

"If you do not know yourself, O fairest among women" : The Song of Solomon 1:8 according to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux

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“If you do not know yourself,
O fairest among women”.

The Song of Solomon 1:8 according to Origen,
Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux

“The whole world does not weigh so much as the day when Israel was given the Song of Songs,” is Rabbi Akiba reported to have said in order to defend the canonicity of the book.¹ This already suggests that it was no easy task. Its resolution was undoubtedly aided – apart from the attribution of the work to King Solomon (Song 1:1) – by the allegorical interpretation, the traces of which can arguably be found in the biblical apocrypha (in 4 Esd. 5:24.26; 7:26, Israel is called a “lily”, “dove” and “bride”).² The literal reading was rejected not only by the Jewish exegesis³ but also the Christian one, apparently because there had always been some who advocated it (e.g. Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose view was rejected at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553).⁴

Allegorical interpretations, however, abound in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Probably the oldest one was the allegoresis of the bridegroom and bride as God, or Christ, on one hand, and his people, i.e. Israel, the church (e.g. in Hippolytus of Rome),⁵ or, later, in Kabbalism,

¹ *Mishna, Jadajim*, 3,5 (ed. G. Lisowsky), in: LISOWSKI, G./BEER, G./HOLTZMANN, O. (Hgg.): *Die Mischna. Text, Übersetzung und ausführliche Erklärung*. Berlin: de Gruyter 1956, 54, l. 5f.).

² See GORDIS, R.: *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*. New York: KTAV 1974, 1f. The idea of wedlock between Israel and its God is not uncommon in the Old Testament; see Hosea 2; Jer. 2:2; Isa. 54:4–8; 62:4f.; Ezek. 16. See also FEUILLET, A.: *Le Cantique des cantiques et la tradition biblique*, in: NRTh 74 (1952), 706–733.

³ See Graf REVENTLOW, H.: *Das allegorische Verständnis des Hohenliedes im Judentum*, in: *Freiburger Rundbrief* 19 (1967), 77–83, here 77 and 81.

⁴ See *Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum sub Iustiniano habitum*, in: *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, IV/1, ed. J. Straub. Berlin: de Gruyter 1971, 68–70 (= THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA: *In Cantica canticorum*, ed. J.-P. Migne [= PG 66]. Paris: Migne 1864, cols. 699–700). Here Theodore expresses his belief that it is not a sacred book, but a song meant to accompany a feast, like Plato's *Symposium* (*de amore convivium*, as Theodore calls the dialogue).

⁵ Greek, Old Church Slavonic, Armenian and Syrian fragments of Hippolytus' commentary were published in a German translation by G.N. Bonwetsch (*GCS Hippolytus I*, 341–374), who also issued a German translation of the Georgian version (BONWETSCH, G.N. (ed.): *Hippolytus Kommentar zum Hohenlied* [= TU 23]. Leipzig: Hinrichs 1902). The Georgian version, together with Armenian fragments and a Latin translation, was also published by G. Garitte (*CSCO* 263–264). A Greek paraphrase of the commentary was issued by RICHARD, M.: *Une paraphrase greque*

the last of the ten Sephiroths – Kingship or Shekinah, i.e. the glory of God among his people – on the other.⁶

Apart from this ecclesiological interpretation, and frequently inseparable from it, the understanding of the bride as an individual soul was also very widespread. It was Origen who became the classic of this dual interpretation: in his commentary on the Song of Songs and two preserved sermons on the beginning of this book⁷ he links the church with Christ and the soul with the divine Logos.⁸ Avid readers of Origen's expositions included not only Ambrose of Milan in the 4th century,⁹ but, hundreds of years later, in the 12th century, also Bernard, the dreaded abbot of Clairvaux.¹⁰

As the third of Solomon's writings, the Song of Songs was regarded by Origen as the highlight of the philosophical formation started by the "ethics" of Proverbs, heightened by the "physics" of the Old Testament Ecclesiastes and crowned by the "epoptics" of the Song of Songs. As Origen goes on to say, these three degrees have their parallels in the Greek philosophical disciplines, which are sometimes complemented by logic, or

résumée du Commentaire d'Hippolyt sur le Cantique des Cantiques, in: *Muséon* 77 (1964), 137–154.

⁶ Cf. RIEDEL, W.: *Die Auslegung des Hohenliedes in der jüdischen Gemeinde und der griechischen Kirche*. Leipzig: Deichert 1898, 1–46; Graf REVENTLOW, H.: *Das allegorische Verständnis*, 78–81; OHLY, F.: *Hohelied-Studien*. Wiesbaden: Steiner 1958; RIEDLINGER, H.: *Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche in den lateinischen Hohelied-Kommentaren des Mittelalters*. Münster: Aschendorff 1958. On the Kabbalist interpretation (included in the appendix to the *Zohar*), see VULLIAUD, P.: *Le Cantique des Cantiques d'après la tradition juive*. Paris: PUF 1925, 116–133.

⁷ Origen's commentary is preserved in Rufinus' Latin paraphrase as far as line 2:13 of the Song of Sol. (SC 375–376, eds. L. Brésard/H. Crouzel/M. Borret); two of his sermons on the Song of Songs exist in Jerome's translation (SC 37bis, ed. O. Rousseau).

⁸ See RIEDEL: *Die Auslegung des Hohenliedes*, 52–66; OHLY: *Hohelied-Studien*, 17–25; RIEDLINGER: *Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche*, 23–42; DASSMANN, E.: *Ecclesia vel anima*, in: *Römische Quartalschrift* 61 (1966), 121–144, here 129–137; CHÈNEVERT, J.: *L'Église dans le Commentaire d'Origène sur le Cantique des Cantiques*. Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer 1969; KÖPF, U.: *Hoheliedauslegung als Quelle einer Theologie der Mystik*, in: SCHMIDT, M./BAUER, D. (Hgg.): *Grundfragen christlicher Mystik*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1987, 50–72, here 55–64.

⁹ With the bride from the Song of Songs, longing for her bridegroom, Ambrose compares the soul of the young emperor Valentinian, who died before he had been baptised (see *De obitu Valentiniani*, 64–77: CSEL 73, 359–365), a virgin dedicated to God (see *De virginibus*, I,7,38–8,51: PL 16, 199c–202d) or the first virgin, Mary (see *De institutione virginis*, 14,89: PL 16, 326c–d). An interpretation of the Song of Songs influenced by Plotinus appears in Ambrose's work *De Isaac vel anima* (CSEL 32/1, 639–700). On the individual interpretations by Ambrose, see OHLY: *Hohelied-Studien*, 33–46; RIEDLINGER: *Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche*, 42–47; DASSMANN: *Ecclesia vel anima*, 137–143.

¹⁰ On Bernard's reading of Origen's expositions, see RIEDLINGER: *Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche*, 156f.; LECLERCQ, J.: *Aux sources des Sermons sur les Cantiques*, in: IDEM: *Recueil d'études sur saint Bernard et ses écrits*, I. Roma: Storia e letteratura 1962, 275–289, here 279–281.

rationalis.¹¹ Origen’s term “epoptics”, which he used to refer to the teaching in the Song of Songs, was a loan from Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*; it was familiar to other Platonists as well.¹²

Gregory of Nyssa, the author of one of the most striking expositions of the Song of Songs, dated to the end of the 4th century, also maintains that the Song of Songs contains its own specific “philosophy” which consists mainly in the imitation of God as the model and lover of the human soul.¹³

In this study, I would like to focus on a topic which is also partially philosophical, namely the interpretation of line 1:8 of the Song of Solomon, which was – because of an imprecise translation – linked with the motif of self-knowledge.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON 1:8

It is not clear what the original purport of the Song of Songs was; in any case, especially its local names point to the pre-exile northern kingdom of Israel (i.e. before 722 B.C.).¹⁴ There are interpreters who – as Theodore of Mopsuestia once did – seek the motif of Solomon’s wedding to the Pharaoh’s daughter here.¹⁵ The cult-related interpretation popular in the first half of the 20th century, according to which the song was part of a sacred marriage of gods (*hieros gamos*), either in the cult of Osiris, Ishtar or Tammuz, or in a kind of re-interpretation in the Israelite cult, is no longer regarded as quite convincing.¹⁶ Today the Song of Songs is read rather as a celebration of human love (which can surely be understood as a token of divine love), i.e. as a collection of love poems (the attempt to see it as a dramatic play fails mainly because of the lack of a coherent event line).¹⁷

Even this interpretation, however, poses a problem. It certainly is a collection or a poetic sequence for several protagonists (the bride, the bridegroom, and perhaps also a country girl different from the bride) and the chorus (women of Jerusalem, the shepherds), and yet it is far from clear

¹¹ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.*, prologue, 3,1–16 (SC 375, 128–138). See also HADOT, P.: *Les divisions des parties de la philosophie dans l’Antiquité*, in: *Museum Helveticum* 36 (1979), 201–223, here 218f.

¹² See PLATO: *Symp.* 210a1; also e.g. PLUTARCH: *De Iside* 77 (382d); CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA: *Strom.* II,47,4. See also BRÉSARD, L.: note *L’époptique*, in: SC 376, 755.

¹³ See GREGORY OF NYSSA: *In Cant.* 1 (GNO VI, 17,10f.; 18,9); *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 44,9f.); *In Cant.* 5 (GNO VI, 137,5).

¹⁴ See GORDIS: *The Song of Songs*, 23f.

¹⁵ See TOURNAY, R.J. O.P.: *Quand Dieu parle aux hommes le langage de l’amour: Études sur le Cantique des cantiques*. Paris: Gabalda 1982, 39–48.

¹⁶ On this theory, see GORDIS: *The Song of Songs*, 4–8; ROBERT, A./TOURNAY, R./FEUILLET, A.: *Le Cantique des Cantiques*. Paris: Gabalda 1963, 53f.

¹⁷ See GORDIS: *The Song of Songs*, 10–13.

how many numbers the sequence consists of (suggestions vary between four and fifty-two poems),¹⁸ or which part belongs to whom.

Line 1:8 (Vulgate 1:7), which is of concern to us, is sometimes regarded as part of the first song (thus after prologue 1:1–4, it would begin with line 1:5: “Swarthy am I, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem”);¹⁹ others regard lines 1:7–8 as a separate number entitled, for example, “Tell me where my love”:²⁰

“Tell me, O thou whom I love,
Where dost thou pasture thy sheep,
Where dost thou let them lie at noon?
Why, indeed, should I be a wanderer
Among the flocks of thy comrades,
Who would say to me:
“If thou knowest not, fairest among women,
Follow the footprints of the sheep,
And pasture thy kids
Near the tents of the shepherds.”²¹

Various interpreters do not agree among themselves as to whether line 7 is a question the bride asks,²² or whether it is posed by another protagonist, e.g. the synagogue (that was the opinion of Hippolytus of Rome and Ambrose of Milan after him, in one his interpretations),²³ or by a country girl whose performance introduces the bride’s,²⁴ or whether it is a romantic travesty of the bride passing for a shepherd girl.²⁵ An even tougher nut to crack is line 1:8, which is of major concern to us. Traditionally, it was regarded as the bridegroom’s reply to the bride’s question, as we will see below. Today it is read as a reply of the chorus (perhaps the “daughters of Jerusalem”, whom the girl addresses in line 1:5),²⁶ or the narrator’s remark,²⁷ or even as part of the question. In the last case, the girl would be asking:

¹⁸ See TOURNAY: *Quand Dieu parle*, 21f.

¹⁹ Thus ROBERT/TOURNAY/FEUILLET: *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 56 and 62–69; TOURNAY O.P.: *Quand Dieu parle*, 9 and 22.

²⁰ See GORDIS: *The Song of Songs*, 47.

²¹ The English translation and division of the text by GORDIS: *The Song of Songs*, 47.

²² This was the traditional reading; see CHAPPUZEAU: *Die Exegese von Hohelied*, 113–123. Similarly also ROBERT/TOURNAY/FEUILLET: *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 56 and 75–78; TOURNAY: *Quand Dieu parle*, 9 and 23.

²³ HIPPOLYTUS: *In Cant.* 6 (TU 23, 36f.); *In Cant.* 4–7 (GCS I, 345,7–346,11); AMBROSE OF MILAN: *In Ps.* 118,10–12 (CSEL 62, 25–27); *Exhortatio virg.* 66–67 (PL 16, 356a–c). See also CHAPPUZEAU: *Die Exegese von Hohelied*, 114 and 116f.

²⁴ Thus GORDIS: *The Song of Songs*, 47.

²⁵ On pastoral travesty as a popular device of love lyric, see GERLEMAN, G.: *Ruth – Das Hohelied*. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 1965, 102f.

²⁶ ROBERT/TOURNAY/FEUILLET: *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 56 and 79f.; TOURNAY: *Quand Dieu parle*, 10 and 23.

²⁷ GERLEMAN: *Das Hohelied*, 102.

“Why, indeed, should I be a wanderer
 Among the flocks of thy comrades,
 Who would say to me:
 “If thou knowest not, fairest among women [...]”²⁸

Whichever is the case, what is more important now is not so much the attribution of the question in line 1:8 as its actual wording. Modern translations along the lines of “If you do not know, O fairest among women” correspond closely to the Hebrew original:

אִם-לֹא תֵדָע יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי הַיָּפֵה בְּנָשִׁים

On the other hand, the Septuagint and then the Vulgate read Ἐὰν μὴ γνῶς σεαυτήν, ἡ καλὴ ἐν γυναιξίν and *si ignoras te o pulchra inter mulieres*, respectively, i.e. “If you do not know *yourself*, O fairest among women [...]” For centuries, this “typically Greek misunderstanding”²⁹ drew the attention of Christian readers of the Song of Songs away from a rustic love game towards the motif of self-knowledge in its philosophical, moral and spiritual meanings.

ORIGEN

Origen was the first to have taken full advantage of the “Greek misunderstanding” of the line in question – paradoxically, against the Greek tradition proper.³⁰ In his interpretation, the Greeks appropriated Solomon’s appeal for self-knowledge (*Scito te ipsum, vel Cognosce te ipsum*) and attributed it to one of their Seven Sages (namely to Chilon the Lacedaemonian, at least according to Stobaeus).³¹ Origen, quite surprisingly, does not recall that it is traditionally linked with Apollo and the oracle of Delphi (a fact

²⁸ Thus GORDIS: *The Song of Songs*, 47 and 80. The author, however, modifies the manuscript, using a “wanderer” instead of “one veiled as a harlot”. Both these readings were already known in the Patristic period; see CHAPPUZEAU: *Die Exegese von Hohelied*, 114–123.

²⁹ See SIMKE, H.: *Cant. 1,7 f. in altchristlicher Auslegung*, in: *Theologische Zeitschrift* 18 (1962), 256–267, here 257. The Hebrew version has the *dativus commodi* form אֵל although it is not grammatically inappropriate to read this as an object: “you” (see ROBERT/TOURNAY/FEUILLET: *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 80).

³⁰ Origen’s exposition of the Song of Songs was dealt with in my study *Fusca sum et formosa. Die Heiligkeit der Kirche und die Heiligkeit der Seele nach den Hohelied-Auslegungen des Origenes*, in: HAINTHALER, Th./MALI, F./EMMENEGGER, G. (Hgg.): *Heiligkeit und Apostolizität der Kirche. Forscher aus dem Osten und Westen Europas an den Quellen des gemeinsamen Glaubens*. Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag 2010, 311–334, on which the present study draws.

³¹ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.*, II,5,1 (SC 375, 354). See STOBÆUS: *Anthologium*, III,1, 172 (Hense 116,1–2). On the tradition of self-knowledge linked with this appeal, see COURCELLE, P.: *Connais-toi toi-même: De Socrate à saint Bernard*, I–III. Paris: Études augustiniennes 1974–1975 (on Origen vol. I, 97–100). Clement of Alexandria also presumed that the appeal for self-knowledge is of biblical origin and was borrowed by Greeks; see *Strom.* II,70,5; II,71,3.

which Ambrose of Milan does not fail to mention)³² and Socrates.³³ In its original sense, the appeal reminded mortal people of the limits of their knowledge and their abilities in general. It was only later that the Platonic tradition understood the appeal as an invitation to get to know the divine element in human beings and unify one's life in accordance with it, i.e. to refrain from multiplicity (which is how Apollo's name was interpreted as well).³⁴

The bridegroom in the Song of Songs, too, says Origen, invites the soul to learn of its beauty, with which it was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and to live a life worthy of this beauty.³⁵ Self-knowledge, according to Origen, has two aspects, which might be labelled as philosophical and moral. On one hand, the soul is supposed to find out what its essence (*substantia*) is, and on the other, it is supposed to know what its affections are (*affectus* or *qualiter moveatur*).³⁶

Knowing one's essence, as Origen puts it, involves an investigation into whether the soul is corporeal or incorporeal, simple or complex, and if the latter, how many parts it consists of.³⁷ These questions, like other questions, are not clearly addressed here: what Origen provides is a certain catalogue of topics drawing on the views of ancient philosophical schools and his Christian predecessors. It is only the sequence of Origen's questions and his references to the problems related to each solution which make it possible to guess which opinion Origen regards as the most plausible one.

The first topic is traducianism versus creationism (which is how this argument will be referred to later): in other words, whether the essence of the soul is contained in the corporeal seed and its germ is passed on together with the germ of the body, or whether it enters from the outside into the body waiting in the womb. If the latter is the case, one must ask whether the soul is created only after the body is ready for it (as if the reason for the creation of the soul were the necessity to animate the body), or whether it was created long before that. In the last case, the question arises of what the reason for accepting the body was.³⁸ From this catalogue

³² See AMBROSE OF MILAN: *In Ps. 118,13* (CSEL 62, 27).

³³ See PLATO: *Apol.* 20d–21d; XENOFON: *Memor.* IV,2,24–40; in a parodic vein, also ARISTOPHANES: *Nubes*, 842.

³⁴ On this etymology of Apollo's name, see PLUTARCHOS: *De E* 20 (393b); PLOTINUS: *Enn.* V,5(32),6,27f. On the Delphi appeal, see COURCELLE, P.: *Connais-toi toi-même*, I, 11–25; BEIERWALTES, W.: *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit. Plotins Enneade V 3: Text, Übersetzung, Interpretation, Erläuterungen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann 1991, 89–93.

³⁵ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.*, II,5,2 (SC 375, 354).

³⁶ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.*, II,5,7 (SC 375, 358). On the double aspect of self-knowledge of the soul, see CHÊNEVERT: *L'Église dans le Commentaire*, 44–49 and 100–102.

³⁷ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.*, II,5,18–21 (SC 375, 364–366).

³⁸ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.* II,5,22–23 (SC 375, 366–368).

of questions, it is possible to infer that Origen presupposed the pre-existence of the soul, but he did not regard the need to animate the body as the reason for its incarnation – it must have been something else instead, presumably some kind of wrongdoing, for which incarnation is a punishment. This question, however, never received a definite answer in the Platonic tradition.³⁹

And yet, if the soul exists before it receives the body, another problem arises, one which suggests not only Platonic, but also Christian inspiration: whether the soul puts on and disposes of the body only once, or whether it receives it again, and if so, whether the second reception is final. Here Origen, under the influence of the biblical testimony concerning the ultimate transformation of the corruptible state into incorruption (1 Cor. 15:53), is inclined to think that the soul does not return into this world in another body.⁴⁰

Yet this does not solve the question as to whether the soul differs from other rational spirits, i.e. angels, permanently, or only temporarily, or, alternatively, whether it will become like them through the act of grace if it proves worthy. But how could it become like them unless it receives back what it was in the beginning and then lost? This seems to answer another of Origen’s queries, namely whether the soul can change its nature or power (*virtus*).⁴¹ It probably can, and even in both directions: it may lose its angelic status but also get it back.

As for moral self-knowledge, the soul is supposed to realise whether its affections are good or not, whether its intentions are pure or not, whether it is persistent in pursuing all virtues, both intellectual and practical, whether it attends to their steady progress, and whether it only cares about its own growth, or whether it also feels concern for the benefit of others.⁴² And so forth.

Thus, to Origen’s mind, the answer to the bride in the Song of Songs becomes not only a small treatise on the soul, but also a guidebook for an

³⁹ See PLATO: *Phd.* 62b3–6; 67c6–d2; *Crat.* 400c1–9; *Phdr.* 246b6–c6; 248c5–8; *Resp.* 514a2–b6; 619d1–7; *Tim.* 34a8–35a1; PLOTINUS: *Enn.* IV,8(6),1,23–50; 5,16; III,9(13),3,1–2; I,1(53),12,24–27.

⁴⁰ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.* II,5,24 (SC 375, 368). In this issue, the notions of metempsychosis and the resurrection of the flesh seem to intermingle. Origen rejected metempsychosis, as even his treatises preserved in Greek prove; see *In Ioh.* VI,10,64 (SC 157, 176); VI,11,66 (SC 157, 176–178); *C. Cels.* III,75 (212,4–7 Marcovich); IV,17 (230,19–23 Marcovich); V,29 (344,12–14 Marcovich); V,49 (363,1–11 Marcovich). See also HARNACK A.: *Der kirchengeschichtliche Ertrag der exegetischen Arbeiten des Origenes*, II (= TU 42/4). Leipzig: Hinrichs 1919, 77 and 85; BRÉSARD, L./CROUZEL, H., in: SC 375, 369, n. 3.

⁴¹ ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.* II,5,25–27 (SC 375, 368–370).

⁴² ORIGEN: *Com. in Cant.*, II,5,8 (SC 375, 358).

“examination of the conscience”⁴³ and perpetual moral self-perfection. For the Alexandrian author, both constitute an organic whole because he does not believe that the soul is in its ultimate state: instead, it is bound to become what it originally used to be, i.e. a being which belongs among angelic spirits. Origen’s soul always chooses what it will become, both in the moral and the ontological sense. Even though Origen does not express this idea in the form of an answer, but merely a question, his treatise *Peri archón* makes it clear that he was quite serious about it.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

While Origen leads the reader of the Song of Songs to self-knowledge by means of the Socratic method, i.e. through a catalogue of questions, his follower Gregory of Nyssa offers answers which are more Platonic than Plato himself, being Neo-Platonic. However, Gregory does not link the appeal for self-knowledge with the Greek tradition as Origen did, but with the biblical commandment: “Pay heed to thyself!” (πρόσεχε σεαυτῆ),⁴⁴ to which his brother Basil of Caesarea dedicated a whole sermon.⁴⁵ The bride in the Song of Songs, according to Gregory, cannot “keep her own vineyard” (Song 1:6), i.e. herself, if she does not know herself well.

Thus those who pay heed to alien things instead of “themselves” and who confuse “their own” with what is alien are “bad keepers of themselves” (σφαλεροὶ φύλακές εἰσιν ἑαυτῶν).⁴⁶ “None of the ephemeral things belong to us,” says Gregory.⁴⁷ The soul must know itself for what it really is in order to pay heed to itself and guard itself:

“See how much you have been honoured by the Creator above the rest of creation. Heaven did not become the image of God, nor the moon, nor the sun, nor the beauty of the stars – nor any other created thing. Only you became a copy of the nature that is beyond any comprehension, a likeness of incorruptible beauty, an impression of the true deity, a vessel of a beatific life, a reflection of the true light. If you are aware of it, you will become what

43 H. Crouzel calls this passage « un petit traité de l’examen de conscience », see CROUZEL, H.: *Origène et la « Connaissance mystique »*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1961, 64; similarly also IDEM : *Théologie de l’image de Dieu chez Origène*. Paris: Aubier 1956, 214.

44 GREGORY OF NYSSA: *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 67f.). See Deut. 15:9: אֲנִי אֶתְּנֶה לְךָ

45 See BASIL OF CAESAREA: *In illud Attende tibi ipsi*, in: RUDBERG, S.Y. (ed.): *L’Homélie de Basile de Césarée sur le mo, « Observe-toi toi-même »*. Édition critique du texte grec et étude sur la tradition manuscrite. Stockholm/Goeteborg: Almqvist & Wiksell 1962. Similarly AMBROSE OF MILAN: *In Ps. 118,13* (CSEL 62, 27). See also COURCELLE: *Connais-toi toi-même*, I, 101–104 and 117–125. On the concept of self-knowledge in Gregory, see COURCELLE, P.: *Connais-toi toi-même*, I, 105–108.

46 GREGORY OF NYSSA: *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 64,2f.): διὰ τοῦτο σφαλεροὶ φύλακές εἰσιν ἑαυτῶν τῆ περι τὸ ἀλλότριον σχέσει ἀφύλακτον περιορῶντες τὸ ἴδιον. Similarly *In Cant.* 9 (GNO VI, 276f.). Before Gregory, BASIL OF CAESAREA: *In illud Attende tibi ipsi*, 3 (Rudberg 26).

47 GREGORY OF NYSSA: *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 64).

God is, for you will imitate that which shines within you by reflecting the shine that comes from your purity. None of the things which exist is so great in comparison to your greatness.”⁴⁸

The bride is to know herself in terms of her greatness and beauty, i.e. as an image of God. If she does not become aware of her worth, she will “follow the footprints of the sheep, and pasture her kids.” Gregory does not put this moral into the bridegroom’s mouth (unlike the majority of traditional interpreters, including Origen), but rather has the chorus of the bridegroom’s friends utter it. In his opinion, the message is that those who ignore the real nature of things – in this case the greatness of rational human nature – will have to make do with the unreliable criterion of human habits, which they will have to follow blindly, in the footsteps of the crowd.⁴⁹ For this reason, argues Gregory, it is better to read it as follows: “If thou knowest thyself not, fairest among women, *you followed* (ἐξῆλθες, instead of *follow*) the footprints of the sheep [...]”⁵⁰ As he understands it, this is a statement of the chorus, commenting on the human lot, not the bridegroom’s appeal.

In order to avoid this lot, the bride has to know herself and care for what she really is: “pay heed to herself”. In such a case, she will not deal with useless things or those unworthy of her greatness because the one who “holds the whole creation in the palm of his hand” will dwell within her. Who would care about ephemeral things while “forever dwelling with him who lasts eternally”?⁵¹

As we have seen, in Gregory’s interpretation “knowing oneself” is a far more ambitious enterprise than knowing the true self, i.e. the soul, not the body, as Plato’s dialogue *Alcibiades Major* (130c) has it. The appeal to know one’s true self was of enormous significance for Plotinus, who returned to the question “Who are we?” (τίνες δὲ ἡμεῖς;) ⁵² several times; his answer, however, was far from unequivocal.

Some of his treatises give the impression that “we” are members of the intelligible world and that we were only secondarily joined by someone who had come to be in time and who – as it were – pulled us down.⁵³ We

⁴⁸ GREGORY OF NYSSA: *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 68): γνῶθι πόσον ὑπὲρ τὴν λοιπὴν κτίσιν παρὰ τοῦ πεποηκότος τετίμησαι. οὐκ οὐρανὸς γέγονεν εἰκῶν τοῦ θεοῦ, οὐ σελήνη, οὐχ ἥλιος, οὐ τὸ ἀστρῶν κάλλος, οὐκ ἄλλο τι τῶν κατὰ τὴν κτίσιν φαινομένων οὐδέν. μόνη σὺ γέγονας τῆς ὑπερεχούσης πάντα νοῦν φύσεως ἀπεικόνισμα, τοῦ ἀφάρτου κάλλους ὁμοίωμα, τῆς ἀληθινῆς θεότητος ἀποτύπωμα, τῆς μακαρίας ζωῆς δοχεῖον, τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ φωτὸς ἐκμαγεῖον, πρὸς ὃ βλέπουσα ἐκεῖνο γίνῃ, ὅπερ ἐκεῖνός ἐστι, μιμουμένη τὸν ἐν σοὶ λάμποντα διὰ τῆς ἀντιλαμπούσης αὐγῆς ἐκ τῆς σῆς καθαρότητος. οὐδὲν οὕτω τῶν ὄντων μέγα, ὡς τῷ σῶ μεγέθει παραμετρεῖσθαι.

⁴⁹ *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 65f.).

⁵⁰ *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 67).

⁵¹ *In Cant.* 2 (GNO VI, 68f.).

⁵² PLOTINUS: *Enn.* VI,4(22),14,16.

⁵³ *Enn.* VI,4(22),14,16–26: “But we – who are we? Are we that which draws near and comes to be in time? Perhaps even before this coming to be came to be we were ‘there’, men

are definitely not a soul immediately present in the body with its physiological functions; instead, that soul is “more divine, which makes us what we are” (θειότερα, καθ’ ἣν ἡμεῖς),⁵⁴ and it governs the “animal” composed of the soul and the body because it is influenced by the ideas in the Intellect.⁵⁵ In other works, Plotinus makes it clear that “we” is the discursive capacity of the soul as the “middle” between the intellect and sense perception.⁵⁶ Thus what “we” are, according to Plotinus, can be many things (πολλὰ γὰρ ἡμεῖς):⁵⁷ in fact, it can be the whole ontological scale comprised by Plotinus’ soul (from its anchorage in the Intellect to its acting upon the body);⁵⁸ perhaps we are that towards which our attention is drawn at any given moment.⁵⁹

Among the Neo-Platonists, the emphasis on self-knowledge was especially typical of Porphyry, who even wrote a monograph on that topic. Unfortunately, his treatise *Περὶ τοῦ Γνωθῆι σαυτὸν* is lost to us,⁶⁰ but it is presumed that the Cappadocian fathers were familiar with it.⁶¹ Plotinus’ notion of us who are “many things” also has a certain counterpart in the wri-

who were different, and some of us even gods, pure souls and intellect united with all that is. We were parts of the intelligible, not marked off or cut off but belonging to the whole. And we are not cut off even now. But now another man, wishing to exist, approached that man; and when he found us – for we were not outside the all – he wound himself round us and attached himself to that man who was then each one of us.” (Translation by Armstrong modified.)

⁵⁴ *Enn.* IV,3(27),27,1-3: “But to which soul, that which we shall call the more divine, by which we are ourselves, or the other, which comes from the Whole?” (Ἄλλὰ τίνος ψυχῆς, τῆς μὲν λεγομένης ὑφ’ ἡμῶν θειότερας, καθ’ ἣν ἡμεῖς, τῆς δὲ ἄλλης τῆς παρὰ τοῦ ὅλου;) Translation by Armstrong.

⁵⁵ *Enn.* I,1(53),7,14-17: “From these forms, from which the soul alone receives its lordship over the animal, come reasonings, and opinions and insights. And this precisely is where ‘we’ are. That which comes before (i.e. below) this is ‘ours’ but ‘we’, in our presidency over the animal, are what extends from this point upwards (τὸ ἐντεῦθεν ἄνω).” Translation by Armstrong modified.

⁵⁶ See *Enn.* V,3(49),3,35f.

⁵⁷ *Enn.* I,1(53),9,7.

⁵⁸ Plotinus’ answers to the question of who “we” are are summarised by B. Ham: 1. a principle which governs our ontological “localisation”; 2. our true self in the Intellect; 3. a lower self we can opt for; 4. a discursive self (see PLOTIN: *Traité 49 [V,3]*, introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes par B. Ham. Paris: Cerf 2000, 116–118). The nature of who “we” are definitely involves more levels and appears to be dynamic (see TROUILLARD, J.: *La purification plotinienne*. Paris: PUF 1955 [reprint Paris: Hermann 2011], 26f.; HIMMERICH, W.: *Eudaimonia. Die Lehre des Plotin von der Selbstverwirklichung des Menschen*. Würzburg: Triltsch 1959, 92–100; BLUMENTHAL, H.J.: *Plotinus’ Psychology: His Doctrines of the Embodied Soul*. The Hague: Nijhoff 1971, 109–111; REMES, P.: *Plotinus on Self. The Philosophy of the ‘We’*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, 239–246). In his monograph on this topic, G. O’Daly even finds a kind of “self” in the union with the One as well (see O’DALY, G.J.P.: *Plotinus’ Philosophy of the Self*. Shannon: Irish University Press 1973, 82–94).

⁵⁹ That at least is the opinion of WARREN, E.W.: *Consciousness in Plotinus*, in: *Phronesis* 9 (1964), 83–97, here 97.

⁶⁰ PORPHYRY: *Περὶ τοῦ Γνωθῆι σαυτὸν* (fragmenta), ed. A. Smith (= Porphyrii philosophi fragmenta). Stuttgart: Teubner 1993, 308–313.

⁶¹ See COURCELLE: *Connais-toi toi-même*, I, 111.

tings of Gregory. As we already know, he maintains that the bride in the Song of Songs is a mirror which reflects divine beauty.⁶² Nevertheless, it may turn towards many different things and their images will reflect in it.⁶³ In order to reflect the beauty of the divine bridegroom, not only must the mirror be cleaned, but the bride must also turn towards to her bridegroom, approach him, and become “his companion”, i.e. “close” to him (which is the original meaning of the Greek ἡ πλησίον). She will only be beautiful if she becomes his companion; that is why the bridegroom says: “Behold, thou art fair, my companion” (Song of Sol. 1:15; 4:1.7; 6:4).⁶⁴

As we have seen, Origen’s bride, or the soul, who puts herself through a catalogue of questions in order to get to know her original beauty as the image of God changes in Gregory’s eyes into a bride who turns her mirror towards the divine beauty and thus becomes its reflection. For all the affinity, Gregory’s concept is different: the soul does not seek by querying and nor does it make a decision about its ontological position. It knows what it is looking for because it is what the soul unchangeably is and always has been: it only has to clean itself, come closer and turn the smooth surface of its own mirror towards its archetype.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Eight hundred years separate Bernard of Clairvaux from his Patristic predecessors, and in his sermons on the Song of Songs, he speaks to us from an entirely different world than the Christianised Platonic universe of the Greek fathers as set out in the introduction.⁶⁵ The Cistercian abbot dedicated five sermons (34–38) in total to the line in question; they give the impression of daily speeches addressed to his brethren (presumably, how-

⁶² GREGORY OF NYSSA: *In Cant.* 5 (GNO VI, 150,9–13): “How could a beautiful image appear in the mirror unless it reflects a beautiful form? Thus the mirror of human nature did not become beautiful until it approached beauty and until it was formed by the image of divine beauty.” (πὼς γὰρ ἐστὶ δυνατόν καλὴν ὄψιν ἐν κατόπτρῳ γενέσθαι μὴ καλῆς τινος μορφῆς δεξαμένη τὴν ἔμφασιν; οὐκοῦν καὶ τὸ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως κάτοπτρον οὐ πρότερον ἐγένετο καλόν, ἀλλ’ ὅτε τῷ καλῷ ἐπλησίασε καὶ τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θεοῦ κάλλους ἐνεμορφώθη.)

⁶³ *In Cant.* 4 (GNO VI, 104): “If it turns towards gold, gold will appear in it and the shine of the substance will be reflected in it. If it reflects an abominable thing, it will imitate its ugliness, and its appearance will correspond to that of a frog, toad or a millipede or some other detestable thing which has turned towards it.” (εἴ τε γὰρ πρὸς χρυσὸν ἴδοι, χρυσὸς φαίνεται καὶ τὰς ταύτης αὐγὰς τῆς ὕλης διὰ τῆς ἐμφάσεως δείκνυσιν, εἴ τε τι τῶν εἰδεχθῶν ἐμφανεῖη, καὶ τούτου τὸ αἶσχος δι’ ὁμοιώσεως ἀπομάσσεται βάτραχόν τινα ἢ φρῦνον ἢ σκολόπενδραν ἢ ἄλλο τι τῶν ἀηδῶν θεαμάτων τῷ οἰκείῳ εἶδει ὑποκρινόμενον, ὥπερ ἂν τούτων εὐρεθῆ ἂντιπρόσωπον.)

⁶⁴ *In Cant.* 4 (GNO VI, 104f.); *In Cant.* 5 (GNO VI, 151); *In Cant.* 7 (GNO VI, 215); *In Cant.* 11 (GNO VI, 325).

⁶⁵ On Bernard’s sermons and their spirituality based on a spiritual experience of love rather than tradition, see OHLY: *Hohelied-Studien*, 136–156. On his concept of self-knowledge, see COURCELLE: *Connais-toi toi-même*, I, 258–272; GILSON, E.: *La Théologie mystique de Saint Bernard*. Paris: Vrin 1934, 93–96.

ever, they are literary works, and the illusion is caused by their author's superb mastery of the homiletic genre).⁶⁶

The theory of self-knowledge as presented by this powerful and formidable man can be summed up succinctly in a single sentence: Know you are nothing! For a man is not as humble as Bernard would have him should he "think himself to be something, when he is nothing" (Gal. 6:3).⁶⁷ Human beings are "mud" (*limus*, cf. Gen. 2:7 Vulgate), "dust and ashes" (*terra et cinis*, cf. Sir. 10:9), and if they do not know that, they resemble senseless beasts (cf. Ps. 48:13 Vulgate) – or, more precisely, beasts are even superior to human beings because of their innocence.⁶⁸

A man going through a door will never make a mistake if he bends his head more than necessary, while the opposite might prove fatal to him; similarly, at least according to Bernard, voluntary self-humiliation is never deep enough.⁶⁹ Humility, to which he is trying to bring his readers, must avoid not only pride, but also the other extreme, despair.⁷⁰

What can save the soul from despair is the knowledge of God, not self-knowledge. To Bernard's mind, "fairest among women", i.e. the spiritual soul (*anima spiritualis*), is only slightly better than "effeminate" souls, i.e. those souls which have entirely succumbed to the temptations of the world. The soul gains real beauty in the kingdom of heaven; at present, it is only endowed with beauty in part, just as it knows in part (1 Cor. 13:12).⁷¹

According to Bernard, self-knowledge of the soul does not involve the knowledge of one's beauty, but on the contrary, the knowledge of one's own nothingness and guilt: "If you knew yourself more fully, you would know you are burdened with a corruptible body" (Ws 9:15),⁷² "infected with the concupiscence of the flesh, blind, distorted, entangled in many an error [...], prone to vice and incapable of virtue".⁷³ "If you turn to yourself, you will take a dislike to yourself" (*reversus in se, et displicens sibi*).⁷⁴ And so forth. Without this self-knowledge, Bernard maintains, there is no salvation

⁶⁶ See BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: *Ser. Cant.* 37,1 (SC 452, 124), where he says that the previous sermon was delivered "yesterday". As the editor of this work shows, however, this is a stylistic device typical of the genre of the sermon rather than a record of Bernard's homilies on this text (which, undoubtedly, existed as well). See LECLERCQ, J.: *Les Sermons sur les Cantiques ont-ils été prononcés*, in: IDEM: *Recueil d'études sur saint Bernard et ses écrits*, I. Roma: Storia e letteratura 1962, 193–212.

⁶⁷ BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: *Ser. Cant.* 37,5 (SC 452, 134).

⁶⁸ *Ser. Cant.* 37,6–7 (SC 452, 94–98).

⁶⁹ *Ser. Cant.* 37,7 (SC 452, 136).

⁷⁰ *Ser. Cant.* 37,5 (SC 452, 134).

⁷¹ *Ser. Cant.* 38,5 (SC 452, 150–152).

⁷² *Ser. Cant.* 38,5 (SC 452, 150). Similarly *Ser. Cant.* 36,5 (SC 452, 116–118).

⁷³ *Ser. Cant.* 36,5 (SC 452, 118).

⁷⁴ *Ser. Cant.* 38,1 (SC 452, 140).

(*neminem absque sui cognitione salvari*).⁷⁵ Moreover, its absence unavoidably entails damnation (*sufficit ad damnationem*).⁷⁶

The listener to (or more precisely, the reader of) Bernard’s sermons is left crushed. In the whole line, it is the imperative which the abbot of Clairvaux stresses the most: “Go!” *Egredere! Abis!* “If you do not know yourself, go forth!”⁷⁷ “Go pasture your kids (i.e. low animals which symbolise sin)!” “Out of my sanctuary!”⁷⁸ Instead of a bridegroom speaking to his bride, this sounds like an angry master addressing his servant⁷⁹ or a strict teacher annoyed by his pupils’ performance, as Bernard himself puts it – and it is not clear at all whether it is meant ironically.⁸⁰

The appeal for self-knowledge, as worded by the Cistercian abbot, thus returns to its original meaning as a reminder of the limits of mortal men, who can never measure up to gods. Bernard, however, does not interpret it in the tragic vein as ancient Greece knew it; neither does he add to it an ironic point and philosophical inquiry like Plato’s Socrates. The aim of Bernard’s sermons is not ironic, but deadly serious: it is humility. It must be added, however, that it is a voluntary kind of humility, humiliation which has been embraced, sought out, desired (*libenter, sponte humiliatus*).⁸¹ It is only the humility of the will based on self-knowledge which is capable of justification (*humilitas iustificat*)⁸² and of making a human being worthy of the grace of God (*sola gratiam [...] meretur laeta et absoluta humilitas*).⁸³ He who knew himself also knows that even if he “strips his skin off” (*nec si te excories*), there is no way to pay off his debts because there are too many of them.⁸⁴

If there is irony, it is unintended. The preacher of the Second Crusade to the Holy Land and the initiator of the Cathar Crusade, Abelard’s persecutor and the enemy of the useless ornamentation of Benedictine churches,⁸⁵ is not making fun of himself; instead, he is trying to convince both himself and his readers of the necessity of humility, humiliation, and awe – which he regards as essential for salvation as love. But there cannot be awe

⁷⁵ *Ser. Cant.* 37,1 (SC 452, 124).

⁷⁶ *Ser. Cant.* 35,9 (SC 452, 100). Similarly *Ser. Cant.* 36,1 (SC 452, 104).

⁷⁷ *Ser. Cant.* 35,1 (SC 452, 82).

⁷⁸ *Ser. Cant.* 35,2 (SC 452, 86).

⁷⁹ *Ser. Cant.* 35,1 (SC 452, 82).

⁸⁰ *Ser. Cant.* 38,3 (SC 452, 146).

⁸¹ *Ser. Cant.* 34,3 (SC 452, 76); 34,4 (SC 452, 80).

⁸² *Ser. Cant.* 34,3 (SC 452, 76).

⁸³ *Ser. Cant.* 38,3 (SC 452, 78).

⁸⁴ *Ser. Cant.* 38,1 (SC 452, 140).

⁸⁵ On Bernard’s ecclesiastical-political engagement, see e.g. AUBÉ, P.: *Saint Bernard de Clairvaux*. Paris: Fayard 2003.

without self-knowledge, just as there cannot be love without knowledge of God.⁸⁶

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The Christian self-knowledge for which the bridegroom makes an appeal addressed to his bride appears in both forms of Apollo's appeal: know your limits and know the divinity in yourself. However, the bride, or the soul, will not find her own divinity but the beauty of the bridegroom of whom she is a mirror. Moreover, she will not only find her own limits, but also her misery and guilt, which she can never overcome by herself. In my opinion, both of these poles of Christian self-knowledge must be taken into consideration simultaneously: one must always balance the other. For this, the tradition of the exposition of the Song of Songs provides a very valuable resource.

Abstract

The inaccurate translation of the biblical line of the Song of Solomon 1,8 אַם-לֹא תִדְעִי לְךָ הַיָּפֶה בְּנָשִׁים ("If you do not know, O fairest among women") in the Septuagint (Ἐὰν μὴ γινῶς σεαυτήν, ἡ καλὴ ἐν γυναιξίν) and Vulgate (si ignoras te o pulchra inter mulieres) meaning "If you do not know yourself, O fairest among women [...]" encouraged Christian reflection concerning self-knowledge of the bride, i.e. soul, in Song of Salomon for centuries. In Origen's Commentary on this book the bride puts herself through a catalogue of questions in order to get to know her original beauty as the image of God. In Gregory of Nyssa's Homilies the bride turns herself as a mirror towards the divine beauty and thus becomes its reflection. In a very different vein, Bernard of Clairvaux calls the soul to self-knowledge which does not involve the knowledge of one's beauty, but on the contrary, the knowledge of one's own nothingness and guilt. Both these interpretations of the Delphic appeal for self-knowledge have their antecedents in ancient philosophy and one should always balance the other.

⁸⁶ BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: *Ser. Cant.* 37,6 (SC 452, 134).