

# SONG OF SONGS

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WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 25

# Song of Songs

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A Michael Glazier Book

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*To Janet, my one and only dearest love*



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## *Abbreviations*

Throughout the commentary, the letters “W,” “M,” and “D” stand for the Woman/Female protagonist, Man/Male protagonist, and daughters of Jerusalem, respectively, and the flow of speech is represented by an arrow. Hence, [W → M] signals the principal woman (Songstress) speaking to her male lover.

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BZAW	Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CEB	Common English Bible
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>

IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IVP	Inter-Varsity Press
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KJV	King James Version
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	The Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NETS	New English Translation of the Septuagint
<i>NIB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society (Tanakh)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NWSA	National Women's Studies Association
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review &amp; Expositor</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Aristotle, Rhetorica</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SEÅ	<i>Svensk exegetisk årbok</i>
SR	<i>Studies in Religion</i>

SymS	Symposium Series
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
Vg.	Latin Vulgate
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
YJS	Yale Judaica Series
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>



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## Foreword

# *“Tell It on the Mountain”—or, “And You Shall Tell Your Daughter [as Well]”*

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**W**hat can Wisdom Commentary do to help, and for whom?

The commentary genre has always been privileged in biblical studies. Traditionally acclaimed commentary series, such as the International Critical Commentary, Old Testament and New Testament Library, Hermeneia, Anchor Bible, Eerdmans, and Word—to name but several—enjoy nearly automatic prestige; and the number of women authors who participate in those is relatively small by comparison to their growing number in the scholarly guild. There certainly are some volumes written by women in them, especially in recent decades. At this time, however, this does not reflect the situation on the ground. Further, size matters. In that sense, the sheer size of the Wisdom Commentary is essential. This also represents a considerable investment and the possibility of reaching a wider audience than those already “converted.”

Expecting women scholars to deal especially or only with what is considered strictly “female” matters seems unwarranted. According to Audre Lorde, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>1</sup> But this maxim is not relevant to our case. The point of this commentary is not to destroy but to attain greater participation in the interpretive dialogue about biblical texts. Women scholars may bring additional questions to the readerly agenda as well as fresh angles to existing issues. To assume that their questions are designed only to topple a certain male hegemony is not convincing.

At first I did ask myself: is this commentary series an addition to calm raw nerves, an embellishment to make upholding the old hierarchy palatable? Or is it indeed about becoming the Master? On second and third thoughts, however, I understood that becoming the Master is not what this is about. Knowledge is power. Since Foucault at the very least, this cannot be in dispute. Writing commentaries for biblical texts by women for women and for men, of confessional as well as non-confessional convictions, will sabotage (hopefully) the established hierarchy but will not topple it. This is about an attempt to integrate more fully, to introduce another viewpoint, to become. What excites me about the Wisdom Commentary is that it is not offered as just an alternative supplanting or substituting for the dominant discourse.

These commentaries on biblical books will retain nonauthoritative, pluralistic viewpoints. And yes, once again, the weight of a dedicated series, to distinguish from collections of stand-alone volumes, will prove weightier.

That such an approach is especially important in the case of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is beyond doubt. Women of Judaism, Christianity, and also Islam have struggled to make it their own for centuries, even more than they have fought for the New Testament and the Qur’an. Every Hebrew Bible/Old Testament volume in this project is evidence that the day has arrived: it is now possible to read *all* the Jewish canonical books as a collection, for a collection they are, with guidance conceived of with the needs of women readers (not only men) as an integral inspiration and part thereof.

In my Jewish tradition, the main motivation for reciting the Haggadah, the ritual text recited yearly on Passover, the festival of liberation from

1. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007), 110–14. First delivered in the Second Sex Conference in New York, 1979.



bondage, is given as “And you shall tell your son” (from Exod 13:8). The knowledge and experience of past generations is thus transferred to the next, for constructing the present and the future. The ancient maxim is, literally, limited to a male audience. This series remolds the maxim into a new inclusive shape, which is of the utmost consequence: “And you shall tell your son” is extended to “And you shall tell your daughter [as well as your son].” Or, if you want, “Tell it on the mountain,” for all to hear.

This is what it’s all about.



## Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

### *"She Is a Breath of the Power of God" (Wis 7:25)*

*Barbara E. Reid, OP*

*General Editor*

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the "Hebrew Bible" and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern

Orthodox Communions (i.e., Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

## **A Symphony of Diverse Voices**

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, she or he may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

## **Woman Wisdom**

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct

wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sir 24:23-34; Bar 3:9-4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Bar 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, “take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, “put your neck under her [Wisdom’s] yoke and let your souls receive instruction” (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lucan parallel at 7:35 they are called “wisdom’s children”). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

## **Feminism**

There are many different understandings of the term “feminism.” The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full human flourishing. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women’s efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. Now a fourth wave may be emerging, with a stronger emphasis on the intersectionality of women’s concerns with those of other marginalized groups and the increased use

of the internet as a platform for discussion and activism.<sup>1</sup> As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

## **Feminist Women and Men**

Men who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

## **Feminist Biblical Interpretation**

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her

1. See Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism" (October 25, 2015), at <http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>; and Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>.

2. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."<sup>3</sup> She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and outstanding intelligence."<sup>4</sup> One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Berakot 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about feminine aspects of the Divine.<sup>5</sup> Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.<sup>6</sup>

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense

3. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

4. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), xlix–lv, at lii.

5. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 110–11.

to subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.<sup>7</sup>

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca. 1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).<sup>9</sup> In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.<sup>10</sup> Another prominent abolitionist, Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), a former slave, quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches<sup>11</sup> and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

7. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

8. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

9. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

10. See further Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

11. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.



Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,<sup>12</sup> published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.<sup>13</sup>

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Sharon Ringe and Carol Newsom (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

12. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God*.

13. See further Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.<sup>14</sup> A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Christiana de Groot, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.<sup>15</sup>

Another groundbreaking work is the collection *The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2015), which comprises twenty volumes of commentaries on the Old Testament. The parallel series, *Feminist Companion*

14. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). Another notable collection is the three volumes edited by Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, *Recent Research in Biblical Studies* 7, 8, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013, 2014, 2016).

15. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta, GA: SBL). Four more volumes are now available: *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014); *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (2014); *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Peroni (2015); and *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (2015). For further information, see <http://www.bibleandwomen.org>.

to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own interpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

## **Methodologies**

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.<sup>16</sup> In the *Wisdom Commentary* series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

16. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.<sup>17</sup> Feminists recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."<sup>18</sup> Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.<sup>19</sup> Wisdom Commentary aims to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.

17. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

18. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 75–97, at 76.

19. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and active agents in creating religious heritage.<sup>20</sup> A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.<sup>22</sup>

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.<sup>23</sup> They do not attempt to separate layers of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in

20. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

21. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

22. See Gina Hens Piazza, *The New Historicism*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

23. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

its present form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.<sup>24</sup> Narrative critics study the interrelation among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.<sup>25</sup> Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.<sup>26</sup> Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.<sup>27</sup> Feminists also use other post-modern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system of ideas that underlies the power and

24. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

25. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1978).

26. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

27. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, BibInt 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.<sup>28</sup> The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.<sup>29</sup> Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.<sup>30</sup>

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.<sup>31</sup> Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where these elites could exercise control."<sup>32</sup> Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology are used by feminists to investigate

28. See Tina Pippin, ed., *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts: Semeia* 59 (1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

29. See, e.g., Ingrid Rose Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When They, We, and the Passive Become I—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Theological Studies / Theological Studies* vol. 61 (2005): 401–16.

30. See, e.g., Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

31. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T & T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004).

32. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also, Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and

women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, child rearing, labor, money, illness, etc.<sup>33</sup>

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."<sup>34</sup> Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").<sup>36</sup> Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."<sup>37</sup> Both groups emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Hispanic women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.<sup>38</sup>

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Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

33. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

34. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, at 265.

35. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

36. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

37. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

38. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, *Studies in Latino/a Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).



Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.<sup>39</sup>

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women's equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.<sup>40</sup>

## Biblical Authority

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as

39. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011).

40. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, *SymS* 46 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America*, *Women from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

the source of women's oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.<sup>41</sup>

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on women and men in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

### Language for God

Because of the ways in which the term "God" has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.<sup>42</sup> Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d*. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G\*d*.<sup>43</sup> Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.<sup>44</sup> In Wisdom Commentary, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

41. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

42. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

43. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3.

44. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, "God," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 128–30.

## Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomenclature: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, for Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books, considered Apocrypha by Protestants. The term "Jewish Scriptures" is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, "Christian Scriptures" is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using "First and Second Testament" also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.<sup>46</sup> Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

## Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.<sup>47</sup>

Because of these complexities, the editors of Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard

45. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

46. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

47. Elizabeth Castelli, "Les Belles Infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, here 190.

Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled “Translation Matters.” When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

## **Art and Poetry**

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry are included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work. It is our hope that the web version will allow a greater collection of such resources.

## **Glossary**

Because there are a number of excellent readily available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell with J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

## **Bibliography**

Because bibliographies are quickly outdated and because the space is limited, only a list of Works Cited is included in the print volumes. A comprehensive bibliography for each volume is posted on a dedicated website and is updated regularly. The link for this volume can be found at [wisdomcommentary.org](http://wisdomcommentary.org).

## **A Concluding Word**

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that *Wisdom Commentary*, by making the best of current feminist biblical scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.



## **Acknowledgments**

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## *Acknowledgments*

In my wildest dreams, I never imagined writing a commentary on the Song of Songs, much less being asked to do so. But however readers might judge the final product, the process of researching, pondering, and producing this volume has been one of the most enjoyable experiences of my professional life. I'm very grateful to the general editor, Barbara Reid, for inviting me to contribute to this monumental series and to the volume editor, Laress Wilkins Lawrence, for her careful attention to the manuscript at every stage and her numerous insights that I gladly incorporated. Both of these scholars represent models of uncommon wisdom and unstinting support. While I have tried to heed their sage voices calling out at conferences (where we've met) and on the cyberstreets of email, I still have much to learn from them and other feminist scholars concerning this breathtaking "Holiest of Songs."

I also thank the amazing women's chorus of Contributing Voices (and Visuals), who enriched this commentary with their distinctive and wide-ranging offerings. It's been an honor and pleasure to work with each one of you.

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## Author's Introduction

# *Playing the Song of Songs in a Feminist Key*

*Just an old fashioned love song  
Comin' down in three-part harmony  
Just an old fashioned love song  
One I'm sure they wrote for you and me.<sup>1</sup>*

So crooned Three Dog Night in their 1971 smash hit written by Paul Williams. Love songs have been in fashion a long time, as long as people have been falling in love. Though only a select few artists are gifted enough to compose good love songs, most of us have the capacity to hear them as if they were written *for us*, “for you and me,” in perfect “harmony.” Of course, the older the song, particularly “comin’ down” from antiquity, the less its love images speak to modern sensibilities. But with some careful linguistic and historical work, ancient tunes can be transposed fairly well into contemporary keys. And such work is worth the effort with the most poignant love songs from any era and environment. The classics, as they say, never go out of style.

1. Paul Williams, lyrics. “Just an Old Fashioned Love Song,” in *Harmony*, by Three Dog Night. Dunhill, 1971.

The Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible is arguably the biggest blockbuster love song ever composed, not just because it claims to be the top Song above all songs (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים; 1:1), but because it constitutes the singular example of sustained love lyrics in the Jewish and Christian scriptural canon known as the Bible, which has been a bestseller in the Western world for centuries. I doubt that the single biblical Song has been “played”—read, heard, voiced—as much as some hits of Sinatra or Elvis in modern America, but as part of the canonical collection, it enjoys an honored place within the #1 album of all time. Popularity, however, while intimating a certain universal appeal, is no guarantee of uniform interpretation. Quite the contrary. The more singers and hearers a song has, the more diverse viewpoints it attracts, all the more so concerning such a complicated and variegated emotion as romantic love, a “many splendored”—and splintered—thing.<sup>2</sup>

My prime concern in this commentary is to interpret the Song of Songs in a feminist key. But that is no simple transposition, like raising all the notes a full step from the key of E-flat to F. There is no definitive “F” key in feminist musicology—or F-sharp, as some critics might insist, naïvely dismissing all feminist criticism as acrimonious, prickly, “sharp.” Contemporary feminism is as multidimensional and intersectional as love—a rich range of feminisms, a dazzling run of arpeggios up and down the keyboard. In all its varied manifestations, feminism does trumpet a programmatic theme of full equality and opportunity for all women throughout society. But this is more of a political orientation than a procedural policy: a core feminist manifesto, yes; a lock-step feminist methodology, not at all.<sup>3</sup>

2. See Aaron Ben-Ze'ev and Rouhama Goussinsky, *In the Name of Love: Romantic Ideology and Its Victims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Helen Fisher, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); Robert C. Solomon, *About Love: Reinventing Romance for Our Times* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006); Solomon, *Love: Emotion, Myth, and Metaphor* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981).

3. See the concise, yet broad-based, definition of feminism offered by bell hooks. She writes, “Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. . . . Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition, it is open-ended” (*Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* [Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000], 1). See also Naomi Zack, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman &

This lively interpretive array is just as true of feminist biblical criticism as of any other discipline. Introducing a multivolume essay series of "Feminist Companions to the New Testament," Amy-Jill Levine assesses the state of play in feminist biblical interpretation via an apt musical image for our interest in the biblical Song.

The feminist choir no longer sounds the single note of white, Western, middle-class, Christian concerns; "feminist biblical studies" is now a symphony. It acknowledges the different concerns social location and experience bring to interpretation and recognizes the tentativeness and partiality of each conclusion: no instrument alone is complete; no two musicians play the music exactly alike. Feminist readers of Christian origins are so diverse in terms of approach (literary, historical, sociological, text-critical, ideological, cross-cultural . . .), focus (imagery, characterization, genre, plot, Christology, ethics, politics, polemic . . .), hermeneutics (of suspicion, of recovery . . .), identity (Womanist, Latina, African, Evangelical, lesbian, Jewish, Catholic . . .) and conclusions—namely, it is just like most biblical studies and indeed like most academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences—that any single definition of what constitutes a "feminist reading" is necessarily reified.<sup>4</sup>

Inevitably, then, this commentary represents *my* feminist reading of the Song of Songs, more specifically, the reading of a white, late middle-aged, forty-plus-year-married American male, father of two young adult daughters, ordained Baptist minister, and seminary professor appointed to teach New Testament and biblical interpretation. You may be forgiven an incredulous reaction at this point. It's nice to have a large, welcoming feminist choir, but surely there are some standards! Did this guy really pass an audition? In good Adamic fashion, I will mostly blame the women editors of this series for their foolish choice and leave you to address all complaints to them (see the acknowledgments for how I really feel about

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Littlefield, 2005); Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, 2nd ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor, 2015).

4. Amy-Jill Levine, "Introduction," in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, 13–24 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 14. A valuable series on books in the Hebrew Bible that preceded this 2001 *Feminist Companion to* series has been edited by Athalya Brenner for Sheffield Academic, including two volumes on the Song of Songs co-edited with Carole Fontaine, *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993); and *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, Second Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

these extraordinary women scholars). But by way of brief apology, I simply appeal to my long-standing engagement with feminist biblical scholarship in both testaments. I have often found Hebrew Bible/Old Testament studies blazing the trail for my New Testament work. The mounting wisdom of a brilliant cadre of pioneering female feminist biblical scholars and a few male feminist associates over the past four decades has immeasurably enriched and challenged my thinking. Fortunately for me, the Song of Songs has been one of the most fruitful fields for feminist biblical commentary. My feminist reading of the Song is thus heavily derivative. The footnotes and bibliography represent more than academic convention; they reflect a confession of debt and gratitude that I can never fully repay.

That being said, this commentary is far from a compendium of contemporary feminist readings of the Song, still less a survey of the poem's long and rich reception history.<sup>5</sup> I make choices all along the way about what to highlight in the Song and how to interpret it within my understanding of the poem's unfolding meaning and relevance to feminist thought. Methodologically, I attend to linguistic and other literary features of the poem within its broad social and cultural milieu. I thus aim at a close, contextual reading of the Song. Though drawing on illuminating studies of comparative ancient Near Eastern artifacts and love lyrics, I try to keep the spotlight tightly trained on the Song itself. Ideologically—I assume that all interpretation is ideologically motivated to some degree—I'm motivated by my feminist commitments, mixed with all sorts of other social and political bents peculiar to my location, many of which I'm scarcely aware. But to borrow an image from the Song, the main "banner" (2:5) stretching across this volume is "My Feminist Commentary"—with due distinctive credits to the gifted guest "Contributing Voices," soloists that chime in from time to time.

The detailed proof of my particular literary and feminist performance of the Song will come through an attentive reading/hearing of this commentary. But it is worth offering by way of general orientation a kind

5. See Francis Landy and Fiona Black, *The Song of Songs through the Centuries*, Blackwell Biblical Commentaries (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016). For thorough engagement with the history of Jewish interpretation, see Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs*, JPS Bible Commentary (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); and Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 89–229; for Christian interpretation, see Richard A. Norris, *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, The Church's Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

of playbill of key features characterizing this work and setting it apart from others.

## **Voices and Valence: The Choral Factor**

The Song of Songs calls for two principal vocal parts, one female and one male, with occasional choral backup. It is a tour de force for the two lead singers, featuring their virtuosic talents sometimes in solo performance and other times in antiphonal response. They must have youthful, vibrant, electric voices appropriate to the passionate love lyrics they sing. Beyond this dominant duo, the Songstress periodically addresses a female chorus, known as the “daughters of Jerusalem,” who may in turn voice a brief reply (Song 1:5-6, 12-15; 2:3-10, 15-16; 3:1-11; 5:1-9; 6:3; 6:11-13; 8:3-5, 8-12). She also occasionally references other influential figures in the couple’s love story—namely, her mother and brothers, her lover’s mother, and the city watchmen—but these have no voice of their own (1:6; 3:3-4, 11; 5:7; 8:1-2, 5, 8-9).

Within the Song itself, the featured woman and man share the stage much of the time with their comparably strong voices and presence. A case can be made, however, that the woman merits top billing. She has the first and last words in the Song, each with exclamatory force directing the man’s actions.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! (1:2)

Make haste, my beloved [man], and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices! (8:14)

And throughout the intervening material, the woman’s voice rings loud and clear with purpose and passion, intention and intimacy. She knows what she wants and is not afraid to say it. Though walls and flowers dot the landscape of the Song (1:14; 2:1, 9, 12; 4:12-16; 5:1, 5, 13; 6:2, 11; 7:12; 8:9), the Songstress herself is no wallflower (see 8:10). All in all, the young diva of the Song of Songs projects the most powerful female voice in the entire Bible. We might well call her the Woman of Women.

This star character has not escaped the notice of feminist interpreters hungry for gynocentric materials and positive female role models within a patriarchal canon and culture. Finally, a female biblical figure and an entire biblical book to be celebrated by feminist readers! For example, Athalya Brenner concludes the groundbreaking collection of feminist essays on the Song that she edits with a strong affirmation and a hopeful question. I track a singular female singer throughout the Song, whereas

Brenner interprets the Song as an anthology of multiple female voices (the feminist point works either way):

After content and form have been taken apart and then made to coalesce again, there remain the images of the Song of Song [sic] women. They come across as articulate, loud, clear, culturally and socially undeniably effective—even within the confines and inner circle of their patriarchal society.

A role model to identify with?<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Marcia Falk asserts:

Women's speech in the Song is hardly reserved or shy; on the contrary, it is uninhibited and even outspoken, and the Song's female speakers do not hesitate to initiate action. . . . Indeed, women may be seen as the Song's central figures primarily *because* of their full participation in both direct and indirect kinds of speech, including modes of self-address. . . . Unlike most of the Bible, the Song of Songs gives us women speaking out of their own experiences and their own imaginations.<sup>7</sup>

But before we throw a feminist parade with the Song of Songs as our marching anthem, we must address a critical question of vocal interpretation. Just because a woman (or women) is given a big part and sings it with gusto does not guarantee that *what* she sings advances women's best interests and represents women's honest perspectives. Further, it doesn't mean that she's performing lyrics and music that *she* composed or even endorses. Who's to say that she is not simply channeling another's voice and vision, even that of a man antithetical to women's concerns? Perhaps she's a hired vocalist, even one pressed into service against her will, a kind of musical whore, hardly a far-fetched notion in a patriarchal society. Or perhaps she is a more congenial accomplice, having thoroughly internalized the dominant social hierarchy and become happy, as far as she is aware, to play her assigned part. In any case, the problem of authentic women's speech persists, as deftly identified by Thomas Hardy's spirited heroine, Bathsheba Everdene: "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs."<sup>8</sup>

6. For consistency, this last line should read, "Role models to identify with?" Athalya Brenner, "An Afterword," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, 279–80 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 280.

7. Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 117 (emphasis original).

8. Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (London: Penguin, 2000 [orig. 1874]), 308.

In the case of the biblical Song, there's much we do not know, including the composers and producers, authors and editors. Undoubtedly, most ancient writing and publishing were done by men, certainly in the fields of history, philosophy, and society. But if there were a literary-artistic opening for women, it would have been in the medium of love poetry. Women from a variety of cultures have been pouring out their hearts in song about love and other deep sentiments for centuries. Comparisons could be (and have been) made between the woman singer(s) in the Song and female poets in Egyptian, Greek (Sappho), Tamil, and Awlad 'Ali Bedouin traditions.<sup>9</sup> Fine, but broad parallels do not clinch the argument for female authorship or the authenticity of female voice(s) in the biblical love Song.

An honest and judicious literary- and feminist-critical hermeneutic acknowledges two interpretive ground rules succinctly identified by Cheryl Exum in her important article, "Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs":

1. There are no real women in this text.
2. The woman, or women, in this text may be the creations of male authors.<sup>10</sup>

"No real women in this text" reminds us that the Song is fundamentally a song about a woman (or women) in love *within* the text (lyrics) of the Song; it is not a journalistic account or verbatim transcription of any "real" particular woman's expressions of love. It may well have been inspired by an actual woman, but it does not emanate from that woman

9. See Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Richard Hunter, "'Sweet Talk': Song of Songs and the Traditions of Greek Poetry," in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn, BZAW 346 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 228–44; Abraham Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems: Poetry and Symbolism*, AnBib 118 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988); Chaim Rabin, "Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry," *SR* 3 (1973–74): 205–19; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); cf. David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 91–93.

10. J. Cheryl Exum, "Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs," in *The Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, FCB, Second Series, 24–35 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 27–29. These are #3 and #4 in her "Ten Things" catalogue. Exum works out these and many other points in her sterling commentary, *Song of Songs*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

or reflect her viewpoints in any unmediated sense. Elton John's "Candle in the Wind (Goodbye Norma Jeane)," co-written with Bernie Taupin, is a moving tribute to Marilyn Monroe (later revised for Princess Diana) but is clearly *his* interpretation of her: about "Norma Jeane" to some degree, but hardly capturing *her* identity. The biblical Song doesn't even come close to identifying the female figure(s), except via the enigmatic "Shulammit" designation in Song 6:13. All we have is a poetic persona, a literary construct of a passionate vocal woman. The Songstress exists only within the bounds of the Song and the minds of readers/hearers.

Accordingly, the Songstress may exist only "as a creation of male author(s)," as Norma Jeane's "candle" first flickers in Elton John's imagination, and then in the conjurations of the song's hearers. Even so, there remains the issue of lesser or greater resonance with the "real" woman. Presumably, millions of actual women and men, by virtue of their making John's song a blockbuster hit, have judged his musical portrait as reasonably authentic, by which they mean comparable, to their concept of the historical Marilyn Monroe—though such judgments are hugely complicated by the fact that Marilyn Monroe was a stage name, indeed, one of the most managed public names in entertainment history. Who knows what the "real" Norma Jeane would have thought about the song, written over a decade after her death? As for the biblical Song, though we have no named referent for the female star(s), we have a number of astute female readers who have carefully attended to what the woman actually says in the Song and how she says it, and they have detected a strong ring of authenticity to her voice that is in harmony with their own experiences of female love and sexuality. Many feminist biblical scholars, whether they hear one dominant voice or many female voices in the Song, concur with Falk's perspective. Expanding her statement cited above: "Unlike most of the Bible, the Song of Songs gives us women speaking out of their own experiences and their own imaginations, in words that *do not seem filtered through the lens of patriarchal male consciousness*. . . . In the Song . . . women are central, not peripheral, and I would add, their speech seems 'true,' not imitative."<sup>11</sup>

But not all critics are so sanguine. Two male scholars, each supporting feminist concerns, raise cautionary flags in the vein of a hermeneutic of suspicion. Donald C. Polaski, evoking the haunting image of Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" prison via Michel Foucault's postmodern theory, sees the lead woman of the Song caught in a web of power relations

11. Falk, *Song*, 117–18 (emphasis added).



that forge her self-identity (her "subject") through the threat of constant surveillance. However much she resists—and she does try to assert herself—she can't shake the feeling that someone is always watching her and monitoring her behavior, specifically, some male authority looking her up and down behind a one-way window to see if she's acting properly, if she's following the agenda he and his patriarchal cohorts have (con)scripted for her. Whether or not anyone is actually behind the looking glass at every moment, she always feels their judgmental gaze boring in, as if an electronic tracker has been implanted within her. Fight as she might, she cannot escape internalizing the dominant standard: "The constitution of the female Subject may be understood as the result of the internalization of the male gaze and the adoption of disciplinary practices which assume the presence of 'a panoptical male connoisseur.'"<sup>12</sup>

David Clines pushes beyond the pressures of internalization that impinge on the woman in the Song and that might still allow for some resistance on her part to a totalizing program of colonization executed by male writers, editors, publishers, and marketers solely for their profit and consumption. As Clines sees it, this commercial enterprise controlled by businessmen is the only way this Song could have survived as *the Song* above all songs—the "top of the pops"—in antiquity. Hence, the passionate woman in the Song is totally a male fantasy, the woman of every man's dreams, a perfectly designed love doll with pull-string cueing the perfectly scripted pillow talk delivered in the sexiest voice. Of course, to mitigate the blatant sexism for more sensitive tastes and to soften the pornography for more sophisticated types, the woman must appear to "want it," to be a happy and willing participant in the fantasy. That's all part of the marketing scheme: "So the Song is the dream of a dream. The male author is dreaming a love poem, and the love poem takes the form of a woman's dream, of a woman dreaming her male lover's words. It is a fetching ventriloquy, this voice that is doubly thrown."<sup>13</sup> So Clines

12. Donald C. Polaski, "What Will Ye See in the Shulammitte? Women, Power and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 5 (1997): 76–77. The final phrase derives from Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, 61–96 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 72; Polaski (70) cites Bartky's fuller comment regarding "the panoptical male connoisseur who resides within the consciousness of most women."

13. David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 205, Gender, Culture, Theory 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 104.

nails the Song of Songs with little room to move. This is what the Song *is*, period, and feminist interpreters should get in line with this position: “Even feminist critics sometimes ignore the fact that what we have in this book is not a woman, not the voice of a woman, not a woman’s poem, not a portrayal of female experience from a woman’s perspective, but always and only what a man imagines for a woman, his construction of femininity.”<sup>14</sup>

So much for Falk’s and other women scholars’ more positive assessments of women’s “true” experiences reflected in the Songstress’s speech. Clines, normally sympathetic to feminist readings and a pioneer of post-modern biblical studies, seems to dismiss the prevailing feminist-critical appreciation of the Songstress with a definitive pronouncement of the “always and only” legitimate way to read the Song, that is, *not* “from a woman’s perspective.” But how does *he* know what a woman’s perspective is on love and sexuality—or on anything, for that matter—or what a woman does (or should!) feel upon reading the Song of Songs? The only way I know for a man to know anything about what a woman thinks or feels about anything is to *listen* to what she says about her thoughts and feelings, dreams and aspirations. Of course, this doesn’t rule out critical response. Indeed, feminist criticism(s) encourages open and honest dialogue, and problems of male cooptation of female voices and women’s internalization of patriarchal voices and values are widely acknowledged by feminist critics. Further, most female feminist scholars welcome the engagement of male scholars who take feminism seriously. But until a perfectly equal, nonsexist utopian society dawns (and we remain a long way from that), priority should be given to women’s opinions on women’s issues, however much women can and will disagree among themselves. This has nothing to do with a man’s virtuous humility or sensitivity, graciously giving the ladies a chance to speak, which only reinforces the hierarchy. It is a matter of social justice, but from a quite pragmatic standpoint; those given the greater voice should be those who know most what they’re talking about.

So in this introductory section on the Song’s vocal expressions and effects, I give the last word to Cheryl Exum, in fact her last point among her “Top Ten” feminist perspectives on the Song:

*Feminists don't have to deny ourselves the pleasure of the text. . . . Why should an ancient author's intention matter? Let's assume for the sake*

14. *Ibid.*, 117.

of argument that Clines and Polaski are right, that the subject position the Song constructs for women is one in which the woman is to see herself as the man sees her; in other words, that the text subtly encourages women to adopt a male vision of woman. It does not follow that I have to read it that way. Our protagonist is assertive, determined, and not least important, vulnerable. This combination makes her an irresistible subject for further feminist investigation.<sup>15</sup>

Are we (men) listening? Do we hear a Songstress that is “assertive, determined,” *and* “vulnerable”? An irresistible feminist subject indeed.

### Harmony and Counterpoint: The Compositional Factor

Two aspects come into play related to the Song's unity and diversity: the genre and the theme. While there is wide agreement among feminist interpreters concerning the Song's broad classification as erotic love poetry, on the more particular level, these scholars divide between those who assess the Song as a single composition reflecting the passionate longings of the same couple throughout and those who regard it as an anthology or album of multiple love lyrics from different artists about different lovers. Again, in the absence of internal headings and copyright information, this Song/Songs issue remains open to dispute and largely a matter of reader/hearer-response: how an interpreter, feminist or otherwise, chooses to approach the text. It can be a valuable exercise to take either stance and see where it leads, since both a single song and a song collection can be either highly unified or multifarious. One song can be so complex as to sound like a mixed tape on its own, and an album can be so formulaic that to hear one song is to hear them all. But I will do well in this commentary to follow one interpretive trail, and I have chosen the more direct, one-lane road. Again, Exum nicely charts the way: “The Song . . . *works* as a unity, so well, in fact, that distinguishing different voices and attitudes is not easy, and nothing approaching a consensus is in sight. Even commentators who see the Song as an anthology tend to read it as though its attitude toward love is uniform and the protagonists are the same two people throughout.”<sup>16</sup>

Still the question of thematic harmony nettles, especially regarding the equality and mutuality of the female and male lovers in the Song. Are they blending their embodied voices together—“the two shall become

15. Exum, “Ten Things,” 35 (emphasis original).

16. *Ibid.*, 29 (emphasis original).

one flesh" (Gen 2:24)—with consummate balance and intimacy? A number of feminist critics well attuned to sexist biases throughout the Bible in fact hear predominantly egalitarian, Edenic strains of heterosexual harmony in the Song. In Falk's judgment:

The equally rich, sensual, emotionally expressive, and often playful language of the Song's female and male voices . . . seems to evidence a nonsexist, nonhierarchical culture—unique in the Bible. Rather than offering a reversal of stereotypical male-female relations, the Song provides a different model, one in which *all* hierarchical domination is absent. Thus the Song expresses mutuality and balance between the sexes, along with an absence of stereotyped notions of masculine and feminine behavior and characteristics.<sup>17</sup>

Carol Meyers also affirms a "sustained sense of gender mutuality" in the Song and boldly contends: "In the erotic world of human emotion, there is no subordination of female to male."<sup>18</sup> And Phyllis Tribble commends the consistent "depatriarchalizing" tone of the Song: "Like Genesis 2, Canticles affirms mutuality of the sexes. There is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex. The woman is independent, fully the equal of the man."<sup>19</sup> These sweeping assessments of gender equality—using absolute "all/no/fully" language—from pioneering feminist writers in the 1970s and 1980s should not simply be chalked up to premature exuberance over finding something in the Bible for feminists to celebrate without demurrals. These are reasoned assessments by thoughtful scholars, and others could be added. And in the feminist hermeneutical repertoire, vibrant moves of remembrance and celebration are just as critical as more cautious steps of resistance and suspicion, especially with such an iconic religious text as the Bible.<sup>20</sup> The vast majority of feminist biblical interpreters have been and remain women and men not just of good faith and integrity but of religious faith and spirituality, Bible-believers in some sense who care enough about the Bible and its God to wrestle with them, like Jacob, until they

17. Falk, *Song*, 118 (emphasis original).

18. Carol Meyers, "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 197–212 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 211.

19. Phyllis Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973): 45.

20. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 1–19, 165–91.

shake out some "blessing." If the cheater-patriarch can do this, why not feminist critics?<sup>21</sup>

More recent feminist interpreters of the Song, however, more deeply informed by polyglot postmodern perspectives, doubt whether any two subjects can ever speak in perfect harmony, whether dialogue ever merges into monologue, whether two bodies ever become fully, equally "one flesh." At the heart of Exum's "Top Ten" list of feminist assessments of the Song, is her own "no" statement: "*There is no gender equality.*"<sup>22</sup> The Song depicts no feminist Utopia or Eden. All is not bliss in the couple's love nest. The shocking scene of violence against the woman in the heart of the poem, however briefly narrated (5:7), is enough to scar the woman and her Song permanently. For these reasons, I give considerable attention to this "text of terror" in this commentary, and there are other twists, tensions, and turns worth investigating in the Song, though none, thankfully, quite as terrible as the beating episode.

Nevertheless, the world of the Song is far from Dystopia or Hell. The earlier feminist writers had a point, even if they carried it too far. Though not granting gender equality in the Song, Exum does recognize "gender bending. Erotic coding in the Song crosses conventional gender lines" in terms of common images, like deer and dove, which are applied to and by both male and female lovers (1:15; 2:9, 12, 14, 17; 4:1, 5; 5:12; 6:9; 7:3; 8:14). Thus, "one could argue on the basis of such gender symbolism that the Song destabilizes conventional biblical gender stereotypes."<sup>23</sup> But destabilization is not the same thing as equalization. Constitutional amendments, legislative acts, and Supreme Court decisions have certainly shaken the foundations of sexual and racial discrimination in the United States over the past century and a half and given liberationists much to sing about. But few would argue that America has achieved full social equality. There's a long way to go and much still to lament. But it's better to proceed with realistic hope than abject defeatism. I hear the Song as sounding many positive notes for feminists' interests in women's agency, opportunity, and equality, but not in some Pollyanna naïveté unhinged from reality. I attempt to follow the Song's score carefully

21. See the appropriation of the Jacob story as a model for feminist biblical criticism in Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 4-5.

22. Exum, "Ten Things," 30 (emphasis original).

23. *Ibid.*

from measure to measure, alert to discordant detours and minor-key modulations along the way.

### Score and Story: The Choreographical Factor

This matter of following the Song's score from measure to measure merits further explanation as an interpretive schema. This is a reading strategy, pure and simple, privileging no particular agenda, unless reading linearly from start to finish is considered an ideological move. This approach may yield insights with feminist implications, but it is not in and of itself more or less feminist than another literary method. Further, I do not claim this as the only way to study the Song, especially if one views the book as a montage of discrete poems, each demanding independent attention. And even taking the Song as a single entity, as I do, it can be instructive to focus on a particular verse or stanza in Janus-like fashion, correlating it with both preceding and succeeding developments in the Song.

I adopt a somewhat constricted approach of reader-response criticism that carefully tracks the reading process of a literary work sequentially, step-by-step from one segment to the next, resisting the urge to peek ahead and spoil the story's suspense.<sup>24</sup> I aim to let the drama unfold with fresh immediacy, as if experiencing it for the first time.<sup>25</sup> This is impossible to achieve fully with familiar works like the Song of Songs that have already been read or heard in whole or part many times. But for those most familiar with the Song and perhaps inured to its charms and challenges (how many classic hymns do we sing and hear automatically, without thinking?), it can be vital to slow down and try to encounter the Song anew, note-by-note, phrase-by-phrase, without jumping ahead too much. Such is the tour I try to lead in this commentary.

24. See Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 50–69; and in the same volume, Stanley E. Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," 70–100. Applied to biblical studies, see Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 41–58 and *passim*.

25. This approach, however, is by no means a naïve reading, as it is sometimes called. While striving to maintain an open element of surprise and not to anticipate the story's ending, this reading strategy remains keenly informed by linguistic and cultural knowledge critical to understanding an ancient text.

But this approach to the Song can be problematic, since a progressive reading strategy is best suited for a plotted narrative, which the Song clearly is not. It doesn't even easily fit the category of narrative poetry, certainly not like Homer's epic-poetic sagas or others' countless love ballads, both ancient and modern. Though a few stanzas, like the dream sequence in Song 3:1-5, have an obvious story structure, the poem as a whole is more loosely episodic and quixotic, flowing down a winding stream of consciousness. As Exum discerns, "The Song is a poetic text of great lyrical power and beauty," a sterling model of "lyric poetry, which is essentially a discontinuous form . . . [in which] we normally do not expect the kind of linear unfolding of events that produces a plot." Yet she also acknowledges "the powerful readerly tendency . . . to read for the plot" and "to create a 'story'" for the sake of meaning, a tendency a number of recent commentators on the Song indulge to various degrees even as they admit a lack of overall narrative structure.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, however, rather than accentuating the Song's narrative development and dynamic, Exum gives priority to its "poetic development" (blossoming images and symbols) and "circular dynamic" (thematic reinforcement). She cautions, "But tempting as it may be, we should be wary of looking for narrative progression in a lyric poem that meanders the way the Song does."<sup>27</sup>

I confess to succumbing to more than resisting the temptation to find narrative threads, however tenuous, holding the Song lovers' experiences together within their special love story, albeit an unending and often untidy one, as love stories tend to be. I grant that the Song's love dance—to shift the artistic image—is more improvisational than choreographed, more like a tango, though with the man and woman alternating lead positions, and less like a ballet pas de deux. But I still see the movement self-consciously moving somewhere rather than just hopping all over the dance floor. Or, to try one more metaphor, I interpret the Song as a series of broadly connected images, scenes, and slides, as in a PowerPoint presentation, rather than a more impressionistic, kaleidoscopic flash barrage, as in old MTV videos.

My motivation to narrativize the Song no doubt owes much, in Exum's terms, to my desire to impose meaning-making structure on the lovers' lyrics, to set these lyrics not simply to inspiring music but also to an informing

26. Exum, *Song*, 42. She cites the commentaries of Bergant, Weems, Munro, Landy, Fox, and Garrett (see "Works Cited" in the present volume) as examples of those who appreciate a "narrative dynamic" (42–45).

27. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

storyline. I particularly appeal to the inherent narrative dimension of human emotion, not least that most intensive and pervasive emotion of love, perceived by some philosophers and psychologists. For example, the philosopher Peter Goldie argues, "Our thought and talk of emotions is embedded in an interpretive (and sometimes predictive) narrative which aims to make sense of an aspect of someone's life."<sup>28</sup> Applied to a couple's love life, a man's laconic "because I love her" explanation of any given affectionate gesture encodes a broader network of experience, encompassing "all the episodes of thought and feeling which are involved . . . placing them in the narrative as part of the love you have for her. The complex web of thoughts and feelings is thus summarized, or concertinaed, so to speak, into a simple explanatory phrase: 'Because I love her.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the research psychologist and novelist Keith Oatley observes that emotions are not just random jolts or isolated impulses but "can be sequences of actions and events, based on scripts," especially storied scripts like various "falling-in-love" plots: "Scripts of the amorous enable us to visit worlds of love, and to take rides on the vehicles that transport us into those worlds. The idea of script works perfectly with the idea of story, which is also a sequence of actions and outcomes. . . . In psychological understandings of love . . . to understand anyone's love relationship, one has to understand what kind of story it has at its center."<sup>30</sup>

Again, I do not claim that the *Song of Songs* tells the love story of any "real" couple in ancient Israel. It is not a historical romance between Solomon and any of his wives or mistresses or between any other actual pair of lovebirds. Neither does the *Song* unfold an intricate tale of love with the narrative detail and psychological depth of a romantic novel, whether of the dime-store or highbrow variety. But as a passionate love song, the *Song of Songs* does draw us into a dynamic world of (e)motion, not simply moment, with elements of elation and frustration, fulfilled and unfulfilled longing, projected across past, present, and future time, though not in strict chronological sequence. This strong sense of move-

28. Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 103; and further: "Emotional experience cannot be adequately made sense of in abstraction from the narrative in which it is embedded" (45).

29. *Ibid.*, 42.

30. Keith Oatley, *The Passionate Muse: Exploring Emotion in Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 74–75; for his final point about love, Oatley is indebted to Robert J. Sternberg, *Love Is a Story: A New Theory of Relationships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); see also Nico H. Frijda, "The Laws of Emotion," *American Psychologist* 43 (1988): 349–58.



ment spurs us readers and hearers to follow the flow, erratic though it may be, and to keep up as best we can.

Before leaving this brief discussion of the Song's framework, a quick word is needed about how I've structured this commentary. After the heading in Song 1:1, I have organized my analysis around fourteen "stanzas," as I call them. I hasten to add, however, that these are simply practical divisions for the sake of discussion rather than formal poetic units. I pay attention to poetic techniques such as parallelism and framing devices, but I make no pretense of tracking the definitive structure of the Song, of which there is no scholarly consensus, or revealing some new grand scheme of things.<sup>31</sup> Along with the basic unit of "stanza," I use common terms such as "segment" and "line" for parts of a stanza, "Song" or "Poem" for the entire work, and "chapter" and "verse" for numerical references in the NRSV. All biblical citations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated, and I generally do not indicate where NRSV versification differs from the Hebrew Bible or Septuagint. I do, however, annotate the NRSV text printed at the head of each stanza with my judgments regarding who's speaking to whom, which are not always obvious in English versions (and sometimes ambiguous in the Hebrew text). The letters "W," "M," and "D" stand for the Woman/Female protagonist, Man/Male protagonist, and daughters of Jerusalem, respectively, and the flow of speech is represented by an arrow. Hence, [W → M] signals the principal woman (Songstress) speaking to her male lover.

## Repertoire and Reputation: The Canonical Factor

Processes of canonization, of circumscribing an official corpus of "approved" writings, naturally capture the suspicious attention of feminist critics, since canonical judgments are ultimately sanctioned by some authoritative body that is usually male-dominated and necessarily involve some degree of exclusion since only the chosen few make the grade. More often than not, women's interests fall outside the canonical circle. This is certainly true concerning the Jewish and Christian scriptural canons with most, if not all, books written by men for men in an ancient patriarchal

31. For a helpful survey of various proposed structures, see Exum, *Song*, 37–41; on p. 39 she charts twelve different schemes! I should also say that my 14-stanza scheme has no numerical significance (say, a "perfect" double-seven pattern) and no particular correlation with Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, JSOTSup 36 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986).

society. But the Bible, comprised of numerous writings composed over centuries, is not the narrowest canon one might imagine and does contain some memorable “women’s books,” like Ruth, Esther, Judith—and the Song of Songs. Of course, how women are treated in these relatively short pieces and how they fit with the other writings and within the prevailing culture are matters of intense debate. We’ve already hinted at the complicated issue of women’s speech and action in the Song.

The pervasive erotic play and tension in the Song poses a special case in a sacred canon wary of sexual pleasure outside the bonds of marriage and the goals of reproduction, neither of which gets much play in this Poem. Ruth, Esther, and Judith all have their sexy moments, but nothing like the Songstress, and for the most part they stay within the bounds of “proper” conduct. They are all beautiful and desirable and know how to use their sexuality, if necessary, in the interests of national and familial security, but they are far from “loose” women like the prostitutes and adulteresses condemned in Proverbs. The passionate woman in the Song, however, operates more on the edge, dances dangerously close to more suspicious sides of the street(s). Any way you slice it, the Song’s presence in the biblical canon flashes like a neon sign signaling its blatant oddity. As Daphne Merkin queries, “How did so conspicuously ungodly a composition—a piece of undeniable erotica, filled with enough sexual punning . . . to make Shakespeare blush—slip by the defenders of the faith, the old men with beards?”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Ilana Pardes comments regarding the Song, “The canonization of a secular work in which female eroticism is presented so favorably—a rare phenomenon not only in the Bible, but in Western culture as a whole—remains an astonishing phenomenon.”<sup>33</sup> So what gives? Did the Song just serendipitously squeak into the Bible as a canonical glitch or more conspiratorially as a deliberate oversight?<sup>34</sup> Did the religious authorities “discreetly look away, recognizing that a religion based on 613 commandments could do with a little leavening, a welcome touch of sensuality?”<sup>35</sup> Or did they suffer some inexplicable blindness when it came to the Song?<sup>36</sup>

32. Daphne Merkin, “The Women in the Balcony: On Rereading the Song of Songs,” in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Büchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 238–51, at 244.

33. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 128.

34. Merkin, “Women in the Balcony,” 240.

35. *Ibid.*, 244.

36. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 128–29.

Merkin and Pardes ultimately propose more substantive answers to their canonical questions, each related, interestingly enough, to the city “watchmen” in the Song who “find” and briefly meet the woman out searching for her lover on one evening and assault her on another (3:3-4; 5:6-7)! Merkin accentuates the harsh police action of the canonical guards: “Radical as its inclusion in the canon of Holy Scriptures may appear to be, I suggest it is less surprising if one sees this amorous dialogue in the form of a warning—a prophylaxis, as Gerson Cohen calls it: Caution ye seekers of passion, lest you end up lost and wandering, in a city with no name, reduced to calling on the help of anonymous and hostile ‘watchmen.’”<sup>37</sup> Pardes, however, is more charitable toward the custodians of the canon and the sentinels of the city: “Why was the Song canonized? Let me suggest that . . . those who set the limits on the sacred corpus were in fact not unlike the keepers of the walls in the Song. Just as the guards in the Song are neither omnipotent nor innocent of desires, so the watchmen of Holy Writ could not fully prevent the admission of ideologically alien voices within the canon, especially those other voices which filled (unconscious) needs in the biblical array.”<sup>38</sup>

Yet, however plausible these theories may appear, they remain speculative, since the process of biblical canonization is shrouded in mystery. It’s difficult to believe that the early rabbis and church fathers signed off on the Song with a quick nod and wink or, worse, dozed off when the Song came up for discussion. Surely they knew the hot potato they had in their hands and gave it due attention. But we have scant evidence of the debate.<sup>39</sup> Our best clue comes from the testimony of Rabbi Akiva (c. 50–135 CE) in the Mishnah, asserting, “Heaven forbid!—No Israelite man ever disputed concerning Song of Songs that it imparts uncleanness to hands” (m. Yad. 3:5).<sup>40</sup> Here the notion of transmitting uncleanness has

37. Merkin, “Women in the Balcony,” 249. The Cohen reference is to Gerson D. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), xv.

38. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 142–43. In my judgment, however, the watchmen in the Song are thoroughly antagonistic characters (see commentary on 5:7).

39. See the helpful general discussions related to the Song’s canonization in Exum, *Song*, 70–73; Fox, *Song*, 247–52; Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 118–43; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 5–7; Tremper Longman, III, *The Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 56–58; and Alicia Ostriker, “A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext,” in *The Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, FCB, Second Series, 36–54 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

40. Translation by Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); cited in Exum, *Song*, 70–71.

to do with the book's powerful sanctity, not its impurity, as the "holiest" of all sacred writings. It is so holy in Akiva's view that all human hands, however well scrubbed, are automatically unclean in comparison and should handle the Song with only the greatest care or not at all; pointers or cloths could be used as intermediaries.<sup>41</sup> The fact, however, that Akiva felt compelled to deliver such a strong and sweeping apology for the Song—he doth protest too much—suggests that some had indeed disputed his claim, perhaps contending that the Song itself was too dirty to handle. In all likelihood, then, the Song was just as controversial among early Jewish authorities as that other strange piece of wisdom associated with Solomon, the book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), which Akiva acknowledges as a contested canonical candidate.

Another tradition attributes to Akiva a further cautionary word concerning the Song: "Whoever warbles the Song of Songs in a banquet hall, treating it like an ordinary song, has no share in the world to come" (t. Sanh. 12:10; cf. b. Sanh. 101a).<sup>42</sup> Again, the good Rabbi's admonition betrays a counter-opinion and probably a common practice of singing the Song in banquet halls and festival centers. What better accompaniment for such occasions than a lively love song invoking a banquet house setting (Song 2:4) and frequently celebrating the joys of rich food, drink, and fellowship? The Song of Songs may well have originated in such a venue as a piece of entertainment, but that doesn't mean it was a purely "secular" composition, still less a blue-movie sound track. The many festivals featured in the Jewish calendar have always blended secular/religious, ordinary/sacred, and bodily/spiritual elements in celebrating earthly life as a gift of the Creator God. Dualistic splits in cosmology and anthropology are largely creations of Western (Greek) thought. Hence, it's no surprise that the Song (or Canticles) came to be grouped with Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations as the five *Megillot* or Festival Scrolls traditionally sung at respective annual festivals. The Song eventually became the anthem for the weeklong Passover holidays, which included many joyous indulgent festive events along with more contemplative acts of prayer, worship, and sacrifice.<sup>43</sup> Christian adherents so accustomed to associating Passover with Jesus' solemn Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, the eve of his crucifixion, can easily

41. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 120.

42. Translation by Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); cited in Exum, *Song*, 70.

43. Fox, *Song*, 247–52; Exum, *Song*, 72.

lose sight of the larger Passover picture and wonder why in the world anyone would “warble the Song of Songs” on this occasion, as if it were a folk concert or a club set.

But Akiva's concerns ran in the other direction. He thought that the Song was appropriate *only* for the most sacred occasions and *never* for the banquet hall, even with its festive language. While the whole earth is the Lord's, there's an apt time and place for everything under heaven, as Qoheleth insisted in Eccl 3:1-15, and Akiva believed that the Song should never be performed in a banquet hall “like an ordinary song.” Nothing wrong with love songs in general sung at celebratory feasts, just not this holiest of Songs. One needs to match the right music with the right ambience. The Lord lamented once to the prophet Ezekiel that the people were missing his serious message of judgment during a period of national crisis because they mistook him for “a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it” (Ezek. 33:32).<sup>44</sup> Again, love songs are ordinarily fine, just not, to return to Akiva, *this* Song at any ordinary time.

But Akiva's restriction doesn't solve the problem of the Song's lyrical contents, which, in their gushing about a torrid romance, reflect the longings of ordinary people about the most basic human drives for love and sexual intimacy, and never once (well, maybe once, 8:6) mention God! How can a book be holy without explicitly honoring God? (The book of Esther has the same problem.) Clearly, Akiva was convinced by some method of nonliteral, spiritual interpretation that the Song of Songs did honor the holy God through and through. What that method was we don't know, but it likely involved some type of allegorizing the lovers as God (male) and Israel (female), which became the standard Jewish approach until the modern era, matched by Christian adaptations of God into the Christ-figure and Israel into the church as the bride of Christ. So interpreted, the Song was best suited for cantors and choirs in synagogues and churches and fell off the repertoire of torch singers and jazz bands in banquet halls. That's the way it often goes as books and songs get into circulation; they take on a life of their own, whatever the composers' original intentions, and if they're lucky, like the Song of Songs, they keep being published for centuries, long past the time when authors have any say over their reception.

44. See Fox, *Song*, 248–49; Clines, “Why Is There a Song?,” 101.

But whatever may be gained by such a dynamic process, a price is also paid: something is lost, perhaps even something vital to the work's core essence, which may still be argued for without claiming that it captures the only valid meaning. Regarding the canonical Song interpreted in purely spiritual terms, the casualty is sexuality and not only in its most worldly, carnal expressions but also in its more sublime, metaphysical aspects. Allegorical readings of the Song may efface its sexual dimensions as much as embroider them, if not more so. Clines contends "that the history of its interpretation is one of a massive repression of sexuality, of denial of the book's ostensible subject matter, a testimony especially to male fear of female sexuality."<sup>45</sup> That overstates the case, however. For medieval monks, the response seems less one of repression than redirection. The great twelfth-century theologian Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, spent eighteen years meditating on the Song's first two chapters and crystallizing his thoughts into eighty-six sermons.<sup>46</sup> This was no dry sermon series sketched out in a dusty cell because he happened, say, to be a scholarly specialist in the later Hebrew idiom of Song manuscripts. Brother Bernard was personally and passionately committed to the Song as a call to embodied passionate union with the incarnate passionate Christ as the highest and deepest experience of God's love. As William Loyd Allen concludes, "[Bernard] may have had a distorted view of human sexuality; he may have failed personally to love as he felt loved; but he did not fail to see the erotic ardor between a woman and a man as an ideal representation of the higher Truth from which it first sprang."<sup>47</sup> To make things even more interesting, we should not ignore that, in this intense nearly two-decades-long engagement with the Song, Bernard, like other monks, would have assumed the subject position of the Song's *woman* in relation to the loving male Christ figure. From the start, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1:2) would mark for Bernard a longing for eroticized spiritual intimacy with Christ on a mystical, gender-bending, homosexualized plane, but no less fervently felt for its metaphorical state.<sup>48</sup>

45. Clines, "Why Is There a Song?," 113.

46. See Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 198–201; William Loyd Allen, "Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Songs*: Why They Matter," *RevExp* 105 (2008): 403–16; and Kristin Johnston Lergen, "The Erotic Passion of God," *Dialog* 49 (2010): 7–8.

47. Allen, "Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons*," 413.

48. See the provocative article by Stephen D. Moore, "The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality," *Church History* 69 (2000): 328–49.

Nuns and other sisters of the church might have an easier, more “natural” entry into the love bond with Christ via the Songstress, but what about modern feminist women, whether professionally or personally religious or not? Feminism’s fundamental commitment to embodied female life in all its facets—not least female sexuality—free from the stifling stays of male oppression and repression does not sit well with exploitations of the female body for others’ interests, whether subtle or overt, allegorical or literal. Such commitment to women’s choice and agency holds even in the face of purportedly noble appropriations, as in the interest of knowing God or Christ with utmost intimacy.<sup>49</sup> Hence, I know of no feminist interpretation of the Song that does not appreciate its basic character as erotic poetry extolling the virtues and vicissitudes of natural, passionate human love. But a Jewish or Christian feminist reader of the Song may certainly *choose* to expand her (or his) interpretive horizon into the spiritual realm, to appropriate the book as a theological-spiritual resource in addition to or in tandem with its natural-sexual elements. Recalling Exum’s tenth point, quoted above, feminists are free to sing the Song as they will. Exum chiefly has in mind reading against the grain of sexist (mis)readings, but she would doubtless allow for additive spiritual or devotional readings, though she herself rarely ventures into this territory in her commentary. Neither do I in the present volume, as I keep the spotlight trained on the “natural” plane of primary concern to most feminist interpreters. But other writers, on various points of the feminist-critical spectrum, happily engage in more multilevel reflections of this multifaceted Song.<sup>50</sup>

49. For a superb discussion of feminist theory’s emphases on women’s embodiment and agency and their implications for theological experience, see Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 1–68.

50. For thoughtful reflections on the spirituality and theology of the Song, see, from a Jewish view, the magisterial new commentary by Fishbane (*Song*), in which, following the traditional rabbinic “Pardes” method of scriptural interpretation, he tracks throughout the Song four levels of analysis: *peshat* (literal/plain meaning), *remez* (allegorical/symbolic approach), *derash* (comparative/midrashic reading), and *sod* (mystical/spiritual insights); Debra Band, *The Song of Songs: The Honeybee in the Garden* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2005), which is illustrated by the author with stunning color paintings, four of which appear in grayscale, with accompanying commentary, in the present volume; Ostriker, “Holy of Holies.” From a Christian perspective, see Carr, *Erotic Word*; Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*; Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 231–302; Stephanie Paulsell, “The Song of Songs,” in *Lamentations and the*

Carey Ellen Walsh strikes a particularly attractive tone that I think most religiously inclined feminists would appreciate, even if it doesn't reflect their main approach. Walsh envisions the Song as "a celebration of all things of human life. . . . [It] is in essence, a spiritual book . . . concerned with the responses of the soul to life and its pleasures. As such, it is neither secular nor religious, since these are modern categories and carriers of dualism."<sup>51</sup> Encountering this remarkable work thus "yields a renewed sense of the erotic as a human energy, a life-enhancing response to the world," what the modern poet Octavio Paz pinpoints as "the luminous side of eroticism, its radiant approval of life."<sup>52</sup> More fully, Walsh expounds her holistic take on the Song:

Discerning the spiritual dimension of the Song is potentially the most rewarding part of the investigation. For if there can be a unity of the spiritual and sexual impulses, then we have come a long way toward healing the rift between religion and sex, between the spirit and the body. And we catch biblical testimony to the sheer glee of being human, without caveat or reflex, religious promises to keep trying harder. Religion of the latter kind can wear one out. Sexual energy can wreak havoc, of course, but that potency itself does not make it sinful. The Song's unremitting, unabashed attention to desire provides a needed heuristic salve for those who have been emotionally splintered by religion.<sup>53</sup>

As one still picking out painful splinters from an early age, I can only say: Amen and Amen.

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*Song of Songs*, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Harvey Cox and Stephanie Paulsell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 169–276; Christopher West, *Heaven's Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be* (West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2008); and Iain M. Duguid, *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015).

51. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 191.

52. *Ibid.*, 187; citing Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 25.

53. *Ibid.*, 193.



## Song of Songs 1:1

### *Heading*

This title, whether original or editorial, provides three guidelines for interpretation. First, it assumes a singular song (שיר) best heard, read, or sung as a whole, in one sitting. Though comprised of multiple stanzas featuring various voices and love themes in a panoply of luscious images, the Song brings all these elements together into one stunning performance. The rich tones, tensions, points, and counterpoints of this complex symphony alternately thrill and chill, delight and disturb the hearer/reader.

Second, the heading dares to claim this Song as superlative: the “Song of Songs” (שיר השירים), that is, in the Hebrew idiom, the Song above all others, the “supreme song” or “songiest of songs,” as David J. A. Clines quips.<sup>1</sup> The wide and long popularity of this book among Jewish and Christian commentators bears out its exalted title. Witness Rabbi Akiva’s famous encomium: “For all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the *Ketuvim* are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies” (m. Yad. 3.5). Of course, the “holy

1. David J. A. Clines, “Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?,” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 205, Gender, Culture, Theory 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 99.

*Song of Songs 1:1*

<sup>1</sup>The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

of holies" comparison works best with an allegorical reading of the Song unfolding the covenantal love between God and Israel (or, for Christians, between Christ and the church). But even if we choose not to go that route, at least not as our primary interpretive path, the Song's soaring language and imagery lifts us above the banal puppy-love musings of a pop song into more hymnic and spiritual dimensions of dynamic love "strong as death" (Song 7:6).<sup>2</sup>

Third, the Song bears a Solomonic stamp; it is related to (7-prefix) though not authored by Israel's renowned king. The Song names Solomon in three places (1:5; 3:7-11; 8:11-12), each reflecting his royal splendor, and refers to an unnamed "king" three other times (1:4, 12; 7:5). In all but one of these cases, the female protagonist extols her male lover; in the lone exception (7:5), the male speaker associates himself with a king "held captive" by the woman's luxurious locks. The persona of Solomon and the royal imagery characterizing both lovers—the woman is compared to a queen or princess in 6:8-9; 7:1—embroider the couple's relationship in the Song, but the Poem does not chronicle the amorous experiences of the historical Solomon. Rather, it evokes Solomon's iconic reputation not only for wisdom and power but also, in sharp counterpoint, for womanizing and exploitation.

With his thousand foreign wives and concubines, opulent self-indulgence, and forced labor of his own people as well as non-Israelites for his massive building projects (1 Kgs 5:13-18; 9:15-22; 11:1-13, 26-28; 12:1-11; cf. Eccl 2:1-11), Solomon is scarcely a feminist hero. He uses people, not least women, for his personal pleasures and profits—quite the opposite of the picture of mutual love that the Song supports. The Song may be viewed, then, in some sense as revising (redeeming) Solomon's notorious past or, perhaps, as returning to his humbler and wiser royal roots before accumulating extraordinary wealth and power (see 1 Kgs 3-4). But the full picture remains to be seen as we work through the Song. With feminist lenses firmly fixed, we read not only with hopeful anticipa-

2. On the spirituality of the Song, see the Introduction, lxiii-lxiv n. 50, and the related discussion.

tion—this is the Song of Songs!—but also with watchful reservation. We know how kings, real and imagined, can operate, not least in pursuits of love. We know how women under enormous societal pressures can internalize dominant perspectives to their disadvantage.<sup>3</sup> The Song must be sung—and suspected.<sup>4</sup>

3. On internalization of prevailing sexist values, see Phyllis Chesler, *Women's Inhumanity to Woman*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2009), xxi, 1–34; Donald C. Polaski, "What Will Ye See in the Shulammitte? Women, Power and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 5 (1997): 68–81.

4. On the foundational hermeneutic of suspicion employed in feminist biblical interpretation, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 175–77; F. Scott Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and Persistence in Luke's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 24–54.



## Song of Songs 1:2-8

### *Comfortable (Mostly) in Her Own Voice and Skin*

The Song begins robustly in *medias res* with the lead voice of the woman addressing her male lover. She primarily speaks to him in the second person, with occasional slippage into a more formal, respectful third-person viewpoint: “Let him kiss me . . . for your love”; “Draw me after you. . . . The king has brought me” (1:2, 4).<sup>1</sup> The male voice is not heard until the final verse of this stanza (1:8).

While the intimate relationship of the couple forms the principal theme, a wider circle of interest soon becomes evident, encompassing the woman’s female friends (“maidens,” “daughters of Jerusalem” [1:5]) and brothers (“my mother’s sons” [1:6]) and the man’s male coworkers (“flocks of your companions” [1:8]). And while the overall tone is joyous and playful, certain ominous and hurtful strains darken the mood temporarily (1:5-6). The

1. On the issue of “grammatical person,” see Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 97. Fox writes, “The lovers often address each other in the third person, sometimes switching back and forth rapidly from third to second person (e.g., 1:12; 2:1-3; 4:6; 6:9; 7:11). Third-person address carries a special tone of respect” (see 265–66). Passionate desire and considerate respect go hand in hand in the bedroom.

*Song of Songs 1:2-8***[W → M]**

<sup>2</sup>Let him kiss me with the kisses of  
his mouth!

For your love is better than wine,  
<sup>3</sup>your anointing oils are fragrant,  
your name is perfume poured out;  
therefore the maidens love you.

<sup>4</sup>Draw me after you, let us make  
haste.

The king has brought me into  
his chambers.

We will exult and rejoice in you;

we will extol your love more  
than wine;  
rightly do they love you.

**[W → D]**

<sup>5</sup>I am black and beautiful,  
O daughters of Jerusalem,  
like the tents of Kedar,  
like the curtains of Solomon.

<sup>6</sup>Do not gaze at me because I am  
dark,  
because the sun has gazed  
on me.

tension focuses on related optic, aesthetic, and somatic perceptions: how one views or “gaze[s] at” (1:6) and values the woman’s body, especially her “dark” complexion. For the most part, she surmounts the narrow “beauty myths” of her society,<sup>2</sup> buoyed by the patent admiration of her lover. But the fact that she defends her beauty perhaps betrays an undercurrent of insecurity in the face of cultural stereotypes.

**Wining and Pining (1:2-4)**

The lead woman vocalist eschews polite overture or foreplay, plunging right in to expressing her deep desire for her lover that brooks no delay: “let’s run [רָרִין]!” (1:4, CEB; similarly NJPS: “we will run after thee”). Her approach is unabashedly sensual, both in its erotic longing and in its somatic engagement of all five senses. Touch, taste, and smell are explicitly cited; hearing is presumed in the act of speaking/singing; so too, seeing is implied, but less strongly, as the pleas for contact—“Let him kiss me” (1:2); “Draw me after you” (1:4)—suggest a pining for intimate presence not currently realized. But this is no pure fantasy in the mind of a lovesick girl. She has previously experienced and enjoyed sexual relations with her “royal” lover—“The king has brought me into his chambers” (1:4)<sup>3</sup>—

2. See Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002); Ellen Zetzel Lambert, *The Face of Love: Feminism and the Beauty Question* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

3. The Hiphil perfect form of בָּרָא (“has brought”) suggests causative, completed action.

My mother's sons were angry with  
me;  
they made me keeper of the  
vineyards,  
but my own vineyard I have  
not kept.

**[W → M]**

<sup>7</sup>Tell me, you whom my soul loves,  
where you pasture your flock,  
where you make it lie down at  
noon;

for why should I be like one who  
is veiled  
beside the flocks of your com-  
panions?

**[M → W]**

<sup>8</sup>If you do not know,  
O fairest among women,  
follow the tracks of the flock,  
and pasture your kids beside  
the shepherds' tents.

and she longs for more of the same. This happy yet poignant tension—at once pleasant and painful<sup>4</sup>—between love's anticipation and satisfaction as well as the lovers' presence and absence runs throughout the Song. A further tension simmers regarding the agency of the lovers. While the woman seems content to be wooed, "drawn," and "brought" by her male lover, she remains very active, collaborative ("let us run"), and directive ("let him kiss me") in the relationship. As the Song unfolds, both parties find themselves swept up in love's overwhelming currents beyond their total control. But neither surrenders personal agency altogether, and the woman may well be the strongest swimmer.

The woman conveys her passionate delight in bodily sensations in vivid language and imagery with no trace of prudery or disgust. Tactile experience leads the way with the woman's particular longing for multiple mouth kisses—no peck on the cheek will do—and her broader excitement about her lover's gestures of passion. "Your love[s]" (רדד), which appears twice, framing the segment in 1:2 and 1:4, is plural in Hebrew and connotes the more physical activity of "love-makings" and "caresses" than the psychological attitude of love.<sup>5</sup>

4. See Aristotle's classic definition of emotions or passions (*pathē*) as a mix of pleasure and pain in *Rhet.* 2.1.8 (see 4 Macc 1:20-28).

5. Fox, *Song*, 97; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 91; William J. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 68. The LXX and Vg. mistranslate the term as "breasts." The Song will frequently refer to the allure of breasts in love-making, but usually applied to the woman's body.

Closely connected with tactile delights of lovemaking are gustatory sensations. Kisses “of his mouth” (פה, 1:2) are at once tasted as well as felt, and the woman extols her beloved’s lovemakings as “better than wine” (1:2), whose piquant flavor immediately strikes lips, tongue, and palate, then “rightly” (1:4) or smoothly<sup>6</sup> flows down the throat and sends a tingle throughout the body. Of course, the delectable joys of wine owe in the first place to nature’s fruitfulness. From the start, the Song celebrates holistic, interconnected experience of love between embodied persons grounded in God’s good earth from which human life sprang and to which it will return (see Gen 2:7-9; 3:19).

The olfactory is the most sensitive of the five senses and most evocative after the initial scent has dissipated. Wine stimulates the nose even before it touches the lips, and at the heart of this segment are parallel lines announcing the lover’s captivating fragrance. The woman recalls the bracing aroma of her lover’s applied colognes mixing with his natural odors. Indeed, she only has to speak or think his name for his titillating smell to permeate or be “poured out” (1:3) into her environment.<sup>7</sup> The Song never reveals either lover’s given name, but the pun on “name” (שם, *shem*) and “perfume” (שמן, *shemen*) suggests the “powerful sensual impact” of the male lover’s person on the woman.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, his delicious scent is so pungent and pervasive that it wafts beyond the woman to stimulate other “maidens” (עלמות, young women, 1:3). Such shared experience at this stage, however, prompts neither competitive jealousy among the young women nor playing the field by the attractive man.

The erotic mix of senses celebrated here bears a provocative resemblance to the seductive charms of the “loose” or “strange” woman in Proverbs, variously cast as a prostitute or adulteress, who brazenly

6. Taking מִיֶּשֶׁר (from the root for “straight”) in 1:4 as “smoothly” rather than “rightly” (NRSV), in association with wine’s smooth flow down the throat and lulling affect on the drinker, as in Song 7:9 and Prov 23:31; see Fox, *Song*, 99; John G. Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall Pickering, 1993), 17.

7. The verb for “pour/empty out” (תּוֹרֵק) in 1:3 has a feminine subject that clashes with the masculine forms for “perfume” and “name” applied to the male lover. Most commentators acknowledge the awkwardness and leave it there; some, however, prefer various emendations, including the possibility that the term refers to a particular type of oil (תּוֹרֵק) or its native region (*Turaq*), otherwise unknown. See the discussion in Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs*, JPS Bible Commentary (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 29.

8. Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 167–68.



“seizes and kisses” (7:13) a vulnerable young man and lures him with “lips smoother than oil” (5:3) to her intoxicating perfumed bed, masking diabolical “chambers of death” (7:27; see 5:3-6; 6:24-29; 7:5-27). The woman who opens the Song matches the Proverbial loose woman’s aggressive, sensual passion, but then, so does the “wise woman” and “good wife” of Proverbs (see Prov 1:20-33; 5:18-19; 8:1-21; 9:1-6).<sup>9</sup> The critical character distinctions have to do with the life-bringing or death-dealing ends of these figures’ behavior, not their erotic means. The Song commences with no hint of death or deception. The tone is thoroughly exuberant, jubilant, and intoxicating in the best, invigorating sense of wine’s beneficence.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, while the Song’s male lover is enthralled by the passionate woman, he is not entrapped against his better judgment: he brings her “into *his* chambers” (Song 1:4; contra Prov 7:16-27).<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, the lack of marital language defining the relationship of the Song’s lovers breaks the confines of the good wife’s world. But this wider world of love is just as “good,” if not “better” (טוֹבִים, Song 1:2-3) than any other arrangement. Even so, that doesn’t mean all is bliss or without tension, as the next segment implies.

### Black but Beautiful (1:5-6)

The mood of communal exultation—“*we* will exult . . . *we* will extol” (1:4b)—suddenly modulates to the woman’s more personal and polemical exhortation toward antagonists in her inner circle of friends and family. She still remains confident and assertive, but from a more defensive posture. The problem is not with her lover but with her female associates and her brothers, and the problem is not, in the first place, with her love but with her looks. So she flatly declares: “I am black, but beautiful!” (1:5, my translation; the verb-less Hebrew is crisper: “black-I-but-beautiful”). Since the woman makes this assertion to counter the disdainful glances and “gazes” she receives “*because* I am dark” (1:6), I favor reading the *waw* (ו) conjunction as adversative (“but, yet”) rather than consecutive

9. See Gale A. Yee, “‘I Have Perfumed My Bed with Myrrh’: The Foreign Woman (יִשְׁשָׁא זָרָא) in Proverbs 1–9,” *JSOT* 43 (1989): 53–68; *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 149–58.

10. See Woman Wisdom’s invitation: “Come, . . . drink of the wine I have mixed,” (Prov 9:2, 6).

11. For a careful comparison of the portraits of the Song woman and both the “strange” and “good” women in Proverbs 1–9, see Kathryn Imray, “Love Is (Strong as) Death: Reading the Song of Songs through Proverbs 1–9,” *CBQ* 75 (2013): 649–65.

("and").<sup>12</sup> But, as F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp argues, informed by the Algerian feminist theorist H  l  ne Cixous, the same protest can be lodged more positively and playfully with appropriate accentuation: "I am black *and* beautiful!"<sup>13</sup> Conversational tone can be tricky to detect in written discourse, especially when speakers first appear in a poem or narrative and we are just beginning to hear their voices and read their characters. Fundamentally, however, we encounter the Song as scripted discourse with no embedded notes about staging or oral performance within a scriptural canon that, as biblical scholar Laress Wilkins Lawrence notes in her perceptive essay included here, "Beautiful Black Women and the Power of Love (Song 1:5)," periodically esteems lighter skin over blacker or, conversely, deems darker skin as inferior or suspect in some way (Job 30:30; Lam 4:7-8; Sir 25:17).

***Beautiful Black Women and the Power of Love (Song 1:5)***

"No wonder," said Hagar.

"No wonder."

"No wonder what?" asked Pilate.

"Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible. . . . Oh, Lord. My head. Look at that." She peered into the

compact mirror again. "I look like a ground hog. Where's the comb?"<sup>14</sup>

What African American woman has not, at some point in her life, experienced a moment of panic like Hagar did in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*? Bombarded by advertising images and cultural icons of blue-eyed blondes with Barbie-like dimensions,<sup>15</sup> it is not

12. Following the Vg. (*nigra sum sed [but] formonsa*) against the NRSV and NAB ("and").

13. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, " 'I am Black and Beautiful': The Song, Cixous, and *  criture F  minine*," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 128–40.

14. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: New American Library, 1977), 312.

15. Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* [New York: W. Morrow, 1991]) offers an early discussion of a range of issues related to "the beauty myth" in Western culture. In addition, volumes of feminist criticism have been written about the deleterious impact that the iconic Barbie doll has had on women of all races. For example, see Mary Rogers, *Barbie Culture*, Cultural Icons Series (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999); and M. G. Lord, *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (New York: Avon, 1995).

uncommon for African American women, even in the twenty-first century, to have internalized “the beauty myth” that only women who are “White, young, slim, tall, and [from a socioeconomic] upper class” can hope to attain the standards of beauty operative in the United States and countries influenced by its culture.<sup>16</sup> According to the informal but very influential rules of that cultural framework, the only way an African American woman could be considered beautiful is “if her hair was straight, her skin light, and her features European; in other words, if she was as nearly indistinguishable from a white woman as possible.”<sup>17</sup> No wonder Hagar, with her dark skin and kinky hair, thought that her efforts to attract her mate were doomed! What if she had had the self-knowledge and confidence expressed by the female lover (Scott Spencer’s “Songstress”) in the biblical Song of Solomon? Then would Hagar have known how truly loved and lovable she was? Would she have recognized and celebrated the beauty in her mirrored image, instead of being driven by that image tragically to her death?

Song 1:5 is the only verse in the Bible that juxtaposes the

Hebrew terms שחורה (“black”) and נאה (“beautiful”). It’s tempting, especially as an African American woman whose childhood coincided with the US Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, to embrace the NRSV’s word choice of “and” instead of the equally correct “but” for the Hebrew ו that connects the two descriptors; hence, “I am black *and* beautiful” (Song 1:5; emphasis mine). But an affirmative reading of that ambiguous conjunction is not consistent with other biblical references to black (or blackened) skin. For example, in Song 1:6, the Songstress explains, in a tone that is defensive and almost apologetic, that her blackness (שחורה, “dark”) is the result of having labored long hours in her brothers’ sun-drenched vineyards. The book of Lamentations describes the skin of Zion’s princes, which had been “whiter than milk” prior to Jerusalem’s fall, but had become “blacker [שחור] than soot” as a result of postwar famine and disease (Lam 4:7-8). Similarly, a much-beleaguered Job laments, “My skin turns black [שחור] and falls from me, and my bones burn with heat” (Job 30:30). Darkened skin is even associated with moral evil, according to the author of the

16. Tracey Owen Patton, “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair? African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” *NWSA Journal* 18 (2006): 24–51 (esp. 30).

17. Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial, 1979), 158; cited in Patton, “Hey Girl,” 26.

book of Sirach, who declares that “a woman’s wickedness changes her appearance, and darkens her face like that of a bear” (Sir 25:17)!<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, these references indicate a temporary darkening of the skin due to challenging circumstances: manual labor outdoors, famine- or disease-induced blemishes, etc. The observation holds, however, that most biblical characters identified as of African descent (and presumably with African physiological features like dark skin) are also described in negative or at best ambivalent terms. For example, the Egyptian maid Hagar, for whom Morrison’s character is named, is “abandoned” by

Abraham,<sup>19</sup> to whom she has by force borne a son (Gen 21); Moses’ wife Zipporah is ridiculed by his sister Miriam for her Ethiopian heritage (Num 12).<sup>20</sup> Pharaoh King of Egypt and his taskmasters and army defiantly oppress the Israelites until Israel’s God crushes the Africans in a confrontation that is recounted frequently in the Deuteronomistic History and the prophetic corpus.<sup>21</sup> And Jeremiah famously refers to an Ethiopian whose skin cannot be washed white to illustrate the impossibility of purifying the character of those “who are accustomed to do[ing] evil” (Jer 13:23).<sup>22</sup> In short, though it’s tempting to interpret Song 1:5 in a way that resonates with post–

18. In Sir 25:17, the Greek term for “darkens” (σκορόω) is the same term used in Lam 4:8 and Job 30:30 (LXX). However, Song 1:5-6 (LXX) uses a different term, μέλαινα, which literally means “black” (see the contrasting word pair λεύκη/μέλαινα [white-black] in Matt 5:36).

19. The name “Hagar” may be an apparent word-play on an Arabic term for “abandonment.” See *Hebrew and English Lexicon with Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 212.

20. Though because of this “rebellion” against Moses’ authority, Miriam, presumably somewhat dark-skinned herself, is punished with leprosy that makes her “as snow” (כַּשֵּׁלֶג, NAB, NRSV, NIV), perhaps connoting “snow-white scales” (NJPS).

21. Notable exceptions to this observation include the Ethiopian Ebed-melech who rescues the prophet Jeremiah from unjust imprisonment and certain death in Jer 38, and the Ethiopian official in Acts 8, who is often associated with the spread of Christianity to the African continent. However, this figure is primarily identified in the text as an emasculated “eunuch” (five times), marking him out as a deviant, stigmatized figure in the ancient world.

22. Trying to wash an Ethiopian white (as a metaphor for the futility of trying to change one’s essential nature) is often associated with Aesop (a contemporary of the biblical prophet Jeremiah), to whom a fable on this topic was attributed. See Karen Newman, “‘And Wash the Ethiop White’: Femininity and the Monstrous in Othello,” in *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 71–93.

Civil Rights Era “Black Pride,” it is unlikely that black skin was positively associated with beauty in the thought-world of the Song of Songs.

Even today skin color presents a challenge to self-esteem and social acceptance for many African American women. Research has demonstrated that not only is “the beauty myth” in the United States based on standards that elevate the physical features of Caucasian women but also that the more a woman’s appearance deviates from those standards, the less likely it is that she will achieve higher socioeconomic status.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, even within the black community, “skin color hierarchies” persist, as Morrison’s frequent identification of characters in *Song of Solomon* as “dark-skinned,” “light-skinned,” and “high-yellow Negroes” reflects. Sociologist Maxine L. Hunter reports that light-skinned African American women tend to enjoy more privileges and opportunities for social advancement than their dark-skinned counterparts. Hunter traces this phenomenon back to the pre-Civil War period, when slaves with lighter complexions (usually as the result of their masters’ having raped their enslaved mothers) often were

assigned less strenuous labor on the plantations than their darker-skinned counterparts. Hunter asserts that light-skinned African American women tend to be offered more and better educational and employment opportunities; in addition, they tend to appeal more to black men who, like Hagar’s lover in Morrison’s novel, tend to seek lighter-skinned (or even non-black) mates who can boost their chances for upward social mobility.<sup>24</sup>

Is it possible, then, as an African American woman, to read Song 1:5 in a way that remains true to the spirit of the biblical text while still affirming the truth of black beauty? Yes, it is, for two clear reasons. First, the King James Version (a Bible translation frequently read in English-speaking black churches) retains the challenging rendering of the ambiguous Hebrew conjunction *as* as “but” instead of “and”: “I am black *but* comely” (Song 1:5, KJV, emphasis mine). But when read in the context of a religious tradition that ideally preaches good news to the oppressed, that rendering invites black worshipers to redefine and re-value what it means to be black and what it is to be beautiful. The message of Song 1:5 is transformed into good

23. Maxine L. Hunter, “Colorstruck: Skin Color Stratification in the Lives of African American Women,” *Sociological Inquiry* 68 (1998): 517–35.

24. *Ibid.*, esp. 522–23.

news for black women and men: "I am black but [contrary to the so-called beauty myth and the centuries-old racist ideologies of colonialism and slavery, 'black' is] beautiful!"

Second, as an African American woman, I hear Song 1:5 as good news when I read it in light of later verses in the Song where the Songstress declares: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (Song 2:16 ; 6:3; 7:10). That declaration evokes a refrain frequently heard in black churches where worshipers whose ancestors were sold as chattel remind each other about the truth of "who we are and Whose we are." We are not property of human slave masters nor commodities tested and approved according to human standards of skin color, hair texture, or the like. No! Our true selves are defined by the infinite love of a compassionate Creator who awesomely, wonderfully, yes, beautifully

has fashioned each of us in the sacred image (Ps 139:14; Gen 1:27). In a world where violence still compels us to assert that "black lives matter," it is important for us to remember why: because each of us is a beautiful, precious, deeply loved daughter or son of God.

And so it happens, in the final chapters of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, that Hagar's grandmother, Pilate, whose "full lips [were] blacker than . . . [her] skin, berry-stained," eulogizes Hagar and, with her, African American women (and men) everywhere, with the good news and the truth about beauty in the biblical Song:

"That's my baby girl. My baby girl . . ."  
 . . . Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, "And she was loved!"<sup>25</sup>

*Lauress Wilkins Lawrence*

The Song woman's initial critical gazers are not crude, leering males but the "daughters of Jerusalem" (Song 1:5), probably the same group as the young women who admire the male lover (1:3) and likely among the female lover's cohort in age and interest. These "daughters" will be invoked several more times in the Song (2:7; 3:5, 10-11; 5:16; 8:4), but their precise relationship with the principal Songstress is only beginning to unfold. Are they her close girlfriends, more distant acquaintances, casual observers, congenial admirers, social critics, potential rivals, or some

mix of these? The first impression they evoke falls on the more remote, judgmental side. The descriptor “daughters of Jerusalem” is rather formal, generic, and suggestive in this context of a privileged royal-urban circle into which the “king” has brought this dark-skinned, sun-scorched country girl. They’re not quite sure what to make of her yet, but at first glance, she doesn’t fit the part.

***“You Are Black, therefore Beautiful”: The Un-“Fairness” of Skin Color***

I heard this for the first time during a visit to North America. Forgetting to thank the stranger for the compliment, I wondered in disbelief, “How can this be? I have only heard of being fair and lovely in India. Could I possibly be black and beautiful?” I quickly dismissed the thought, saying to myself, “Maybe the North American sun has not kissed me like the South Indian sun!”

Scorched by the blazing sun of South India, many women lighten their skin with the root spice turmeric (the source of yellow color in many curries). Turmeric complements feminine beauty, both as an antiseptic and a bleaching agent. Likewise, pregnant women hoping for a beautifully fair child drink warm milk spiced with saffron (also used to flavor rice). South Indian women, young and old, often covet fair skin. Fair maidens are deemed fittest to catch the most desirable grooms (see Song 2:15 on catching the “foxes”). Darker-skinned baby girls are more likely to be given up for adoption.

In Middle Eastern and South Indian cultures where marriage

may be more of an economic transaction than a romantic enterprise, class discrimination besets society as much as, if not more than, racial prejudice. Historically, dark skin has been a sign of lower caste and material status. The dark-skinned Dravidian race was pushed aside by the white Aryan Hindus of the higher caste in India’s early history. The lower the caste, the harder one worked under extreme conditions, including greater exposure to the sun, thus leading to darker skin. For generations families would be bound in the bondage of discrimination based on skin color. Song 1:5 potentially offers hope for economically disadvantaged dark-skinned women who, in the absence of help, servants, and slaves, do their own work; who, instead of bathing in milk and honey, moisturizing and maintaining their skin, toil under the blistering heat of the sun (1:6); who develop sun spots and wrinkles laboring for their families; whose profile pictures rarely make it on magazine covers or the desks of their lovers.

The Hebrew ו and Greek και (LXX) in Song 1:5, normally

rendered “and,” resist a discriminatory reading. The reader sees the possibility of the young woman’s being both black *and* beautiful. We thus focus less on the brutal effects of the sun and more on the beautiful essence of the girl; less on her outer appearance and more on her inner strength. Nevertheless, in describing her skin color, not to her lover, but to the dissenting “daughters of Jerusalem,” the woman hints at an alternative counter-reading: “I am black, *but* comely” (KJV, RSV). It is not surprising that this potential bride-to-be is concerned about her beauty viewed through the eyes of other women, for in a traditional, arranged marriage system, the opinions of mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, aunts, and grandmothers are critical to the success of a marriage deal. Bottom line: a bride’s personal value and the wealth of her family are calibrated by her skin color.

Consider, further, a third reading: “I am black, *therefore* beautiful.” In evoking prospects of racial, gender, and familial discrimination in society, the Song’s opening scene offers a time-tested platform on which to construct erotic love. What makes a young woman beautiful? Comparing her skin color and quality to rugged tents and shielding curtains, Song 1:5 prompts us not to disregard the skin embracing the soul, but to embrace the skin in all its protective power, which the pigment melanin provides. The tents and curtains were sturdy and durable, designed to weather the storms of life and to shield the domestic sphere from danger. Such is the tenacity of the Shulammité’s dark, black, melanin-filled skin—a sign of inner strength and durability, characterizing women’s worth and beauty which do not *fade* away.

*Jerusha Moses*

The woman’s distinctive swarthy pigment that draws others’ downward looks results less from ethnic heritage (most Middle Easterners would have darker skin than Europeans) than from the environmental effects of the sun looking down upon her. She is the object, then, of a double-gaze: by other women and by the sun. She is deeply tanned from daily toil in the vineyards (1:6), not from lolling on the beach. Aesthetics, not least standards of physical beauty, are culturally conditioned. Tanned skin of various shades, which is coveted by modern white American women of all classes and the men who look at them as a model of attractiveness, does not translate to the Song’s ancient Near Eastern world—or to that of contemporary South India, as Jerusha Moses observes in her Contributing Voice essay, “‘You Are Black *therefore* Beautiful’: The



Un-‘Fairness’ of Skin Color.” Here the female protagonist’s darker skin marks her as an underprivileged field hand, physically and socially distinct from the less dark-complexioned daughters of Jerusalem. But she also clearly stands out for her exotic beauty, which is appreciated by her gorgeous kingly lover, whatever anyone else might think. As for the daughters’ inspections, they need not reflect sinister, piercing dirty looks or the envious, ill-wishing “evil eye” intent on sabotaging the woman’s relationship with her lover. But they at least betray gawking curiosity and wide-eyed puzzlement that this different outsider has managed to catch such a desirable suitor. This relationship doesn’t *look* quite right to them.

Feminist critics of film and literature have exposed the problem of the male gaze objectifying the female body and subjecting it to microanalysis and fantasy severed (disembodied) from women’s subjectivity and agency.<sup>26</sup> The camera zooms in and slowly scans a woman’s body from an ogling male perspective. Her form is captured—held captive—in the frame, and however artificial and airbrushed the scene might be, it reflects, reinforces, and reconfigures aesthetic standards and social locations from the male viewpoint, too often internalized by women who assume the position. The Song’s leading woman, however, dares to protest, “Don’t look at me like that!” She writes her own script, makes her own movie. She doesn’t hide but rather reveals herself on her terms proclaiming her blackness beautiful—just “like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon” (1:5). These ebony textile images merge two contrasting environments: the dark canvas dwellings of the Arabian tribe Kedar (קדר) whose name denotes “black”<sup>27</sup> and the elegant black draperies in Solomon’s Jerusalem palace.<sup>28</sup> Thus collapse foreign/domestic, tribal/

26. See the pioneering article by Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18; repr. in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (Houndsmill Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 14–27.

27. See the related noun קדרות in Isa 50:3 meaning “blackness.” Roland Murphy comments that “the tents of these Bedouin would have been made from black goat skins” (*The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990], 126).

28. As Exum (*Song*, 104–05) observes, though Solomon’s curtains evoke a different setting from Kedar’s tents, both could have been fashioned from black goats’ skins into distinctively beautiful materials. Not satisfied with this broad connection, however, some interpreters forge a tighter parallelism by revocalizing the consonants for Solomon’s name to render Salmah, the name of another Arabian tribe evidenced in some sources. See also Fox, *Song*, 100, 102; Snaith, *Song*, 18; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 7C; (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 291, 320.

royal, rustic/urbane, nomadic/monarchic binaries under a thick coat of beautiful black paint. And thus our blackened vineyard woman finds a welcome home in the black-shaded chambers of her kingly lover. For an actual painting that suggestively coordinates images of picked grapes and dark curtains from 1:5-6, along with a weathered mosaic panel, with that of the striking tanned woman, see the illumination and commentary by the contemporary artist and Contributing Voice, Debra Band.

### ***Illumination 1 Commentary***

*(The depicted Hebrew text is 1:5-8)*

A picked-at cluster of grapes— invariably symbolizing joy and sanctification in Jewish lore—still looks juicy and sweet, and a mosaic of grapevines has lost some tiles yet remains bright and colorful. While the young woman worries that her dark skin renders her undesirable to her lover, she asserts defiantly that the tan is not her fault, that she is beautiful nonetheless. In spite of the moment of self-doubt, she remains confident that the apparent flaw will not prevent the union with her lover. The midrashic, philosophical, and kabbalistic interpretations of the passage play on the notion of desirability despite unwitting imperfection. Putting the same argument into the mouth of Israel, cast here in female form, rabbinic legend compares the contrast of light and dark to the contrast of good and evil deeds. *Song of Songs Rab.* 1:5 reminds the reader that Israel has swung repeatedly



between obedience to and rebellion against God: in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, in reaction to the spies' report, and on several other occasions. Finally, Israel declares, "I am black in this world and comely in the world to come," that is, after the dreamed-of union with the Divine beloved.<sup>29</sup> The same curtains seen in *Illumination 3*<sup>30</sup>

29. Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Other Kabbalistic Commentaries* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Press, 1999), 53.

30. See Band's commentary on 7:6-9a below, pp. 188-89.

sway in the breeze. The dark and light layers of drapery reinforce the same theme, that the evil impulse which separates Israel from God can be conquered, that goodness can indeed supplant evil and bring about the union of God and Israel.

In Gersonides' Aristotelian analysis of divine wisdom, the woman becomes the human soul restrained by the material intellect from union with wisdom: "The material intellect said to the other faculties of the soul that ab initio she is *black* since she lacks any intelligibles but is nonetheless comely because of her disposition

to receive every intelligible when she will be stimulated to do this."<sup>31</sup>

In the Kabbalistic interpretation of 1:6, the Shekhinah, the feminine divine emanation closest to the human realm, asserts that after descending to Egypt along with Jacob, she participated in Israel's exile (thus separated from the higher levels of the Godhead), "complain[ing] and thunder[ing] forth about her being in exile," as she longs for reunion with the higher emanations.<sup>32</sup>

*Debra Band*

But the native home of the Songstress has proven not so hospitable. In particular, her brothers, though identified as "my mother's sons,"<sup>33</sup> have not treated her well; they have betrayed or taken advantage of the familial bond. Being "angry" with her, the brothers made their young sister "keeper of the vineyards" (1:6). This anger term (חרה) connotes a burning, boiling emotion;<sup>34</sup> its hot-headed force thus functionally coincides in the present case with the high-voltage energy of the sun irradiating earth's

31. Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides), *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. and ed. Menachem Kellner, YJS 28 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 27.

32. ben Solomon of Gerona, *Commentary*, 43.

33. Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch explain, "A term for full brothers, brothers of the same mother [that] sometimes implies a sense of special closeness" (*The Song of Songs: The World's First Great Love Poem* [New York: Modern Library, 1995], 141). See Gen 43:29; Judg 8:19; Ps 50:20; 69:8. Alternatively, Robert Alter notes that the sister's identification of "my mother's sons" rather than "my brothers" marks "a certain distancing from them" (see *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: Norton, 2015], 9). In any case, the way they treat her scarcely befits true brotherly love.

34. Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis*, Siphrut 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 197-98; Ellen van Wolde, "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible," *BibInt* 16 (2008): 7-17.

fields and those who toil in them.<sup>35</sup> The brothers' blazing anger caused their sister's sunburned condition. Beyond that, by overburdening her with tending the family vineyards (pl.), the hostile brothers prevented her from keeping her own vineyard (sg.). She decries this loss in the most emphatic terms: literally, "My vineyard—which [belongs] to me [שלי]—I have not kept" (1:6).<sup>36</sup>

At this point, we face the first of many interpretive decisions on the literal-figurative spectrum. Of course, the poetic genre of the Song demands a keen figurative imagination, but not an unbridled one. Most contemporary scholars, for example, resist a thoroughgoing allegorical reading so favored by patristic and medieval interpreters. For example, the picture of the woman as darkly stained by sin but made beautiful by God's redemptive grace imposes a narrow theological template on the Song persuasive to few modern readers, not least feminist readers attuned to the deleterious effects of depicting women, especially sexually active women, as prototypes of human sinfulness.<sup>37</sup> The image of the vineyard (כרם) is a well-known symbol for Israel in prophetic literature (Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer 2:21; Ezek 19:10-14; Hos 10:1; see also Ps 80:8-16) and for the woman's sexuality in the Song (1:14; 2:15; 7:13; 8:11-12). But any effective metaphor trades on reality, and poetic imagery typically evokes multiple associations.

Simply to substitute "the female sex" for every use of "vineyard" across the Song is reductionist. In the present scenario, the woman might be admitting that she has not "kept" her sexuality—that is, not maintained her virginity. She has taken a lover before marriage, seemingly without personal shame or regret. Perhaps it is such shameless disregard for sexual-marital convention that sparks her brothers' anger. As older male siblings protective of socioeconomic as well as more personal interests related to their sister, hoping to obtain an optimal bride price and marriage contract for her (see Song 8:7-12), they try (unsuccessfully!) to rein in their wild sibling with forced labor. This plausible scenario, however, is not made explicit; we are not privy to what provoked the brothers' ire against their sister, only to her conscripted labor that resulted.

35. Fox, *Song*, 102.

36. Or "my vineyard, mine" (Bloch and Bloch, *Song*, 141).

37. On patristic interpretation, see the stimulating article by Mark S. M. Scott, "Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriological Exegesis of the 'Black and Beautiful' Bride in Song of Songs 1:5," *HTR* 99 (2006): 65-83.

It is also possible that the woman laments the neglect of her property, that is, an actual vineyard to which she feels entitled. With multiple living brothers, it is doubtful that she legally owned any parcel of the family estate. But this need not stop her from desiring some financial independence, a piece of land to call her own (“my vineyard”) apart from fraternal exploitation, like the capable woman of Proverbs (though admittedly a wife) who “considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard” (Prov 31:16).<sup>38</sup> At this early point in the Song, it seems best to take the woman’s “vineyard” as representing her own multifaceted interests, including sexual and socioeconomic aspects. The celebratory joy of the Song is forged out of the woman’s struggle to control her own life.

### Hiding and Seeking (1:7-8)

Impinged by withering looks from Jerusalem’s daughters in the city and by the whip-cracking of her mother’s sons in the vineyard, the woman seeks respite and refuge in her lover’s pastures. In reflecting on her vulnerability to others’ power plays and honor games, she shifts her lover’s image from a king in palatial chambers to a shepherd in bucolic fields. The potential exploitative dimensions of royal rule give way to or, better, blend with gentler associations of pastoral care and protection from blazing midday heat. “Lying down at noon” in green pastures (Song 1:7) provides a soothing contrast to laboring in the sunbaked vineyards.<sup>39</sup> In the literal and figurative dance of the Song, we need not settle the male lover’s actual occupation (king or shepherd? both or neither?) nor imagine two distinct suitors. The woman projects an ideal composite picture of her beloved as a shepherd/king-type, on the order of Solomon’s father David at his best—protecting family flocks (1 Sam 16:11; 17:34-35) and composing Ps 23, *not* cruelly seizing another man’s dear “ewe lamb” (2 Sam 12:1-15).

The activity of “pasturing” or “grazing” flocks (רעה, *raʿah*)—pursued by both male and female protagonists (she too has goat “kids” to feed

38. On this text in the context of women’s property rights and opportunities in the ancient Near Eastern world, see Christine Roy Yoder, “The Women of Substance (אשת-חיל): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31,” *JBL* 122/3 (2003): 444–45.

39. The Hiphil form of רבץ used in 1:7 means “make lie down” (NRSV), stressing the causative agency of the kindly shepherd in resting his flock (see Ps 23:1), in contrast to the angry brothers who press their sister into harsh fieldwork.

[Song 1:8]) and by other male shepherds (1:8)—evokes a homophonic link with the daughters of Jerusalem’s looking/gazing (רָאָה, *ra’ah*) and what will soon emerge as the man’s favorite pet name for his dearest “love” (רַעְיָה, *ra’yah*) (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4).<sup>40</sup> As the woman is the object of both looking and loving, she also appears in some sense as the object of the man’s grazing or tending. She is his “fairest” (1:8), most beautiful (יָפֵה), most precious lamb or kid; she anticipates his laying her down at noon (1:7), his resting and eating with her in erotic refreshment.<sup>41</sup> She is a willing, pursuant partner in this arrangement, seeking out his pastoral location where she may actively feed her needs. As a lovemaking picture, the *al fresco* setting both extends and complements the bedchamber in 1:4. Our couple’s love longs for free, unfettered expression in harmony with nature’s open environment.

But pastoral romance in the Song is not wholly idyllic. It poses its own teases and tensions as others encroach on the lovers’ meadow. Other shepherds, the man’s male “companions” (1:7), graze their flocks and pitch their tents. We don’t know how close these other men are to the woman’s lover, just as her relationship with the “daughters of Jerusalem” remains ambiguous, but they do not appear overtly hostile as the woman’s brothers have been. Still, they constitute a crew of field-working men. An attractive woman appearing in their midst is bound to draw a few lewd glances and rude advances. Far from being threatened by this prospect, however, the woman cleverly turns it to her advantage to prompt her lover’s protective guidance. She questions the prospect of “veiling” herself in the shepherds’ company, either to shield herself from their unwelcome glances or to pique their desire to see what lies behind her gossamer mask. Either way, she tantalizes her lover in a “mock pout” with this scenario.<sup>42</sup> Does he want her receiving all this public attention? Why should she be so exposed?

In response, he treats her query more playfully than seriously, matching her primary concern with seeking-and-finding him rather than fending off dirty looks and come-ons from other shepherds. And he presumes that she knows exactly where to find him—perhaps at their favorite trysting spot—but prefers to keep him wooing her and worrying that,

40. Fox, *Song*, 103.

41. Noting that רָעָה may mean “eat” (intransitive use) as well as “feed” (transitive), Fox (*Song*, 103) aptly remarks: “She desires him and he her, and he ‘eats’—enjoys sexual pleasures—with her.”

42. Dobbs-Allsopp, “‘I am Black’,” 133.

if she takes a notion, she just might wander into other men's tents. In other words, she's playing coy and hard to get, and in turn he tries to play it cool and aloof: "Well if you don't remember, my dear, where to find me, go ahead and follow any tracks that strike your fancy and try your luck with any shepherds you happen to meet" (1:8, my paraphrase). Ah, the courting games young lovers love to play. No surprise here. The cheeky banter only makes the inevitable rendezvous more delicious. But teasing—the playful as well as hurtful kind—trades on real possibilities. While in this situation the woman does not appear seriously to fear for her safety—because she knows where to reach her lover who desires her deeply and will defend her, if need be—she still must make her way in a precarious, male-dominated public world. She has to watch her step and track her course judiciously. An undertone of vulnerability never fades completely from the Song.