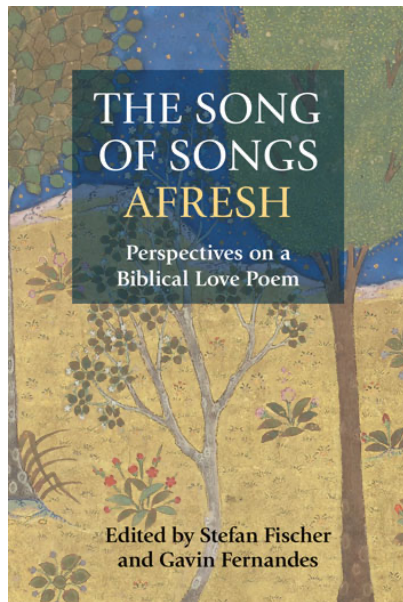


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Stefan Fischer and Gavin Fernandes, eds.

The Song of Songs Afresh: Perspectives on a Biblical Love Poem

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The Song of Songs, to an extent perhaps unique among biblical books, defies any singular reading. No single analytical approach can contain its evocative energy, with a result that interpretations of the Song often reveal more about the interpreter than they do about the Song itself. It is thus welcome that among concerns running through the essays included in *The Song of Songs Afresh* are those of plurality of meaning and the importance of self-awareness.

This volume brings together thirteen essays originally delivered at a series of international conferences on the Song held between 2012 and 2017. It features work by emerging young scholars as well as seasoned senior figures in the field of Hebrew Bible and its history of interpretation; the roster of contributors displays a welcome diversity of backgrounds and approaches. While the approaches are eclectic and not comprehensive, the contributions selected for inclusion give a sense of variety in the field at present and expressly model a nondogmatic approach to textual analysis.

The contributions are organized into four thematic groups: “Classical Exegetical Studies” (six essays); “Postmodern Exegetical Studies” (three essays); “Jewish Studies” (two essays); and “Hermeneutics” (two essays). For all the diversity of approaches, the individual pieces typically reflect a common approach: each piece focuses on a specific pericope or single topic and models a particular style of reading. In several instances, different readings of the same verses or phrases are

presented. Analytical methods span conventional historical-contextual approaches to the psychoanalytic, traditional religious hermeneutics to the postmodern, and others. A brief synopsis of each contribution will illustrate the volume's range (and its inherent limitations).

The first two essays offer contrasting interpretations of Song 1:5–6, particularly the phrase “I am black and/but lovely” (Song 1:5). Hans Ausloos explores how ancient and modern translators have approached these verses in order to contextualize the modern preference for “and” rather than “but” as an apologetic response to accusations of racism and bias in Scripture. After presenting a synopsis of premodern figurative readings (Jewish and Christian) and several modern translations, the author concludes that the phrase is contrastive (“I am dark, but nevertheless beautiful” is his rendering [13]) but that reading this self-description through a racialized lens is anachronistic. David Biernot, by contrast, argues that the reference to skin color in this passage demands that readers confront the evidence of Greco-Roman “proto-racism” in the Song. He ultimately concludes that, while the adjective *black* probably lacks racial import in the biblical text, it arose in a context of increasing attention to ethnic, and possibly racial, awareness and serves as a precursor to what would come to be recognized as Orientalism.

Gavin Fernandes turns his attention to Song 5:2–6:3, in which the woman describes the experience of searching for her beloved. Fernandes, influenced by ancient Near Eastern analogues, considers but rejects readings that understand the passage as fantasy or a dream sequence. He argues instead that the episode, including its violence, occurred while the woman was awake, and he concludes that readings that take the passage otherwise introduce more problems, whether from the perspective of narrative coherence or theology. Stefan Fischer turns our attention from the experiences of a single female figure to that of the “daughters of Jerusalem.” He makes a case that this collective voice offered a means for readers to integrate themselves into the text and may have specifically functioned to model for young women in the audience to gain an understanding of love.

Christo Lombaard turns from antiquity on its own terms to how the past shapes contemporary literature in his essay on modern artistic representations of the Song's female protagonist. He focuses on the responses one verse in particular, Song 7:1, has evoked in twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers and constructs a chronology of interpretation that links the Song to the 1904 popular novel (later play and film), *The Shulamit*, Paul Celan's post-Holocaust “Death Fugue” (1952), and Spies's “Confessions of a Shulamite” (2018). Hans-Peter Mathys's essay reads Song 8:6–7 through the lenses of ancient Near Eastern (particularly Ugaritic) myth and mythological vocabulary and the language and imagery of Prov 6:20–35 in order to illustrate the dangerous power of love. In the course of his analysis, Mathys argues for the ethical component of love, in addition to sexuality and eroticism.

The next three contributions share a commitment to postmodern analytical approaches. Francis Landy and Maria Meltzer construct their exploration of equine imagery in the Song as a dialogue in their own distinct voices. Landy and Meltzer model their piece in the style of the Japanese poetic genre of *renga*; it is a playful, self-aware experiment that reads a wide variety of texts, ancient and modern, together, even while remaining firmly grounded in the biblical text. Pieter van der Zwan reads the same verses as Mathys (Song 8:6–7) but through the lens of psychoanalytical exegesis. The Song’s interweaving of woman, love, and death in Song 8:6 leads van der Zwan to consider whether the Song articulates an eroticized desire for death or a denial of its power. Danilo Verde’s essay highlights how the biblical Song employs familiar metaphors (especially “love is war” and “man is conqueror”) even as it subverts conventional masculinity by repeatedly depicting the female lover in militarized terms. Employing Ricouer’s understanding of the tensions implicit in metaphors along with cognitive metaphor theory, Verde delineates a specific but evocative facet of the unconventional gender dynamics in the Song.

The two essays that comprise the third part of the volume focus on late antique and medieval modes of Jewish exegesis, specifically targum (Aramaic versions of Scripture) and *piyyut* (liturgical poetry). Marek I. Baraniak offers a broad and comprehensive introduction to the Targum of the Song of Songs, focusing on its exegetical techniques and its thematic reading of the Song as a rehearsal of the sacred history of Israel. Given the historical sweep of the Targum’s figurative reading, which spans the exodus to messianic times, the Targum essentially paraphrases the entire biblical text. Pavla Damohorská’s contribution, on the role that the Song of Songs plays in liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) composed for recitation in the synagogue during Passover, offers a particularly welcome expansion of the scholarly conversation beyond more thoroughly treated bodies of writing. This piece focuses on a lineage of poems composed in medieval Ashkenaz (Rome and the Rhineland) to embellish the Festival Morning services of Passover, the holiday when the Song of Songs is read. These lengthy hymns not only employ language and imagery from the Song but integrate its opening words, verse by verse, in their various units.

The two essays that conclude the volume, constituting the section entitled “Hermeneutics,” approach the Song of Songs from a broader perspective. Marlene Oosthuizen addresses the power of the reader’s context and biases as they influence interpretation, and she calls for “contextual consciousness”—critical self-awareness—as a way of mitigating against these pressures and, as a consequence, reading responsibly. Oosthuizen concludes that readers’ frank acknowledgment of the role context plays in their interpretation results in sounder, more open, and sensitive explication not just of the Song but of any text. In the volume’s final essay, Eben Scheffler exemplifies the possibilities raised by Oosthuizen, as he interrogates the subjectivity of allegorical modes of reading, specifically those of the Targum of the Song, Luther’s lectures on the Song, and the seventeenth-century Dutch Calvinist Statenbijbel in their treatment of the most overtly erotic elements of the text. He concludes that the readers’ biases and needs shape figurative readings to

such an extent that allegories should be considered not interpretations but applications and appropriations of their source materials.

The volume cannot escape the unevenness that is typical of such multiauthor works, particularly in the way that certain methods and topics are favored (e.g., philological and contextual-historical literary readings, particularly in part 1) while others are, of necessity, marginalized or neglected entirely. In particular, more direct attention to early Christian exegesis and classical rabbinic midrash would have been welcome, as well as newer analytical approaches such as ritual studies, affective theory, and attention to embodiment and the senses. Unsurprisingly, given the origin of this volume, the authors tend to favor European scholarly literature, with Israeli and American scholarship somewhat less emphasized. But ultimately no single volume could encompass all the ways in which the Song of Songs is studied historically or in the present, and the present anthology gestures toward additional avenues for inquiry even as it reminds readers of the usefulness of more familiar approaches.

This volume models complexities of scholarly discourse in a serious and welcome way, both through the juxtaposition of divergent analyses of specific texts and through the theme of self-reflective critical awareness that runs through the essays. These two features, a result of the editors' careful work as well as the individual essays, provide a welcome model for scholarly capaciousness. The individual essays are useful and sound, but it is in the aggregate that the value of this work is most evident.