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Exum, J. Cheryl

Song of Songs

Old Testament Library

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Christoph Uehlinger
University of Zurich
Zurich, Switzerland

The Song of Songs is seductive poetry, making it hard for readers to resist its exuberant unfolding of pleasure, desire, and erotic fantasy displayed in a multisensual atmosphere. J. Cheryl Exum has authored a truly seductive commentary on the Song in turn, a piece so splendidly written that this reader often found it difficult not to succumb to it either. Since succumbing is, however, not the sort of things one is meant to do as a reviewer, and since Exum's commentary is first of all an eminent piece of critical scholarship, I shall accommodate to academic conventions and serve the legitimate expectations other readers may have when they turn to a review such as this. As it happens, Exum's book has already been praised by two other, more timely critics (Athalya Brenner and Mark McEntire; see http://bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=4959&CodePage=4959). My comments shall therefore concentrate on aspects not touched upon or less developed by these predecessors. As Exum herself states with fully justified self-confidence, "the present commentary is the first to examine systematically gender differences and the role they play in the presentation of the relationship between the lovers in the Song" (81), and this is one major reason why her book makes such inspiring reading.

As usual with commentaries published in the OTL series, this one comes with a substantial introduction (1–86) and a commentary section proper (87–263), which follows the

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standard format of the series: translation, philological notes with references to textual variants or alternative translations, and an exegetical verse-by-verse commentary exposing the meaning (or, in this instance, several layers of meaning) a careful reader may discover in this stunning lyric collection. The main parts of the book are preceded by a list of abbreviations (vii–ix) and select bibliography listing twenty-three commentaries in series, fifty-three other books and monographs as well as approximately 250 articles and chapters in books (xi–xxii)—an ample if not exhaustive bibliography (see below). There is no foreword, where readers usually get an idea about an author's social and scholarly location and academic affiliation beyond dustjacket information.

1.

The introduction includes the following seven sections:

A Love Poem (1–2)
Love and Death (2–3)
Controlling Poetic Strategies (3–13)
Gendered Love-Talk and the Relation of the Sexes (13–28)
Poetic Composition and Style (28–47)
The Song of Songs and Its World (47–73)
The Song of Songs and Its Readers (73–86)

These superscriptions reveal the main axis of Exum's approach. She explores the Song of Songs essentially as lyric poetry, subtle and even sublime literature, as it were, a literary work of art parts of which were probably once sung and possibly performed but which has come down to us as literature and, after all, a book in the Bible.

Among the many issues Exum develops in her introduction, one may single out the following ones, which are more original, characteristic, or particularly well argued and make this commentary an outstanding contribution to modern scholarship on the Song: For Exum, the Song of Songs is a lyric poem about erotic love and sexual desire (1). A major key to its understanding is 8:6, which declares that love is as strong as death. "The proof is the poem. Perhaps all literature is a defense against mortality; certainly the Song of Songs is.… Real lovers die, but the love that is celebrated here lives on, preserved on the page. It still seems fresh and alive centuries after it was written down, because it is love in progress, not a story about famous lovers of the past" (3). Among the controlling poetic strategies, there is the illusion of immediacy: "By presenting the lovers in the act of addressing each other, the poem gives us the impression that we are overhearing them and observing their love unfold" (4). It conjures up the beloved as if by incantation: "The lovers are always present for each other because they are always speaking or being spoken

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about.… Throughout the Song, speech embodies desire by calling bodies into being and playing with their disappearance in an infinite deferral of presence" (6–7). At the same time, the poem requires and implicitly invites its readers. It is so conceived that readers may feel well when looking at the love play that unfolds along the individual speeches. Who are the lovers we are looking at? Exum thinks they are two "archetypal lovers" rather than identifiable individuals, composite figures who change their guise according to various contexts and circumstances. Still, "the lovers seem to take on distinct personalities as we get to know them.… They are consistent in the way they each talk about their love and in the way love makes them behave … and this encourages us to feel we know them and enables us to build a picture of them" (8–9). The special art of the poem reflects itself in the way the lovers are designed as plausible, consistent, authentic, and "believable female and male characters" (66), while still remaining universal figures who represent all lovers of any time and place. Among the special features of the Song's poetry is its unfolding of love in progress, blurring distinctions between anticipation and enjoyment, seeking and finding, desire and fulfillment of love without ever letting the play come to a definite closure. According to Exum, "its resistance to closure is perhaps the Song's most important strategy for immortalizing love" (12).

Section 4, addressing the issue of gendered love-talk, includes among the most original and sensitive pages of this commentary. Exum reminds us that we are dealing with love poetry,

> where the boundaries between the conventional and unconventional are unpredictable, and not with a description of actual gender relations of a particular time and place. The Song of Songs is a priceless resource not so much for what it tells us about relations between the sexes in ancient Israel, for it tells us very little, but for what it reveals about the construction of desire in ancient Israelite culture.… Because we possess the Song of Songs, we know that a romantic vision of love was available in ancient Israel, a vision that recognized both desire and sexual pleasure as mutual and that viewed positively a woman actively seeking to gratify her desire. (13).[1]

Exum further notes "the poet's remarkable sensitivity to differences between women and men—differences that, in turn, reflect cultural assumptions about gender differences and roles" (14). For instance, the man constructs the woman through the *gaze,* whereas she

1. As it will become clear below, I have some doubts as to just how unpredictable the boundaries of convention are in this poem, and I am not quite sure that I understand what Exum means when using the phrase "ancient Israel."

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constructs him primarily through the *voice;*[2] she quotes him speaking to her (2:10–14; 5:2), but he never quotes her. Her condition is repeatedly characterized in the Song as *lovesickness.* He rather thinks of their mutual passion in terms of conquest, capturing, and being captured or *awestruck;* she, in turn, would go so far as to surrender, which he never does. He would also *take* love and consume it (although "he takes what he desires only by invitation" [27]), whereas she, while occasionally tasting sweet fruit as well (2:3; 5:13, 16), is more prepared to *offer* her gardenly pleasures, and the imagery of her speech is generally more relational than his. Exum further notes that "only the woman is concerned with self-description" (22), something the man apparently does not need to do. Hence "it appears that, in ancient Israelite culture as in many others, autonomy is part of the dynamic of male eroticism.… She is not in awe of him; she is in need of him" (15). While any of these statements would require detailed cross-checking, the case is well-taken and on the whole very convincing.

Section 5 provides more technical discussions such as one is used to in commentaries on biblical books: manuscript tradition, poetic features, voice identification, structure and composition, anthology of discrete poems versus unified work, multiple versus single authorship. Following Fox, Murphy, and others, Exum stresses the Song's overall coherence, which in her opinion makes it unnecessary to posit an editor but allows us to speak of a real author, regardless the fact that we should not think of an individual inventing all the poems by himself. "Whether commentators see the whole or only the parts when they read the Song may be largely a matter of temperament.… The present commentary assumes that only by reading it as a whole can we do justice to its poetic accomplishment" (37).

Section 6 on "The Song of Songs and Its World" is the longest, which is due mainly to extensive quotes from Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts. These allow readers to get a sense of both similarities and differences between quite different literary corpuses. Although not necessarily the most original part of Exum's introduction (she acknowledges Fox's discussion, unsurpassed in this reviewer's opinion, of the Egyptian collections and their relationship to the biblical Song), these pages provide a well-informed state-of-the-art account. Exum's reading of texts from neighboring cultures is generally as careful as with biblical texts, though legitimately less detailed and based on translations. It allows her to define distinct literary profiles of the various compositions referred to. "Perhaps the most remarkable difference between our one example from ancient Israel and the other surviving love poems from the ancient Near East is that the Egyptian and Mesopotamian love poetry deals with a wider range of situations and

2. Still, "she too owns the gaze" (5:10–16), and this is "an extraordinary feature of the Song, for traditionally women are looked at and men do the looking" (20).

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emotions, and offers a more multifaceted vision of love, than the Song of Songs" (63). This impression may be essentially due to the fact that we know but *one* single collection of love poetry from the Bible, as opposed to several from neighboring cultures.

Curiously enough, Exum does not discuss Greek or Roman love poetry from Sappho to Ovid, nor does she show particular interest in Arabic love poetry, medieval to contemporary. These materials have been repeatedly brought into the discussion of the Song by scholars who prefer to enlarge a debate that often tends to remain too narrowly Egypt-cum-Mesopotamia-focused. The more one considers the Song to be a relatively late work, composed in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, one should consider the fact that its "world," in the sense of the world that produced it, must have differed considerably from that of late third-millennium or early second-millennium Mesopotamian writers. At this juncture, however, Exum's option to read the Song as universally pertinent love poetry while at the same time considering it in historical terms as a testimony of "ancient Israelite culture" betrays its limitations and perhaps a real contradiction.

Taken as a whole, Exum's introduction has the laudable effect of laying open much of her interpretative premises and assumptions. As a rule, they are well argued and presented in a style that tries to avoid normative reading instructions but leaves room for several alternatives. Among these, I would mention one that, in my opinion, does not get a fair enough trial in Exum's commentary. As many (probably most) commentators before her, Exum considers 8:6 to be some sort of a climactic statement toward the end of the poem (3), so there must be progression (5). She recognizes that repetition, echoes, interlacing patterns, and the like have a cumulative effect, which she would describe as "a gradual unfolding and a denouement" (12). The Song, in her opinion, "far from being structureless … offers a superabundance of structural clues" (37). At one point she even finds it conceivable that the dialogue format of the Song reflects actual performance (4). Further on Exum acknowledges "the powerful readerly tendency to read sequentially and to make sense of a literary work as a whole; in other words, to read for the plot" (42). However, she rejects herself what she considers too linear a reading and with it any dramatic approach to the interpretation of the Song of Songs, claiming that dramatic theories inevitably must provide their plot from outside the textual world. At this point, and strangely enough, her generally pluralistic and nonexclusive approach to interpretation becomes normative in its overconfident rejection of two readerly options that both can claim a long history among attentive readers: the recognition that the male voice in the Song may actually not represent a single character but two different speakers (a king and an outside lover) belonging to different social environments; and the hypothesis that the redactional arrangement of the individual poems may well reflect a progressive plot insofar as the girl from the very beginning is described as being taken into the loving

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company of the king and the daughters of Jerusalem (probably concubines and other women inhabiting the women's quarter of the royal palace) but regularly escapes from that world in order to find another lover in a less formal and otherwise luxurious environment. This is not the place to develop any further such a reading hypothesis, which makes sense of many features in the text, such as what one might call the "Solomonic plot" unfolding from 1:1 to 8:11–12, and stresses nuances in gender perspectives that clearly go beyond a mere male/female dichotomy (curiously enough, Exum is aware of but does not really explore the gender dimension involved in the girl's brothers' and mother's role).[3] Suffice it to say that Exum does not seem to have put the plot hypothesis to a real test, as against her own preferred option, and I found her rejection of what I consider a valid alternative both surprisingly superficial and disappointingly dogmatic. Resisting readers will of course recognize that there is some fundamental tension between a three-character plot, on the one hand, and Exum's tendency to universalize love as displayed by the Song (heteronormative love, after all) and to range it under the "romance" umbrella, on the other—a rubric, by the way, that I doubt is as culturally innocent and may be as easily universalized as Exum wants us to believe.

2.

The commentary section divides the Song into ten subunits of very different length. A glance at the following table of contents confirms that Exum's main interests are neither in exposing a subtle overall composition nor identifying and connecting a series of well-balanced units and even less an implied narrative subtext with a real plot:

1:1	Superscription
1:2–4	The Voice of Desire
1:5–2:7	A Dialogue about Love
2:8–3:5	The Woman's First Long Speech
3:6–11	The Woman's First Long Speech, A Continuation
4:1–5:1	The Man's First Long Speech
5:2–6:3	The Woman's Second Long Speech
6:4–7:9	The Man's Second Long Speech
7:10–13	The Woman's Reply
8:1–14	A Dialogue about Love

3. But see Erich Bosshard-Nepustil, "Zu Struktur und Sachprofil des Hohenlieds," *BN* 81 (1996): 45–71; Christoph Uehlinger, "Das Hohelied—Anthologie oder Dramaturgie?" *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 6 (fasc. 21, 3/2001), 34-39; idem, "Cantique des Cantiques," in: *Introduction à l'Ancien Testament* (ed. Thomas Römer, Jean-Daniel Macchi, and Christophe Nihan; Genève: Labor et Fides, 2004), 530–43.

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Readers will probably agree that this table of contents does not exactly reflect what one would call a well-conceived, structurally coherent and aesthetically pleasant literary work of art. How would anyone imagine making music of such an uninspiring sequence of just speech and talk?

Still, initial perplexity rapidly vanishes once one enters the commentary proper. There is much insight to be gained from many detailed (but never too long) discussions, including such issues as who kisses whom in the Hebrew Bible and under what circumstances (93). There obviously are a number of instances where any critical reader will contest details of translation. I am unconvinced, for instance, that once one has recognized how problematic it is to render *nepeš* with "soul," one should simply go on perpetuating the problem. To Exum "soul" seems "especially appropriate, since it has an English equivalent in such expressions of total devotion as to love someone with all one's soul, or with all one's heart" (106–7). But in modern use the heart has largely outruled the soul in matters of passion, and there would thus be good reasons to look for alternative and more sensual translations of *nepeš.* The Song of Songs is rightly famed for its imagery, and hence it matters how one translates metaphors and what meaning one constructs for them. Generally speaking, Exum favors a delicate approach that aims at not pressing the similes too much. She privileges open translations that hint at a semantic field rather than narrow lexematic precision. Regarding the metaphor "Your eyes are doves" (1:15), for instance, it is enough for her to recall that "the dove was used as a symbol of love in the ancient Near East" and that it attained a special status as love bird in ancient and modern love poetry "for the range of romantic images it conveys by its aspect, movement, and behavior, as well as its association with the love goddess and with spring" (112). Keel, whose inspiring work on metaphors and similes in the Song is acknowledged by Exum, would tend to be significantly more specific and stress the dove's *function* as a messenger of amorous sentiments.

One feature found particularly helpful and actually illuminating the whole commentary section is Exum's recurrent use of straightforward questions involving the reader's imagination to participate: "Where does she want to be kissed?" (93 on 1:2); "Who then is the 'we'?" (95); "Might the other women … be present in the king's chamber?" (96); "How are the women of Jerusalem looking at her? With disdain? With envy? With fear? … Moreover, why does she tell them she is lovely? Can they not see it?" (103–4 all on 1:4). Reading both the poem and the commentary side by side, readers are thus invited to give their opinions. They are conceived as true partners who should have an essential share in a common interpretative undertaking (see 82–86 on "Privileging the Reader").

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Could such an attitude be overstretched at times to the extent that it favors arbitrary or even meaningless reading options? As someone trained in the German-speaking tradition of biblical exegesis, I was surprised by the liberty this commentary may occasionally take with issues that are considered basic and essential ones in German exegesis. "Would knowing when it was written help us understand the poem? Probably not very much" (67) is a rather startling statement for someone who takes profound interest in the *history* of cultures. On a different level, I find it rather strange to read that "Hebrew *ḥăbaṣṣelet* is surely not a rose (which did not grow in Israel in biblical times)" (113, undoubtedly correct) alongside the following translation of 2:1: "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" (98). Exum justifies her option for the familiar by the subterfuge that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (113), but why should we give precedence to smell over other aspects of the flowers involved, and how far should we go in de-contextualizing the Song? As for the other flower, Exum notes that "*šôšannâ* has been variously identified as a lily (*Lilium candidum,* which has large white flowers, or *Lilium chalcedonicum,* with red flowers), the lotus (*Nymphaea lotus*), or the water lily (*Nymphaea caerulea*). The narcissus, chamomile, crowfoot, sea daffodil, sternbergia, yellow flag iris, and blue hyacinth are also candidates" (113–14). Not surprisingly, her commentary leaves the issue undecided, but the translation cannot and once more returns to the conventional and familiar, however wrong that may be in this particular instance. Part of a justification for such an open approach to imagery, symbolism, and metaphor is given in the introduction, where Exum writes that her observations "are not intended to explain the meaning of the images in any definitive sense, for it is not the case that there is only one correct way to approach them.… Images are matched in some way to their referents and are not interchangeable.… But what exactly the images are meant to convey is not always apparent. Words and images are never simply denotative, and in poetry they are excessively connotative" (19). Still, the world reflected in the Song, as imaginary as it may be, is a culturally peculiar one, shaped by geographical, cultural, social, and historical context, experience, and imagination. I would maintain that these contexts deserve to be acknowledged in their own right as precisely as possible, however reader-friendly a scholarly commentary wants to be. The problem of decontextualization that underlies any universalizing reading strategy is a serious one and ultimately relates to the ethics of interpretation. While I cannot imagine that this problem could not have occurred to such a sensitive and resistant reader as J. Cheryl Exum, I am surprised to find her commentary insufficiently affected by the issue.

3.

A cursory examination of the bibliography cited may explain two major characteristics of Exum's work. To begin with, most secondary literature cited comes from the English-speaking world, most notably North American and English authors; there are a few titles

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each in French and German, but it is obvious that Exum addresses the Song of Songs well within an Anglo-American scholarly discourse and shows little interest in a number of questions that German scholarship, for better or for worse, has long been preoccupied with (form criticism, literary criticism in the sense of *Literarkritik,* questions of origin, date, *Sitz im Leben,* etc.). More important in my opinion is the fact that no commentary on the Song of Songs has ever been so sensitive to various forms of resistant reading, that is, interpretations that aim at unveiling the hidden premises of heteronormative ideologies of sex and gender. Such ideologies, characteristic of any patriarchal society and culture, run as a subtext throughout the Song, disguised as they are by such truly remarkable features as stunning lyrics, erotic exuberance, the fact that a woman is (one of) the Song's main protagonist(s), the presence of female speakers in general, a distinctive female perspective on human love and sexuality, and so forth. These and other features have led a number of commentators, feminist and traditionalist alike, to consider the possibility of female authorship. Exum discusses the issue but considers the solution unlikely—there is more to social history than is sometimes acknowledged.

Exum's bibliography and introduction cites numerous articles published within the last twenty-five years and informed by feminist and queer criticism, ideology criticism, or psychoanalysis. Not surprisingly, they warn readers from too easily succumbing to the charms of all this sublime poetry. Their authors, generally less inhibited than ecclesiastical scholars, have raised important new questions about the Song: Does it allow for sexist, voyeuristic, pornographic, or even perverse readings? How does it relate to and what does it tell us about the (cultural) history of sexuality and erotic desire? Exum's is to my knowledge the first commentary published in one of the major Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) commentary series that gives ample room for such questions to be asked alongside the more conventional ones in one of those well-established hardbound series, which display all but the characteristics of a "marginal" or "alternative" scholarly milieu.[4] It would have been thrilling to put her insights into dialogue with recent research on homosexuality in the Bible and the ancient Near East.[5] This may be the subject for another celebration, just as "It remains for future study to construct the history of gender ideology in Song of Songs interpretation by examining how and to what extent

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4. "One person's erotic look may be another person's voyeuristic gaze. Moreover, one might, for any number of reasons, want to resist the Song's invitation to look, or one might choose to look differently, or even perversely.… Readers of this commentary … will decide for themselves how they feel about looking, both the characters' looking and their own looking at the characters in this love poem" (24).

5. See especially Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); Daniel Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality'?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.3 (1995): 333–55; Thomas Römer and Loyse Bonjour, *L'homosexualité dans le Proche-Orient ancien et la Bible* (Essais bibliques; Genève: Labor et Fides), 2005.

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commentators reinscribe the gender ideology of the text or how they read sexual stereotypes of their times and their own culturally conditioned gender biases back into the biblical text" (83).

To sum up, Exum's commentary offers much food for thought because it differs in more than one respect from conventional scholarship on the Song. As someone who is more acquainted with the *mores* of Continental European exegesis, which is culturally more traditional in its approach to biblical literature despite (or because of?) greater confidence put in the interpretative potential of the so-called historical-critical method, I have found much to be learned in this book while taking great pleasure when reading it. I am sure many other professional and nonprofessional readers will share that experience and will find this a sophisticated, imaginative, and truly inspiring commentary too.

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