

○ REVIEW OF J. CHERYL EXUM'S *SONG OF SONGS: A COMMENTARY*

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Esther Fuchs reviews J. Cheryl Exum's *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Kentucky, 2005).



This is a meticulously researched and nicely organised commentary, which consists mainly of two parts: an introduction and a close reading of the text. It introduces traditional and current research on the Song of Songs (hence SOS), especially in the close reading, while following a literary approach to the text. As such it will be valuable for students, lay readers, as well as scholars, notably those who wish to understand a feminist literary approach to this biblical text. Yet, the commentary does not offer a comprehensive or systematic overview of the history of scholarly research on the SOS, the various trends, schools and approaches, how perspectives changed overtime, and what seem to be the current concerns in biblical scholarship. Nor does it necessarily offer a feminist approach to the text, though it does list various approaches, mostly without commenting on them, or mildly rejecting a few. It strives instead to be comprehensive, objective and 'scholarly' thus accommodating the style and structure of the traditional pattern of commentaries published by The Old Testament Library and the genre of biblical commentaries as such.

The introduction suggests that the poem is 'about' erotic love and sexual desire, about the body as object of desire and source of delight and about lovers who engage in a game of seeking and finding sensual gratification with each other. Exum asserts that the poem is equally interested in the man and the woman's experiences of love, a point she will stress throughout her introduction and close reading, though she will often give evidence to the contrary. 'It looks at what it is like to be in love from both a woman's and man's point of view' (1). Another point that is not consistently substantiated in the commentary has to do with yet another theme Exum highlights right at the beginning of the introduction, namely, the idea that love is as strong as death. Exum does not try to negotiate the apparent contradiction between this analogy and the affirmation she offers next, that the poem is for the most part too engrossed with the celebration of life and love to give much or any attention to the darker analogy with death (3).

From here the introduction moves to a discussion of major poetic strategies, commenting on and briefly illustrating each of them (for example: the invitation to the reader, the illusion of

immediacy, conjuring, the lovers as representing all lovers, blurring distinctions between anticipation and enjoyment of love, repetition and resistance to closure). Exum devotes the next section to a discussion of 'gendered love-talk and the relation of the sexes' (13). Not only does she consider the male and female lovers to be treated equally by the poet, she considers the poem to be exceptional in its ability to reveal the female character's inner thoughts and feelings (25). Does the poem devote attention to these thoughts and feelings because they are so fondly focused on a man? Exum does not stop to ponder or problematise this possibility. Instead, she treats the concept of gender as a definition of behavioral, expressive and emotional differences between the sexes. Thus, she notes different ways of speaking about love, the woman tends to be lovesick while the man is awe-struck, the female and male bodies are described differently, but she stops short of offering a feminist analysis of the differences she notes, avoiding a systematic analysis of power asymmetries that may be lurking beneath the surface. Instead, she restricts her discussion of power asymmetries to the social world reflected in the poem. Thus she concedes that the man enjoys social freedom that is prohibited to the woman. The woman is subject to control by brothers, social expectations, and greater restraints on her sexual expression. She notes as well that the poem succumbs to traditional convention in its tendency to depict love as something the man takes and the woman gives (27). Exum does not consider the price the woman may pay for her willingness to ignore these controls in the social and historical context she discusses. Instead, she is much impressed by the woman's audacity, notably her daring to go out into the streets alone (SOS 5:2-6:3) in search for her lover (SOS 5:2-6). Exum does not construe the woman's willing self-sacrifice as an expression of patriarchal desire, as part of the poem's poetic license, its imaginative flight into fantasy. Instead, she follows Francis Landy's emphasis on the woman's erotic power (28). After a detailed discussion of poetic composition and style, text and translation, alliteration and assonance and literary arrangement, Exum returns to the topic of fantasy, but discusses it strictly as a literary device within the context of lovers' dreams and fantasies. She discusses the hyperbolic description of the woman's body (e.g. comparing her nose to the tower of Lebanon) as part of the poem's flights of fancy, remaining all the while within the limits of the poem's represented world. Rather than a flight of fancy, the poem is construed as an authentic reflection of a social world that apparently permitted, promoted and celebrated heterosexual love as egalitarian romance.

Exum distances herself from the brief history of feminist criticism on the SOS, including her own previous work on the poem. She suggests that feminist criticism evolved from appreciative readings (e.g. Phyllis Trible, Carol Meyers, Athalya Brenner) to a critique of the patriarchal assumptions and desires embedded in the poem (e.g. David Clines, Fiona Black). Reluctant to endorse any one of these approaches, she summarises her own approach in non-feminist, descriptive terms: 'To my knowledge, 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). Rather than a theoretical point of departure, feminist criticism is discussed as a contemporary approach, placed right after a section that discusses traditional Jewish and Christian approaches. In sum, it would be erroneous to read this commentary as a 'feminist' one, though Exum's previous work did engage seriously with feminist methodologies.

The second part of the book, the 'commentary' itself, is divided into four main sections: the woman's first long speech (SOS 2:8 - 3:11), the man's first long speech (SOS 4:1 - 5:1), the woman's second long speech (SOS 5:2 - 6:3), and the man's second long speech (SOS 6:4 - 7:9).

Drawing on numerous scholarly sources, Exum carefully weighs options for establishing the correct original text, a feasible translation and the most reasonable interpretation. For the most part, her commentary focuses on the literary features of specific verses, their creative force, effectiveness and poetic brilliance. Thus, for example, she presents the woman's second long speech as follows: 'In a dazzling feat of conjury the woman describes her lover so that he materialises before our eyes' (188). To what extent the rather conventional similes attributed by the woman ('His head is gold, pure gold/ his locks, palm fronds, black as raven. His eyes, like doves by watercourses bathing in milk') indeed conjure up a specific form of an individual man is, I would argue, highly debatable. In fact Exum herself concedes that the lovers are not described in individual terms but rather as generalised types so to facilitate the reader's identification with/as the lovers.

With great versatility Exum does point up in her commentary the numerous instances that suggest that for the woman erotic longing involves trials and tribulations not imposed on the man (197–200). She points out as well that the woman's speeches reflect intense attachment as they tend to emphasise the emotional and relational aspects of her love for him, while the man's speeches tend to be more visual and descriptive, focusing on the woman's attractiveness and explaining his response to this attraction (214). Exum suggests that the man's description of the woman's body parts suggests that he is awestruck rather than detached from her personality. She accepts that overall love is described in the *SOS* as something the man receives and the woman gives, yet she insists that the basic philosophy of the poem is based on reciprocity and mutuality (216). The gender differences Exum detects do not lead her to a feminist conclusion regarding traditional gender roles the poem consolidates by presenting the woman as offering sensuality in return for true love. She is content rather with pointing up the differences and delighting in the *Song*'s articulate and enticing description of desire as such and in its poetic effectiveness.

Exum's commentary is solidly researched, well organised and well written. It is inclusive, thorough and largely traditional in its attempt to be comprehensive and objective rather than engaged and defiant. It is admittedly a lover's commentary, enthused and appreciative rather than critical and quizzical.