

## Introduction

Meditations on the Song of Songs

by Teresa of Avila

Teresa states that she wrote these meditations out of **obedience**, because of her desire to share with her Sisters her **understanding** of the *Song of Songs* that she experienced. Her hope was that her Sisters would receive some of the **consolation** and **knowledge** that had been given her upon hearing those **mysterious words of love**.

Teresa enthusiastically undertook this work. It **consoled** her to tell her meditations to her daughters. She reasoned that even if she failed to explain what had been mystically given to her, her time would have been well spent reflecting on such sublime themes. Teresa felt that the Lord's love was poorly understood and that people refused to consider the mysteries contained in these words spoken by the Holy Spirit.

For many years, she had many fears but was consoled by hearing words from the *Song of Songs*. Through them, she understood her soul was being well guided and that a soul in love with its Spouse could experience all these favors ... and joys in relation to Him. In addition, she felt it was wrong that women were being prevented from enjoying the riches contained in God's words and works.

### 1-Historical Context

The **daring** behind her *Meditations* can only be grasped if we consider the dominant attitude at the time in Spain towards the Scriptures. The Spanish Inquisition kept a

tight check on the vernacular or people's versions that were not as numerous as in other countries in Europe ...

In the fourth session of the Council of Trent in 1546, the suitability of translating the Bible into the language of the people was **debated**. The Spanish theologians were opposed; the Council made no legislation about it. Spain, on its own however, included vernacular versions of the Bible on its indexes or lists of forbidden books.

The reasoning behind this restriction was explained where there was a risk of interpretation error when women and unlearned people read parts of Scripture ...

The Spanish indexes, that would have affected Teresa, forbade both the reading and publication of Sacred Scripture in the vernacular. It was however possible to provide translations of Scriptural passages in spiritual books. Spiritual writers made ample use of this permission.

In light of such facts, Teresa could not have had access to the Bible in the vernacular ...

With respect to the verses from the *Song of Songs* that she used there are several ways she could have come to know them.

We know she read verses in Latin in the breviary and understood them. She tells us: **"For a number of years now the Lord has given me great delight each time I hear or read words from the Song of Songs. The delight is so great that without understanding the words my soul is stirred and recollected more than by devotional books written in the language I understand ... even when the Latin words were translated for me .... I no longer understood the text."**

Teresa might have used a translation of the *Song of Songs* from an Office of the Blessed Virgin in the Spanish Book of Hours or asked a confessor for a translation or perhaps taken the passages from a spiritual book.

## 2-The Word of God

It is clear from a study of Teresa's life that she received **no education** in Sacred Scriptures yet her knowledge and use of Scriptures despite this lack of formal training is amazing.

Without previous knowledge of the meaning of a passage or the exact meaning of Latin text, she penetrated, through **mystical experience**, to the deepest sense of the verse. **"And, in fact, it has happened to me that while in this quietude, and understanding hardly anything of the Latin prayers ... I have not only understood how to render the Latin verse in the vernacular but have gone beyond to rejoicing in the meaning of the verse."**

The obstacle to an understanding is sin. **"Since such persons have no love, they can easily read the Song of Songs daily and not become involved in the words ..."**

Teresa of course did not mean that her experience was the criterion for judging Scripture. She recognized that those whose work it is to explain Scripture work hard ... and much can be gained by their careful study.

Yet even these masters of Scriptures admitted to her that the doctors who had written commentaries on the Song of Songs had never finished explaining the words... Teresa at one point exclaimed: **"For one word of His will contain within itself a**

**thousand mysteries; our understanding is very elementary."**

Humility is the attitude and it must accompany anyone's approach to the Bible. The **supreme example** of this **humility** is the Blessed Virgin Mary. Once the angel had answered her question ... **"she engaged in no further discussion."**

Teresa expressed displeasure with some learned men: **"The Virgin Mary did not act as do some learned men ... they want to be so rational ... and precise in their understanding ... that it seems that only they with their learning can understand the grandeurs of God. If only they could learn something from the humility of the most Blessed Virgin."**

... Through Teresa's **mystical experience**, she was able to **penetrate to the deepest content** of the Biblical texts especially when they centered on such **themes** as; God's truth and fidelity, the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity; union with Christ in both His humanity and divinity and the peace of Christ.

The *Song of Songs* may be applied, as it has been in Christian Tradition, to the **mutual love** between **Christ and His Church**, the **Blessed Virgin Mary**, or the **individual soul**.

There is a crescendo in both the love and the intimacy between bride and bridegroom. This culmination would seem to be the total gift of marriage. If applied to the **individual member of Christ's Church who better than a soul** who has experienced the **'favors, swoons, deaths, afflictions delights, and joys'** that accompany the ascent to total **union with God**.

In Teresa's reflections on the *Song*, she only covers a **few verses** of the entire text.

Though they apply perfectly to the Blessed Virgin Mary, she concentrates on an interpretation that speaks of the **love between Christ and the soul.**

### **3-Copies & Date of Composition**

These meditations by Teresa have been **lost** to us. It seems that though Teresa wrote her Meditations with the approval of a confessor; but a later confessor, upon hearing of so daring a work, became **frightened**. He thought it dangerous for a woman to write on the *Song of Songs* and felt like St. Paul that women should be silent in the Church. He told Teresa to burn her meditations which she did.

Happily though, copies of these meditations were already in circulation and guarded by persons who valued them as **spiritual treasures.**

Teresa's nuns in Alba de Tormes hid their copy in the monastery. Of the four copies available today, this one is the most complete copy. When they were told by Teresa's confessor to burn it, they instead gave their copy to the Duchess of Alba who valued and guarded it.

Teresa possibly wrote the work at St. Joseph's in Avila ... There is however thought that the work was drafted twice: the first in late 1566 or early 1567; the second sometime between 1572 & 1575. AMEN