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The Dream Vision from the *Song of Songs* by Jerome

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Jane Beal
The Dream Vision
from the *Song of Songs*

Jerome
Somnium
ex Cantica Canticorum

Song of Songs 3:1, 5:2–6, 6:2

On my bed, through the nights, I sought him whom my soul
loves:

I sought him, and I did not find him...

I sleep, but my heart wakes. The voice of my beloved
knocking...!

Open to me, my sister, my friend, my dove, my immaculate
one—

for my head is full of dew
and my hair curled with the drops of long nights.

I have taken off my tunic: how can I put it on?

I washed my feet: how can I dirty them?

My love reached his hand through the door,
and my womb trembled at his touch.

I arose to open to my love.

My hands dripped with myrrh
and my fingers were full of the finest myrrh.

I opened the bolt of my door to my love,
but he had turned aside, and he had passed by.

My soul was melted, as I said:

I sought him, and I did not find him;

I called, and he did not answer me...

for my beloved has gone down to his garden.

The *Song of Songs*, first written in Hebrew, was later translated into Latin by Jerome in the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*. The Vulgate became the Bible of the Catholic Church, and the *Cantica Canticorum*, as the *Song of Songs* or the *Song of Solomon* was known, became one of the most widely translated and commented-upon books of the Bible during the late medieval period (see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*). It held an important place in the lives of contemplative Christians living monastic or anchoritic lives, for it informed the language they used to express their love for Jesus (affective piety), journey toward intimacy with him (through the stages of illumination, purification, and unification, or spiritual marriage to Christ), and even behold him in their mystical vision during times of ecstatic prayer.

The *Song* was widely read and usually interpreted allegorically as a representation of the soul's relationship to Jesus. Although some medieval commentators could acknowledge that the *Song* had a literal sense concerning sexual love, most of the people who read it were unmarried and had taken vows of virginity or celibacy. These medieval contemplatives saw Jesus as their beloved in a spiritual sense.

The brief passages of the *Song* that I have translated here are from the dream vision of the *Sponsa* (the Bride), as the *Shulamite* or female speaker of the *Song* was called. The dream vision reveals the Bride's deep longing for her beloved, the frustration of his nearness and departure, and her continued, ardent seeking after him despite every delay and obstacle. The tension between seeking and not finding causes the Bride pain at both the beginning and near the end of the poem as I have constructed it here ("On my bed, through the nights, I sought him...I called, and he did not answer me"). Yet that pain is relieved when she realizes (verse 6:2) where he is: in his garden.

Specific details from the verses I have translated were given allegorical significance in the medieval commentary tradition. Mary Dove's translation, *The Glossa Ordinaria on the Song of Songs*, provides readers with many of these details. For example, the Venerable Bede remarks on verse 3:1 ("On my bed, through the nights, I sought him..."):

The soul seeks God in her bed at her leisure when she has a desire to see God and longs to go forth to him from the prison of the flesh. But this is not permitted, and the bridegroom hides himself so that, not having been found, he may be sought the more ardently (trans. Dove, 62).

As this annotation reveals, medieval interpreters saw the Bride not only as the Church, but as the individual soul devoted to Christ in mystical contemplation: any man or woman who longed for Jesus.

The idea that the Bride represents the individual soul (and, by extension, not only the individual souls of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene but also

corporate Israel and the universal Church), originates with Origen in his 2nd century *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Bernard of Clairvaux preached a series of sermons on the *Song* in the 12th century that emphasized this idea. In the 17th century, both Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross would write elaborately in the same vein. These are only a few examples of such allegorical interpretation of the *Song* and of the tendency of Christian contemplatives to view their own souls as the *sponsa Christi* or Bride of Christ.

The medieval commentary tradition on the *Song of Songs* is rich with allegorical interpretations, and this is especially true of the fifth chapter of the *Song*. In an annotation of verse 5:2 (“I sleep, but my heart wakes...”), one commentator urges readers, “Arise from the leisure and quietness of contemplation, and open [your] hearts; with the obstacles of vice cleared away, let them clearly let in the light of truth” (trans. Dove, 105). The Church is urged to preach to the world as well as contemplate the Beloved, who is Christ Jesus. Anselm understands the garment of 5:3 (“I have taken off my tunic”) as “any worldly impediment” (trans. Dove, 108); the myrrh of 5:4 is both “an example of suffering bitter things” and “that which makes things incorruptible” (trans. Dove, 110).

For medieval commentators, every detail in the *Song* was imbued with spiritual meaning.