The Song of Songs and Twelfth-century Byzantium

In 1150, or maybe 1151 or 1152 — we can't be certain — a messenger came galloping along the road from Constantinople to Philippopolis, the modern Plovdiv in Bulgaria where the emperor Manuel Komnenos was encamped, with his army and a large portion of his court, during a respite in his campaign against Hungary, the details of which are now largely obscure and confused. Tucked in amongst the routine communications from the capital to the emperor was a document of a rather different sort for another recipient. 'You have become a flower and lily of the valleys, excelling the remaining flowers, arising out of the plain of our nature sweetly smelling, lustrous and pure' it states; it goes on: 'Then your Majesty says, “Lead me to the banqueting house, put over me the banner of love, stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples” [Song of Songs 2. 4-5] ... You wish to be led to the banqueting house itself and to put your mouth to the very vats in which they ferment the sweet wine of wisdom'. Now this is perhaps slightly extravagant and bizarre language, or at least that is how it struck me the first time I came across it. It occurs in fact in a letter of spiritual advice written by

1 This paper was first read at a seminar held in April 1991 at the Humanities Research Centre in the Australian National University, Canberra, to discuss the contribution of Peter Brown to the study of the ancient world. Though it has benefited from comments both from those present and from others, it remains substantially as it was delivered.

2 For this period, F. Chalandon, Les Comnène: études sur l'empire byzantin au IXe et au XIIe siècle, ii (Paris, 1912) remains valuable; see also P. Lamma, Comneni e Stauffer, 2 vols (Rome, 1955-1957); and for a general overview M. Angold, The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204 (London, 1984).

3 Iakovos Monachos, letter 7. 32-34 = Gregory of Nyssa, Homily on Song of Songs 4, in Gregorii Nysseni in Canticum Canticorum, ed. H. Langerbeck (Leiden, 1960), 113. 110-11, 20-21f. Subsequent citations are by page and line number of this edition. References to the letters of Iakovos are by letter and by line number of the forthcoming edition.

4 Iakovos, 7. 70-72, 76-77; Gregory, Homily 4 (119. 12-14, 17f).
a certain Iakovos, a monk, to the sevastokratorissa Eirene, Manuel’s sister-in-law, with whom he was at this time in fairly regular correspondence. I will have more to say about Iakovos in a moment; for the time being let me continue with my first reactions to these lines. The phraseology seemed familiar, and sure enough a cursory investigation showed that Iakovos was quoting from the *Song of Songs*. Further investigation showed that he was also quoting extensively from Gregory of Nyssa’s commentary — or rather, homilies — on the *Song of Songs*; and that, moreover, he was rewriting his selected phrases into a kind of mosaic, to make a connected sequence of thought that paraphrased Gregory’s and was tied in thematically and grammatically to Eirene and her circumstances.

Amidst all the other oddities that surround this correspondence, of which my husband and I are completing the *editio princeps*, I was conscious of a series of tensions — between for example, Iakovos’ assumption on occasion of a high moral tone towards Eirene and his abject obsequiousness at other times; between the monastic circumstances of Iakovos and Eirene’s court environment; but most especially between Iakovos’ exhortations to a life of quiet piety and (he sensuous language in which it was couched, both that of the *Song of Songs* itself and of Gregory’s response to it.

At about the time that the extent of Iakovos’ debt to Gregory of Nyssa was dawning on me, Peter Brown’s *Body and Society* came into my hands — a book which I read with a sense of revelation, and also with the hope that it would illuminate Gregory’s use of a text which seems somewhat incongruous to a life of ascetic renunciation. However, though the *Song of Songs* is mentioned once or twice in *Body and Society* neither it nor any of the commentaries on it are among the texts taken for detailed exposition, though Origen’s use of the *Song of Songs* is discussed briefly. That seems perfectly reasonable — not every pertinent text can be covered in generous detail and Peter Brown’s selection of material for discussion is wide-ranging and judicious. But I have come to feel this omission as a significant one. The *Song of Songs* on the one hand generated tensions by problems arising out of its own interpretation and at other times served to express and perhaps redress some of the tensions in the medieval world that are presaged by *Body and Society*. This talk is thus a proposal for a few more pages for that book, though written from a different stand-point in the twelfth century and without...

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5 ‘Sevastokratorissa’ is the title used by the wife (or, in this case, widow) of a ‘sevastokrator’, a son or brother of the emperor.

the coruscating eloquence with which the real writer of *Body and Society* would have invested them.

Tensions have, of course, always surrounded the *Song of Songs*. This is a book in which lovers sing of their yearning for each other in terms that are charged with an erotic physicality, direct and recognisable over the centuries. There have always been debates as to how it should be read — as some kind of allegory or as a real celebration of human love.

Though it seems to have been long situated securely in the Old Testament canon and accepted both by the Synagogue and the early Christian Church, in the first century A.D. Rabbis at the council of Jamnia were still able to debate its canonicity. After all God is mentioned once only in the book (*Song of Songs* 8. 6) and then only indirectly, and the tone throughout is secular, to say the least. Nevertheless the Rabbis concluded that 'all the Scriptures are holy but the *Song of Songs* is the Holy of Holies'. As for the Greek text, the Septuagint version from the Hebrew was made probably by about 100 B.C., while other Greek versions were made subsequently by Aquila (90-130 A.D.) and by Symmachus and Theodotion towards the end of the second century. Rahlfs' Septuagint edition, which takes occasional notice taken of Symmachus' version, is based on the codices Alexandrinus and Sinaiticus and is probably a reasonable representation of the text generally used in the Byzantine world. As for when the original Hebrew text came into being — that remains a matter for considerable debate. Is the Solomonic attribution to be taken seriously? Does the list of spices reflect trade with the Indus valley or even Ceylon? Do the place names represent a geographic and historical actuality? Is the context then to be taken as the ninth century B.C.? Or are there pastoral parallels with Theokritos, for example, and do these suggest a later date, in the third century? Is the final text a late reworking of many traditional elements? There seems no definitive answer — in fact the text is one which defies such pedantic questions.7

Equally there is no clear agreement on how the text is put together. There would seem to be two main characters, one male — traditionally interpreted as the Bridegroom, and one female — the Bride, also called the Shulamite; there would also seem to be two groups, choruses as it were, of young men and young women whose comments are interspersed in the dialogues of the protagonists. But there are no connecting narrative passages

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7 For a survey of the background to the *Song of Songs* and changing interpretations of the text as sketched in this and the following paragraphs, see the invaluable survey of M.V. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible, vol. 7c (New York, 1977); or more recently R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis, 1990).
and it is not always clear who is speaking. Although a number of manuscripts — amongst them the codex Sinaiticus — add marginal notes to assign sections to characters and to give a rudimentary dramatic framework, there is no agreement among commentators on what divisions may exist in the text.

Modern discussions and criticism of the Song of Songs have tended to focus on questions of origin, which have implications for the text’s date. It has been pointed out that parallels for the erotic scenario might be found in the fertility rituals of Canaan and Assyria, in the symbolic marriages of Ishtar and Tammuz for which hints can be found within the Old Testament itself as well as more definitively from archaeological evidence from the seventh century B.C. Begging questions of continuity, parallels have been drawn with Syrian village wedding customs observed in the last decades of the nineteenth century where the bride and groom used to play the role of king and queen in a week-long marriage feast. More prudently, thematic parallels have been found in love songs from Ancient Egypt, though even these must pre-date any possible time of composition for the Song of Songs by at least a millennium. The thrust of recent work, however, is to de-allegorize and de-mythologize the text — in its oldest form at least — and read it as a straightforward celebration of human love and sexuality. Which, of course, leads us back to the question why the book was ever included in the Jewish sacred scriptures in the first place. It has been suggested that probably the simplest explanation is that these are a genuine collection of wedding songs, which tradition gradually enshrined in popular affection until they became sanctified and canonised by familiarity.

However, the fact remains that from very early on the Song of Songs was read allegorically. For Jewish commentators it was taken as representing the relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people, first in general terms of a mystic marriage (for which there are a few Old Testament parallels, especially in Hosea 2. 18 and Isaiah 54. 5), then in more ingenious and poetry-destroying detail as a series of statements about Israel’s historical progress and rituals, and eventually as a more general description of the union of the active and passive intellects in the human psyche.

The Christian commentators shared a number of these approaches. One of the attitudes common to both Jewish and Christian writers on the Song of Songs was that this was a difficult text to understand correctly. It was all too liable to misinterpretation by the pruriently minded and was better kept out of the hands of women, children and young men: it should not be made freely available to the immature. It was classed with the other so-called Solomonic texts, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, whose interpretation progressed from the
straight-forward in *Proverbs*, where the meaning was almost entirely on the surface, to the complex and subtle in the *Song of Songs*, where the true meaning was well below the surface.

It is time to ask where this discussion is going in terms of this conference. Is it not rather striking that Origen, who is one of the key figures in the development of the idea of sexual renunciation in the early Church, should have made special studies of this text whose subject would seem to be a joyous affirmation of that very sensuality that he says is to be eschewed? Let me remind you of Origen's writings on the *Song of Songs*. He treated this text three times in the course of his life. First in his youth in notes of which only fragments survive in the *Philokalia*; then in his mature years in a major commentary and also in homilies which drew on the commentary. The Greek text for these three studies barely survives independently — cannibalised in sundry catenae or absorbed by later writers, especially Gregory of Nyssa. As a result we are at something of a disadvantage since we can know both by and large only through Latin translations, made for the homilies by Jerome (in about 383) and for the commentaries by Rufinus (in about 410). Though Jerome and Rufinus both had their problems in interpreting Origen it would seem that neither translation was unduly distorted: Jerome in fact expressed profound admiration for Origen's exposition of this text, declaring that here he had outdone himself.  

Now Origen, partly presumably by temperament, partly from his Platonic formation, was deeply conscious of the impermanence of this world and all its physical manifestations, with the corollary that the only true permanence lies elsewhere — beyond the visible frontiers of the world of sense perception or else deep within the individual. Origen would seem to have seen the *Song of Songs* as a demanding text, the culmination of the seven Old Testament canticles, meditation on which would lead the individual to a more profound understanding of the spiritual world. It was also a text to which Origen, like the Jewish commentators whose work he clearly knew, thought the reader should come after the easier concepts of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*. It most certainly was not for the spiritually inexperienced, who otherwise would read 'in a carnal sense what is intended spiritually'.

So, for Origen (and here I am relying mainly on the Homilies), of the characters seen in the *Song*, the Bridegroom is to be read as Christ and the

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9 Rousseau, op. cit., p. 26 (my translation).
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Bride as the Church; this may sound somewhat impersonal but Origen tells the reader to identify personally with the Bride as representing the Church, so that the Bride’s responses are to become those of the individual soul. Furthermore, given that for Origen the visible world is but a fleeting shadow of that invisible realm to which we should aim, we must not live according to flesh and blood. We must therefore understand in a spiritual sense the images of the Song — the kisses, the ointment, the chariot of Pharaoh and so on. As the Bride is aflame with passion for the Bridegroom, so the soul must burn with a spiritual passion to achieve the union with Christ which is the goal of every soul. Though drawing on the Jewish tradition of piecemeal exegesis of separate elements in the Song, Origen subordinates these to the overarching concept of the soul’s upward progression towards the final union with the Divine in the world beyond the present.

Now it would seem that what emerges from Origen’s response to the Song of Songs is somewhat paradoxical, and here my argument in this paper only provides a variation on the illuminating paragraphs in Body and Society (pp. 172-3), where Professor Brown speaks of Origen moving away from the determining of the body. In denying the reality of the flesh Origen is nevertheless affirming its force; though translated to a spiritual sphere, it is only through admitting the strength of carnal passion that the overwhelming nature of a spiritual love can begin to be adumbrated.

Now Origen on the Song of Songs was enormously influential in both the Greek and Latin traditions — his creative mysticism caused previous commentaries, such as those of Hippolytus, virtually to disappear. I shall come back to Origen in the Latin West briefly later. In Greek, Gregory of Nyssa — as I have already remarked — drew both on Origen’s homilies and on the commentaries, so much so that some passages would seem to have been taken over almost verbatim. But I would like once again to draw your attention to the particular exemplification of the tensions we are examining that can be observed in Gregory’s attitudes — an aspect I would like to have seen explored in the relevant chapter of Body and Society. On the one hand we have the De virginitate. Here Gregory argues that successful achievement of spiritual union with God is to be associated with physical chastity. One has to admit, however, that many of his arguments have a mundane ring — the responsibility of running a household is a burden that distracts one from one’s spiritual duties, and the rearing of children is a heart-breaking process. As a married man, Gregory is regretful that the path of physical chastity and its spiritual rewards have been denied him. On the other hand, however, the commentary on the Song of Songs, written probably towards the end of his

life, shows a comfortable acceptance of physicality as he describes, to take but one example, the Bride embraced by the Bridegroom, held first by his right hand and then by his left as she is wounded with love;¹¹ and this physicality is not rejected but is taken as a vehicle to express a Platonic mysticism.

Like Origen, Gregory urges his readers to approach the *Song of Songs* in the appropriate frame of mind — ‘Let no one bring passionate fleshly thoughts’, for ‘through the words of the Song the soul is escorted to an incorporeal, pure and spiritual union with God’, he says.¹² Also like Origen, Gregory considers that different texts are appropriate at different stages of spiritual progress; so *Proverbs* ‘teaches us in one way and *Ecclesiastes* in another’,¹³ leading finally to the teaching of the *Song of Songs* where ‘what is described is a marriage but what is understood is the union of the human soul with God’.¹⁴ In *Proverbs* the text to be interpreted presents a male figure, an inexperienced youth, to be interpreted as the soul, to whom advice was given by Wisdom, Sophia, presented as a personified female and to be interpreted as the Divine Wisdom, God. In the *Song of Songs*, however, the figure to be interpreted as the soul, the Bride, is now female (with a neat grammatical gender correspondence to ψύχη) while the divine Being is now to be seen through the male Bridegroom.¹⁵ Elsewhere Gregory emphasizes the irrelevance of gender — ‘there is neither male nor female in God, for how can anything transitory like this be attributed to God?’¹⁶ Nevertheless Gregory still finds it meaningful to express the soul’s progress to union with God through images of this physical world, both those already included in the *Song of Songs* and those he adduces himself — on a rather mundane, even if Platonic, level when the soul is depicted as a mirror reflecting the archetypal beauty, through a more exotic set of explanations when the Bride’s likeness to Pharaoh’s cavalry is explicated as a catalogue of praises and including the everyday: an apple is a pleasant sight, delightful to the senses, and when correctly interpreted nourishing to the soul.

¹¹ *Homily* 4 (128. 20 - 129. 1).
¹² Prologue to *Homily* 1 (15. 4-5, 13-15).
¹³ Ibid. (18. 7-8).
¹⁴ Ibid. (22. 17 - 23. 1).
¹⁵ Ibid. (23. 1-6).
¹⁶ *Homily* 7, on *Song of Songs* 3. 11 (213. 2-4).
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The point I am trying to make is that Gregory's arguments and language are those of some one who sees that one must turn away from this world in order that his and his reader's attention should be focussed on the more abiding realities beyond and behind what can be seen and touched and felt in the present. But his language, and his arguments, are also those of some one who cannot escape an awareness of the goodness, beauty and good report of much that is in the imperfect world of natural phenomena and human relations. He guides us through these, as a route and as a metaphor, to what lies beyond.

Now we have rather lost sight of the starting point of this discussion — the monk Iakovos sending his letters down the probably muddy roads of Bulgaria early in the 1150s; we must return to him. He is a figure of whom virtually nothing is known. He is to be identified with the Iakovos from Kokkinobaphos who wrote six homilies on the Theotokos, based on the Protoevangelium of James and the ninth-century homilies of George of Nikomedia.17 These texts, known as the Kokkinobaphos homilies, survive in two manuscripts from the mid-twelfth century which are masterpieces of illumination. They are as well full of iconographic puzzles, so much so that it is just possible, from the peculiarities in design, that Iakovos painted the manuscripts himself, though it is more likely that he simply provided detailed instructions for the compositions. But this opens up all sorts of other issues, and does not help us in identifying Iakovos — especially as Kokkinobaphos has remained obstinately unidentifiable as a town, or village, or monastery. The reason why it is possible to argue that the Iakovos of the letters and the Iakovos of the homilies are one and the same is that they share a stylistic trait: both writers are reluctant to compose a sentence of their own but instead construct at times quite complex periods out of strings of phrases snipped from earlier writers. In analysing the situation in the letters in the course of preparing the edition, Michael and I began by avoiding the word plagiarism as inappropriate to a medieval context in which the individual ownership of a phrase was not a current concept. We have passed through ideas like mimesis and cento, but have found ourselves back with the still unsatisfactory term plagiarism. Leaving the homilies to one side, the letters are something of an extreme case. The source hunt that we have been conducting on Iakovos, on and off, for the past few years has now reached its feasible limits.18 The two


18 The final stages would have been impossible without the benefit of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae and the immense kindness of Edwin Judge and Alanna Nobbs of Macquarie University who allowed us access to the TLG disk and their Ibacus
per cent or so of text for which we cannot find a source comes probably from
the pen of Iakovos himself, while all the rest is stitched together from one or
more works by half a dozen or so authors: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of
Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom (all from the fourth century),
Prokopios of Gaza (from the sixth) and Niketas of Herakleia (from the late
eleventh). The only books of the Septuagint that are quoted extensively are
*Job* (and that largely in connection with Prokopio’s *catena* on *Job*) and the
*Sophia Sirachides* while the New Testament is cited only when it appears in a
source. I do not know of any other author who cobbles his sentences together
in quite such a laborious fashion; however, discussion of the reasons for his
technique leads into quite a different set of issues and must be set aside.
Iakovos’ method is to change genders of nouns and adjectives to suit his female
addressee and adapt the syntax elsewhere so that he can fabricate a sentence that
is often made up of two or three widely dispersed phrases. Sense is usually
made, though there are some horrendous anacoloutha within sentences and
frequent abrupt transitions of sense from one sentence to the next. Brilliant
phrases from the Cappadocian Fathers gleam amidst the blurred syntax and
imprecise logic that links them. Grammatical howlers are comparatively rare,
and are most common in the few passages that would seem to be written by
Iakovos himself. However, by and large a coherent sense does emerge from
each letter when taken as a whole, though infuriatingly often this dissolves
when key passages are examined in detail for their implications. One
interesting aspect of the choice of texts is what it reveals about the material
that at least one monastic library held and what theological literature at least
one twelfth-century monk, who was loud in his rejection of secular writings,
knew well. What I want to emphasize in the present context is that one of
these texts, perhaps the one that he used most extensively, was Gregory of
Nyssa on the *Song of Songs*. He must have judged it appropriate for his
purposes. What were they?

Iakovos was offering spiritual advice to the sevastokratorissa Eirene, a
high-ranking court lady. Now the role of spiritual adviser is one for which we
have a certain amount of evidence from the late eleventh and the early twelfth
centuries, in that such figures can be observed flitting through the pages of
Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad*, for example, moving from one aristocratic
household to another. It has in fact been suggested that these individuals,
privileged by their calling, could have played covert political roles since they
could well have been privy to much otherwise secret information. However,
as far as I am aware, there are very few examples of the sort of advice they communicated to their ‘clients’. One set of letters between a nun from the imperial family and her rather reluctant counsellor in the fourteenth century was published recently but I know of no such correspondence from the twelfth century. Iakovos’ letters then are of potential interest on several levels. As I have just mentioned, they indicate the reading of one twelfth-century monk; they show the relationship between spiritual adviser and advisee in action; and they shed some light on topics that concerned one individual, which can be expected to illuminate details of twelfth-century spirituality. The one level on which their usefulness is rather limited is as a historical source, and I must confess that it was this aspect that led me to them in the first place; some information can be extracted, but only indirectly and in conjunction with other contemporary material.

What about the recipient? She is a shadowy figure in the Comnenian court of the early years of the reign of Manuel Komnenos (1143-1181) — shadowy because she seems to have been written out of the contemporary histories, with a damnatio memoriae so successful that when subsequent histories came to be written she could not be reinserted. Widow of one of the emperor’s elder brothers, briefly a potential empress, mother of the young man who for more than a decade was the next obvious successor to the empire, she spent most of the 1140s in deep disfavour with Manuel; she was imprisoned several times, complaining bitterly of harsh treatment. At the same time, however, on a private level she managed to sponsor lavishly some of the most prominent writers and painters of the time. On a public level her children were major figures in Manuel’s diplomatic games. But by the early 1150s Manuel’s patience would seem to have run out for reasons about which we can only speculate, and he seems to have decided that the best place for Eirene was out of the capital and in the campaign headquarters at Philippopolis, probably because here he could keep a closer eye on what she was getting up to. It is in these circumstances that Iakovos is writing to her.

We have only one side of the correspondence, Iakovos’, of which there are 43 letters and one treatise (On Faith, largely concerned with the role of


21 A.C. Hero, A Woman’s Quest for Spiritual Guidance (Brookline, 1986).

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Holy Spirit in the Trinity). If we take Iakovos' remarks at their face value he would seem to have received some 16 letters from Eirene in the course of their correspondence, and it seems that it was she who initiated it. Chronological indications in the letters are non-existent — there are only the slightest suggestions of passing seasons and no discernible mention of church festivals, for example — but I would think that they must be spread over at least two years, and quite possibly more, to allow both for the number of letters and for the various silences on Eirene's part, on the length of which Iakovos comments — though of course we do not know how long it would be before a pause might begin to disquiet him. Eirene's letters to Iakovos would seem always to have been short, to judge from his comments.

The histories of Kinnamos and Choniates, the recently published *Anacharsis*, the voluminous outpourings of John Tzetzes23 all testify to the hothouse atmosphere of intrigue and back-biting that seems to have been normal in the Constantinopolitan court of the 1140s and 1150s — an unpleasantly venomous environment in which one had to watch one's back and one's tongue for fear of intrigue, tale-bearers and vengeful critics. The letters reveal something of the same unpleasantness. Eirene is warned to beware of disaffected members of her household, told to be fair but firm and be on the look out for any sign of disloyalty. Despite this advice some one close to her, not apparently a family member, did tell tales about her, not once but twice. On the first occasion the problem seems to have blown over, but the second seems to have been more serious: Iakovos does not reveal what the crisis was about, remarking cryptically that the person carrying the letter will have more to say. But Eirene's credibility with the emperor seems to have been totally lost; after this episode there are two more letters from Iakovos but no sign of further word from Eirene. What happened? Was she sent even further away? Did she return to Constantinople? Did she die? — she can by then have been little more than 45 but she may have been in ill-health for some time. But who saw to and paid for the copying of Iakovos' letters into the handsome manuscript in which we know them now? All that, however, is another story.

There is no sign in the letters that Eirene and Iakovos met during the course of the correspondence though Iakovos had clearly had contact with Eirene in the past; he considers that in some way he had helped to bring her into prominence — which raises all sorts of intriguing questions about her background, which is yet another problem that cannot be examined here.

There are three sorts of spiritual advice that he gives her. The first is the practical. Iakovos vehemently advises Eirene to stay away from secular literature. This is fascinating, on two counts — here we have a nice demonstration of a monk’s instinctive reaction to Byzantium’s classical past; and we also have an indication that the criticism corresponds with reality, for Eirene’s involvement with literary sponsorship, as we know from other sources, was a real part of her activities. Iakovos particularly associates Homer, astronomy and rhetoric with her interests and seems to think that she had sat as adjudicator in literary contests. All this, he says, is to be abandoned: but she seems to have been rather obstinate as he comes back to the subject several times. On the positive side Eirene is to read the Scriptures and certain other improving books; Iakovos does not specify what parts of the Bible nor what he means by improving books but he twice says that he is sending a specially prepared pamphlet to help her. Once when she must have told him that she had been looking for books on her own initiative he reacts in horror: she is not to read those books (though what they are is unspecified), rather he will send something more suitable. Then she is to sing hymns early in the morning. And finally, she is commended for teaching and passing on her experience. It is unfortunately not at all clear who it is that she is teaching. Iakovos cannot mean her children, who are by (his) time all elsewhere (the sons on campaign and the daughters married), though they may have left behind some grand-children in her household; perhaps he was referring to young members of her domestic establishment, such as it was; perhaps she had been parked in a religious establishment in Philippopolis and Iakovos is referring to its younger elements. Is she herself by now a nun, a not unlikely scenario for a widow?

The second kind of spiritual advice is doctrinal. Eirene would seem to have problems understanding the status of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, and Iakovos devotes sections of several letters as well as the treatise On Faith to this topic. On Faith might well be one of the improving pamphlets that Iakovos mentions, for otherwise it is difficult to see why it is bundled up with the correspondence. Iakovos argues that the three persons of the Trinity have equal standing without subordination despite the hierarchy implied by the terms Father and Son. So far as I can judge and despite Iakovos’ use of material from patristic Trinitarian debates, this was not a general problem at the time, though, of course, the status of the ‘filioque’ clause in the Nicene creed and its implications for the procession of the Holy Spirit raised issues that were a major factor in the schism of 1054. The Trinitarian controversies of the mid-twelfth century of which we have record (such as those involving Soterichos Panevgenos and Demetrios of Lampe, condemned in 1156 and 1161 respectively) were over the status of the Son and were not focussed directly on
the nature of the Holy Spirit. But further investigation may produce a different conclusion.

The third sort of advice Eirene is given is contemplative — and this is where Gregory of Nyssa comes in and we return to the subject of this paper and the conference. Eirene is urged to devote her soul towards progressively aspiring to a mystic union with the Word, and it is in these passages that Iakovos draws on Gregory’s homilies on the Song of Songs.

Iakovos quotes from all fifteen of the homilies. Although he shows a slight tendency to start with the first and work his way through to the end he also leaps around from homily to homily, following themes. While he has filleted out, as it were, Gregory’s overarching approach — the interpretation of the text as the soul’s progressive search for union with God through contemplation of a series of images — it is nevertheless something of a travesty that survives; which raises all sorts of questions. Did Eirene realise what he was doing? At what level of intertextuality was she operating? Did she recognise the biblical texts? Did she realise that so much was from the Cappadocian Fathers or was she simply and uncritically impressed by Iakovos’ ideas? There is something odd about Eirene which makes it possible that she did not have a fully Greek background and so makes her acceptance of this material less improbable than it might have been, say, with her aunt by marriage, Anna Komnene.

However, the thrust of Iakovos’ contemplative advice (and it only comes in the context of quotations from Gregory of Nyssa) is first, that the ultimate goal of the soul is union with God, expressed as the Lord of Creation, the Word, the Son, the Bridegroom; second, that this achieved by stages, through the contemplation of a series of images, and the text which provides the images is the Songs of Songs, as mediated through Gregory. While I am not sure what this tells us about twelfth-century practice generally, the Song of Songs was certainly used as his mystical vade-mecum by Iakovos.

In the first stage Eirene is to equate herself with the Bride, that is, with the soul as interpreted by Gregory; and the Bride’s words are put in Eirene’s mouth (letter 2). Eirene is described as a lily of the field which rises in its beauty above the thistles. In the next stage (letter 7) Eirene is told that God can dwell in the individual soul, that all natural phenomena are transitory and that one must aspire to the more beautiful world beyond and knowledge of its Lord by contemplation of symbols from this world; symbols such as an

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apple, grapes, the Bridegroom's garments trampled in the vat of grapes, and so on. Eirene as a lily transformed with the eye of a dove, that is, with the eye of prophecy, will comprehend these things. After due assimilation, in the next stage (letter 10), Iakovos moves on to use a deer, that leaps over evil, as a symbol of God and then immediately progresses (scarcely without pause) to what he says is the stage after that and has Eirene declare in the persona of the Bride that she is wounded with love for the Beloved. Discourse follows on the symbolism of the bridegroom's head of gold and his black locks. In the letter following this (letter 11) Eirene is congratulated on her assimilation of the earlier symbols — the apple and so on — and is introduced to the idea that she is to see herself as a horse, ridden by the Word, that is, as a horse in Pharaoh's chariot. Iakovos keeps Gregory's comment that this is a difficult metaphor.

Now the passages that Iakovos has used up to this point are full of responses to the senses of sight — Eirene is compared to a lily, and the Word to a rosy apple; of smell — the lilies are fragrant, Eirene is to anoint herself with perfume; of taste — the apple is delicious, and later honey and milk are brought in to quench Eirene's divinely inspired hunger and thirst. But Iakovos has shown some inclination to avoid the erotic sensuality of the Songs of Songs itself, despite instructing Eirene to desire the apple and its shade, and despite declaring that she is wounded with love for the beloved Bridegroom.

In letter 17, however, Eirene's soul is to be adorned like a Bride for co-habitation with the Son, and she is vouchsafed a kiss. But Iakovos then draws back from whatever thoughts this might have instigated by stating that he has passed from the material to the immaterial, and concludes by declaring that what he has written can be understood on several levels, and has a meaning hidden behind the surface words. That is, whilst proferring images of sensuality, Iakovos is simultaneously withdrawing them. However he is not unwilling to continue using the language of desire — for example, in letter 23 he speaks of the nature of the soul's true desire for the Lord of Creation.

I have made it sound as though Iakovos had a definite programme of spiritual exercises based on Gregory's homilies on the Song of Songs through which he was putting Eirene, and she does seem to have asked him specifically for guidance in this area of spirituality. I have, however, firmed up the edges of his remarks a little, since Iakovos is very unspecific as to how Eirene was to focus her attention on the images he was bringing forward (despite several disquisitions on the nature of the mind and the interaction between mind and soul). One reason for any lack of coherence could well be that the programme has been overlaid by Eirene's other problems, which also demanded comment from Iakovos. There were also the difficulties inherent in dealing with a person of high rank at court, even if that person were intermittently out of favour. At times Iakovos' obsequiousness, to which I referred at the beginning of this
paper, is quite appalling; one can accept his begging Eirene's pardon for bothering her with letters although it is quite obvious that she had demanded them, since his phraseology would come within the vocabulary of court etiquette and he has in fact taken most of such expressions from Basil of Caesarea, but his praise for her spiritual progress, especially in the later stages of the correspondence (for example, in letter 27), is all too often couched in terms that go beyond simple encouragement and seems designed to flatter rather than assist. This is in contrast to some of his reproofs in the earlier letters, particularly in connection with her taste for secular literature in preference to the Scriptures.

Now one problem to be faced when dealing with this correspondence is to assess the quality of the religious experience that Iakovos is advocating for Eirene. From my standpoint in the twentieth century with current attitudes towards plagiarism and in an almost totally secular society, I am instinctively inclined to dismiss Iakovos as a rather ignorant poseur pretending to knowledge and feelings that he does not have — but I think that would be unfair. I suspect that he is clutching at whatever means he can to express himself and, despite the artificiality of using other men's words and the handicaps imposed by Byzantine court intrigue, his attempts to guide Eirene are genuine.

Of course, despite making an issue of the tensions generated by Iakovos' use of Gregory of Nyssa's homilies on the Song of Songs as a guide to spiritual development, I really should not have been surprised. The Song of Songs became one of the most frequently commented books of the Bible. In the East Origen's and Gregory's commentaries were picked through in the mid-fifth century to make a continuous verse-by-verse commentary to which was added in the seventh century material from Maximus the Confessor which formed the so-called Three Fathers' Catena. In the sixth century Prokopios of Gaza produced another catena, with selections from Hippolytus, Didymus, Cyril of Alexandria as well as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. The only commentaries (or full sequence of homilies) to survive complete, however, were those of Gregory and of Philo of Carpasia (from the early fifth century). But the differences between Gregory and Philo, and Gregory and the two main catenae (the Three Fathers' and that of Prokopios) are enormous. All are treating the text allegorically, but where Gregory has an overarching conception of the soul's progress towards union with God and a magnificent, if barely expressible, vision of what that union might mean, the other texts have a piecemeal approach. The Bride is taken to represent the Church and not the

25 R. Devreesse, 'Chaines exégétiques grecques', in Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément 1 (Paris, 1928), col. 1158f. 'Cantiques des Cantiques' remains fundamental.
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individual. Perhaps the compilers of the catenae were shunning the intimacy that was implied. Philo, for example, lacks any overall argument and is content to take the text verse by verse with abrupt equivalents for each item, totally killing any poetry or passion either in the original text or in his interpretation. The next phase of activity by eastern commentators on the Song of Songs before the twelfth century came with Psellos' paraphrase of the Three Fathers' catena, written in political verse at the request of one of his imperial pupils (not named but presumably either Constantine or Michael [Michael VII Doukas, 1071-78]) who had asked for a simple explanation of a complex text. Psellos was not very ambitious in his response; he followed the Three Fathers' catena in making the Bride represent the Church rather than the individual soul and the result rather successfully made the original text sound not terribly exciting. In turning, then, directly to Gregory Iakovos was showing sound literary as well as theological judgement.

But the sequence of commentators in the East is as nothing compared to the Latin West.26 There is a steady but not overwhelming trickle of attention between the sixth and the eleventh centuries, from — for instance — Gregory the Great, Isidore of Seville, Bede, Alcuin, Aponius (one of the longer examples), all fed by Jerome's translation of Origen's commentaries. But in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries there is, or so it seems, within a short space of time an amazing outburst of expositions of the Song of Songs — Anselm of Laon, Bernard of Clairvaux, Rupert of Deutz, Honorius Augustodunensis just to start with. By the end of the century there were a host of homilies, commentaries, and paraphrases in the vernaculars as well as in Latin. The attitudes taken to the text by these writers and preachers varied. Honorius Augustodunensis developed a complex pattern of interlocking symbols by the end of which the original sensuality of the Song of Songs had almost vanished from sight: one suspects that the extent of his desexualisation of the text would have won the admiration of Philo of Carpasia. Bernard of Clairvaux, on the other hand, seems to welcome the sexuality of the Bride's embraces and the Bridegroom's kisses and transfers the phraseology to the individual soul's desires without apparent hesitation, as do later Cistercians such as Gilbert of Hoyland. Rupert of Deutz demonstrates the final stage of the allegorization of the Song of Songs. The Bride, seen by earlier interpreters as the chosen people of Israel, or the Church or eventually the individual soul, is now equated with the Virgin Mary, subsuming within this image both the Church and the individual for both of which the Virgin acts as intercessor.

Now it has not gone unnoticed by critics that this upswelling of interest in the Song of Songs in Western Europe took place at the same time.

26 For a bibliography, see Marvin, op. cit., pp. 236-44.

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as (in no particular order of significance) the rise of the troubadour courtly love lyric, increased devotion to the Virgin Mary, heightened use of Ovid and from the middle of the century the appearance of romances. To use the most general terms, these phenomena are all part of a developing attitude in which an individual's responses to his own sensibilities have become of significance: this is a period during which the psychology and physiology of romantic love began to be a topic of general debate. The *Erec et Enide* of Chrétien de Troyes, to take but one example at random, deals with the interaction between a knight and his lady making that interaction the mainspring of the plot. Discussion why an interest in romantic love should develop at this particular time is a whole academic industry in itself; all I want to do here is point out that the raised profile of the *Song of Songs* is simply part of the same phenomenon. Its refrain ‘for I am sick with love’ (*quia amore langueo* in the Vulgate, τετρωμένη ειμι τῆς ἀγάπης in the Septuagint) could be transferred into one of the secular love songs without incongruity.\(^{27}\) It could even be taken literally as a recent study of the relevant medical treatises has shown: lovesickness came to be recognised as a malady where one person could show physical symptoms of illness through love for another.\(^{28}\)

By this stage, then, though there is still an apparent tension and incongruity between a practitioner of the ascetic life, like Bernard of Clairvaux, drawing on a highly sensuous text to express an approach to the spiritual life, contemporary secular society appears to now be quite comfortable with such an approach. It has recently been argued cogently that one should see Origen's homilies on the *Song of Songs* as playing a significant role in this.\(^{29}\) Though they are not cited directly at this time, there is a marked increase in the number of manuscript copies in circulation. One feels that the biblical parallel with the *Song of Songs* is now serving to articulate and even accommodate within the religious framework ideas which could have remained quite secular.

There are parallels for this in twelfth-century Constantinople. Though there may be no free-standing love poetry to match the troubadour songs, there are novels, the first of which was probably written in the 1140s, in which such


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poetry was embedded. These novels are more artful and complex than anything produced in the Latin West until well on in the century.\(^{30}\) Quite what impetus led to their production is still not clear, though the movement arose within the group of writers who had Eirene as their principal patroness. Nor is it clear how the novels are to be read. Are they to be taken on a literary plane only, as clever pieces of intertextuality drawing on the full range of Greek literature? Or are they to be taken as allegories for the soul’s yearning for unity and the safe haven of salvation, as exemplified by the union in married life of two storm-tossed lovers? Those who could allegorize the *Song of Songs* in the ways we have been discussing would have no difficulty in identifying with this approach. As for any increase in devotion to the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos — that is rather hard to document given that the Theotokos had since the late sixth century been considered the defender of Constantinople; but it is striking that the sevastokratorissa Eirene herself dedicated numerous pieces of church furniture in various churches of the Theotokos in Constantinople and was arguably involved in the preparation and preservation of the other work we ascribe to Iakovos, the Kokkinobaphos homilies in honour of the Theotokos: Eirene would seem to have had, then, a special devotion to the Theotokos.

As one tries to understand Iakovos’ letters to Eirene, it becomes apparent that he chooses as sources texts appropriate to his theme; thus the letters of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus are generally used for the epistolary courtesies that open and close each letter; *Job* and Prokopios’ catena on *Job* are used for lamentation and consolation when disaster strikes Eirene. Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*, on the creation of mankind and the world, is used for accounts of natural phenomena: here one can see another factor at work. Iakovos is recognising Eirene’s special interests since a book on astrology had been dedicated to her by Theodore Prodoromos. In his references to σός Όμηρος he is acknowledging her interests as indicated by the dedication to her of Tzetzes’ Theogony and Manasses’s chronicle. In choosing Gregory on the *Song of Songs* to guide Eirene, rather than the Three-Father paraphrase of Psellus, Iakovos was undoubtedly turning to a spiritual masterpiece. But was he also recognising that it was peculiarly appropriate to Eirene, in that she had previously instigated a certain sort of writing, that is, novels in which the devout have to read the protagonists’ struggle for unity in marriage as symbols of the soul’s striving for unity with God?

Eirene then would be one of many medieval examples — most of whom are found in the West — where both functions of the *Song of Songs* can be seen in operation in close proximity. On the one hand, asceticism boldly

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appropriates erotic imagery to describe and to teach its ultimate metaphysical purposes. On the other hand, the same erotic imagery, filtered through a mass of commentators, good and bad, inspired and prosaic, is used to sanctify and even institutionalize to some extent within the Church, the new psychological interest in romantic love. The Song of Songs played a significant role in the reintegration of the sexual needs of the body into the official consciousness of society.

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