to turn to it in our thoughts; rather, we should only regard the soul and attribute all manifestations of affection in the text to the surpassing goodness of God as pure, undefiled offerings. For God alone is truly sweet, desirable and worthy of love. The present enjoyment of God is the starting point for a greater share of his goodness, and it increases our desire for him. Thus, in Moses [Ex 33.11] the bride loved the bridegroom. As the virgin says in the Song: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” Moses conversed with God face to face, as scripture testifies [Dt 34.10], and he thereby acquired a still greater desire for these kisses after the theophanies. He sought God as if he had never seen him. So it is with all others in whom the desire for God is deeply embedded: they never cease to desire, but every enjoyment of God they turn into the kindling of a still more intense desire.

Even now the soul united to God never has its fill of enjoyment. The more it enjoys his beauty, the more its desire for him increases. The words of the bridegroom are spirit and life [Jn 5.24], and everyone who clings to the Spirit becomes spirit. He who attaches himself to life passes from death into life as the Lord has said. Thus the virginal soul desires to draw near to the fountain of spiritual life. The fountain is the bridegroom’s mouth from which the words of eternal life well forth. It fills the mouth drawn to it, just as with the prophet when he drew in the spirit through his mouth [Ps 118.131]. Since it is necessary for the person drawing water from a fountain to apply his mouth to his mouth, and since the Lord himself is a fountain as he says: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” [Jn 7.37], so the thirsting soul wishes to bring its mouth to the mouth that springs up with life and says: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” [1.2]. He who wells up with life for all and wishes all to be saved desires every person to share this kiss, for this kiss purges away all filth.

It seems to me that the Lord was reproaching Simon the Leper when he said: “You gave me no kiss” [Lk 7.45]. He meant by this: you would have been cleansed of disease if you had drawn purity with your mouth. But in all likelihood Simon was unworthy of love since he had an excess growth of flesh through his illness and remained unmoved in desire for God by reason of his disease. But once the soul has been cleansed and is no longer hindered by the leprosy of the flesh, it looks to the treasure house of all good things. A name for this treasure house is the heart. From it there comes to the breasts the wealth of divine milk by which the soul is nourished and draws grace in proportion to its faith. Therefore the soul ex-
claims: "Your breasts are better than wine," signifying by
the breasts the heart. Nobody will err if he understands by
the heart the hidden, secret power of God. One would right-
ly suppose that the breasts are the activities of God's power
for us by which he nourishes each one's life and bestows ap-
propriate nourishment.

We are indirectly taught another lesson through the philo-
sophy of this book, namely that perception within us is two-
fold—bodily and divine. As the Word says in Proverbs, "You
will find perception of God" [Pr 2.5]. A certain analogy ex-
ists between the activities of the soul and the sense organs
of the body. This we learn from the present text. Wine and
milk are distinguished by taste, while the intellectual and ap-
prehending capacity of the soul grasps spiritual realities. A
kiss is effected through the sense of touch; the lips of two
persons make contact in a kiss. On the other hand, there is
a certain sense of touch in the soul which takes hold of the
Word and works in an incorporeal, spiritual way. As John
says: "Our hands have handled the word of life" [1 Jn 1.1].
Similarly, the scent of the divine perfumes is not perceived
by the nose, but by a certain spiritual and immaterial power
drawing in the good odor of Christ by an inhalation of the
Spirit. Thus, the next part of the virgin's prayer in the Song's
first words says: "Your breasts are better than wine, and the
scent of your perfumes is beyond all ointments" [1.1-2].

What is signified by these words is, in our opinion, neither
trivial nor unimportant. Through the comparison of milk
from the divine breasts with the enjoyment obtained from
wine we learn, I think, that all human wisdom, science, power
of observation and comprehension of imagination cannot
match the simple nourishment of the divine teaching. Milk,
the food of infants, comes from the breasts. On the other
hand, wine, with its strength and warming capacity, is en-
joyment for the more perfect. However, the perfection of
the wisdom of the world is less than the childlike teaching of
the divine world. Hence the divine breasts are better than human
wine, and the scent of divine perfumes is lovelier than any
fragrance.

The meaning seems to me to be as follows: We under-
stand the perfumes as virtues—wisdom, justice, temperance,
fortitude, and so forth. If we anoint ourselves with these
aromas, each of us, according to our own capacity and choice,
THE SONG OF SONGS

but love such a beauty provided that he has an eye capable of reaching out to its loveliness? The beauty grasped is great; but infinitely greater is the beauty of which we get a glimpse from the appearances.

Passion does not touch those who are still infants, for an infant is incapable of passion; neither is it a problem for those in extreme old age. So too with regard to the divine beauty: both the person who is still an infant tossed about by every wind of doctrine and the aged person approaching death are incapable of desire. The invisible beauty does not touch such people, but only the soul which has passed the state of infancy and has attained the flower of spiritual maturity. Such a soul the text calls young [1.3]; it has no spot or wrinkle or the like; it is neither lacking in perception because of infancy nor enfeebled by old age. This soul obeys the greatest and first commandment of the Law—to love that divine beauty with all its heart and strength [Dt 6.5]. The human mind is unable to find any description, example, or adequate expression of that beauty.

Therefore, such maidens have grown through their virtues and at the proper time have entered the bridal chamber of the divine mysteries. Now they love the bridegroom's beauty, and through love they draw him to themselves. For he is a bridegroom who repays the desire of those who love and says in the person of Wisdom "I love those who love me," and "I will give substance to those who love me." (The bridegroom himself is this substance.) "And I will fill their treasuries with good things" [Pr 8.17, 21]. The souls, therefore, draw to themselves a desire for their immortal bridegroom and follow the Lord God, as it is written [Hos 11.10]. The cause of their love is the scent of the perfume to which they eternally run; they stretch out to what is in front, forgetting what is behind. "We shall run after you toward the scent of your perfumes" [1.4].

Those who are not yet perfect in virtue and who are still young promise to run towards the goal which the scent of perfumes represents. For they say, "We shall run toward the scent of your perfumes." But the more perfect soul, having stretched forward more earnestly, has already obtained the goal for which the course is undertaken, and it is worthy of the treasures in the storehouse. For she says: "The king has

THE FIRST HOMILY

brought me into his chamber" [1.4]. She desired to touch the good with the very tip of her lips and touched the beauty only as much as the power of her prayer could reach. (She prayed [1.2] to become worthy of a kiss through the illumination of the Word.) Now, through what she has already achieved, she has passed to a more interior part of the mysteries with her mind, and she cries out that her passage has brought her only to the vestibule of goodness. By the first fruits of the Spirit of which she was made worthy by the kiss of her spouse she says that she searches the depths of God within the innermost sanctuary of paradise, and, as the great Paul said, sees things unseen and hears words not to be spoken [2 Cor 12.4].

The discourse now reveals an ecclesiastical concern, for those who were first instructed by grace and who became eye-witnesses of the Word did not keep the good just for themselves. They passed on the same grace to those who came after them. Because of this the maidens say to the bride who was the first to be filled with good things by coming face to face with the Word and who was made worthy of the hidden mysteries: "Let us rejoice and be glad in you" [1.4]. For your joy is our common rejoicing. Because you love the Word's breasts more than wine, we shall imitate you and love your breasts more than human wine, for through them you feed those who are infants in Christ.

To make the intention of the passage even clearer, consider the following: John, who reclined upon the Lord's chest, loved the Word's breasts [Jn 13.25]; and having placed his heart like a sponge, as it were, beside the fountain of life, he was filled by an ineffable transmission of the mysteries hidden in the heart of the Lord. John offers us the touch filled by the Word and fills us with the good things he got from the fountain of goodness, loudly proclaiming the Word who exists eternally. Thus we may now rightly say, "We will love your breasts more than wine," if we have become like the maidens and are no longer infants in mind, yoked to an infantile kind of vanity, and if we are not soiled through sin in an old age unto death. Therefore, let us love the flow of your teaching, for "righteousness has loved you" [1.4]. This is the disciple whom Jesus loved, and Jesus is righteousness. The text applies a more beautiful and fitting name to the Lord than the prophet David did, for David says that "The Lord is
righteous’” [Ps 91.15]. This text, however, calls him righteousness. Whatever is crooked he makes straight. May all our crookedness be made straight and all our roughness, smooth [Is 40.4] by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

5. I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains (skins) of Solomon.

6. Do not look at me because I have become blackened, because the sun has looked unfavorably at me. The sons of my mother have fought in me, they have placed me as a guard in the vineyards; I have not guarded my own vineyard.

7. Tell me, you whom my soul has loved, where do you pasture, where do you cause your flock to lie down at midday, lest I become as one who is veiled by the flocks of your companions?

8. If you do not know yourself, beautiful among women, go in the footsteps of the flocks, and feed the kids by the shepherds’ tents.