



Bergant, Dianne

The Song of Songs

Berit Olam

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 123. Cloth. \$29.95. ISBN 0814650694.

David M. Carr

Union Theological Seminary in New York
New York, NY 10027

This volume on the Song of Songs occurs in a series, Berit Olam, whose stated aim is presenting “the latest developments in the literary analysis” of the Bible in its final form to a wide audience of scholars, students, and general readers. Nevertheless, unlike some other volumes in the series (e.g., Tod Linafelt on Ruth and Timothy K. Beal on Esther, in their *Ruth and Esther* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999]), the literary analysis done here does not include developments in literary studies over recent decades. Instead, the commentary focuses on various translation issues and identification of poetic features within individual pericopes of the Song of Songs (hereafter the Song).

The volume begins with a brief (nine and one-half page) introduction in which Bergant presents her judgments regarding the background of the Song, its history of interpretation in religious communities, and the character of Hebrew poetry, particularly in the Song. Bergant contrasts interpretations of the Song “from outside” (e.g., the allegorical or dramatic approaches) with “a literal reading of the Song of Songs” that has been recovered by critical scholarship and will be pursued in the commentary. The discussion of “Hebrew Poetry” mostly comprises Bergant’s summary of the character of metaphor and Hebrew parallelism. She devotes only a page to her position on larger structures, such as Hebrew forms or the structure of the Song as a whole.

The bulk of the book consists of Bergant's poem-by-poem commentary on the Song. When discussing key translation and interpretive issues, she often strikes a moderate position. For example, she suggests that a given half-verse "might be better rendered" in a given way, or she follows a summary of a debate by suggesting that "it may be that the poet wanted all of these characteristics to be operative" (84; see also 58). This commentator does not appear to have many axes to grind.

Overall, the commentary stands as an accessible synthesis of some insights from works on the Song of Songs that are available in English, along with some interesting observations that do not appear in every commentary. For example, Bergant offers a number of useful diagrams of patterns across couplets (see esp. 42, 43, 51, 54, 90). In addition, she makes interesting observations on topics such as the distinctiveness of the praise of the man's body in 5:10–16 (68), the way tower imagery works across the book (86), and the particular focus in 8:1–2 on the man's rather than the woman's reputation (93).

That said, the commentary also has some shortcomings. There are several comments that this reviewer found imprecise and/or poorly grounded, such as Bergant's assertion that the Song of Songs—a pre-Arabic text—"contains several examples of a particular kind of Arabic poem known as a *wasf*" (xv, see also 37), her statement that "the sages were what we today would call humanists" (4), and some comments Bergant makes about general sexual experience (e.g., 9 and 105). More importantly, this book does not fully live up to the promise of the series to present "the latest developments in literary analysis" of the Song. There has been brilliant literary work on the poetry of the Song by Alter, Exum, and others. This is not drawn on significantly. Instead, much of the commentary summarizes and re-presents the contents of the Song itself. Although this is done in a balanced and usually accessible way, Bergant's rereading of the Song does not represent a major interpretive advance in analysis of a biblical book that most past and present commentators—critical and otherwise—already interpreted in its "final form."

Overall, this is a balanced and accessible entry to the Song of Songs for general readers and students up through college. Moreover, it points such readers to some excellent resources in English for further reading. Professional biblical scholars and graduate students will need to look elsewhere for sophisticated synthesis and advancement of literary analysis of the Song.