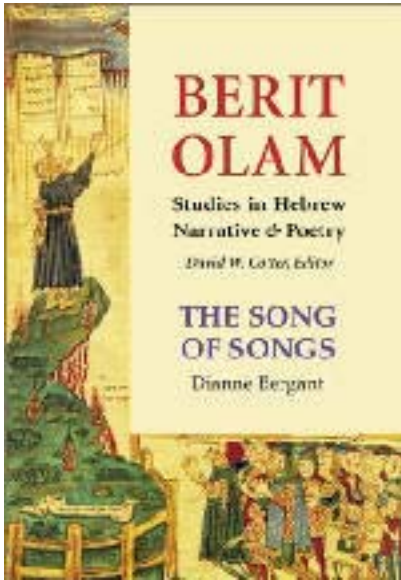


RBL 05/2003



Bergant, Dianne

The Song of Songs

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001.
Pp. xvi + 123. Cloth. \$29.95. ISBN 0814650694.

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Dianne Bergant's commentary on the Song of Songs, like other contributions to the Berit Olam series, is a final-form, literary reading of the text that concerns itself very little with matters that preoccupy more traditional commentaries, such as date, provenance, and genre. Its object is to communicate the beauty of the poetry, to explicate its images, to point out its problems, and to give some cultural background. A brief introduction is devoted to questions of authorship, the history of interpretation, and the techniques of biblical poetry.

Bergant's approach is broadly literary, paying a great deal of attention to parallelism, chiasmic structures, and wordplay. She divides the Song into six poems, often delineated on the basis of correspondence between their conclusions, or framing devices such as *inclusio*. It is not clear, however, whether she regards these as originally separate compositions or as contributing to an overall unity; frequently her divisions seem arbitrary, and she often uses the term *poem* for small subunits. She treats the Song as a secular love poem, but one that was preserved within the wisdom tradition, which she regards as the ancient equivalent of humanism (4). For this tradition, she claims, the Song contained "insights beneficial for right living" (5). On the whole, however, Bergant eschews religious interpretations and interconnections, even downplaying the significance of the comparison between love and death in 8:6 (98).

Bergant's account of biblical poetry concentrates on its formal characteristics, drawing heavily on the work of W. G. E. Watson. The book is full of neatly arranged structures; for her, indeed, "biblical poetry is characterized by the regularity of its structure" and by "terseness" (xii) Not only is this description inadequate, as has been shown by Kugel and others, but it also disconnects poetic form from meaning. One symptom of this is that Bergant's discussions generally move from the sense of a particular passage to its underlying patterns and verbal features, without showing the correlations between them.

The commentary is generally adequate but rarely exciting. Its prospective audience seems to be the general reader, for whom Bergant provides helpful explanations of terms such as *hapax legomenon* and *merism* but has little to offer that the specialist would not garner from more detailed recent commentaries. It lacks philological nicety and literary acuity. But the literarily sensitive reader, too, would find it frustrating, since interpretative comment is generally paraphrastic. The style, moreover, is pedestrian, appropriate perhaps to an unsophisticated audience but scarcely adequate to communicate the lyric intensity of the Song.

The issue is of the depth one expects from a commentary and the questions one asks of a poem. How is the symbolic world of the Song constructed? What are its insights into the human person? How do the metaphors interact? What is the role of intertextuality? What is the ancient Near Eastern cultural background? It is not that Bergant has no regard for these questions but that she does not pursue them very far. For instance, the relation to wisdom literature is intriguing and has often been discussed, but once asserted in the introduction it more or less disappears from the body of the commentary. In 1:3 Bergant does not notice that the wordplay between אִשׁ and אִשָּׁה inverts that in Eccl 7:1. She makes no comparison between the descriptions of the heroine of the Song and the strange woman of Proverbs, despite their similar vocabulary. The Song, indeed, could be seen as an antiwisdom poem, since it embodies the temptations the sages most fear.

Another example is the systematic comparison with the garden of Eden, first discussed in detail by Phyllis Trible, whose formative work, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress, 1977), is not cited. Similarly, she dismisses any allusion to the exodus tradition in 3:6 and 8:5 (38) despite the motif of the tryst between God and Israel in the wilderness in the Prophets. She assumes that a "secular" love song cannot use the resources of sacred literature or vice versa. However, as Michael Fox has shown, ancient Egyptian love poetry is full of such imagery, as is all erotic poetry, ancient and modern.

Bergant, in common with most recent critics, comments on the predominance of the woman's voice in the Song (4), the absence of the father (16), and the mutuality of the lovers (90). She notes the rejection of patriarchal values; however, this is not developed

into a social critique. For instance, when the watchmen beat the woman, in 5:7, Bergant suggests that they mistake her for a prostitute (66), rather than regarding it as emblematic of the conflict between the values of the Song and the guardians of public morality.

The separation between form and content makes poetry into a set of techniques for expressing a message rather than a vehicle for reimagining the world. Bergant emphasizes the regularity and predictability of the poetry of the Song at the expense of its subversiveness. She does not, for example, discuss the strange juxtaposition of metaphors and their baroque development. Indeed, she apologizes for their strangeness or crudity to the modern reader—who apparently does not read modern poetry—and justifies it in terms of oriental convention (xv).

The commentary is seriously under-researched. There is no reference to any book in any language other than English. This means that she has not availed herself of Daniel Lys's *Le Plus Beau Chant de la Création* (Paris: Cerf, 1968), which is still perhaps the best of modern commentaries. Hans-Josef Heinevetter's remarkable *Das Hohelied als programmatische Komposition* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1988) is likewise missing, as are the poetic commentaries of Krinetzki. Bergant also seems unaware of all modern trends in literary criticism. No literary theorist is cited; she makes no reference to recent postmodern readings of the Song by Stephen Moore, Roland Boer, David Clines, David Carr, Donald Polaski, Fiona Black, and others. Cheryl Exum's groundbreaking article of 1973 is mentioned, but none of her recent work on the Song. Strikingly, Robert Alter's brilliant chapter on metaphor in the Song in *The Art of Biblical Poetry* ([New York: Basic, 1985], 185–203) is absent, as is Harold Fisch's discussion of the Song as reversed pastoral in his *Poetry with a Purpose* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988], 80–103). In general, Bergant does not credit philological or cultural interpretations to their original sources, for instance, G. R. Driver's suggestion that אֶהְבֶּהָ in 3:10 means "leather" or B. J. Isserlin's proposal that תֵּלְפִיּוֹת in 4:4 means "towers with winding courses."

There are quite a number of typographical errors in the volume, in particular of transliteration. I regretted that Bergant overlooked Fox's ingenious suggestion that מִדְּבָרִים in 4:3 is a pun on the word for "wilderness." In her introduction, she refers to the "Targum Canticles Rabbah" (ix). Otherwise, there are no substantial errors.

In short, this is a good volume for beginners who do not wish for anything too demanding. More advanced students and scholars will, however, require a more substantial commentary.