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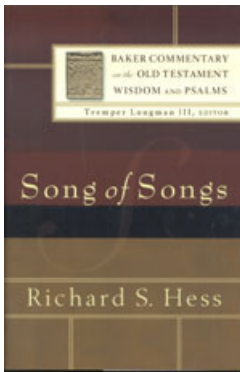


**Exum, J. Cheryl**

***Song of Songs***

Old Testament Library

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Pp. xxiii + 263.  
Hardcover. \$39.95. ISBN 0664221904.



**Hess, Richard S.**

***Song of Songs***

Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005. Pp. 285. Hardcover. \$29.99. ISBN  
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These two new books on the Song of Songs were published in 2005 within a few months of each other. Both belong to the recently debated genre/category of Bible “commentaries,” and both are written by established Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholars. The target audience of both is primarily the scholarly community. Both are of approximately the same length and affordably priced. And, of course, although they share similarities, they are fundamentally different. In order to present the similarities and the differences, I shall draw a comparative table, listing some of those aspects in general terms and according to relevant parameters. Thereafter I shall briefly reflect on the list and on the important question: Who may benefit more from using either, why, and for what purposes?

	Exum	Hess
<b>Technicalities</b>		
Series Editor’s Preface	X	7–9
Author’s Preface	X	11–12

Abbreviations	vii–ix	13–15 [classified]
Introduction	1–86	17–36
Commentary	87–263	37–251
Bibliography	xi–xxxiii [selected, classified]	253–69
Subject Index	X	271
Author Index	X	273–76
Reference Index	X	277–85
<b>Structure of Commentary Section</b>		
Division into Units	ten	seven
Title Given to Units	by discourse type or speaker	by contents, plot
Unit Boundaries	1:1; 1:2–4; 1:5–2.7; 2:8–3:5; 3:6–11; 4:1–5:1; 5:2–6:3; 6:4–7:9[10H]; 7:10–13[11-14H]; 8:1-14	1:1; 1:2–2.7; 2:8–3:5; 3:6–5:1; 5:2–6.3; 6:4–8:4; 8:5–15
Further Internal Divisions	into voices (in translation)	into voices (in commentary)
Internal Unit Handling	translation followed by linguistic notes, continuous verse interpretation; very few footnotes throughout, an integrative meta-text to the biblical text	translation (linguistic matters in copious notes) interpretation of structure and meaning by verse comments, also metaphor and imagery, leading up to concluding “theological implications”
Use of Comparative Love Poetry	yes	yes
<b>General Outlook and Matters of Approach</b>		
General Tone	open, tending to readerly response	prescriptive (“how to” and “how not” to read [34–35])
Allegory?	no	overtly no—but see other features below
Unity of Book	yes	yes
Unity of Characters: One Couple	yes	yes
Date and Provenance	perhaps late, but this is not helpful for understanding the Song of Songs	undecided
Social Contexts	discussed at length in the introduction (including gender	shortly discussed

	relations)	
Poetics and Style	in introduction	comments dispersed throughout commentary
Authorship, Gendered	impossible to determine	possibly female
Erotics, Eroticism, Desire	yes, for its own sake	yes, leading to a higher form of love
Pornography, Explicit Sex	presented but not adopted	no
Humor	presented but not accepted	no
Evaluation of Poetry in the Song	“masterly”	“sublime”
Major theme	love and desire in poem and metaphor	commitment of love (as example for love of the divine), beyond physicalities; a metaphor also beyond itself
Link to New Testament and Theology	no	repeatedly, in the “theological implications” sections

My first meta-comments on these commentaries will refer to several points listed under the table’s technicalities title. Hess’s book has two prefaces: first that of the series editor, Tremper Longman III, then his own. Longman’s preface is informative in more than one way. For instance, it states that “the message of the biblical book is the primary focus of each commentary, and the commentators have labored to expose God’s message for his people in the book they discuss.” Furthermore, “the Song of Songs is a passionate, sensuous love poem that reminds us that God is interested in more than just our brains and our spirits; he wants us to enjoy our bodies. It reminds us that we are not merely a soul encased in a body but whole persons made in God’s image” (Longman, 8). In his preface Hess writes that “In a fallen world in which the first couple was expelled from the garden of Eden, this song offers the hope that couples today may find something of that garden again and may see in their love that which is beautiful and good, from the good God” (11). Thus the attentive reader of prefaces will know immediately that Hess’s commentary should be placed within a specific ideological context, a *theological* context. That the statements by both series editor and commentator are problematic is beside the point at this stage; at any rate, such prefaces situate the commentary in a specific milieu and are thus helpful if restrictive. Exum has no such prefaces and plunges straight into her introduction. For this reader, the immediate effect is that no prior considerations have to be entertained before reading her commentary.

Exum's introduction is rather long by comparison with Hess. A closer look will ascertain that some of the materials discussed by Exum in her introduction (such as gender relations, contexts, poetics, poetic imagination and metaphor, readerly strategies) are in fact not neglected by Hess but discussed within his comments on individual sections or verses. Whose method is more useful? That depends on the individual reader—and on one's ideology of what a "commentary" should be. At any rate, each choice represents a different understanding of the task, and both have their [de]merits and followers or adversaries.

Exum's bibliography is placed at the book's front and is classified according to genre (commentaries in series, books and monographs, articles and chapters), a good choice in the absence of indexes of any sort. Hess's bibliography precedes his indexes. I find his author and reference indexes highly useful (the subject index is too short to have real value) and regret their absence in Exum's book. Both bibliographies are well informed, although Exum has a decisive edge in including feminist and "postmodern" references.

**The commentary section.** This is, so to speak, the centerpiece and presumably most important part of a book belonging to the commentary genre, although Exum's organization (after a well-known tradition) deflects a little from its centrality. Here, once again, pragmatically speaking, each commentator has divided the Song of Songs into sections or poetic units (E: ten; H: seven), titling each section informatively and further supplying a superscription of voice attribution (H: "female," "male," etc. in the commentary itself; E: "he," "she," etc. in the translation given) for each line or group of lines. The division into individual poems is one of the difficult issues confronting any reader of the Song. What to use as delimiters—speakers' voice changes, scenery change, context, imagery, plot—is always a problem. Both solutions offered are equally valid (and invalid), although each is attempted from a different (as implied and stated) viewpoint. Further, appearance and arrangement in each commentary are certainly different. Although detailed linguistic notes are attached to the translation of each section in both, beyond those Exum commences to give us a continuous interpretation, a text with only rare footnotes attached. Hess is more conventional in his use of footnotes; hence, his meta-text is fragmented into two in the usual scholarly manner. This decision—to footnote or not to footnote—goes to the heart of the commentary and academic writing debates. Once again, any reader has to make her or his own decision in this regard. As for the present reader, I certainly prefer Exum's way and find her integration of secondary literature into her discourse more pleasant to follow, much more helpful than the more traditional framework offered by Hess, and well supported by the extensive introduction.

**General approach.** Both commentators subscribe to the notion that the Song of Songs is a unified composition whose *dramatis personae* is, basically, one heterosexual couple. Both reject the notion that the Song is a collection of love songs from different times and places, with different “couples” and contexts, for my taste—without adequate explanation for this rejection that is discussed but not ultimately substantiated. This approach enables them to divide, title, and subtitle the individual poems as described above. In both works I find this approach cautious but limited. A dual reading with both possibilities—as for a dual gender authorship, without a firm decision as to the “prescribed” or “preferred” reading—would have been more productive perhaps. After all, no one can ever be certain of such things; the book’s title, Song of Songs, allows for both a “song” (singular) and “songs” (plural), not to mention internal factors.

Both authors are commendably hesitant on issues that have engaged Song of Songs readers in modernity—issues of date and provenance, (gender) authorship, and gendered voices. As far as the latter possibility is concerned, Hess is perhaps more positive than Exum (to this reader’s surprise). Both regard the poetics of the Song highly and seriously and more or less reject the possibility that the text includes potential allusions to humor and pornographic elements. Both are respectful toward allegorical interpretations but reject them as primary. Both see love and desire as the main contents of the Song.

But here the similarities stop and a fundamental difference emerges. Exum takes great care to clarify her readerly position: the Song is poetry of human love and desire, erotic and outspoken, meticulously written and poetically superb. Her warnings about paying close heed to the *metaphorical* nature of the Song’s poetry and the book’s danger for feminists are well balanced indeed. Hess subscribes to most of the same ideas, in his own fashion—although he seems less interested in feminist and “radical” readings—but subjugates them to “theological implications.”

What does Hess mean by “implications,” and what is an “implication,” strictly and lexicographically speaking? Does he mean something that is implied as a natural consequence of something else? or the state of implying or being implied, without being plainly expressed? or, as in logic, a relationship between two propositions that holds when both propositions are true and fails when the first is true but the second is false (based on Encarta® World English Dictionary)? Or does he mean a subtle quality underlying or felt to underlie a situation, action, or person (The American Heritage Dictionaries)? Hess is a sophisticated user of the verbal medium, as evidenced by his analysis of the Hebrew text and by his book and other publications. Like everyone else, he is entitled to his personal beliefs and to expressing them. But to claim that the Song of Songs has “implications”—as a *natural* consequence or mutually *logical* or *subtly* reciprocal relationship with Christian faith—seems to me not only offensive but also a

revival of Song of Songs allegorization. Most certainly, as Hess claims in his introduction, the same term is used in the Hebrew Bible for loving God and loving humans (the Hebrew root אהב). But this point of usage is a far cry from claiming, as he does in his final “Theological Implications” section (249–51), “It is the finitude of human love that points towards something greater and more complete. From a canonical perspective, this love points toward the consummation of all yearnings for a more complete love, a fulfillment that is reached in the marriage of Christ and his Bride” (and a quote from Rev 19:7–9 NIV follows [250–51]). I look at Hess’s text at this point in utter disbelief. Are these the Song of Song text’s “implications,” as per the dictionary definitions? I do not think so. These are at most theological *reflections* and *associations*, admissible in general and undoubtedly welcome within the framework of the Baker series as presented in the series editor’s preface—but not “implied” by the Hebrew Bible (pardon me, *not* the Old Testament) text of the Song of Songs. As *implications*, such reflections amount to an act of prescriptive and spiritualizing appropriation and, thus, belie Hess’s real scholarly achievement in his commentary. What’s in a word? A lot.

Exum makes no such or similar claims. Her analysis is centered on Song of Songs poetics and is reader-friendly and inclusive, gender-wise and otherwise. I find her choice of style and presentation easier to pursue, but again this is a matter of personal taste. Ultimately, both commentaries will find their own followers, for the actual clarifications of the Hebrew text and its suggestive nature as well as for contextual and actual ramifications. If I have a critique of Exum’s approach, it refers to her apparent refusal to consider humor, and bawdiness, as appropriate expressions of love and desire (alongside admiration, metaphorization, come-hither and self-defense distancing attitudes). However this, once again, is a matter of personal viewpoint.

On a personal note, I would like to make the following suggestion for further Song of Songs study. We habitually read it *as a text*, an accomplished object of writing, and this is how we interpret it. Indeed, this is how the Song is transmitted to us. Nevertheless, and in the footsteps of Goitein and others, let us remember that the Song of Songs is first and foremost a *song* or *songs*, not *poetry* or *poems*, and this means that, an assumption no doubt, the poems of the Song were originally created as lyrics to be sung and performed, possibly to the accompaniment of musical instruments and even dance (contra Exum, who takes me, and others, to task for envisioning a Shulammite dance beyond the verbal metaphor, Song 7). Circumstantial evidence in and beyond the Hebrew Bible upholds the notion that biblical poetry, or the largest part thereof, was composed not for the purpose of silent reading or recitation but to be sung on the appropriate—if at times unknown to us—occasions, with the appropriate—if at times mysterious for us—musical accompaniment. We have the libretto but largely ignore the music and performative element. We may, as Exum judiciously observes, be reading too much performance into

Song of Songs poetry. But, on the other hand, if we view Song of Songs poetry as “literary” rather than the equivalent of contemporary pop music, may we not be missing something, including motivation for eventual “canonization” and allegorization?

To sum up, in spite of the criticism and the reservations set out in this review, 2005 has been a good year for Song of Songs research. Two major commentaries, one more traditional in format and approach (H) and one more innovative (E), have been published. Both pay their respects to Marvin Pope’s monumental commentary and take Song of Songs scholarship further, each in its own fashion. A celebration is in order.