

THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE IN SONG OF SONGS. A TERMINOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SOME ADDRESSING FORMULAS¹

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Abstract: In the Hebrew or the Greek text, the term "beloved" represents a real challenge, especially because the Romanian Bible translates the Hebrew and Greek words in various and different ways: iubit/ă or drag/ă ("dear" or "beloved"). The Hebrew Bible uses both ahabah and dod. The Septuagint translates each time ahabah through agape and dod through adelphidos. When the bride is addressed or when she is spoken about, the Hebrew text uses the word ra'ya. The Septuagint uses in this case the word plesion. Each word used in the original text has distinct meanings according to the way they are used in the Biblical text. The understanding of these words gives us an image of the true meaning of the play upon words used by the author of this revealed book.

Keywords: love, Song of Songs, passion, God, bride/groom.

For many centuries, the Song of Songs was read by scholars in different ways. It doesn't matter if the main characters of the book are a king and his bride, Solomon and Shulamite, God and Israel or Christ and His Church. The idea of the book rests the same. It is a song of love, written with love and for love.

This is why the main purpose of this paper is not that of finding who the characters are. The paper takes a closer look to those two lovers and to their play upon words. Any modern reader of this sacred text will see there are a lot of metaphors used by the author. It is very easy to observe such expressions as "thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold" (1, 10); "honey and milk are under thy tongue" (4, 11). In fact, the whole book is a metaphor of love. But there is something that captivates the attention of Bible's readers: the way the lovers speak to each other. They are calling themselves with words as "beloved", "dear", "spouse", "sister/brother", "friend". But the English or the Romanian translations of the Song of Solomon lose something from the scene of love described by the author. The modern languages are quite poor in describing the multiple aspects of the love related feelings.

When the bride and the groom call each other with words of love, the Hebrew Bible uses three different words: אָהָב (ahab), דָּוָד (dod) and רַעְיָהּ (ra'ya). Each word it is translated by the Greek text of the Septuagint in different ways. For אָהָב (ahab) it uses the Greek ἀγαπάω (agapao), for דָּוָד (dod) it uses ἀδελφιδός (adelphidos), while the Hebrew רַעְיָהּ (ra'ya) is translated by πλησίον (plesion). When anyone tries to make an analysis of these words, he or she will see what the real meaning of the biblical text could be.

For example, the first two words, אָהָב (ahab) and דָּוָד (dod) are used for the groom, while רַעְיָהּ (ra'ya) refers only to the bride. One of the questions to be asked is why the author of this sacred text preferred this play upon words. In the pages to follow we will try to offer a possible answer to these questions.

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Ahab and agapao

We will analyze this pair of words first because they are the most common verbs for love used in the Hebrew and the Greek Bible. The verb *ahab*² has about 200 occurrences in the Old Testament writings³ while *agapao* is used by the translators of the Septuagint for 260 times⁴.

Agapao has a very interesting evolution in the Greek vocabulary. It had different meanings from a period to another, from one writer to another. *Agapao* had begun to be used for describing hospitality⁵ and the feelings for another person⁶. In Aristotle writings the *agapao* verb spoke about an unselfish love⁷. In Septuagint's *agapao* is used for all classical verbs which meant love⁸. Throughout biblical texts *agapao* implies not only the verb to love, but it implies a certain action from the one who loves. First of all he has to choose the person to be loved. His action should be entirely free.

They come together, as a pair, for about 5 times in the book which interests us in this paper. Their importance is given by the participation in a very powerful statement of love. When the bride calls her loved one for the first time with these words she uses the Hebrew *ahab*: אָהַבְתִּי נַפְשִׁי (se'ahaba naf'si; 1, 7). The expression can be translated "whom my soul had loved" and it is the way it is used in all other verses of the Song of Songs (3, 1; 3, 2; 3, 3: 3, 4). The Greek version has the same meaning ὃν ἠγάπησεν ἡ ψυχή μου (on egapesen e psihe mou).

This expression is more powerful than a simple "beloved" or "loved one". Some interpreters had seen here a love which implies not only the soul, but the entire person "the whole being"⁹. It is true that *ahab* describes a love which manifests in all aspects of human life, but the association of this verb and of *nephes* (soul) reminds of an episode from the book of Genesis.

When Shechem fell in love with Dinah, Jacob's daughter, it is said that "his soul clave unto Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl" (34, 3). The relation between Shechem and Dinah implies an intimate intercourse and it has some erotic connotation. But the sexual aspect of this relation precedes the moment of Shechem's falling in love with Dinah. The only desire he has is to marry her and this is why he is willing to do anything Jacob asks. It's a love that makes sacrifices because its only wish is to be close to the loved one.

² For more details about *ahab* see our study *The Main Hebrew Words for Love: Ahab and Hesed*, in *Analele Științifice ale Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”*, Teologie Ortodoxă, tome XIV, 2009, no. 1, p. 51-66.

³ Katharine Drob Sakenfeld, *Love*, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, David Noel Freedman, Editor-in-Chief, Doubleday, New York, 1992, p. 376.

⁴ Carl F.H. Henry, *Dumnezeu, revelație, autoritate*, vol. VI: *Dumnezeu care stă și rămâne*, Ed. Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 2002, p. 389.

⁵ Georg Autenrieth, *A Homeric Dictionary for Schools and Colleges*, Translated by Robert P. Keep, Revised by Isaac Flogg, University of Oklahoma Press, 1958, p. 2; Richard John Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1977, p. 2.

⁶ John Chadwick, *Lexicographica Graeca, Contributions to the Lexicography of Ancient Greek*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 32.

⁷ C. Spicq, *Agapé. Prolégomenes a une etudes du théologie néo-testamentaire*, Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1955, p. 57.

⁸ Petre Semen, *Iubirea aproapei după Epistola I a Sfântului Apostol Ioan*, în „Mitropolia Olteniei”, 1982, nr. 1-3, p. 9

⁹ J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs. A Commentary*, John Knox Press, Westminster, 2005, p. 106.

The same meaning is revealed in the bride's statement. It means that she loves her groom and that she really wants to be with him. Passion is the word that would describe best her feelings and relationship. The presence of *agape*, the future mark of Christian love, doesn't erase the intense feeling that consumes the person who bares it¹⁰.

When someone looks at the verses where *ahab* is used to describe the bride's love for her groom, he or she will be able to see how the feeling grows. All verses speak about the same search. She is looking for her lover. First of all, he looks for the place where he feeds his sheep (1, 7). It's a continuous search, since the same verse ends by stating that "why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions?"

The search for the one who is loved by her soul becomes more intense in the verses to follow. She looks for him even in her bed: "by night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not" (3, 1). The desire speaks through these words. The groom was never in the same bed with the bride, but still she looks for him as it should be there, as his place was near her. This love makes the bride to continue her research outside her place of rest on the street and in the open spaces of the city. We can only imagine how fierce this kind of search was. The Hebrew language is capable of presenting the intensity of her actions. The verb *בָּקַשׁ* (*baqas*), to seek, to look for, is at perfect piel *בִּקַּשְׁתִּי* (*biqqas'ti*) and at piel imperfect *אֲבַקֵּשׂ* (*abaqsa'*). Piel is a form that shows a more intense action of the verb or an action done for more than one time. So, in this case the author wants to suggest that the bride looked for her lover for many times. Only a person who loves very much can be so persistent in such a quest. When she finds the one whom her soul loves she will not let him go, because she will take him to her house (3, 4).

Sometimes, the Romanian translation loses some of the intensity given by the Hebrew and the Greek versions. In 1, 7 it translates by "iubitul meu". In chapter 3, verse 4 it is "pe cel iubit" and all other verses of that chapter (1, 2, and 3) prefer "dragul sufletului meu". It is clear that none of these can express the same intensity as the original text does. The association of those two words, a verb and a noun, love and soul has a strong mark of passion. It is as if the bride can not rest until she rests in her lover's arms: "by night on my bed I sought him whom my soul had loved" (3, 1). She is thirsty for the love of her groom.

Love finds its place in the heart of any person. When it begins to increase it moves into the inner part of the souls and rests there. Love is like a flame; it grows bigger and bigger.

Dod and adelphidos

The second group is composed of two nouns, *dod* and *adelphidos*. The both words are surely very interesting because they are mainly related to our book.

The Hebrew word *dod* can be translated as uncle, lover or friend¹¹ and it is used for about 56 times¹² in the Hebrew Bible and in 41 cases it means love. There are just a few

¹⁰ Eleni Hristinakis, *Agape in the Old Testament under the Light of 1 Cor 13*, in „Teologia” XI, 2007, 3, p. 22.

¹¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Based on the Lexicon of William Gesenius, as translated by Edward Robinson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 187; Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*, Carta-The Israel Map and Publishing Company, Jerusalem/Tel-Aviv, 1987, p. 117.

¹² According to J. Sanmartin-Ascaso (דוד(*dod*), in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. I, Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Nelter Ringgren, translated by John T. Wallis, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and David E.

cases outside the book of Songs where *dod* means love. But these cases give an opportunity for a better understanding of the biblical message.

An example is its use in Proverbs (7, 18): “come, let us take our fill of love until the morning” (לֶכֶּה נִרְוֶה דוֹדִים עַד־הַבֹּקֶר) (leka nirwe dodim ad-ha’bboqer). Previous verses show that these words belong to a harlot. She is not identified in person, by her name, because she represents an entire social category. Her description is quite suggestive. She is described as a predator which waits for its prey to come. The woman is fierce and her feet won’t rest until she catches the man she wants. The text reveals that she is married, but the man she looks for is not her husband. The same sexual and erotic significance is seen in Ezekiel (16, 8; 23, 17). In both cases it is about Israeli idolatry which is associated with harlotry and it implies sexual behavior.

An exception from this perspective is the text from Isaia 5, 1: אֲשִׁירָה נָא לִידִידֵי שִׁירָתְךָ דוֹדֵי לְכַרְמוֹ כֶּרֶם הָיָה לִידִידֵי בְּקָרוֹן בְּוֶשְׁמֹן (aşirah nna lididi şirat dodi le’karmo kerem haya lididi beqeren ben-şamen - “Now will I sing to my well beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill”).

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible avoids *eros* as a word unworthy of being part of the revelation. But it could use *agapao*, which follows *ahab* in all its appearances. Even if we speak about a passionate love, *dod* doesn’t mean sexual or erotic love. It is clear that it is a word used to describe the relation between two people, a man and a woman. He refers always to how the woman will describe her lover.

In Songs *dod* is not used just to describe a simple beloved person. It has the suffix of 1 person singular, which means “my beloved”. In this way it has the powerful mark of possession: it belongs to me. *Dodi* is bride’s confession towards all the people. She speaks of her beloved to the “daughters of Jerusalem” (1, 4) so that all others should know that he belongs to her. It is possible to sense here a little bit of jealousy.

With the exception of Isaiah 5, 1, where it has a different meaning, *dod* describes a passionate love. This is the reason why the preference of the Septuagint for *adelphidos*, as translation of *dod* is surprising. *Adelphidos* is a characteristic of the Song of Songs and it appears only in this book for 32 times¹³ and its meaning is uncertain. Anatole Bailly send us to the meaning of *erastes* to find out that *adelphidos* means to love with passion¹⁴. Another lexicon indicates that it means son of brother or sister, nephew¹⁵ and Liddel-Scott¹⁶ refers only to the idea of the beloved one.

It is clear that *adelphidos* comes from the same family as *adelphos* and is quite tight with the idea of brotherhood. Indeed, the bride and the groom address each other using words such as brother and sister: “thou hast ravished my heart, my sister” (4, 9); “a garden inclosed is my sister” (4, 12); “o that thou wert as my brother” (8, 1). In the latest example, *adelphidos* is used for naming the groom.

Green, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, p. 148), *dod* can be found for almost 35 times in Song of Songs.

¹³ Edwin Hatch, Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament*, volume I A-I, Akademische Druck-u Verlagsanstalt, Graz, 1975, p. 20.

¹⁴ Anatole Bailly, *Le Grand Bailly, Dictionnaire Grec-Français*, Ed. Hachette, Paris, 2000, p. 23, 796.

¹⁵ Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of Septuagint*, Peeters, Leuven, 2009, p. 9.

¹⁶ Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott (Compiled by), *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 20.

It can hardly be accepted that our Greek word meant really brother or it could anyhow be connected to family bounds. In ancient times, during the Patriarchs' period marrying someone within the same family was habitual. It was the case of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But since the time of Moses, it was forbidden to marry a relative.

Concerning the possession suggested by the Hebrew *dodi*, it is possible that the translators of the Bible would think that *adelphidos* will show the real meaning of the biblical text. Since it comes from an area of family bounds, the Greek term should render the sense of belonging to someone. The brother and the sister are connected to each other by families ties. There is nothing that could separate them no matter what happens. It is also the case in the relation between the bride and the groom. At least, this is her perspective that he is her beloved one and no one will ever change this. She affirms this lot of times by affirming "he is my beloved", as if this expression seems to be one of the main ideas of book of Songs.

The affiliation is very important to the bride. That's why she underlines in different ways the strong bound between them both. She says, for example, "my beloved is mine, and I am his" (2, 16). We can see in these expressions what she meant when she called him "my beloved". When she is asked where her groom is, she feels that it's necessary to underline the aspect of belonging to each other "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (6, 3).

The way she describes their relationship, even if they are not husband and wife yet, reminds of that special moment of creation, "therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2, 24). Since the marriage was sacred in Israeli beliefs, the bride presents themselves as already married so that no one could break their bound of love.

Ra'ya and plesion

The last pair of words presented in the beginning of this paper refers to groom's feelings for his bride: *ra'ya* and *plesion*. If we stop first to the Hebrew word, *ra'ya* we'll see it means "companion" and it is part of the verb רָעָה (*ra'a*) family, a verb which has the meaning of "to be companions". In fact all the words from this verbal root have the same meaning: friend, companion, fellow¹⁷. The root רעה covers all the possible range of friendship in the Bible's writings. It refers even to the relation given by affiliation to a tribe or a nation¹⁸.

According to George W. Wigram's concordance, *ra'ya* is used only for a few times in the pages of the Hebrew Bible. It appears for about 10 times and only one of these times it is outside the book of Songs. The text form Judges (11, 37) states the words of Jephthah's daughter. She asks her father to let her go into the mountain to weep for her virginity with her friends. It is clear that the friends of whom the text speaks about are very close friends, but the text has nothing to do with the possible meaning of *ra'ya* in Songs.

It is indeed a mark of a certain affiliation, possibly a mark of fidelity, but there is no other sign of passionate love. *Ra'ya* speaks about a friendly love or a brotherhood-kind of

¹⁷ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 945-946.

¹⁸ Richard S. Hess, רעה, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. III, Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, translated by John T. Wallis, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and David E. Green, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, p. 1145.

love. But not about a love that could indicate any sign of passion, of eroticism. And this is the reason why the holy author of this book preferred such a word, instead of using others. At first sight, it seems that the groom's love for his bride is not as powerful as hers. It is quite different than what you might expect to be.

For the readers of the entire Bible and for those who have just a little knowledge of the Ancient Near East's habits during those times, the Song of Songs is a surprising work. More than a half of the song belongs to the bride who speaks very passionately and strongly about her feelings. In the first chapter of the book, 10 of the 17 verses are women's words. The same thing occurs in all chapters: in chapter 2 – 9 of 17 verses (verses 10 to 15 seem to describe what the groom would say); chapter 3 – 4 of 11 verses (the verses from 6 to 11 seem to be the writer's words); chapter 4 – 1 of 16 verses; chapter 5 – 14 of 16 verses; chapter 6 – 3 of 12 verses (some of verses are the writer's words); chapter 7 – 4 of 14 verses; chapter 8 – 4 of 14 verses. Anyway, the bride uses many powerful words to declare her love. There are some other romance stories during the Old Testament pages, but this one is the first story where the woman plays an important role. She seems to be more important than the man, because her words are courageous for those ancient times. The bride doesn't stay, she doesn't wait and, surely, she doesn't receive love as a gift. She acts, she states her feelings loud and clear without being afraid to express herself.

The groom seems to be more rational in expressing his feelings. He doesn't use great words of love, of passionate love. But almost every time he uses *ra'ya* he makes a reference to her beauty: "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair" (1, 15; 4, 1; 4, 7; 6, 4; 7, 7). In the few moments when he doesn't underline her beauty, the groom describes her in special words. So in all other cases, *ra'ya* is surrounded by some of the most descriptions ever written.

It is interesting that those who translated the Septuagint used a well known word, which is *plesion*. It is a word that comes a lot in the Greek text of the Bible because it was used to translate more than one word. When the Hebrew text speaks about *re'a* (neighbor), *ach* (brother), *qabod* (near), *amit* (fellow) it translates through *plesion*. So it covers a huge area of meanings. It is used to refer to a neighbor to whom you had no relation of any kind (Genesis 11, 3; 11, 7; Exodus 11, 2). Most commonly it is preferred for the one coming from the same nation as the speaker, for the fellow. And this is the way we can find it in Moses' laws. The well known commandment "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19, 18) used the Greek *plesion* to indicate the neighbor.

The fact that this term was preferred to render the groom's words regarding his bride is surprising. It speaks about a kind of a relationship, but it is a relationship that originates in duty and not in love. The duty is to love your neighbor, to do him well, to help him and not to hurt him. It is a duty, a commandment. This is why the Greek text doesn't express any passion in the groom's statement. Thus, the text is barren.

Why did the Greek translators use *plesion*, such an arid word? The explanation might be that they have seen something more here than just a common love story between two lovers. If the ancient rabbinic exegesis has seen in the Song of Songs a metaphor of love between God and his people, they could not use passionate words on the behalf of God. And, from piety towards the Lord they used the word *plesion*.

The scene where the act of Song of Songs takes place is filled with statements of love. Verbs, nouns and adjectives are put together to form one of the great love stories of all time. But the words the lovers use for each other are quite unique in this literary genre. We can see eroticism there, but an Eros filled with pure passion. There is nothing impure here. It is a story about lovers belonging to one another, about how love makes a lover lose himself or herself into the beloved person.

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