

Week 22, Lecture 62.¹ Introduction to the Song of Songs, Part 1

Resources

Garrett, Duane. *Song of Songs/Lamentations*. vol. 23B, Word Biblical Commentary., vol. 23B. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2004.

Murphy, Roland Edmund. *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*. Ed. S. Dean McBride. Hermeneia --a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.

Pope, Marvin H. *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible, vol. 7C. New York: Doubleday, 1977.

Weems, Renita J. "The Song of Songs," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 5. Ed. Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997.

Spencer, F. Scott. *Song of Songs, Wisdom Commentary*. Liturgical Press. Available as e-book, but not yet in hard copy.

Authorship. Traditionally ascribed to Solomon.

The traditional claim finds little support in the work itself.

Solomon is nowhere designated among the 3 speakers: man, woman, daughters of Jerusalem (Murphy, 3)

Cultural Provenance. Scholars are divided

Some argue this is folk poetry. Others claim it is the work of elite artists & poets.

Murphy: we do not have enough evidence to decide.

Date. If it is by Solomon, it has to come from the 10th century B.C.

Most critical scholars favor a post-exilic date, i.e., after 530 B.C. (Murphy 4-5).

Wisdom literature is notoriously hard to date.

But "very little can be said with confidence about date, authorship, or social provenance" (Murphy, 5).

Collection or Literary Unity? Levine describes the work as a "collection" of love poems.

Murphy argues (cautiously) that it seems to be a literary unity. Garrett insists that it is clearly a literary unity.

Tradition of Interpretation

The majority opinion in the Jewish tradition is that the Song is an allegory – the love of God & Israel.

The majority opinion in the Christian tradition is that it is an allegory – the love of Christ & the Church.

However, we have little evidence for how early the allegorical interpretation is in Judaism

or even if it is pre-Christian (Murphy, 14)

Concerning the Christian interpretation, **Murphy observes:**

When one realizes, for example, that most of the Christian exegesis on the Song until the Reformation was produced by **clerics and monks**, it becomes understandable that a mystical interpretation thrived. This **social reality** in combination with an **entrenched hermeneutical position**—that the Old Testament must have a **specifically Christian meaning** and that the scriptural word of God should deal directly with the religious aspirations of the individual believer and the community of faith—made the spiritual interpretation of the Song in patristic and medieval Christian exposition virtually inevitable.²

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

He reached the high point of the monastic interpretation the sermons he delivered to his Cistercian monks.

¹ Lectures are numbered consecutively. Although this is this week's first lecture, its number reflects its place in the **total** sequence.

² Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 12.

It should be noted that those who comprised this order were not all men who had lived the hot-house existence one might associate with a monastery. Many in Bernard's monastic audiences were undoubtedly worldly figures, among them former knights who had served in the armies of the Crusades and who knew what life was about. We can only admire the temerity and insight of Bernard to choose the Song as the scriptural basis for his prolonged and wide-ranging instructions on the discipline of Christian spirituality³

Post-Reformation Protestant Interpretations

The Reformation brought about no immediate changes in the traditional interpretation of the Song.

Luther's interpretation of the themes of the work was "consistently allegorical" (Murphy, 34).

Calvin, and the Genevan wing: allegorical interpretation of the love between Christ & the Church (Murphy, 35).

Catholic Interpretations (Murphy, 36-37).

Teresa of Avila & John of the Cross argued for an allegory of "spiritual marriage" of the individual soul with Christ

The Enlightenment (1600's, 1700's)

Scholarship began to consider an ancient (minority) opinion: this was actually about sexual love.

It was a wedding song from the marriage of Solomon and an Egyptian princess (Murphy, 37).

This became the dominant scholarly interpretation in the 19th century, 1800's (Murphy 38-39).

Mid-Eastern Discoveries: Mesopotamia (cuneiform = "wedge-shaped" writing)

A by-product of European empires in the Near East was the discovery of extra-biblical parallels to biblical literature.

This began to affect scholarship in the 19th & 20th centuries.

The Mesopotamian materials contained literature relating to fertility rites, sacred marriages of gods & goddesses.

Pope's Anchor Bible commentary (1977) was heavily influenced by this school of thought.

Mid-Eastern Discoveries: Egypt

The Egyptian materials contained literature celebrating human sexual love.

The commentaries of Murphy (Hermeneia, 1977) and Garrett (Word, 2004) are more influenced by this literature.

I have not yet had time to read the commentary by Weems (*New Interpreter's Bible* 1997).

Also, as far as I know, she is the first woman to write a full length critical commentary on the Song.

According to Murphy, St. Teresa of Avila was a post-Reformation Catholic commentator, using allegory.

Literary Character & Structure (Murphy, 58-59)

Those who consider the song as a **collection** do not posit one overall genre for the work as a whole.

Genres that have been proposed include: Drama & Marriage Song

Drama? Those who think of it as a "drama" try to devise stage directions for what they see as the plot

The 19th-century Lutheran Franz Delitzsch saw it as the story of the love between Solomon & a shepherd girl.

Heinrich Ewald (19th century Protestant) saw three characters: Solomon, humble shepherd boy, simple Shulamite girl

Problem: theatrical drama, as we know it originated with the Greeks. We have no evidence of drama in ancient Israel

Marriage Song(s)? This interpretation goes back to Origen (ca. 200 A.D.)

Problem, the only **explicit** mention of marriage is in 3:1, but the woman is called "bride" in 4:18-12 & 5:1.

But other interactions of lovers could account for the rest of the song.

Parts of the Song may have been sung at weddings, but -- no evidence this is why the work as a whole was composed.

Love Poems. Murphy prefers this less specific description because it does not claim more than the evidence will bear.

He classifies these in the following ways:

³ Murphy, *Song*, 26.

Poem of Yearning (1:9-11) [I'll give one example of each type]

Poem of Admiration (1:12-14)

Poem of Praise (6:8-10)

Tease, a flirtatious conversation (2:14-15)

Invitation (2:16-17)

Wasf, Arabic word that means "detailed description of the beauty of the body of the beloved" (4:1-7)

Descriptions of Experience (2:8-13)

Murphy argues for the **Structural Integrity** of the Song (pp. 60-66)

refrains that are repeated several times throughout the Song

themes & motifs that occur over and over repeated vocabulary

Recent Attempts at Allegory. These appear to be mainly from French exegetes.

In the case of 7:4 [3], the woman's anatomy becomes Israelite geography, when her "breasts" are supposed by Robert to represent the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. Great ingenuity is displayed in application of this method, and that is part of the problem; the textual data adduced are too precarious to bear the weight of interpretation placed on them. Despite the pretense of exegetical precision, exaggeration and uncontrolled fantasy seem to be flaws endemic to allegorical exposition.⁴

The attempts to relate allegory to the original intention of the author have been unsuccessful, in Murphy's opinion (94).

Cultic-Mythological Interpretations. We have no records of **liturgies** for marriage in ancient Israel.

Such reconstructions are therefore too hypothetical to be of use in interpreting the Song.

In some respects these interpretations are similar to allegory.

E.g., from the effusive descriptions of the woman's beauty, it is argued that she is a goddess.

I think Pope's Anchor Bible commentary suffers from this weakness.

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Differences from Other OT Texts

There are no references to the "business" aspects: dowries, child-bearing, inheritance.

The poetry of the Song does not deny these are important, but this is not its focus.

For the moment we, as audience, are invited by the poet to appreciate the qualities of tenderness, joy, sensual intimacy, reciprocal longing and mutual esteem, all of which are socially desirable and beautifully mysterious dimensions of human sexual love.⁵

Murphy does **not** accept the position that "sexual love is its own legitimation."

He proposes, rather, that the sensual experiences depicted by the Song are to be seen in the context of the Hebrew Bible.

The Desire to find a "Spiritual" Meaning in the text

Murphy observes that the assumption that the literal meaning of an erotic text cannot be spiritual is "surely too narrow."

Just because the purpose is not to teach doctrine or inculcate ethics does not mean it is not "spiritual."

The ecstasy of sexual love is a part of the human experience that comes from the Creator.

The literal sense of the Song contains theologically relevant meaning.⁶

Prominent Themes⁷

The joy of physical presence; the pain of absence. The emotion of longing; the "sickness" of love.

⁴ Murphy, *Song*, 93.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 101-103.

The mutuality of feelings that draw the man and the woman together.
Their reciprocal admiration, and exuberant praise of each other's physical charms.
Eroticism, not in clinical detail, but in the emotional joy it brings to both parties.
Human sexual fulfillment, consummated in reciprocal heterosexual love.

The Characters

Some **Greek** manuscripts assign the verses to a: **Man**, **Woman**, and "**Daughters of Jerusalem**" (a kind of chorus)
The NAB & NABRE have marginal notes of: **M**, **W**, and **D**, as does Murphy in his commentary.
(I am pretty sure that Murphy was the main translator for the NAB -- I don't know who did the revisions for NABRE)
Duane Garret (WBC) calls these: Tenor, Soprano, and Chorus

Differences of Approach. The treatment of the characters is typical of the approach of these two commentators.
Murphy is much more tentative about the evidence. He is not convinced that the parts were originally **sung**.
Garret, by contrast, posits a Tenor (why not a Bass?) and a Soprano (why not an Alto?)
Murphy is not at all sure that the couple is married. [Levine mentioned in her lecture this is disputed]
Garret is confident the story of the wedding of a young couple who are in love.
This is evident by the outlines they propose

Murphy's Outline in the Hermeneia Series ⁸

1:1	Superscription: Solomon's "Finest Song"?
1:2-6	A Love More Pleasing Than Wine
1:7-2:7	A Dialogue Between the Lovers
2:8-17	A Reminiscence Concerning the Lover's Visit
3:1-5	Loss and Discovery
3:6-11	Solomon's Procession
4:1-5:1	A Dialogue Between the Lovers
5:2-6:3	A Dialogue Between the Woman and the Daughters
6:4-12	Praise of the Woman's Unique Beauty
7:1-8:4	The Union of Lovers
8:5-14	Appendices

By Contrast, **Garrett**, in the **Word Biblical Commentary**, discerns a far more definite outline. ⁹

Superscript (1:1)

- I. Chorus and Soprano: The Entrance (1:2-4)
- II. Soprano: The Virgin's Education I (1:5-6)
- III. Soprano and Chorus: Finding the Beloved (1:7-8)
- IV. Tenor, Chorus, and Soprano: The First Song of Mutual Love (1:9-2:7)
- V. Soprano and Tenor: The Invitation to Depart (2:8-17)
- VI. Three Wedding-Night Songs (3:1-4:15)
 - A. Soprano: The Bride's Anxiety (3:1-5)
 - B. Chorus: The Bride Comes to the Groom (3:6-11)
 - C. Tenor: The Flawless Bride I (4:1-15)
- VII. Soprano, Tenor, and Chorus: The Consummation (4:16-5:1)
- VIII. Three Wedding-Night Songs (5:2-6:10)
 - A. Soprano, Tenor, and Chorus: Pain and Transformation (5:2-8)
 - B. Chorus and Soprano: The Bride Recovers the Groom (5:9-6:3)

⁸ Murphy, *Song*, viii.

⁹ Duane Garrett, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, vol. 23B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2004), vi.

C. Tenor and Chorus: The Flawless Bride II (6:4–10)

IX. Soprano, Chorus, and Tenor: Leaving Girlhood Behind (6:11–7:1 [6:13])

X. Tenor and Soprano: The Second Song of Mutual Love (7:2 [1]–8:4)

XI. Chorus and Soprano: Claiming the Beloved (8:5–7)

XII. Chorus and Soprano: The Virgin's Education II (8:8–12)

XIII. Tenor, Chorus, and Soprano: The Farewell (8:13–14)

Where I am on this Project

I have gone through the Hebrew, and arranged the text for translation.

My arrangement includes the outlines of both Murphy and Garret.

Highlighted in my Hebrew a few places where the text might need to be emended so that I can provide both translations.

Here is a sample of my "translation template," which corresponds to the outlined Hebrew

1:1 Superscription: Solomon's Finest Song? ¹⁰ Superscript (1:1)

1:2-6 A Love More Pleasing Than Wine I. Chorus and soprano: the entrance (1:2-4)¹¹

A
2a W [to D/C]¹²

2b W [to M]

B II. Soprano: the virgin's education (1:5-6)

Time to "Bite the Bullet?"

So, is it now time to bite the bullet and go through the 8 chapters?

I could probably do a chapter a week, sometimes two chapters -- translation & commentary.

We would combine that with video lectures from other speakers:

- 1) The final lectures by Levine on the Old Testament
- 2) Lectures on the theology of Karl Rahner¹³

I am torn between "going for it" now, and waiting for Spencer's Wisdom commentary to come out in print.

(Of course I could order the PDF for \$20).

Post-Lecture Note for Online Students. The live Thursday morning crew wants a couple more weeks of general lectures, rather than a detailed look at a particular book. I'll probably find something from Daniel 1-6 to lecture on in Week 23, and something from Daniel 7-12 for Week 24.

¹⁰ **Titles in bold black** are from Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 1990). Items **highlighted in red** are "absolute hapax legomena" -- root appears nowhere else in BH (Murphy 75).

¹¹ **Titles in bold blue** are from Duane Garret, *Song of Songs*, WBC, vol. 23a, p. 32.

¹² The single-letter abbreviations are from Murphy (108): M = the man; W = the woman; and D = the "Daughters of Jerusalem". I believe the NAB and NABRE use the exact same designations, but I have not double-checked this [8/27/16]. Material [in square brackets is my own.]

¹³ *Karl Rahner: Theologian of Grace. 12 Lectures on 4 DVDs*, by Fr. Richard Lennan. www.NowYouKnowMedia.com 800-955-3904. A friend loaned me the audio CDs. I have listened to the 12 (25 minute) lectures about 5 or 6 times each, and love them so much I bought the DVD version to discuss with the Thursday class. Since this is copyrighted material, we cannot put it online.