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Longman, Tremper

Song of Songs

The New International Commentary on the Old Testament

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For approximately twenty-five years now, the Song of Songs has been the object of intense scholarly interest, probably for the first time since the Middle Ages. An initial marker of this renewed interest—and probably the impetus for much that has followed—was Marcia Falk’s rendering of the Song as universal love poetry. Her free translation was published in full in 1977, and followed five years later by a literary study detailing her approach. Also in 1977, Marvin Pope’s far more sexually explicit translation (The Anchor Bible) appeared, accompanied by a massive commentary which constitutes the fullest reading of the Song in light of what (little) we know about Canaanite cultic tradition.

Longman’s own concise and lucid commentary follows in the trajectory set by Falk. Like her, he reads the Song as an anthology of topically related poems for which multiple authorship is likely—“a kind of erotic psalter” (43). More significantly, he agrees with Falk and the vast majority of contemporary scholars that the Song “focuses on the experiences and emotions of intimate male-female relationship” (xiii). However, the approach of this commentary is distinguished by its explicitly evangelical perspective, adopted for all the volumes in the NICOT series. In order to apply this perspective to a book that makes “a studied avoidance” of direct reference to God (116), Longman appeals to the role of the Song in the canon. This is the only extended biblical affirmation of sexual love—in his view, married love—as it is “redeemed” from the distortion that occurred in Eden (following the argument of Phyllis Trible). Since marriage is a favorite prophetic metaphor for the “intensity, intimacy, and exclusivity”

(70) of the divine-human relationship, the Song can be read as indirectly illuminating that relationship.

The first third of the volume is devoted to an introduction that treats, briefly but clearly, matters of title, authorship, literary style, date, condition of the text, genre, ancient Near Eastern background, genre, structure, canon, theological significance; and, at greater length (30 of its 70 pages) the history of interpretation. The footnotes and the accompanying bibliography are extremely valuable in referring readers to a wide range of modern literature. On the whole, the discussion shows balance and good judgment. For instance, Longman takes up successively the conservative claim of Solomonic authorship and the feminist claim of female authorship. He leaves open the possibility that some of the poems may have been written by Solomon, but at the same time, he suggests that “little is at stake” (7) in such arguments. With respect to female authorship, he makes the interesting observation that insistence on it (or against it) ironically abets the sort of gender typecasting common among social conservatives.

In a few pages of the introduction, Longman offers an excellent basic treatment of the Song as lyric poetry rather than a narrative account of events, actual or fictional. The verse-by-verse commentary that follows is divided according to the canonical chapters of the text, each of which is seen to consist of two to six short poems. In each case he offers a rationale for the division, while frequently acknowledging other possible divisions and connections to other parts of the text. (These connections would seem to imply that Longman sees the unity of this anthology as being tighter than that of the Psalter.)

The commentary and notes show good awareness of poetic structure and careful weighing of translational options, and the results are consistently reliable. The only exception I note is at 8:6, where he renders the famous bicolon:

For *stronger than* death is love,
Tenacious like the grave is jealousy.

One might suppose that in this case a theological conviction has caused him to ignore the obvious parallelism and read against the unambiguous Hebrew text (“strong *like* death is love”). Yet the text as it stands yields an understanding that is equally congruent with evangelical theology: namely that love, like death, is a force that escapes our control, and therefore “abandoning ourselves” in love is the best preparation we can make for a good and even godly death.

Longman’s main exegetical concern is, properly for this highly imagistic book, the unpacking of metaphors. Without underplaying its sensuousness, he generally observes the Song’s delicacy in both evoking a physical relationship and “creating a world” (127). One could wish that the significance of the world the lovers create or desire were more fully developed. For instance, he frequently notes the opposition between city and country that is such a prominent feature of the Song, but he does not go far in exploring the significance of that opposition. Of course, lovers want some privacy, but why is this love of (as he presumes) a married couple so distinctly resistant to the public sphere? Does the lush natural world stand for something more than the woman’s

body or a chance for the lovers to be alone? Again, Longman emphasizes the tone of unfulfilled yearning that persists to the very last verse and supposes that the full consummation even of sexual love must wait for the world to come. One senses that through the Song Longman is glimpsing dimensions of reality that incorporate but transcend the private and the sensuous, but he does not articulate what those might be.

One could quibble with his insistence that the Song, in concert with the rest of the Bible, portrays sexual intimacy as legitimate only between wife and husband. Arguing that there is no narrative progression through the Song as a whole enables him to explain the fact that the lovers are at some points evidently not married, even though in earlier chapters they have been fully intimate. The only thing that can be proven on the basis of the Song itself—that is, the only thing the author or editor seems to care to communicate—is that this love is faithful, lifelong (“strong like death”) and wholly exclusive. Is the Song’s ambiguity about what was for Israel an important societal norm itself worth pondering? To one modern commentator, André LaCocque (*Romance She Wrote*, Trinity Press International, 1998) it suggests that the Song is flouting the norm. To me (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs*, Westminster John Knox, 2000) it suggests that sexual union is not the only kind of intimacy that the poem seeks to evoke. Perhaps the very absence of moral guidance here indicates that a “horizontal” reading of the Song (at the purely human level) does not exhaust its meaning.

The only serious flaw in Longman’s scholarly work would seem to be his treatment of the allegorical tradition of medieval Christianity. His judgment that the assignment of spiritual meaning by monastic commentators is “incredibly arbitrary” (36) appears to depend on second- and third-hand descriptions, most often by unsympathetic readers. His treatment of Bernard of Clairvaux is close to caricature—and is soon contradicted when Longman cites with apparent approval one of Bernard’s many astute literary observations, namely that the first line of the Song is a “beginning without a beginning” (89). I have frequently taught Bernard, Gregory of Nyssa (also mentioned dismissively), and other allegorical interpreters to students who initially share the general modern prejudice against their approach. My consistent experience is that the judgment that such interpretations stem chiefly from “unnatural suppression” (33) does not stand up to careful reading of the best medieval preachers and commentators. There is simply too much luminosity and spiritual freedom to be ignored. Indeed, taking this tradition more seriously might enable Longman to deepen his own occasional probes into reading the Song in the larger context of the Christian canon. For example, he cites Jack Lundbom’s “persuasive” argument that Mary Magdalene’s search for Jesus’ body (John 20) is modeled on the search of the woman in the Song, and concludes: “Like the beloved in the Song of Songs..., Mary has a sense of ‘paradise regained.’”

A final quibble that is addressed primarily to the publisher, since authors are not responsible for the jacket art on their books. The choice for this volume is curiously at odds with Longman’s interpretation. In Tiepolo’s eighteenth-century *Abraham and the Three Angels*, Abraham gazes raptly and (arguably) languorously at the legs of one half-clothed male angel. Does this really come close to capturing the kind of “poetic reverie” about marital love for which Longman argues at length? On the other hand, if this is an

acceptable piece of cover art, then there must be more to be said than the brief comments offered about a metaphorical and theological connection between human love and the love of God. One might point out, for instance, that when the medieval rabbis portrayed Abraham as a lover of God, it was precisely the language of the Song they chose to express the depth of his passion.