

Song of Songs: A Brief Guide to Some Secondary Literature

R. S. Clarke

Abstract

This review article first outlines some of the most important modern research on the Song of Songs. It then analyses three recent commentaries which offer three different approaches to the Song, those of Cheryl Exum, Daniel Estes, and Robert Jenson, considering introductory matters, the commentary proper, and any theological interpretation.

In recent years there has been a welcome resurgence of interest in the Song of Songs within the scholarly community. Despite this, there is still remarkably little consensus regarding even the most basic of exegetical and hermeneutical questions which the Song raises, making it difficult for the student or pastor to navigate the secondary literature. In this article, I outline some of the most important modern research on the Song and analyse three recent commentaries in this context. It should be noted at the outset that while I would hesitate to fully endorse the contents of any of the works mentioned, they all have valuable insights to contribute. Further, it will be immediately obvious that the article makes no attempt at comprehensiveness.

Prolegomena

The introductory questions of dating, authorship, genre, structure and purpose are not easily settled, and most commentaries on the Song thus have disproportionately long prolegomena relative to the length of the book itself. Here an author must indicate the decisions he or she has made with respect to issues such as the unity of the Song, the number of characters to be identified, and the historical and theological context of the Song. The crucial hermeneutical questions which arise from the genre debate must also be addressed, in order to decide whether the Song will be read as a theological allegory, a drama, a song of human love and sexuality, a wisdom book, or a liturgical text.

Three broad approaches have been developed to answer some or all of these questions: the comparative approach which emphasises the role of other ancient literature; the feminist approach which focusses on questions of gender; and a literary approach which analysis the poetic structure of the book.

Comparative Studies

The two most influential books on this subject are Michael V. Fox's *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) and John White's *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry* SBL Dissertation Series, 38 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978). Most commentators draw on one or both of these volumes to some extent for their insights into parallels between the Song and the ancient Egyptian love poetry. Parallels have also been noted with some Sumerian, Akkadian and Ugaritic poetry. However, an important counter-argument to the results of the comparative approach has been made in an article by Hector Patmore ("The Plain and Literal Sense: On Contemporary Assumptions about the Song of Songs", *VT* 56 no 2 [2006], 239-25), which strongly limits the usefulness of the ancient Egyptian comparisons by demonstrating that the supposed thematic links are too vague and general to be significant.

Nonetheless, the comparative approach has provided several valuable insights as to the genre of the Song, which is now widely

accepted as lyric love poetry. The form of the descriptions in the central chapters of the Song is known to be that of a *wasf*, a wedding song still in use in some Middle Eastern nomadic tribes. However, it should be noted that there is no example of ancient near Eastern love poetry of comparable length or depth to the Song. The vivid characterisation, the compilation of numerous texts, and the use of refrains are all unique to the Song. In addition, as Patmore notes, the thematic links which have been suggested between the Song and the Egyptian poems are so general as to be unconvincing.

Feminist Studies

It is unsurprising that the Song is a favoured text among feminist commentators because of its subject matter of romantic love, its female speaker, and its emphasis on mutuality between the genders. The most influential feminist studies began with Phyllis Trible's seminal work in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). As the title of Trible's work suggests, her focus is on the role of sexuality in the scriptures. In her chapter on the Song she notices the strong connections it has with Genesis 2 and 3 and interprets the Song as the reversal of the fall. This theme was developed further by Francis Landy in his work, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983). Both Trible and Landy work with keen sensitivity to the literary features of the text, though both are also committed to the feminist school of interpretation.

These studies are valuable for the care they take in paying attention to details of the text and their sensitivity to the genre of the Song, as well as its canonical context. Because they are usually, although not always, written by female commentators, they are also valuable for providing a counterpoint to the male-dominated field of biblical studies. Not all feminist scholars who have followed in the footsteps of Trible and Landy are such careful exegetes, however, and there are many examples of hermeneutical excesses to be found in this school.

Literary Studies

A different kind of literary approach is exemplified in the work of M. Timothea Elliot, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle*, (Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang, 1989). Elliot undertakes a close analysis on the Song, paying particular attention to its various refrains, in order to demonstrate the structural unity of the book. A more recent work which takes a similar approach is Patrick Hunt's *Poetry in the Song of Songs: a literary analysis*, *Studies in Biblical Literature*, 96 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). These monographs are extremely useful starting points for understanding the poetic structure of the Song.

A number of more detailed studies have highlighted specific literary aspects of the Song. Jill Munro's work looks at the various kinds of metaphor used in the book (*Spikenard and Saffron: Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995]). Stephen Horine focusses just one such metaphor, that of the marriage bed (*Interpretive Images in the Song of Songs* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

Commentaries

The Song of Songs contains some of the most difficult Hebrew in the Bible, with numerous *hapax legomena* and challenging grammatical structures. The poetic nature of the book also creates its own difficulties, especially the infamous metaphors and similes which the author uses to describe the male and female characters. A good commentary can be a valuable resource in guiding a pastor, student or scholar through this tricky text. However, the lack of consensus on the introductory matters listed above can make it extremely difficult to know what to look for in a good commentary. There is value to be found in all kinds of commentaries on the Song and perhaps the thing to be most avoided is over-reliance on a single commentary, or type of commentary.

There are at least five kinds of commentary on the Song being published today.¹ The least common is what we might call the

¹ I have not included any commentaries which take a dramatic interpretation of the Song since this has largely disappeared from contemporary scholarship.

traditional commentary, which is to say an allegorical interpretation on the Song. A modern commentary of this kind is that by Richard Brooks (*Song of Songs, Focus on the Bible* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1999)). The best commentaries which take such an approach are the Puritan expositions of John Gill (*An Exposition of the Song of Solomon*, 1724) and James Durham (*The Keys to the Song of Solomon*, 1668). The early and mediaeval church also took this approach, and the works of Origen and Bernard of Clairvaux are among the most significant from these eras.

A second approach is exemplified by the vast commentary of Martin Pope in the Anchor Bible series (*Song of Songs* [New York: Doubleday, 1977]). This is a solidly historical-critical commentary, relying heavily on extra-biblical evidence from archaeology and comparative literature. Historical matters such as dating, authorship, purpose and setting are significant. The text itself is subject to detailed examination, with the complexities of the grammar and language in the Song providing fertile ground for Pope to demonstrate his mastery of the subject.

For some commentators, the historical questions are of secondary importance compared to the literary ones. Cheryl Exum (*Song of Songs, Old Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005)), Carey Ellen Walsh (*Exquisite Desire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000)) and others prefer to read the Song as an interesting collection of love poems. These commentaries and monographs can provide great insight into the poetic nature of the text and its emotional effects on the reader.

The fourth category may be described as theological commentaries. These interpreters begin with the presumption that the Song is a canonical text with a theological purpose and their theology, to a greater or less extent, drives their interpretation. Christopher Mitchell's Concordia commentary is self-consciously Lutheran in its approach to the Song (*Song of Songs Concordia Commentary: a Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture* [St Louis: Concordia, 2003]). Iain Provan also makes theological reflections on the Song throughout his commentary (*Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs NIVAC* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001]). Neither Mitchell nor Provan offer not allegorical interpretations in which God becomes a character in the Song, but they do recognise the book as a divine text

which exists in the canon of Scripture, for the benefit of the church.

Finally, there is a fifth, easily distinguished, category of evangelical commentaries. These all follow a similar pattern in which the Song is first avowed to be an anthology of love poems celebrating human love and sexuality. It is then recognised that since Scripture elsewhere draws the analogy between human marriage and the relationship between Christ and the church, the Song may appropriately be used to illuminate those passages. But it is not, itself, about the divine-human relationship. The primary purpose of the Song is thus to help repressed Protestants to overcome their inhibitions about sex. Commentaries of this kind include those by Tremper Longman III (*Song of Songs* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001]) and Richard Hess (*Song of Songs* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005]).

No commentary or collection of commentaries will be an adequate substitute for close, careful, repeated reading of the text itself. However, each has something to offer which can help to illuminate this most wonderful of books. As Rabbi Akiba famously remarked, 'If all Scripture is holy, the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies',² that is, God reveals himself in all Scripture, but in the Song of Songs God reveals himself most intimately and fully to his people. The Song of Songs will richly reward the time spent in it with a more intimate and deeper knowledge of and love for the God who authored it for us.

In the rest of this article, I examine three recently published commentaries, with attention given to the introductory matters, the commentary proper, and any theological interpretation.

**1. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs*, Old Testament Library
(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005)**

Introduction

There are seven chapters devoted to introductory matters, focussing mainly on poetic and thematic issues, but also dealing with historical background, comparative literature and reception history. Exum is a

² Mishnah Yadayim 3:5

thorough and knowledgeable scholar and she handles these issues insightfully without letting the discussion become unnecessarily detailed.

Exum briefly examines the questions of dating and authorship in chapter six, concluding that the evidence is insufficient to determine either. She notes that the style and vocabulary of the book suggest that its finished form was composed within the Israelite elite, rather than within popular culture, although parts of the Song may be adapted from folk songs. The various geographical and historical references within the Song give only the broadest hints of its date, and Exum proposes that they are deliberately vague so as to suggest a 'lyrical, magical time' (66). The linguistic evidence is similarly uncertain, given the mix of archaic and later forms. Exum considers the possibility that the Song was authored by a woman but concludes that although it contains an authentic female voice, this is insufficient evidence for its authorship. She does not discuss the possibility of Solomonic authorship.

For Exum, the most important feature of the Song is its genre. She begins her commentary with this statement:

The Song of Songs is a long lyric poem about erotic love and sexual desire – a poem in which the body is both object of desire and source of delight, and lovers engage in a continual game of seeking and finding in anticipation, enjoyment, and assurance of sensual gratification. A love poem. (1)

The poetic nature of the Song is critical to Exum's interpretation of it and she demonstrates great skill and sensitivity in identifying and analysing its various poetic techniques. The use of dialogue throughout the book is an important part of the Song's literary technique, engaging the reader in the world of the lovers. Meaning is found at many levels in the Song, as is to be expected of such a poem. In particular, Exum finds sexual innuendo throughout, though she is careful to note that it is innuendo. The double entendres of the Song never collapse into the vulgarity of a single entendre. Again, this necessarily involves the reader. Double entendre is 'encoded in the text' but it is 'activated by the reader' (10). For Exum, this allows the Song 'to be read as both very explicitly and very delicately erotic' (10).

While many interpreters have attempted to discern a plot, Exum

points out that these have always proved unsatisfactory. Although there are hints of a story behind the text, or as she puts it, a 'flirtation with a plot' (42), there is not enough information given to reconstruct the story. The narrative is not the point of the poem. Other genres which have been associated with the Song, such as the drama, the cultic reading and the allegory are discussed briefly in the chapter on reception history.

Exum identifies just three speaking characters in the Song: the man, the woman, and the women of Jerusalem. The women of Jerusalem have a key role in Exum's approach to the Song for they form an inbuilt audience to the lovers' dialogue and thus 'facilitate[s] the readers' entry into the lovers' intimate world of eroticism' (7).

In Exum's view, as a love poem, the book was first a literary composition for the purpose of entertainment, rather than ritual or other religious purpose, although it was later used in a religious way. She identifies Song 8:7 as the key verse for understanding the poem, since it is the only place where a speaker talks about love in general. The Song is a literary 'defense against mortality' (3):

Real lovers die, but the love that is celebrated here lives on, preserved on the page. It still seems fresh and alive centuries after it was written down, because it is love in progress, not a story about famous lovers of the past. The Song is too engrossed in how glorious it is to be alive and in love to voice bitterness or melancholy about death. Ever discovering their pleasure anew and ever rejoicing in each other and in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangibility of the world around them, the textual lovers and the vision of love they embody live on so long as the poem is read. (3)

The Song presents its lovers as universal archetypes rather than specific individuals. In this way it 'encourages all readers to identify the lovers' experience of love with their own experiences or fantasies about love' (70). At this level, the purpose of the Song is to invite all its readers to experience love, even if only for the duration of their reading.

Although it is not Exum's primary concern, she does note that the reason for the Song's preservation is its position within the Jewish and Christian canons. Its inclusion in the canon may have prompted the traditional allegorical interpretations. At least as importantly for Exum, the Song exerts an influence on the canon: 'The Song

contributes to the Bible an unparalleled affirmation of the pleasures of the flesh, the strength of love, and the beauty of the created world. Its status as a biblical book serves as an obvious reminder that the Bible is not a univocal, unified text but a collection of widely diverse material, within which a plurality of voices speak, often in tension with other voices'(72).

Commentary

For the purposes of the commentary, Exum divides the Song according to the dialogue she perceives. This is most successful in the central chapters (from 2:8 to 7:13) and least helpful in the opening and closing sections of the book. For each section, she provides an annotated translation of the Hebrew text, followed by her commentary. Exum's translation, whilst accurate and precise, also retains the poetic nature of the original as far as possible. The commentary draws attention to poetic devices used in the text and Exum is skilled at drawing out their significance. She points out the ambiguities and the gaps in the poem, showing how they actively engage the reader in the text. Hers is a lively reading, engaging and emotional as she describes the multiple connotations and implications of the Hebrew text. Exum does not fall into the trap of forcing the poem to hold only one meaning, rather she is comfortable playing with the multiple layers of meaning, innuendo and double entendre.

As an example, consider Exum's commentary on Song 5:1, commonly held to be the climactic verse of the book.

Her translation:

<He>

I come to my garden, my sister, my bride,
I pluck my myrrh with my spice,
I eat my honeycomb with honey,
I drink my wine with my milk.

<Women of Jerusalem>

Eat, friends,
drink yourselves drunk on caresses! (153)

The commentary notes the use of previous metaphors and catchwords to bind his speech to hers. The man responds directly to

the woman's invitation in the previous verse: her 'let him come' is answered by his 'I come'. Exum points out how the male lover emphasises his claim on the woman by the sequence of verbs (come – pluck – eat – drink) and the eight-fold repetition of 'my'. While the tense of the perfect verbs in this verse usually determined according to the view of the commentator regarding the consummation of the relationship (past, present or future), Exum prefers to see the distinction between anticipation, enjoyment and deferral as blurred throughout the Song.

The last line of the verse is more difficult. Some commentators interpret it as a continuation of the man's speech, addressing an unspecified crowd of well-wishers and urging them to join in the celebration. Exum translates אֲוֵרִים not as the abstract notion of love but as 'acts of love' or 'caresses', as it is elsewhere in the Song. Thus she prefers to attribute the verse to the women of Jerusalem, the audience who are watching the lovers. They offer encouragement to the man and the woman in their mutual intoxication. From a literary perspective, making the women of Jerusalem witnesses to the intimacy invites the reader to watch as well. The lovers are never completely private in the Song.

Theological interpretation

Since she presumes that the Song is a love poem, with no special religious or theological significance, Exum makes no attempt to discern any such themes in her commentary. In the only verse where there is a possible direct reference to God, Song 8:7, Exum remains undecided: "The poet is suggestive at best... thus my translation, "almighty flame" (254).

2. Daniel Estes, "The Song of Songs" in *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Nottingham, Downers Grove: IVP Apollos, 2010), pp 267-444

Introduction

Estes' commentary is somewhat briefer than Exum's and thus his introductory notes are likewise curtailed. He addresses the traditional matters of prologomena but does not provide such

extensive notes on thematic issues and poetic devices as Exum. The questions of dating and authorship are examined, with the main proposals for each given due consideration, but no conclusions are reached. The three suggested dates for the Song are the tenth century (Solomonic era), the late eighth century (during the reign of Hezekiah), and the post-exilic era. Historical, geographical, literary and linguistic factors are found to be inconclusive, if not precisely contradictory. Similarly, Estes assesses various proposals for the authorship of the Song including Solomon, a female author, and an edited wisdom compilation. Here there is simply insufficient evidence.

The history of interpretation of the Song is briefly covered with an appraisal of each of the major schools of interpretation: allegorical, typological, dramatic, cultic, literal. Estes concludes that: 'there seems to be compelling justification to read the Song of Songs literally as a song of human erotic love. There may well be additional theological significance that can legitimately be drawn from the Song, but its primary meaning is centred in what it communicates about intimacy between a man and woman' (286). He identifies two major characters, whom he refers to as Solomon and the Shulammitte, though he notes that these are literary personae rather than historical persons.

As lyric poetry, the Song 'directs the attention inwards to feelings instead of outwards towards a plot' (286). Estes notes that many scholars have struggled because the tools of the historical-critical method of interpretation are not suited to poetry. Rather, the interpretation of a book like the Song requires 'imagination and poetic sensitivity'. The poetic devices should not be regarded as mere ornament. They are used to 'evoke the sensory and emotional responses of the reader. In addition, numerous rhetorical strategies are employed in order to draw the reader into the emotions of the characters' (287). Estes thinks that the sexual language in the book is 'candid but not crude' (289), and 'As Solomon and Shulammithe approach that sublime moment, the language becomes more poetic and allusive, and yet the attentive reader is able to discern what the poet does not say explicitly' (289).

Estes is reluctant to discern a strong structure to the book. He perceives only the 'literary unity of an impressionistic song cycle'. There is a simple thematic structure centred on 4:16-5:1. The first half

of the book builds to this climax of intimacy, while the second half strengthens and deepens it.

The Song speaks about human sexuality, though it is primarily about intimacy. Estes notes that there are strong links between the Song and the wisdom literature and considers that it is a didactic book which both celebrates erotic love, within marriage, and teaches us about intimacy. Although its literal meaning is at the level of human relationships, 'the Song in addition to its literal meaning also yields legitimate theological and ethical significance that illustrates truths taught explicitly elsewhere in the biblical texts' (299). That is, the Song itself does not teach such theological or ethical truths, but it illustrates those found elsewhere.

Commentary

The commentary is divided into short units according to the poetic structure Estes discerns. For each unit Estes provides an annotated translation which leans more towards the literal than the poetic. He makes non-traditional but more scientifically accurate choices for the flora and fauna mentioned in the text. A brief section on form, structure and setting usually alludes to any poetic devices in the text. The comment attempts to elucidate the meaning of the text and the explanation then offers a reflection on its significance. The commentary is often frustratingly brief in these final two sections.

By way of comparison with Exum's commentary, consider Estes' approach to Song 5:1.

His translation:

SOLOMON

I am coming into my garden, O my sister, O bride,
I am gathering my myrrh with my spice,
I am eating my honeycomb with my honey,
I am drinking my wine with my milk.

GOD

Eat, O friends;
Drink and become intoxicated, O lovers!

Estes thinks that Solomon and the Shulammitte have sexual

intercourse off stage between 4:16 and 5:1. Thus this verse reflects the new situation in which their extensive foreplay has finally reached its climax in consummation. The repeated vocabulary from 4:8-16 is given a new edge in the light of the new status. The four verbs and seven nouns in the man's speech all have erotic reference, according to Estes and, 'By this means, Solomon alludes poetically to their sexual intercourse without being crass or pornographic. Song of Songs always treats lovemaking with sublime dignity rather than in a voyeuristic or exploitative spirit' (362).

Unusually, Estes identifies God as the speaker of the final line in this verse. He suggests that this is 'God himself expressing his pleasure in their lovemaking and encouraging them to enjoy fully their newfound sexual intimacy within marriage.' This allows the lovers to maintain the privacy of their marriage bed and also allows Estes to introduce a theological note to his interpretation. His explanation of the verse notes that 'Within marriage, love brings total satisfaction that is endorsed and celebrated by God' (363).

Estes' interpretation is much more specific than Exum's, both with respect to the sexual content of the verse and its theological significance. This is typical of his commentary which is much less comfortable with multiple levels of meaning, ambiguity and double entendre. Although he admits in his introduction that poetic devices are more than mere ornament, his interpretation frequently consists in 'translation' into prosaic terms.

Theological Interpretation

As the example above demonstrates, Estes consciously attempts to interpret the Song theologically throughout. He even sees the possibility that God is an active, speaking character within the world of the Song as in the final line of 5:1. As a didactic wisdom text, the Song should be read as divine instruction. Further, Estes recognises the canonical nature of the Song and as such, he interprets it as the counterpart to Genesis 3 and as a source of illustration for texts such as Ephesians 5. Thus it is a theological book insofar as theology relates to sexuality.

One specific theological meaning which Estes discerns is that 'love as God designed it, to be exclusive and mutual, could in part turn

back the damaging effects of the human fall and sin' (299). This remark in the introduction is repeated in the commentary on Song 7:10, where the uncommon Hebrew word תִּשְׁקֶה (desire), is used in a way which deliberately reflects and reverses its use in Genesis 3:16 (397). Estes thinks that this intertextual connection may indicate that human love is able, even if only in part, to reverse the effects of the fall: 'intimacy within marriage is in part a way back to idyllic Eden' (397). Estes confuses the direction of causality here: intimacy in marriage is not a means of redemption, as he suggests, but a consequence of Christ's redemptive activity, and an instance of common grace. Estes is careful to note that such redemption is only partial, but even so, he attributes to humankind that which only God can achieve.

Though most evangelical commentators fall short of Estes in attributing redemptive action to human intimacy, it seems to me that this is the logical conclusion of a position which reads the Song as a book solely about human sexuality. The connections with Genesis 3 are so strong that it is impossible to read the Song in its canonical context without seeing it as a reversal of the fall. Unless there is a theological meaning intrinsic to the Song, this reversal is inevitably linked to human sexuality.

3. Robert Jenson, *The Song of Songs, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005)

Introduction

This is not a technical commentary and the introductory matters are discussed in just over a dozen pages under the commentary on the first verse. Jenson does not rehearse the familiar arguments for dating and authorship, though he does note one significant point which is often overlooked, namely that the Song is 'so steeped in the specific images and language found in the Old Testament canon [that] many of the documents now in that canon must have been extant and available together in such a way as to speak with one voice' (3) at the time of its writing. On this basis, Jenson tends to exclude an early date for the Song. He chooses to use the female pronoun for the author of the Song, though this represents no more than the

possibility that the author was a woman.

With respect to the genre of the Song, Jenson identifies it as a collection of poems whose 'overt sense' is that of erotic love poetry. However he remains open to the possibility that this erotic poetry was always intended to be read as an allegory about God and Israel:

Since the poet of these songs was a devotedly Scripture-reading Israelite, who cast her lyrics in the language and imagery of that Scripture—that is, of texts which directly tell the Lord's stormy love affair with Israel and sometimes explicitly call it that—there seems to be no reason why such an Israelite poet should not have written these songs for that very love. (7)

Even if that were not the original author's intention, Jenson thinks that the inclusion of the Song within the canon makes it such an allegory: 'the canonical entity is about the love of Israel and the Lord, and to read it by construing theological allegory is to read what we may call its canonical plain sense' (8). Jenson further notes that to read the Song in a canonical way also invokes ecclesiological and historical constraints. He suggests reading the Song 'as if we were reciting in synagogue or at Eucharist, and only within the structure and rhetoric of such events let the Song's apparent allusions play out' (11).

Jenson identifies various speaking characters within the Song including the man, the woman, the female chorus, one or more male choruses, and possibly even the voice of the poet herself. The separate poems are thus linked by a continuity of characterisation.

The Song should be understood as lyrical theology, as opposed to the narrative or didactic theology found in so much of the Scriptures. In addition, the Song portrays God's love for his people as desire. It is the *eros* which parallels the self-giving *agape* love shown elsewhere. The Song thus enriches our theological experience. Jenson also notes that there is a two way analogue involved. The Song takes human sexuality as the analogue to divine-human love, and in so doing, it does indeed speak about human sexuality. There is, in the Song, a theology of sexuality. The Song is thus 'the song of the lovers, the song of the Lord and his bride, and the song of all human love, embedded as it is in the Song of God' (103).

Commentary

The commentary is structured according to the individual poems which Jenson discerns. For each there is an explanation of the overt story, followed by an analysis of the theological allegory and then the implications for created sexuality. The commentary is based on the text of the NRSV and does not address questions of translation or text. Jenson wisely counsels the reader to spend time with the text of each poem before turning to his commentary and also suggests that 'should you wish to join the *church's* long engagement with the Song, let all be done with prayer for the love the Song praises' (15).

Since there is no verse by verse comment, the comparison must be with Jenson's comment on the section 4:9-5:1. Jenson identifies the man as the speaker of 4:9-15, the woman in 4:16, the man in 5:1a-d and the poet in 5:1e. The entire poem is to be understood as an extended metaphor in dialogue form. The orchard described is a fantasy, bringing together fruits and flowers which were imported luxuries. The metaphor becomes transparent in 4:16 with the invitation to the man to eat the woman's choicest fruits. However, the items on which he feasts, honey, milk and wine, are not fruits of the orchard but blessings of the promised land. Thus the metaphor for the woman is not just a fantastical garden, but the promised land itself.

The one native Israelite fruit mentioned in the poem, the pomegranate, provides the theological key to the passage as it evokes the Temple with its latticework screen of two hundred bronze pomegranates. Thus the bride is not merely the land, but the Temple, opening herself to the Lord's presence in the world. Jenson thus interprets the consummation of the lovers in 5:1 in incarnational terms. As a man and his bride become one flesh, the Lord enters into the world by becoming part of that world.

The human analogue of the poem highlights the importance of words and gestures of desire. Wooing, or foreplay, must come before the consummation of desire. In particular, the poem demonstrates the importance of specificity in this wordplay: there is only one garden, one sister, one bride for the male lover, not one among many.

Theological Interpretation

Theological interpretation is an integral part of Jenson's commentary since he views the theological allegory as the canonical sense of the Song. Jenson is a systematic theologian, and his interest in and understanding of theology proper is evident throughout the commentary. Thus his commentary provides a welcome example of cross-fertilisation between two theological disciplines.

Conclusion

Research on the Song of Songs is at an exciting stage of development. The inadequacies of the historical-critical method are being exposed and interpretations with greater sensitivity to the literary, theological and canonical nature of this unique text are forthcoming. While there is as yet no consensus on questions of genre and hermeneutics, nevertheless valuable insights can be gained from across the spectrum. Exum's commentary is highly recommended for its insight into the poetry of the Song and its exegesis of what Jenson calls the 'overt sense'. Estes offers a classically evangelical interpretation of the Song and although his theological interpretation pushes too far, he nonetheless has a good grasp of the Song's teaching about the human sexuality part of the analogy. Jenson, by contrast, has the fullest interpretation of the Song, recognising multiple levels of interpretation and unashamedly reading the Song from a specific theological, ecclesiological and canonical stance. Despite the lack of detailed interaction with the text, his is the commentary which offers the deepest understanding of the book as a whole.

R. S. CLARKE
Stafford.