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Exum, J. Cheryl

Song of Songs

Old Testament Library

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It is difficult to believe the venerable Old Testament Library commentary series has been around for so long without a volume treating the Song of Songs. This gap has finally been filled by J. Cheryl Exum's brilliant new volume. One lacuna remains, Jeremiah, while replacement volumes, such as Deuteronomy, Joshua, Isaiah, Proverbs, and Amos, are appearing fairly regularly (John Gray's *I and II Kings* appears to be out of print, while a replacement has not yet appeared). Those familiar with Exum's previous work might expect two qualities, a flawless and concise writing style and meticulous attention to the language and literary structure of the biblical text. Both of these expectations are more than fulfilled in *Song of Songs: A Commentary*. In these days of critical commentaries that explode in size, a volume like this that comes in at under three hundred pages, front matter included, is most welcome.

The eighty-six pages of introduction are dominated by discussion of how the poetry and its language operate. Exum promises that "attention to the Song's guiding poetic strategies, therefore, forms a major part of this commentary" (3). She labels the Song of Songs as "lyric" poetry (5), which she never fully defines. This designation seems to mean that the poem does not move in a clear linear direction, that it is irregular in its movements (33), and that a sense of narrative development is typically undone by the poem's "circularity" (45). The lengthy discussion of "Gendered Love-Talk and the

Relation of the Sexes” addresses some important questions for the readers of the Song of Songs. In the Song, the lovers each describe the body of the other, and the reader is confronted with some difficult choices. Perhaps the most important is whether the Song is “voyeuristic gaze” or “erotic look.” As Exum emphasizes, readers must decide “how they feel about looking, both the characters’ looking and their own looking at the characters in the love poem” (24).

Questions about the point of view in the Song naturally lead to issues of authorship, which Exum treats briefly but insightfully within the section on “The Song of Songs and Its World.” It is difficult to separate authorship from voice in an anonymous text, and Exum points out the failure of some commentators to maintain these distinctions. She holds open the possibility that the Song had a female author but admits that it is unlikely. The discussion of the origin of the Song concludes with the significant question, “Would knowing when it was written help us understand the poem?” and an appropriate answer, “Probably not very much” (67). The expected review and presentation of parallel literature from the ancient Near East appears within this section and contributes to a helpful, subsequent discussion of the “social world” of the Song. Exum is careful to keep the idea that “Love poetry need not correspond to social reality” (68) at the forefront of the discussion. Hence, she does not overreach in her conclusions about the social context of the Song. “What the Song reveals about the social world of ancient Israel is that its worldview included a vision of romance that attached importance to mutual desire” (68).

Exum declines the production of a thorough survey of the history of interpretation. Pointing to such surveys in the commentaries of Marvin Pope and Roland Murphy, she provides instead a “[sketch of] what have been the major trends” and a “[consideration of] some of the newer ones” (73). Still, the fourteen-page section called “The Song and Its Readers” offers a succinct and thoughtful synthesis of the ways that the Jewish and Christian traditions have handed the Song of Songs from generation to generation up to the present day. This treatment is punctuated by Exum’s analysis of reader-oriented approaches in a subsection called “Privileging the Reader,” which makes up more than one-third of the whole section. It is into this interpretive context that this commentary itself generally fits.

In the commentary proper Exum provides her own translation, supported by extensive notes. She is quite willing to part creatively from customary translations, such as her choice of “your caresses” for **דד** in 1:2. The note argues that “your love” is “too abstract” here (91). At the same time, she resists emendation of MT vocalization at 1:5, retaining “curtains of Solomon,” against such influential commentators as Pope and Fox, who vocalize as “Salmah” (104). On the other hand, when supported by ancient versions, Exum sometimes does choose to emend MT, such as at 1:7 where she reads **כטעיה** rather

than כַּעֲטִיָּה of MT, assuming metathesis (99). The resulting translation, “a wanderer,” rather than “a veiled one,” is supported by Syriac, Latin, and Aramaic versions. She also parts from MT at 4:12, reading גַּן (garden) rather than גַּל (fountain), an emendation again supported by numerous textual witnesses (154–55). In 6:12, where emendation does not provide a clear solution to a textual problem and ancient versions show signs of “struggling,” Exum again opts for a creative, “conjectural” translation to address the problem (213). Thus, she establishes a pattern of adapting the receptor language with poetic sensitivity, while working judiciously with the Hebrew text of the Song.

Early on the commentary performs the kind of heavy labor with concordances and other tools that is most valuable for readers of a commentary. A fine example is the data on נִשְׁק presented in the commentary on 1:2, which establishes, among other things, that the Hebrew Bible rarely uses this word to describe romantic kissing between a man and a woman. This kind of service to the reader continues through the end of the commentary, as exemplified in Exum’s meticulous discussion of the lexicography and poetic structures involved in 8:6 (250–54), which she understands as the key verse in the entire book. “For the Song of Songs, love’s ultimate rival is mortality. In the face of death’s ineluctable claim on the loved one, the woman audaciously declares, on behalf of the poet, that love ... is just as unyielding, just as adamant in its refusal to let go of the object of its desire as its rival, death” (253).

A final point of interest may be Exum’s treatment of the theological issues swirling about 8:6. The commentary on this verse presents the textual situation surrounding שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה and the possibility that a divine name appears here. If the divine name is understood here, what impact would it have on the text? Exum argues that this reading is “suggestive at best” (250). She follows this argument in her translation with a fascinating choice. “Its flames are flames of fire, an almighty flame” (243). The lower case “a” and the adjectival use of “almighty” leave a hint of divine reference for the attentive reader but resist a clear expression of divine presence.

Although it is always difficult to identify a point of origin for any major movement, the appearance of Phyllis Trible’s 1973 article “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Tradition” was an early, defining moment for feminist scholarship of the Hebrew Bible. Three decades later we are beginning to see volumes by female authors in major commentary series, such as the Old Testament Library. It should be with tremendous gratitude that our field continues to receive the work of scholars such as Trible, Exum, Carol Newsom, and others who survived those years during which feminist interpretation struggled to find its voice and make its way into the mainstream of Hebrew Bible studies. Exum’s careful attention to gendered language and gender relations in the Song of Songs provides occasion to reflect upon such issues and their place in our field. Raising such questions

risks the invention of one more way to allegorize the Song, but it seems appropriate, perhaps even necessary, to ask, Is this a feminist commentary, or are we beyond the use of such labels? The question certainly hangs in the air around a work such as this, and honesty requires the acknowledgment of its presence. There is no easy answer to this question, however, and it is made more complex by the maturation of feminist scholarship and some of its early practitioners. Exum's own observation that "the song can be hazardous to a feminist's critical faculties" (81) is evidence of a radical self-awareness that is part of this maturation. This commentary clearly addresses questions and issues that other commentaries have not, and it does so largely because of the author's identity and experience as a feminist interpreter. On the other hand, these questions and issues are developed and treated in such a way that makes them essential to any subsequent interpretation of the Song of Songs. We are moving toward a day when such interpretive concerns may no longer be clearly distinguishable as "feminist," but we have not yet fully arrived.