Norris, Richard A., ed.

The Song of Songs: Interpreted by the Early Church and Medieval Commentators

The Church’s Bible 1


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Two short articles by the general editor of the series, R. L. Wilken, open the book: “Series Preface” (vii–viii) and “Interpreting the Old Testament” (x–xvi). Norris then gives us an “Introduction to the Song of Songs” (xvii–xxi).

The bulk of the book (1–297) is arranged as follows. The Song of Songs is divided into twenty-four subsections, from the superscription/title of 1:1 to the last section, 8:11–14. For each verse or group of verses the relevant Septuagint and Vulgate texts are translated into English and set opposite each other. The reason given for this choice of base text, rather than the Hebrew text, is the fact that the church fathers worked from the Greek and later the Latin texts (xvi). A terse, italicized, helpful comment by Norris then precedes his own translated choice of early Christian interpreters up to the Middle Ages. These excerpts from commentaries and sermons are arranged as verse-by-verse comments under their producers’ names.

Who are the authors whose works are used, and what are the sources for these works? These are set out in appendix A (298–302) and B (303–9), respectively. The author list is alphabetical (see below). The source list is conveniently arranged according to the order of appearance of their authors in each section. Three helpful indexes dealing with subjects (311–15), names (316–17), and scripture (318–25) are provided.
The alphabetical list of authors runs from Ambrose of Milan to William of St. Thierry and includes Apponius, Augustine of Hippo, Bede, Bernard of Clairvaux, Cyprian of Carthage, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory the Great, Gregory of Elvira, Gregory of Nyssa, “Honorius,” Hugh of St. Victor, John of Ford, Nicholas de Lyra, Nilus, Origen, Philo of Carpasis, Richard of St. Victor, Rupert of Deutz, and Theodore. Chronologically, therefore, the time frame covered is from the third to the fourteenth centuries C.E. This reader is grateful for every fragment of the church fathers’ work made accessible in this book in an organized manner and in idiomatic translations. This is certainly of great historical value to scholarship.

Although it may seem unfair to judge a book for what it does not contain rather than for what it does, let me take the risk. The editor/translator does admit that he made personal choices of inclusion and exclusion. This is understandable. That Hippolytus (died ca. 236) is missing might be attributed to his (slightly) earlier date. But what is the reason for omitting Jerome (beyond his Latin translation, of course, and references to his translation on pages 99 and 155), with regard to Song 4:12? Surely the references to the Song of Songs, virginity, and marriage in Jerome’s Against Jovinian, 1.30 (written 393) is theologically more than just interesting. The exclusion of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428) is even more amazing. Both rabbinic Jewish interpretations of this text and Christian interpretations of the entirety (or most) of the Hebrew Bible as allegorical (in the latter case, of Jesus) sought to uncover hidden meanings. Theodore insisted on the literal meaning of the Song of Songs. His work was quickly condemned as heretical. Surely his voice is more than astounding against the backdrop of his time and place. However, as the series general editor writes in his introductory piece on “Interpreting the Old Testament”:

The task of the interpreter (and of this series) is to help the faithful look beyond the surface, to highlight a word here, an image there, to find Christ in surprising and unexpected places, to drink at the bountiful spring whose water was ever fresh.

And, as it is further explained and reinforced,

Though early Christian exegesis may on first reading appear idiosyncratic and arbitrary…. Exegesis was not about novelty but about finding the triune God in new and unexpected places within the Scriptures. (xv)

While it is true that most early and not so early Christian interpreters set this task for themselves, does this mean that dissenting voices, as few as they were, should be left outside the scope of the church’s bible (in the lowercase or capitalized, as in this series
name), as not as “spiritually, exegetically, or theologically interesting and significant” (xvi) as the ones included? Moreover, I cannot understand why the fourteenth century was chosen as the latest chronological frame. For me, the works relating to the Song of Songs by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, both of the sixteenth century, are amazingly rich. I would have loved to see some excerpts from them in this volume.

To summarize: if you regard this volume as a source book for church interpretations of the Song of Songs, that is, catholic interpretations, personally selected in a noninclusive manner, harkening back to Greek/Latin texts (and not to the Hebrew text) as their proof-texts, you will certainly profit. The series editor is ideologically frank concerning the intended audience of the work and how one should and could benefit from this source book today. In case you do not share his views, such frankness will allow you to resist this particular brand of confessionalism. Ultimately, for my taste, allegorical interpretations—be they Christian, as is the case here, or Jewish, or of any other provenance—remain an opulent mine of historical interest and significance. They may be bizarre, but they are a rich source for assessing their authors’ sense and sensibility. Therefore, a responsible English translation, when its limitations and context are known, is indeed welcome.