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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

Abstract

The inaccurate translation of the biblical line of the Song of Solomon 1,8 אִם-לֹא תִדְעִי לְךָ הַיָּפֶה בְּנָשִׁים (“If you do not know, O fairest among women”) in the Septuagint (Ἐάν μὴ γνῶς σεαυτήν, ἡ καλὴ ἐν γυναίξιν) 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.