

# SONG OF SONGS

PAUL J. GRIFFITHS



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## SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that Scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that Scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.<sup>1</sup>

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of Scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of Scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of Scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of Scripture is encumbered in our own day.”<sup>3</sup> The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”<sup>4</sup> We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks

2. *Against the Heretics* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of Scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”<sup>5</sup> In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read Scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.<sup>6</sup> To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”<sup>7</sup> The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of Scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of Scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapide, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of Scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of Scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jeremiah 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”<sup>8</sup> This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of Scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by

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8. *Sermon* 212.2.

doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of Scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with Scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of Scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as Scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically

fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of Scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of Scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

# INTRODUCTION

## Confecting the Song

In contemporary English Bibles, sandwiched between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah, is a short work called sometimes “Song of Songs” and sometimes “Song of Solomon.” In this commentary I’ll call it simply “(the) Song.” This piece of scripture, like most, has a long and complicated history of composition, redaction, edition, translation, commentary, and liturgical use, much of which is no longer accessible to us. “Confection” is a useful summary term for this process: to confect is to make something sweet and beautiful by judicious mixing of ingredients; it may also imply a co-making, an act of making in cooperation with other makers. The confectioner makes sweetmeats; the Catholic priest, it used to be said (the usage is archaic but elegant), cooperates with God and the people of God in the confection of the sacrament of the Mass; and the people of the Lord cooperate with the Lord in the confection of the canon of scripture as a whole and in each of its parts. In the case of the Song the result is unusually sweet, and the confection went roughly as follows.

Long ago, perhaps some time after the return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon midway through the first millennium before Christ, there began to take shape among the Jews a collection of Hebrew love songs. This collection belongs to the cultural and religious world of the ancient Near East—there are many parallels and echoes in the love poetry of the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians<sup>1</sup>—but it finds its specific location in the Hebrew-using, which is

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1. Many modern commentaries on the Song include analyses of ancient love poetry. See especially Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Othmar Keel, *Das Hohelied*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare AT 18 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986); Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977); John Bradley White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry* (Missoula, MT:

to say Jewish, part of that world. Gradually, by a long process of compilation and redaction whose details can no longer be known (which does not prevent scholars from attempting to know it), this collection of love songs came to be recognized by Jews as a single literary work associated with the name and reputation of Solomon, though never unambiguously said to be by him. By the time of the Maccabees, in the second century BC (and probably earlier), this Hebrew work was known by the title *Shir hashshirim 'asher lishlomoh* (“The Song of Songs which is Solomon’s”), and under that title it was, after some argument, judged by Jews to belong to the Tanakh, the canon of scripture that is approximately equivalent to what Christians call the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> By the second century AD, this Hebrew work was located firmly among the Writings (Ketubim) within the Tanakh, which is to say among those eleven works that do not belong to the Torah (the five books of Moses) or the Nebiim (the eight prophetic books). There the Hebrew Song remains to this day, a continuing fertile source of commentary and a constant object of study by Jews, as well as at various periods—though certainly not continuously—by Christians, and latterly by pagan scholars as well. But the Hebrew Song was not firmly and finally fixed as a text by Jews until, during the second half of the first millennium AD, the Masoretes (traditionists) supplied vowels in order to fix the pronunciation and meaning of a previously exclusively consonantal text, together with indications as to how the text should be sung and various devices (letter counts, among other things) intended to minimize scribally produced textual change. It is this Masoretic Text, an artifact a little more than a millennium old, that is the living text of the Song for contemporary Jews; it effectively displaced and largely extinguished Hebrew witnesses to earlier states of the Hebrew text,<sup>3</sup> and it is, with very minor modifications, what is printed in contemporary versions of the Hebrew text of the Tanakh and in contemporary Torah scrolls. It is also what is translated under the name “Song of Songs” (or “Song of Solomon”) in most English Bibles since the seventeenth century.

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Scholars Press, 1978); and Yair Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, trans. Dafna Mach (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004).

2. “Approximately” because the books are enumerated and divided differently by Jews and Christians. Protestant Old Testaments enumerate thirty-nine books rather than the twenty-four of the Tanakh, but in fact include the same material divided differently; and Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments enumerate forty-six books because they contain seven books not found in the Jewish and Protestant collections.

3. For discussion of the fragmentary Hebrew manuscripts of the Song found at Qumran, see Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 8; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 21–22. The most useful resource for textual questions about the Song, and for easy reference to variations among the versions, is Giovanni Garbini, *Cantico dei cantici: Testo, traduzione, note e commento* (Brescia: Paideia, 1992). This contains, presented synoptically, the Masoretic Hebrew text (with comments on the Qumran fragments), Septuagint (with comments on other Greek versions, especially Aquila and Theodotion), Vetus Latina version(s), Vulgate, and Syriac.

There is also a Greek Song, provided by the energetic work of Jews and Christians in rendering into Greek states of the Hebrew text sometimes earlier than and often different from that fixed by the Masoretes. This work began in the second, or perhaps the first, century BC, when Jews produced a Greek version of the Song that is now ordinarily classified as belonging to the Septuagint, the Greek version of the entire Tanakh produced by Jews for Jews (but later taken up by Christians) over about two centuries beginning in the mid-third century before Christ.<sup>4</sup> That was only the first of several Greek versions: Origen, working at Alexandria in the third century AD, tabulated three others in addition to the one in the Septuagint,<sup>5</sup> and there may have been more. The earliest among these Greek versions of the Song is, therefore, the earliest complete surviving witness to the work by a long way; it was also the version most commonly used by Christian writers during the first three centuries; and it, like the Masoretic Hebrew text, is part of a living tradition with a long history of commentary and study and liturgical use: Orthodox Christians still treat it as their authoritative text, and commentary upon the Greek Song has been continuous since Origen.

And then there is a Latin Song. Here too, the story is not exactly straightforward. Latin versions of the Song began to be made (probably) in the second century AD, largely (and perhaps exclusively) from one or another of the Greek versions. There were several of these old Latin versions, collectively called *Vetus Latina*, but none of them now survives in anything other than quotations and references in Latin works composed by Christians between the second and fifth centuries AD and in liturgical tropes and formulas.<sup>6</sup> These earlier versions were displaced and largely extinguished by the Latin version made by Jerome, working in Bethlehem at the end of the fourth century. There, in 398, he produced a Latin text of 213 lines written *per cola et commata*, which is to say divided into sense-lines as a help for vocalized reading and understanding, but without other punctuation or division.<sup>7</sup> He called this work *Canticum Canticorum* (“Song of Songs”) and

4. On the Septuagint version of the Song, see Jay Treat’s translation in Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 657–61, which enumerates about fifty differences between the Hebrew that may be speculated to have been read by those who produced the Septuagint version of the Song, and the Masoretic Text. The extent to which readers and hearers of the Septuagint were aware that they were reading or hearing a version is an interesting question; for discussion see Marguerite Harl, “La Septante et la pluralité textuelle des écritures: Le témoignage des pères grecs,” in *Naissance de la méthode critique*, ed. Françoise Laplanche et al. (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 231–43.

5. Work toward a new critical edition of the surviving fragments of Origen’s Hexapla is now under way. For preliminary details, see [www.hexapla.org](http://www.hexapla.org).

6. On the *Vetus Latina* texts of the Song, see Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 11; E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), xxxiv–xxxv.

7. Jerome actually says, in his prologue *in libris Salomonis* (he means Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song), that the work of translating these three books took only three days in total (*Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 3rd ed., 957)—and since the Song is by a long way the shortest of

included it as part of the canon of scripture and as one of the Solomonic works along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—though he was not committed one way or another to Solomonic authorship of the Song. He had before him as he worked at least the following materials: (1) a Hebrew text, which was his primary point of reference and which he thought of himself as translating; (2) at least one of the Greek versions, and perhaps more; and (3) at least one, and probably several, of the Old Latin versions. Jerome's version became the standard—indeed, effectively the only—version used by Western Christian scholars between the fifth century and the sixteenth, which explains its coming to be called the Vulgate, the popular version. The Latin Song, like the rest of the Vulgate, did not pass through a thousand years of scribal transmission and liturgical use without change, and it never became as effectively frozen as did the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Song: local and other kinds of variants developed, though most of them were fairly minor. But awareness of them on the part of the Catholic Church did mean that at various points attempts were made to edit, revise, and fix that text, a process that continues today.

There are many other Songs: Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Chinese, English, German, French, and so on. But the three whose confection I've summarized above—Hebrew, Greek, Latin—are the ones most read, celebrated, chewed over, commented upon, preached about, and memorized by Christians.



For Christians, the process of confecting a scriptural book does not yield a single, authoritative original text from which all others are derived and upon which they are parasitic. There is, textually speaking, no real thing: there are only versions, all of them confected, some involving translation from one natural language into another and some not.<sup>8</sup> Affirming the possibility and desirability of translation, which Christians have almost always done, strongly supports this conclusion. If you think that when you're reading or hearing some version of the English Song you're reading or hearing scripture—and this is something Christians do think: when scripture is read in churches, in whatever language, its reading is ordinarily

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the three, it seems fair to assume that it took him less than a day. This is quick work. But perhaps the three days he mentions is linked symbolically to the three books and is not meant as a simple descriptive statement about time taken.

8. In fact, all confections involve translation in a relaxed sense. Every natural language develops in intimate exchange with those around it: it is shaped by the borrowing and lending of words, syntax, and idioms (among other things). It is also the case that every text in any natural language has behind it, more or less distantly, a history of translation from texts in other natural languages. There is in fact no very easy way to individuate one natural language from another: this is a topic about as intractable as that of species individuation in biology. We may, for convenience and brevity, speak of the Hebrew original of the Song, for example. But that is no more than shorthand for a textual object confected in considerable part by translation. Consider, for example, the almost-indubitable resonances between the love lyrics of the Song and those of some Egyptian texts, on which see Fox, *Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*; Keel, *Das Hohelied*; and Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*.

followed by the proclamation “the word of God” or “the word of the Lord”—then you must also think that the Lord speaks to you as effectively and fully by way of those words as he does to others by way of German or Hebrew or Latin words. Hearing the Song in English is not second best to hearing it in Hebrew: both are confectioned versions, and each is fully the word of the Lord.

What are they versions of? Among other things, of what the Lord says to his people. If scripture is the Lord’s most explicit and complete verbal address to his people, then there is something that the Lord says to his people by way of scripture as a whole, and also by way of each of its proper parts, among which the Song is one. There is a complex verbal caress with which the Lord delights and instructs his people, a kiss that he places upon his people’s lips—tropes especially apposite to the Song.<sup>9</sup> This particular caressing kiss can be given to us here below only by way of words in some natural language or other, and since the depth and passion of the kiss is unfathomable, no set of such words can exhaust it. The words in which each version consists are successive attempts on the part of the people at various times and in various places to respond to the Lord’s verbal kiss: this is true of the anonymous poets and scribes who put together the various successive versions of the Hebrew text;<sup>10</sup> it is true of those who translated particular versions of that text into Greek and Latin and then subsequently into the languages of our times and places; and it is true too of those who have commented upon, preached about, or otherwise elucidated the words of the Song in any language. The confection of a scriptural book does not, therefore, end with the establishment of versions; those are its first yield, and they are inevitably and properly supplemented by commentary, which is confection’s second yield, solicited by the first. Versions and commentary together are the people’s return of the Lord’s kiss (no kiss is given if one offered is not returned, as anyone knows who has kissed an unyielding pair of lips), and the exchange of verbal kisses will have no end here below. Versions and commentaries will, therefore, be endless.<sup>11</sup> This book is one among those returned kisses.

9. For an especially rich use of the trope of the kiss, with special reference to depictions of mystical death in Judaism, often by way of commentary on the Song, see Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

10. I am aware that there are many theories about how the Song came to be what it now is in its various versions, and that some of those theories consider it to be a unified literary text marked by the mind of a single human author, while others do not, thinking of it rather as a compilation of disparate song fragments. I incline to the latter view. But nothing hinges upon this so far as this commentary is concerned, and I place very little confidence in any particular view of the Song’s literary prehistory, including my own.

11. Augustine expatiates in *De doctrina christiana* (Christian Teaching) 2.6.7–8 on the importance of scriptural obscurity, taking as his example Song 4:2, in which the beloved’s teeth are likened to a flock of shorn sheep. It is, he says, a wonderful thing that the Holy Spirit has so arrayed the scriptures as to “satisfy hunger by its clearer parts and deter boredom by its more obscure ones” (*locis apertioribus fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret*); *Sant’Agostino: La Dottrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. Vincenzo Tarulli, *Opere di Sant’Agostino* 8 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1992), 64–66.

None of this means that all versions are equally good, equally effective at returning the Lord's kiss and thereby conforming the people's lips to the Lord's. But it is no simple matter to discriminate the good from the less so. This is because there are many variables in play: it is not only that one may be less faithful, less adequate, less beautiful than another; it is also that a kiss that elicits a response from some may fail to do so from others. Every teacher and preacher knows this: the same words, delivered in the same setting, by the same person, will be transformatively effective for some and lifeless failures for others. The Lord's people, whether synagogue or church, will, under his guidance, over time discriminate good versions of the Song from less good. Some versions die and some live; some enter deeply into the corporate and individual life of the Lord's people and some remain on the margins or fall dead-born from the press. Fortunately, those who offer a version or a commentary do not need to worry very much about this. They need only do their work thoughtfully, attentively, prayerfully, and with love.

Understanding scriptural books as confected versions in this way, none of which is identical with what the Lord says to his people, is at odds with two different widely held understandings of what scriptural books are, and it will highlight the distinctiveness of the view taken here (which is also the properly Christian view) to briefly explain the contrasts.

First, it is possible to think that a scriptural book consists essentially in a single set of words in some natural language and that any translation, paraphrase, gloss, or commentary upon this single set of words has authority or significance only to the extent of its intimacy with that single set. Some Jews, perhaps, think something like this about the set of Hebrew words that constitute the Masoretic Text of the Song; some Protestants, oddly, seem to think something like this about the set of English words that constitute the English Song found in the King James (Authorized) Version; maybe some Orthodox think this about the Greek Song of the Septuagint; and it is even possibly the case that some (misguided) Catholics think this about the words of the Latin Song in the Vulgate. And outside the spheres of Judaism and Christianity, it seems very likely that some Hindus think something like this about the Sanskrit phonemes of the Veda, and that most Muslims think this about the Arabic words of the Qur'an.<sup>12</sup> On this view, not everything is a version and not everything is confected: there is an originary natural-language text whose words are the Lord's very words, and nothing can approach it in authority. Those who think this are likely to be wary of translation, or at least to think of translations as expedients for the needy or incompetent, to be abandoned as soon as they can be done without.

Second, a historicist version of this single-inspired-text view identifies the authoritative text with the original (the autograph, the first spoken version, or

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12. It is interesting to note that Christians and Buddhists (or at least the unconfused among their number) are united in not holding any such view, and (largely) in the reasons for not holding it: that is, their constant emphasis on the necessity of translating the sacred text. This differentiates Buddhism and Christianity from the other long-lived text-encumbered religious traditions.

something of that sort), devotes great effort to finding and establishing this original, and then (and therefore) treats all subsequent versions as secondary, derivative, and interesting only to the extent that they provide information helpful to the task of reconstructing and understanding the hypothesized original. It is true that the Greek and Latin Songs are derivatives of the Hebrew Song in the sense that without it they would not exist, while it could have existed—and for a while did—without them. But this has no implications for the desirability or interest of studying the Greek or Latin Song independently of the Hebrew. To think that it has is to confuse the two claims just mentioned: that  $x$  is a translation of  $y$ , and that the only interest  $x$  has is as a witness to  $y$ . Even without theological commitments or interests it should be easy enough to see that these two claims are easily separable. Suppose, for example, that  $x$  is a work with a long history of being read and commented upon—for example, Chapman’s version of Homer or Dryden’s of Virgil. Then, because it has itself prompted a history of reception and use,  $x$  warrants study in its own right, and not merely (or at all) for what it reveals about  $y$ . The stream of reading, writing, memorizing, thinking, and commenting that began with Virgil’s composition of the *Aeneid* during the first century BC includes Dryden’s Englishing of a version of the Latin during the last decade of the seventeenth century AD. Choosing to comment upon any one of the Latin *Aeneids* or Dryden’s English *Aeneid* is not to choose between the most valuable version and a less valuable version: it is (or ought to be) to make a choice determined by the purposes of the commentary.

For most contemporary pagan (in the sense of neither-Jewish-nor-Christian) scholars, some version of the historicist view just given and criticized—though not usually expressed in quite this blunt way—informs the judgment that the real Song, the one that counts and the one that ought to be read and studied, is whatever contemporary scholarship takes to be the earliest state of the Hebrew text. A quick survey of recent scholarly commentary on the Song shows that almost all of it expounds the Masoretic Text; and almost all of it likewise makes a sharp distinction between the text and the history of its translation and interpretation. There is of course nothing wrong in expounding this text or, more generally, in paying attention to the Hebrew Song in any of its forms. For Jews, I should think, doing so is essential. But there is no reason, even for non- or antitheological historians, to adopt such a rigid demarcation of value between original text and everything prompted and solicited by that text; and there are positive reasons to reject such a view on the theological understanding of what a scriptural text is expounded above.



Christians, then, ought not think that a real or imagined original, whether of the Song or of any other scriptural text, is any more or less the word of the Lord than any chronologically subsequent version. But does some other kind of authority that the supposed original holds lead Christians to treat it differently than

subsequent versions? There are some interesting questions here for Catholics, for whom there is an authoritative teaching tradition about these matters.

In 1943 Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical letter under the title *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Inspired by the Spirit) in which he reviewed earlier papal teaching about the nature of scripture and how it should be interpreted and read by Catholics, and discussed then-recent advances in textual and historical knowledge relevant to scriptural interpretation. His purpose was to clarify the Catholic Church's mind on these matters and to make some recommendations. Relevant to the question of the authority of the versions is his urging of the study of the "ancient languages and original texts" (§14) in order that the "original text . . . which has more authority and greater weight than . . . even the very best version, whether ancient or modern" (§16) might be studied and expounded well.<sup>13</sup>

Four centuries earlier, the Catholic Church in council at Trent, had written: "The old Vulgate edition, tested by the church in long use over much time, should be retained as the authentic text in public reading, debate, preaching, and exposition."<sup>14</sup> These words have high authority for Catholics because Trent is, by Catholic reckoning, an ecumenical council; and of course Pius XII was aware of them. The Vulgate is a translation, not an original, because no part of the canon of scripture was composed in Latin. The council's words, therefore, provide a *prima facie* difficulty for Pius's claim that originals are weightier, which is to say more authoritative, than any translation.

Pius proceeds, as any Catholic thinker would, by making a distinction between two kinds of authenticity—or, as he also says, two kinds of authority. There is, he says (§21), critical authenticity (*authentia critica*) and juridical authenticity (*authentia iuridica*). The former belongs to the original texts in the original languages; and the latter belongs to the Vulgate because of its long use in the church. With Trent, Pius affirms that the Vulgate "may be deployed without danger of error in disputation, reading, and public discourse" (§21).

I read Pius's distinction between critical and juridical authority as establishing the grammar of a properly Catholic position on the authority of translations without specifying everything that flows from such a grammar. According to the grammar of the position Pius provides, two things must be said: (1) A translation—that is, a scriptural text rendered in any language other than that of its composition, whether by translation from that language or from some prior translation from that language—may (and in the case of the Vulgate does) possess full authority as the word of the Lord for the church's liturgical, homiletical, catechetical, and doctrine-developing purposes. (2) An original—that is, an untranslated text, a scriptural confection in the language of its composition—possesses authority greater than that of any translation for the purposes of critical scholarship. Those

13. Author's translation from Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Latin at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/encyclicals](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals)).

14. Author's translation from the second decree of the fourth session (April 1546) at Trent (Latin in Tanner 1990: 664).

purposes might include, though are certainly not limited to, reconstruction of the intentions of the author (if there was one); understanding the relation of the text to others contemporaneous with it, or nearly so; understanding the process of composition or compilation, and the sources used in that process. Both—that is, translations and originals, with their respective weights—are essential to the church’s life. And the two kinds of authority are distinct, while related. Abandoning either option, whether by subsuming one into the other or by erasing one or the other, would be to move outside the grammar of a Catholic position on this matter. (I leave aside the question of the extent to which a properly Catholic position makes sense for non-Catholic Christians.) What remains in the sphere of speculative thought is the attempt to specify in a more detailed way the relations between the authority of translations and the authority of the original, or, to put the same matter differently, the relations between critical scholarship and preaching, teaching, and the formation of doctrine.<sup>15</sup>

The speculative position briefly developed above—that confection has been at play as much in the formation of originals as in that of translations—does not contradict Pius XII’s distinction between original and translated texts. It affirms, as he does, the following claims: that translations can serve the church’s teaching and preaching needs as well as the originals can; that translations are essential to the life of the church; and that attention to originals, in the limited sense of scriptural texts that are not translations, can provide answers to questions that attention to translations cannot provide. In making the more radical claim that, really, there are only versions, I intend to suggest that the lexicon, syntax, and history of one natural language, whether Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek (the three “original” languages of scripture), together with the intentions and understandings of the authors and compilers of the works that now constitute the canon of scripture, cannot, in principle, exhaust or contain what the Lord says to his people by way of those works; and that proper to the work of the church in developing and extending its understanding of what the Lord says is the provision of translations, each of which is (potentially) a rendering of the word of the Lord as full and as

15. Subsequent magisterial teaching on the authority of the versions does not much develop Pius XII’s position. The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) has only a single paragraph on the versions (§22; Latin and English in Tanner 1990: 979), which are said to be made so that all the faithful might have easy access to scripture. This already implies that a version is indeed an instance of scripture, and by the time we reach §25, this is made explicit: the versions are indeed (instances of) the sacred text (Tanner 1990: 980–81). The work of the Pontifical Biblical Commission since the Second Vatican Council does not much advance the question, though the 1994 document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” contains the following suggestive (and entirely accurate) claim: “Translating the Bible is already a work of exegesis” (from the text’s conclusion; English at [catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC\\_Interp.htm](http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp.htm)). A translation is, then, the product of an exegetical act. From this can be quickly derived the conclusion that what is read and expounded in the church’s public worship is the product of an exegetical act on the part of the church; and, if what is preached on and proclaimed is *Dei verbum*, then the word of the Lord is itself capable of being read and heard as the product of an exegetical act.

authoritative as that found in the originals. If that position is correct, among its implications is that exegetical attention paid to a translation is as important to the church's life as exegetical attention paid to an original. And there is a notable lack of the former in the work of the church's exegetes at the beginning of the third millennium.



If there are only confected versions of the Song, none in principle more intimate with what the Lord says than any other, then theological commentators must choose one among them to comment upon on grounds other than identifying the original or oldest text. They must, that is, choose a particular point in the stream of textual tradition that constitutes the Song and focus their work upon it. I choose one of the Latin Songs for my commentary—more exactly, the Latin text of the Song as printed in the second edition of *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*.<sup>16</sup>

Why the Latin Song at all, and why this particular version of it? The vast majority of Western commentators on the Song between the fifth century and the sixteenth (and a good many afterward) treated Jerome's Latin version. Jerome's Latin Song, rivaled only by one or other of his Latin renderings of the book of Psalms, attracted more commentary than any other scriptural book during those centuries;<sup>17</sup> and writing such commentaries was among the principal means used by Christian scholars during those centuries for the development of ecclesiological, mystical, and mariological theology. The vast body of Latin commentary provoked by Jerome's Latin Song is still largely untranslated into modern languages, although some parts of it have recently begun to be anthologized and studied,<sup>18</sup> and it seems

16. More exactly still, I have used for the text of the Song *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), 915–21. This is a reprint edition of the second (revised) *editio typica* of the New Vulgate, issued in 1986.

17. On the commentary tradition, see Friedrich Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien: Grundzüge einer Geschichte der Hoheliedauslegung des Abendlandes bis um 1200* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1958); Helmut Riedlinger, *Der Makellosigkeit der Kirche in den lateinischen Hoheliedkommentaren des Mittelalters* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1958); and Anne-Marie Pelletier, *Lectures du Cantique des Cantiques: De l'enigme du sens aux figures de lecteur* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989). The last of these is a work of considerable theoretical interest in its own right.

18. For anthologies and studies of Latin commentary on the Song see Blaise Arminjon, *The Cantata of Love: A Verse-by-Verse Reading of the Song of Songs*, trans. Nelly Marans (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988); Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Chrétien 2005; Russell J. de Simone, ed. and trans., *The Bride and Bridegroom of the Fathers: An Anthology of Patristic Interpretations of the Song of Songs*, Sussidi Patristici 10 (Rome: Istituto Patristico Augustinianum, 2000); Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*; Richard A. Norris Jr., ed. and trans., *The Song of Songs Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, The Church's Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1995); J. Robert Wright, ed., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentaries, Old Testament 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).

likely that more will follow. Medievalists, theologians, and even, now, exegetes of scripture are increasingly interested in premodern scriptural commentary, and this interests me as well: in this commentary on the Song I will make use of, and sometimes explicitly engage, contributions from premodern commentators writing (in Latin) on Jerome's Latin Song. In order to be able to do so effectively, and in order for my comments to resonate effectively with theirs, to be a returned kiss like theirs, a moment in the history of response to the divine verbal kisses of the Song of the same kind as theirs, I must comment on a version lineally related to and intimate with the one they also commented on.

This means a Latin version, certainly. The New Vulgate is that; but it is not what Jerome set down in 398 in Bethlehem. It is, instead, the fruit of work set in motion by Pope Paul VI in 1965 and aimed at revision of the received Vulgate text of both Old and New Testaments, "so that the church might be enriched with a Latin edition which the progress of biblical studies demands, and which might be of special use in liturgical matters."<sup>19</sup> Those who worked on the revision of the received Vulgate text in the 1960s and 1970s made extensive changes to that text, but always with an eye (and ear) to what the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy called the "conventions and habits of Christian latinity together with liturgical use."<sup>20</sup> The New Vulgate's Song differs in verbal particulars and syntax from what Jerome set down in at least thirty places, and usually in the direction of assimilating the text toward what most interpreters take the Hebrew (or sometimes the Greek of the Septuagint) of the Song to mean. But it also preserves much of Jerome: perhaps 85 percent of the New Vulgate's Song is Jerome, verbatim. The New Vulgate is therefore sufficiently intimate with Jerome's version to make use of it easily compatible with constructive engagement with the premodern commentary tradition. It is also sufficiently close to the Hebrew version that underlies most contemporary English versions to make it useful for and usable by those familiar with those versions.

Another reason for using the New Vulgate's Song is liturgical. The Catholic Church has, since the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, devoted a good deal of attention to the theory and practice of preparing vernacular versions of its Latin liturgical books.<sup>21</sup> The New Vulgate has an important place in these discussions because it is now the version given in the authoritative Latin editions of the liturgical books—most importantly, the lectionary for Mass, both Sunday and

19. Author's translation from John Paul II's 1979 Apostolic Constitution *Scripturarum Thesaurus*, as given at *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*, 6; the words translated are John Paul's quotation of Paul VI's allocution of December 23, 1966, on the subject of the revision of the received Vulgate text.

20. From *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 91 (Tanner 1990: 836), with application there to the revision of the Psalter for use in the Daily Office.

21. A list of the forty or so magisterial texts on this matter promulgated between 1963 and 2001 may be had from *Liturgiam Authenticam* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001), 14–19.

daily, but also the books that contain the Liturgy of the Hours; and while this does not by itself mean that the scriptural parts of the revised vernacular versions of these books as they come into use during the second decade of the twenty-first century will be made directly from the New Vulgate, it does mean that the New Vulgate will be increasingly important as a shaping force behind new vernacular renderings of scripture for liturgical use in the Catholic world—which in turn means for the vast majority of the world's Christians.<sup>22</sup> A commentary on the Song as it appears in the New Vulgate may therefore take its place as a contribution to the reception of that version in at least the Catholic world, and may thereby also contribute to a renewed appreciation of the liturgical possibilities of the Song. There are, as yet, almost no commentaries on the New Vulgate's Song.

This decision about which version of the Song to expound, like all such decisions, is local, informed by particular interests that are not, and do not need to be, shared by all commentators on the Song. The church, understood broadly as the body of Christ, needs all the versions, and needs sustained textual attention to them all. Catholics have special interests in the Latin Song because of its deep significance for aspects of the European Christian tradition that were rejected by the Reformers but that have remained lively in the Catholic Church. Commentary on and liturgical use of the Song in late-medieval Europe was, for example, among the more important elements in the development in Christian understanding of and devotion to Mary that found their dogmatic formulations in 1854 (immaculate conception) and 1950 (assumption). Renewed attention to the Latin Song is, among other things, a way of understanding these developments more fully. But Orthodox Christians, Protestant Christians, and (certainly) Jews will and should have other interests in expounding the Song. I intend the commentary that follows, then, as a moment in the Catholic Christian reception and interpretation of the Song, a single note in a millennia-long symphony in which Jewish, Orthodox, and Protestant voices have essential parts to play even though they are not much sounded here.

## Naming the Song's Voices

The Song has, on its surface, three voices, and all its words, with the exception of the title, come from the lips of one or another of them.<sup>23</sup> There is no narrative

22. New vernacular versions of the Catholic Church's liturgical books are on the way in many parts of the world, following with different degrees of faithfulness the principles set forth in *Liturgiam Authenticam* and its attendant documents, and attended by different levels of conflict about those principles. But the process is slow. In the English-speaking world, for instance, it is unlikely that these new vernacular versions will come into use before 2011 or 2012. The place of the New Vulgate in the production of vernacular liturgical books is described in *Liturgiam Authenticam* 24, 37, 41, 43; the interpretation and application of these principles is at the time of writing a topic of chronic and acute controversy in the English-speaking world.

23. Most premodern commentators find more than three voices in the Song. Origen, for example, in *Homeliae in canticum canticorum* (Homilies on the Song of Songs) 1.1 (Lawson 1956: 267–68),

voice: the Song is a lyric in direct speech. This is what provides it with its hallucinatory immediacy. You, the hearer, are plunged at once, as soon as the Song opens, into a series of passionate exchanges that appear to take place in an unmediated literary present.<sup>24</sup> It is certainly possible to hear the Song as an auditor only, preserving distance with the cynical smile of the worldly wise or the analytical sneer of the scholar. But that stance is not the one the Song's text calls you to. To hear it responsively, and with attention, is to be made breathless and to have your own loves reconfigured by what its lovers say.<sup>25</sup>

None of the voices in the Song is clearly named in its text, though each of them is identified with various titles and epithets and endearments. I call them, to begin with, the lover (a man), the beloved (a woman), and the daughters (a group of women). The speakers refer to one another most often by pronouns or by epithets; and their presence in the text, whether as speaker or addressee, ordinarily has to be inferred or, in cases of unclarity (there are many), guessed. It is often productive in such cases to consider different possibilities, and I do that sometimes in the comments that follow. Why should the Song or any scriptural text (or indeed any text at all) have just one meaning even when considered *ad litteram*?

The lover is identified by a number of titles and endearments. He is, most commonly, his beloved's "delightful man": she calls him this twenty-seven times. He is also her "king," though she never calls him this directly, rather twice (1:4, 12) describing him to others with this word. Once (5:16) she calls him her "lover." And five times (1:7; 3:1–4) she calls him "the man in whom my soul delights," using the same verb (*diligere*) that stands behind "delightful man" (*dilectus*). The daughters once, in the pivotal 5:1, address the lover and his beloved together as "lovers"; and in 5:9 they speak to the beloved about her "delightful man." Apart from those instances, no one other than the beloved ever calls the lover anything.

The lover speaks most of his lines directly to the beloved. He exchanges endearments with her in 1:8–2:15; the entirety of Song 4 is a hymn of praise by him of her, as is 7:2–10; and there are occasional other speeches from him to her (5:1–2;

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finds four; and Bede, *In canticum canticorum* (On the Song), prologue (Latin in *Bedae Venerabilis Opera II.2b*, ed. D. Hurst, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 119B [Brepols: Turnhout, 1983], 185–89), finds five and differentiates them further according to addressee, yielding a rather complex picture. There are many intermediate positions. I do not judge these analyses wrong; in some cases they are produced by textual differences, but for the most part the more complex enumerations of the Song's speaking characters come not from the surface features of the text (shifts in voice, mood, gender, number, and so forth), but rather from the retrojection of elements of a particular theological reading of the Song into the analysis of the Song's voices. That is not a method I follow here, though there is much to be learned from it.

24. On the question of how the Song works, literarily speaking—how it places the hearer into itself and what it does to the hearer by way of its literary form—see J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 1–12.

25. David J. A. Clines recognizes this, with clarity; see "Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in his *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 94–121. Unfortunately, his recognition of it is deeply infected with a moral self-righteousness.

6:4–9; 8:5). In addition, he speaks directly to the daughters three times (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) and possibly a fourth (3:7–11). And there are two possible soliloquies (6:11–12; 8:11–13), though both of these are capable of other readings. About 45 percent of the Song's words are reasonably identified as the lover's.

We learn nothing from the lover's speeches about himself, except the flavor and range and intensity of his delight in and love for the beloved, and that he can adjure or command the daughters, which he does thrice (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). A little more can be gleaned from what the beloved says to or about him. He "grazes" (1:7), for example, and is thereby associated with "shepherds" (1:8). But the language is suggestive and associative rather than precise. Is the grazing metaphorical? Does he graze sheep or goats? Nothing is clear. And in reading most of what she says to or about him we do not learn about him but rather about the fire of her passion for him. We learn a great deal, for example, about how she thinks of him and his body. We learn too that she can call him her "king," but not whether she means this sexually or politically or metaphorically or some combination of all these.

As to the beloved: she is, on his lips, "beloved" (many times), "most beautiful of women" (1:8), "delightful woman" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), "dove" (2:10, 14; 5:2; 6:9), "lovely one" (1:5; 2:10), "bride" (4:8–12; 5:1), "sister" (4:9–12; 5:1–2), "stainless one" (5:2), "Sulamite" (7:1), and "prince's daughter" (7:2). The daughters replicate some of this, also calling her "most beautiful of women" (5:9; 6:1) and "beloved" (5:2). This is a more elaborate and differentiated range of epithets and endearments than those given to him. She, the beloved, like him, the lover, neither speaks a name nor is addressed by one.

The beloved speaks most of her lines directly to the lover, as he does to her; but she also speaks to the daughters (1:5–6; 5:8, 10–16; 6:2–3) and twice, or perhaps three times, in soliloquy, which may also be dream (3:1–4; 5:2, 3–7). Her share of the Song's words is very slightly more than that of the lover, accounting for about 47 percent of the whole. That leaves about 8 percent for the daughters.

The beloved says a little more about herself than does the lover about himself, though what she says is in highly colored and apparently metaphorical terms. She says that she is "black but lovely" (1:5) and that her "mother's sons" (1:6) have been angry with her and have set her as guard over the vineyards, a duty at which she has failed (1:5–6). She has spent time with the king "on his couch" (1:12), and she and the lover have a shared bed, which she calls "flowerful" (1:16). He has embraced her intimately (2:6; 8:3) and has had sex with her (the most probable reading of the verses centering on 5:1), but when he comes to her bedroom she is reluctant to get up and open her door and herself to him (5:3). She wanders the city in search of him when he is not there (3:2–4; 5:6–7); and she is eager to take him "into my mother's house" (8:2; cf. 3:4), so that she can make love to him there. She takes the epithet "Sulamite" to herself (7:1).

The third voice is a chorus, the "daughters of Jerusalem," mentioned and apostrophized frequently (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 8:4), also called "daughters of Zion" (3:11), and given five or perhaps six speeches (3:6; 5:1, 9; 6:1, 10; 8:5).

They may also be identical with the “young girls” (1:3) who “have delighted” in the lover; but this is not clear. What the daughters say reveals nothing about who they are; they speak usually interrogatively (3:6; 5:9; 6:1, 10; 8:5). The daughters have several functions in the Song. First, they prompt speeches that could not plausibly be made if the work contained only the lover and the beloved as speakers; this is why they usually speak interrogatively. Second, they are intermediaries between the world of the couple and the world of the audience external to the Song—that is, the world of you and me. When they speak, the hothouse, closed world of the lovers’ exchanges, a world that includes only two people, opens out, and it is a relief to the hearer that it does.<sup>26</sup> The daughters’ questions are often and naturally taken by the Song’s hearers to be theirs. The effect of what they say upon the Song’s audience is in many ways like that of a Shakespearean soliloquy, spoken principally for the benefit of the audience.

There are a few personal proper nouns used in the Song, of which the most prominent is “Solomon.” He is mentioned in the book’s title (“Solomon’s Song of Songs”), in the beloved’s likening of herself to “Solomon’s skins” (1:5), thrice in verses about his “bed” and his “litter” (3:7–11, probably spoken by the lover), and twice in the enigmatic verses about his “vineyard” (8:11–12, perhaps spoken by the lover). The Song’s text, heard literally, does not make it clear either that Solomon is the lover in the Song (the attentive hearer, on the basis of the text alone, is given no strong reason to think so) or that he is the author of the book. That the book presents itself as having some association with him is clear, but the nature of that association is left entirely unclear: the words used in the title are equally compatible with the judgment that Solomon wrote the book, that he commissioned it, liked it, endorsed it, had it read at court, gave it as a love offering to some woman, and no doubt many other things as well. Solomon is called “king,” and so this may dispose the reader to think that when the beloved calls her lover that, without adding the name “Solomon,” she is really identifying the two. But there is much that speaks against this on the surface of the text, not least that she associates her lover with shepherding as well as ruling. Solomon is a figure of grandeur in the Song, certainly, most obviously in 3:6–11, where the lover (probably: there is no clear sign as to who speaks these words) describes the retinue accompanying Solomon’s litter as it approaches through the desert. But in spite of the grandeur, he remains marginal to a literal reading of the Song.

“Pharaoh” (1:9) and “David” (4:4) are mentioned too, but each only as part of an extended trope or as an illustrative reference. They are not players in the drama. No other personal names are used, and so there are no other characters: the beloved, her lover, the daughters of Jerusalem, and a shadowy Solomon at the margins of the text exhaust the cast of characters. The most striking absence

26. I draw here upon the analysis in Exum, *Song of Songs*, 100–102, of the function of the daughters in the Song.

is the Lord: neither his name nor any epithet ordinarily applied to him is found in the Song.

The Lord is not named in the Song; neither is Jesus, neither is Mary, and neither is the church. Even the people of Israel are scarcely there, making an explicit entry only because of the naming of places in which they live. But it is the unanimous witness of Jewish and Christian commentators before the modern period (and to a considerable extent after it) that the unnamed characters of the Song are figures, which is to say that in addition to being themselves they point to and participate in and reveal, in part, others: the people of Israel, the church, the individual beloved by the Lord, Mary, she whom the Lord has most desired and with whom he has entered into the greatest intimacy. The romance and desire of the Song, on these views, are not only, and perhaps not at all, about two unnamed lovers; they are also, and perhaps principally, and perhaps even only, about the desire of the Lord for his Israel, for his church, for Mary, and for you and me.

Such views permit, and even require, those who read the Song under the guidance of them to see things both in the Song and in the canon to which it belongs that would not otherwise be apparent. All reading works like this: every work of literature is read under the tutelage of assumptions about what it may mean arrived at in part independently of reading it; and then, in a feedback loop, the particulars of the work read question, deepen, and alter the assumptions brought to the act of reading it. In the case of classics (Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe), this process lasts a long time and is subtle. The classic is read and reread and as a result becomes ingredient to works composed later—they gloss it, comment upon it, use its characters, motifs, tropes, and themes, ingest and excrete it, bow in homage before it, and so on. The classic is also given new interpretations as its readers read it in new contexts and under new pressures. And the classic itself—its words—is one among the powers that alter the configuration and trajectory of the culture to which it belongs. All this is true of scriptural works as well, and in some ways more intensely so. The Song, as both scriptural work and classic, has provided a template for thought and writing about what it is like to be the Lord's beloved and, therefore, about who the Lord's ideal beloveds are. Those thoughts and writings then form part of the Song's burden: just as Dante's depiction and use of Virgil enters into readings of the *Aeneid* subsequent to Dante and contributes in that way to the *Aeneid*'s burden, so medieval Christian readings of the Song's beloved as if she were Mary form part of the weight now borne by the Song's words.



Four principal candidates have emerged among Jews and Christians as answers to the question of who the Song's human beloved figures. Sometimes, even often, these answers have been given in a flatfooted allegorical way, as if, once the beloved figured by the Song has been identified, the human beloved of the Song—the woman who figures but is not herself figured, this human woman panting for her lover, opening her door and her body to him, praising the beauties of his

body, recalling the delights of his kisses, lamenting his absence, imagining his presence—can be left aside, having performed her figuring function and then having nothing left to do. This way of reading dissolves the figuring into the figured and leads all too easily into a dissolution of the text's surface, and even of its very words, into some deeper or higher meaning. On this allegorical view, the human beloved and the eroticism of the text vanishes, is neutered and absorbed. Better, certainly more fully Christian, is to read in such a way as to preserve both the text's figures and what they figure.

The first thought about whom the beloved figures is that she figures the people of Israel, the Lord's chosen people whom he loves with a passion. The relations between this people and their Lord are often set forth in scripture as those between spouses or lovers (Hos. 1–3; Isa. 50:1; 54:4–8; Jer. 2–3; Ezek. 16), and the Song can therefore reasonably be taken as another instance of the same kind, unusual perhaps in the intensity and explicitness of its imagery, as well as in its consistency in refusing to name the Lord as the lover or Israel as the beloved, but still far from unique in kind. On this reading, a fuller understanding of the desire of the Lord for the people and the people for the Lord can be had by attending to the history of the Jewish people.

The second thought is that the beloved figures the church, the community of those who have been incorporated into Christ by baptism and who confess his lordship explicitly.<sup>27</sup> This view, naturally, is not one offered by Jews; it is the Christian gloss upon the first interpretation and can stand together with it without replacing it. On this way of taking it, the Lord's beloved is a doppelgänger whose doubleness has often been conflicted, but that need not necessarily be so. On this reading, a fuller understanding of the divine love affair with the people can be had by attending to the history of the church.

These first two thoughts may, but need not, contradict one another. Whether they do depends on the narrowness with which “church” or “people of Israel” is construed. On a wide construal, like that adopted by Nicholas of Lyra in the fourteenth century in his commentary on the Song, each term denotes the *una fides modernorum et antiquorum* (“the one faith held by moderns and ancients”).<sup>28</sup> For him, both Jews and Christians are church because they share the same faith, though he takes the latter to have a more intimate relation with the Lord than the former. On a narrow construal, according to which church is defined, for

27. The identification of the Song's beloved with the church is sufficiently standard by Augustine's time that he can refer to it in his early-fifth-century *De baptismo contra donatistas* (On Baptism, against the Donatists; Latin at [augustinus.it/latino/sul\\_battesimo/index2.htm](http://augustinus.it/latino/sul_battesimo/index2.htm); Latin and Italian in *Sant'Agostino: Polemica con i Donatisti*, ed. and trans. Antonio Lombardi, Opere di Sant'Agostino 15/1 [Rome: Città Nuova, 1998]) 5.27.38, offhandedly as though it is obvious, as in his comment that it is the church's soul, *perfecta et sine macula et ruga* (quoting or echoing Eph. 5:27), that the king has brought into his storerooms (Song 1:4).

28. Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla super Cantica Cantorum* (Latin and English in *The Postilla of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs*, ed. and trans. James George Kiecker [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998], 32).

example, as in the preceding paragraph, things are a little more complex. But even here, there is no necessary incompatibility: it could be said—I would say—that the Song’s beloved figures both the people of Israel and the church and that the embraces given and returned between the Lord and both beloveds continue to this moment. I will often use the term “Israel-church” in the commentary that follows as an expression of this view.

The course of the love affair between the Lord and his Israel-church has not been smooth, and this too is figured in the Song. She is separated from him and suffers because of it (3:1–3; 5:6–7); she remembers his lovemaking and hopes for it again, but throughout most of the Song she is not experiencing it directly; and she is frustrated because she cannot publicly express her devotion to and love for him (8:1–2). Similarly, the histories of the Jewish people and the Christian church with the Lord have been and continue to be disfigured by denial, betrayal, absence, suffering, and unfulfilled longing. These two views of the beloved, as people of Israel and church, need not contradict one another.

The third view of the figure of the beloved, again offered only by Christians, is that she figures Mary, the virgin mother of the Lord. This understanding of the beloved is most often based upon a rule of interpretation of which the following is a good example:

The glorious Virgin Mary represents the type of the church, which exists as virgin and mother, for she is proclaimed as mother because she, fertile through the Holy Spirit, daily brings forth children through baptism. But she is said to be virgin because, serving inviolate the purity of faith, she is not corrupted by vicious heresy. Thus Mary was mother in giving birth to Christ, and, remaining closed even after giving birth, she was virgin. Therefore all that is written of the church is suitably ascribed to her as well.<sup>29</sup>

A series of parallels is here drawn between the church and Mary, and the rule derived from them is that anything said of the church can also be said of Mary. This third understanding of who the Song’s beloved figures is therefore not incompatible with the first two: indeed, it presents itself as an outworking of the second, which is itself an outworking of the first. There are some difficulties in the rule of interpretation as baldly stated in the last sentence of the quotation just given. Does it mean, for example, that the church’s constant need for repentance, purification, and renewal also belongs to Mary? There is also the further question of whether the rule of interpretation works in the other direction, which would be to say that everything written of Mary can also be written of the church. Here, I suspect, there are even more difficulties. Is it possible to say, for instance, that the church conceives Jesus in its womb or is married to Joseph? But whatever

29. Honorius Augustodunensis, *Sigillum Beatae Mariae* (Seal of Blessed Mary) (English in *The Seal of Blessed Mary*, trans. Amelia Carr [Toronto: Peregrine, 1991], 53, amended on the basis of *Patrologia Latina* 172.499).

the proper conclusion is about these difficulties, it remains true that the Marian thread is woven deeply into the fabric of Christian interpretation of the Song and forms part of the Song's burden.

A representative statement of the Marian approach to the Song is the following, from Alan of Lille, writing probably in the second half of the twelfth century:

And just as a spark is struck from a stone or honey extracted with a fragile reed; and inasmuch as the tongues of men and angels sing in praise of the Virgin, so too is her praise drawn forth from every creature capable of speech and in all of Scripture the great worth of this mother is told. And so, although the song of love, Solomon's wedding song, refers particularly and according to its spiritual sense to the Church, in its most particular and spiritual reference it signifies the most glorious Virgin: this, with divine help, we will explain as far as will be within our power.<sup>30</sup>

The fourth thought about who is figured by the Song's beloved is that it is the individual human soul or, better, the individual human person. The Latin tradition has been encouraged in this interpretation by *anima*, the Latin word usually translated "soul," being feminine in gender, which is an important matter when considering the appropriateness of this line of interpretation. Commentators on the Song in the Latin tradition often move happily back and forth among *ecclesia* ("church"), *anima* ("soul"), and *Maria* ("Mary") when discussing the resonances and depths of the Song's beloved, and are encouraged in doing so by the fact that each word is feminine in gender, as the Song's beloved also is. This fourth thought, therefore, does not need to displace or be seen in tension with the first three. Reading the Song's beloved as figure for the church led the church before long to consider her also as figure for Mary because Mary is the church *in nuce*, as well as the church's mother. The church too is the collectivity of Christians, and so what is said of her can in significant part also be said of each individual Christian: the church's acceptance of the gift of Christ and her yearning for fuller union with Christ and fuller understanding of the gift given are acts and attitudes and desires in which the individual Christian also participates.

And in similar fashion, Mary's acceptance of the gift of Christ figures with a peculiar intensity the acceptance of the church and of the individual Christian. This is not to say that there can be a simple exchange of predicates among Mary, church, and individual Christian: Mary does become pregnant with Jesus, and I do not; the church has the power to mediate the Lord's forgiveness of sins, and I do not; I can receive baptism and be received into heaven (should that happen) after the death and destruction of my body, neither of which is possible for Mary; and I can reject the Lord and thereby succeed in moving myself toward the nothingness of damnation, perhaps even accomplishing that nothingness, which

30. Alan of Lille, *In Cantica Cantorum elucidatio* (Elucidation of the Song), prologue (Latin in *Patrologia Latina* 210.51–110, trans. Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1995], 294).

neither Mary nor the church can do. But even though not every aspect of Mary's acceptance of the gift is mirrored by the church's or mine, and not every aspect of mine is mirrored by hers or the church's, and not every aspect of the church's is mirrored by mine or hers, it remains the case that the church's reading of the Song weaves these three figurings together, often in such a way as to show their mutually illuminating character, and sometimes (not as often as I would like) without dissolving the figure into the figured. To signal the intimacy between the Song's beloved's figuring of Mary and church, I will sometimes use the compound expression "Mary-church" in the commentary that follows.



The Song's lover, also not named or otherwise explicitly identified in the Song, has most often been taken to figure the Lord, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Mary and Jesus and the church. This figuration I wholeheartedly accept in the commentary that follows. Jewish and Christian commentators are at one in offering it. It provides, of course, some interpretive challenges, not least because the lover in the Song needs and wants his beloved as much as she needs and wants him, and this can easily be taken to call into question one or another theological understanding of the Lord's nature and the relations he bears to his Israel-church and his Mary-church. I will discuss some of these issues in the commentary, but for now it will suffice to say that I do indeed take the lover to figure the Lord, and will sometimes call him "lover-Lord" to signal that fact. Recall, however, that this is figural rather than allegorical exegesis. The Song's lover, with his "ringlets like palm fronds / raven-black" and his "eyes . . . like doves" (5:11–12), remains who he is.



You may worry that this naming of the Song's characters goes altogether too far. Why not read the text just as a series of lyrics about love and desire? Well, of course that is possible. But to do that would not be to read the Song as a scriptural book; neither would it be to take seriously the weight of the Song's readings by Jews and Christians over two thousand years. I will offer a reading that tries to do both these things.

## An English Version of the Song

What follows is an Englishing of the Latin Song, which is to say of the Latin version printed in the New Vulgate. Every translation of a much-translated work like the Song must echo earlier ones, and I have consulted and benefited from many other English versions made from a variety of languages.<sup>31</sup>

31. I first became familiar with the Song in the cadences of the King James (Authorized) Version and so no doubt those sonorosities linger in my words even though I've tried hard to expunge

In translating the Latin I observe a few conventions that it will be helpful to note before reading the translation.

First, I follow the New Vulgate's chapter and verse divisions in the Song without exception, which are for the most part identical with those found in contemporary English Bibles. The sole exceptions are that the phrases that open 5:1 in the New Vulgate belong to 4:16 in most contemporary English versions; and that 7:1 in the New Vulgate is 6:13 in most contemporary English versions, which means that it is necessary to subtract one from the New Vulgate verse numbers of Song 7 to arrive at the corresponding verse in a contemporary English version. I also follow New Vulgate chapter and verse divisions elsewhere in scripture, but where they differ from contemporary English versification, I include the Revised Standard Version equivalent.

Second, I do not follow the New Vulgate's punctuation, which is heavy. Generally, I punctuate more sparingly. This punctuational parsimony rarely contradicts what is suggested by the New Vulgate's heavier punctuation. It does, however—and this is an important reason for it—give the English a breathless, tensive, and (I hope suggestively) incomplete sense. This is entirely in accord with the Latin.

Third, I've taken care in the translation to avoid both the semantic thinning that comes from rendering different Latin words with a single English word and the semantic thickening that comes from rendering a single Latin word with a variety of English ones. So, for example, all and only members of the *diligere* complex (finite verbal forms, participles, and the nominal *dilectio*, principally) in Latin are rendered with terms from the “delight” complex in English; all and only members of the *amor* complex (verbal and nominal forms, including *amicus/a* and *amor*) are rendered by terms from the “love” complex in English; and *caritas*, which occurs only twice (2:4; 8:7), always as “loving-kindness.” I take the same approach with the Song's rich vocabulary of herbs, spices, flowers, fruits, animals, and body parts. You can be sure, then, that when an English term occurs more than once, it is reflecting the same Latin word in each case. This semitransparency is

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them. As to English versions made from one or another of the Latin songs, see especially Norris, *Song of Songs*; Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, xvi–xxiii; and the original Douay-Rheims version of the Old Testament, first published in 1609–10, and in its eighteenth-century revision (which was sufficiently drastic as to make it effectively a different text). I've also found the French version in Claudel's 1948 *Cantique* very illuminating—even though, as the *nihil obstat* says, his work was “donné non comme une explication théologique ou exégétique, mais comme une poème”; more poets should provide exegesis of scriptural texts if the quality and intellectual interest of Claudel's work is anything to go by. All the versions I've just mentioned were made from one edition/redaction or another of Jerome's Latin. I've found useful the literal rendering of the Septuagint version made by Jay Treat in Pietersma and Wright, *New English Translation of the Septuagint*, 662–66. And among the many English versions made from Hebrew, the Revised Standard Version and New Revised Standard Version have been constantly at my side, as have the versions in Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*; Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003); Murphy, *Song of Songs*; Pope, *Song of Songs*; and Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*.

important because the Song, more than most other scriptural books, has prompted commentary minutely attentive to verbal particularity. Precise verbal echoes and repetition of trope-patterns matter deeply to premodern commentators, and my commentary also attends to them; although I am writing (and largely thinking) in English, the echo and trope comments I make are effectively about the Latin text of the New Vulgate, both of the Song and of the corpus of scripture as a whole. And in order for it to be possible to do that in English, a translation of the kind mentioned is essential.

Fourth, I provide no information in the translation about who is speaking to whom other than that given on the surface of the text. Often, the gender of the addressee is explicitly indicated in the Latin text. For instance, in 1:7 someone male is addressed as the “man in whom my soul delights”; in 1:8 someone female is addressed as “most beautiful of women”; and then in 1:13 the “delightful man” is addressed again. But it is rare that the Latin text unambiguously indicates, with gender-specific pronouns or nouns, who is speaking; and it is often quite unclear just where a speech made to one addressee ends and one made to another (or by another speaker) begins. I discuss these matters in the commentary, but my translation provides neither more nor less than what is in the Latin text, which should permit you to make your own decisions about the matter. The only instance in which my English does not make gender clear on its face is that of the terms “lover,” which always renders the masculine *amicus*, and “beloved,” which always renders the feminine *amica*. The “lover,” that is to say, is always him; the “beloved” is always her.

The running translation that immediately follows is given without verse numbers or notes and with breaks only where it seems to me that there is (probably) a change of voice or a significant shift of theme and focus. All of this translation will be given again, piecemeal, in the commentary that follows; the point of providing it here is to give you an opportunity to read the Song through once, naked—and to be appropriately puzzled.

### Solomon's Song of Songs

Let me be kissed with your mouth's kiss  
 for your loves are better than wine  
 fragrant with your best ointments.  
 Your name is oil poured out  
 and so the young girls have delighted in you.  
 Drag me after you—let us run!  
 May the king lead me into his cellars  
 so that we might exult and rejoice in you.  
 Mindful of your loves above wine  
 they have rightly delighted in you.

I am black but lovely  
 O daughters of Jerusalem

like Kedar's tents  
like Solomon's skins—  
do not think me swarthy  
for the sun has darkened me.  
My mother's sons were angry with me  
they placed me as guard of the vineyards  
but my vineyard I did not guard.  
O man in whom my soul delights  
show me where you graze  
and where you rest at noon  
so that I might not begin to wander  
after the flocks of your companions.

If you do not know  
O most beautiful of women  
then go out and depart  
after the flocks' traces  
and graze your young goats  
close by the shepherds' tents.  
To a mare among Pharaoh's chariots  
I have likened you, O my beloved.  
Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings  
your neck with necklaces—  
we shall make earrings for you  
silver-chased.

While the king was on his couch  
my spikenard gave off its scent.  
A satchet of myrrh is my delightful man for me  
he lingers between my breasts;  
a henna cluster is my delightful man for me  
in the vineyards of Engaddi.

O my beloved—  
see how beautiful you are  
see how beautiful you are  
your dove-eyes.

O my delightful man—  
see how beautiful you are  
and splendid!  
Our flowerful bed—  
our cedar-beamed house—  
our cypress-paneled ceilings.  
I am a field-flower  
and a valley-lily—

like a lily among thorns  
is my beloved among daughters—  
like an apple among forest trees  
is my delightful man among sons.  
I sat under his shade—that of the man I desired—  
and his fruit was sweet to my throat.  
He led me into his wine cellar  
loving-kindness was his banner above me.  
Sustain me with raisin cakes  
fill me with apples  
for I languish with love.  
His left hand under my head  
his right embraces me.  
O daughters of Jerusalem—I adjure you  
by the does and hinds of the fields  
not to enliven or awaken this delightful woman  
until she wishes.

The voice of my delightful man—  
look—he comes  
leaping among the mountains,  
skipping over the hills  
like a doe or fawn among harts.  
He is the very one who stands behind our wall  
looking through the windows  
gazing through the lattices.  
And my delightful man speaks to me—

“Get up, O my beloved,  
my dove, my lovely one, and come—  
for already winter has gone away  
the rain has departed and withdrawn  
flowers have appeared in the land  
the time of pruning has arrived  
the turtledove’s voice is heard in our land  
the fig tree has put out its figs  
and the flowering vineyards have given off their scent.  
Get up, O my beloved,  
my comely one, and come,  
my dove—  
in the chinks of the rock  
in the precipitous cave  
expose your face to me  
let your voice sound in my ears  
for your voice is sweet  
and your face splendid.  
Catch for us the foxes—the little foxes—

who destroy the vineyards  
as our vineyards are flowering.”

My delightful man is for me and I am for him  
the one who grazes among lilies—  
until the day breathes  
and the shadows flee.  
Turn back, O my delightful man,  
be like a doe or fawn among harts  
on Bether’s mountains.

In my bed—night by night—  
I sought him—the man in whom my soul delights.  
I sought and did not find him.  
I will get up and walk around the city  
through the streets and the squares  
I will seek the man in whom my soul delights.  
I sought and did not find him.  
The watchmen found me  
they who walk around the city.  
“Have you seen the man in whom my soul delights?”  
Soon after I had passed them by  
I found the man in whom my soul delights.  
I held him and would not let him go  
until I could lead him into my mother’s house  
into the bedroom of my genetrix.  
O daughters of Jerusalem—I adjure you  
by the does and hinds of the fields  
not to enliven or awaken this delightful woman  
until she wishes.

What is this ascending through the desert  
like a wisp of smoke  
spiced with frankincense and myrrh  
and all the perfumer’s powders?

See Solomon’s bed—  
sixty strong men surround it  
from Israel’s strongest  
each holding a sword  
supremely skilled in war  
each one’s weapon on his thigh  
against the terrors of the night.  
King Solomon made himself a litter  
from Lebanese trees—  
its pillars he made of silver

its seat of gold  
its step of purple  
its middle ebony-inlaid.  
O daughters of Jerusalem  
O daughters of Zion  
go out and see King Solomon  
diademed as his mother crowned him  
on the day of his wedding  
on the day of his heart's joy.

How beautiful you are, O my beloved  
how beautiful you are—  
your dove-eyes  
through your veil;  
your hair like a flock of nanny goats  
coming down from Mount Gilad;  
your teeth like a flock of shorn sheep  
ascending from the bath  
each pregnant with twins  
not a sterile one among them;  
your lips like a scarlet thread  
and your speech sweet;  
your cheeks like a fragment of pomegranate  
through your veil;  
your neck like David's tower  
built with battlements  
hung with a thousand shields  
with all the armor of the strong;  
your two breasts like two fawns  
doe-born twins  
grazing among lilies.  
Until the day breathes  
and the shadows flee  
I shall go to the mountain of myrrh  
and to the hill of frankincense.  
O my beloved—you are completely beautiful  
and there is no stain in you.

O bride—come from Lebanon,  
come from Lebanon,  
come in—  
look from the summit of Amana  
from the peaks of Sanir and Hermon  
from lions' lairs  
from leopards' mountains.  
O my sister-bride—you have wounded my heart  
you have wounded my heart with one of your eyes

with one of the necklaces of your torque.  
O my sister-bride—how beautiful are your loves  
your loves are better than wine  
and the scent of your ointments is above all spices.  
O bride—your lips drip honeycomb  
honey and milk are under your tongue  
the scent of your clothes is like that of Lebanon.  
A closed garden is my sister-bride  
a closed garden  
a sealed spring.  
Your shoots are a paradise of pomegranates  
with the best fruits—  
henna with spikenard  
spikenard and saffron  
sweet calamus and cinnamon  
with all the incense-bearing trees—  
myrrh and aloe  
with all the prime ointments.  
The spring of the gardens is a well of living waters  
streaming forcefully from Lebanon.  
North wind get up—  
south wind come—  
blow through my garden—  
let its spices stream!

Let my delightful man come into his garden  
and let him eat his best fruits.  
O my sister-bride—I have come into my garden  
I have harvested my myrrh with my spices  
I have eaten honeycomb with honey  
I have drunk wine with my milk

O lovers—eat and drink—  
O dearest ones—be drunk!

I sleep with wakeful heart—  
the voice of my delightful man who is knocking—  
“Open to me, O my sister, my beloved  
my dove, my stainless one—  
for my head is full of dew  
and my ringlets of the moisture of the night.”

I have stripped off my tunic—  
how can I put it on?  
I have washed my feet—  
how can I make them dirty?

My delightful man put his hand through the chink  
and my belly trembled.  
I got up so that I might open to my delightful man  
my hands dripping with myrrh  
my fingers full of choicest myrrh  
above the bolt's handle.  
I opened to my delightful man,  
but he had turned aside and gone away.  
My soul melted because he had left.  
I sought and did not find him  
I called and he did not respond.  
The guards found me,  
those who walk around the city  
those who care for the ramparts—  
they beat me and wounded me  
and took my cloak from me.

O daughters of Jerusalem—I adjure you  
if you should find my delightful man  
what should you say to him?  
That I languish with love.

O most beautiful of women  
how is your delightful man better than others  
how is he better than others  
that you so adjure us?

My delightful man is dazzling and ruddy  
distinguished among thousands—  
his head is of the best gold  
ringlets like palm fronds  
raven-black;  
his eyes are like doves'  
above rivers of water  
milk-washed  
beside completely full streams;  
his cheeks are like seedbeds of spices  
ointment piled up;  
his lips are lilies  
dripping prime myrrh;  
his hands are lathe-turned gold  
violet-full;  
his belly is ivory  
sapphire-adorned;  
his legs are marble pillars  
founded upon golden pedestals;

his comeliness is like Lebanon's  
he is set apart like a cedar;  
his throat is supremely smooth  
and completely desirable.  
Such is my delightful man—that very one is my lover  
O daughters of Jerusalem.

O most beautiful of women  
where has your delightful man departed?  
Where has he turned aside?  
Shall we seek him with you?

My delightful man has gone down into his garden  
to a seedbed of spices  
to graze in the gardens  
to gather lilies.  
I am for my delightful man and my delightful man is for me—  
the one who grazes among lilies

O my beloved—you are beautiful like Tirzah  
splendid like Jerusalem  
terrible like an ordered rank from the camps.  
Turn your eyes away from me  
for they disturb me.  
Your hair like a flock of nanny goats  
coming down from Gilead;  
your teeth like a flock of sheep  
ascending from the bath  
each pregnant with twins  
not a sterile one among them;  
your cheeks like a fragment of pomegranate  
through your veil.

Sixty queens  
eighty concubines  
young girls beyond number—  
but the dove—my perfect one—is the only one  
her mother's only one  
set apart by her genetrix.  
The daughters saw her and proclaimed her supremely blessed  
the queens and concubines also praised her.

Who is she who comes out  
like the dawn rising  
beautiful like the moon  
set apart like the sun  
terrible like an ordered rank from the camps?

I went down into the nut garden  
to see the fruit trees in the valleys  
to look closely at whether the vineyards had flowered  
whether the pomegranates had budded.  
My mind did not notice  
when it placed me in the four-horse chariots of the prince of my people.

Return—return—O Sulamite  
return—return—so that we might contemplate you.

What will you look at in the Sulamite  
when she dances between two choruses?

O prince's daughter—  
how beautiful your sandaled feet;  
the curves of your thighs like necklaces  
formed by craftsmen's hands;  
your vulva like a lathe-turned bowl  
never needing to be mixed with wine;  
your belly like a heap of wheat  
fortified by lilies;  
your two breasts like two fawns  
doe-born twins;  
your neck like an ivory tower;  
your eyes like fishpools in Heshbon  
in the gate of Bathrabbim;  
your nose like the tower of Lebanon  
facing Damascus;  
your head like Carmel  
its tresses like purple  
the king captured by your ringlets.  
How beautiful you are  
and how splendid  
O my dearest  
in your pleasures!

Your height like a palm tree's  
your breasts its clusters.  
I said—I will ascend the palm tree  
and seize its fruit  
and your breasts will be like clusters on the vine  
and the scent of your mouth like apples.  
Your throat is like the best wine—  
worthy to be sipped by my delightful man  
ruminated by his lips and teeth.  
I am for my delightful man

and his appetite is for me.  
Come, my delightful man—  
let us go out into the meadow  
let us linger in the villages  
let us hasten early to the vines  
to see whether they have flowered  
whether the flowers have opened  
whether the pomegranates have flowered—  
there I will give you my loves.  
The mandrakes give off their scent—  
all the best of the fruit trees in our gates  
new and old  
I have saved for you, O my delightful man.

Who can give you to me as my brother  
sucking my mother's breasts  
so that I might find you outside and kiss you  
and no one would despise me?  
I will seize you and lead you into my mother's house—  
there you will teach me  
and I will give you a cup of flavored wine  
with the pressed juice of my pomegranates.

His left hand is under my head  
his right embraces me.

O daughters of Jerusalem—I adjure you  
not to enliven or awaken this delightful woman  
until she wishes.

Who is this woman ascending from the desert  
leaning on her delightful man?

Under an apple tree I enlivened you  
there your mother gave you birth  
there your genetrix gave you birth.

Place me like a seal on your heart  
like a seal on your arm  
because delight is as strong as death  
and zealous desire as hard as hell  
whose lights are lights of fire and divine flames.  
Many waters have not been able to extinguish loving-kindness  
neither have floods been able to overwhelm it  
if someone should give all the substance of his house for delight  
they would despise him as if he were nothing.

Our sister is little  
 and without breasts—  
 what shall we do for our sister  
 on the day she is spoken for?  
 If she is a rampart  
 we should build silver battlements upon it;  
 if she is a door  
 we should buttress it with planks of cedar.  
 I am a rampart  
 and my breasts are like a tower;  
 and so I have become before him  
 like one who arrives at peace.

Solomon had a vineyard  
 in Baalhamon;  
 he handed it over to guards.  
 A man brings for its fruit  
 one thousand pieces of silver.  
 My vineyard is before me—  
 one thousand for you—O Solomon—  
 and two hundred for those who guard its fruit.

The woman who inhabits the gardens—  
 lovers are listening—  
 make me hear your voice.  
 Escape, O my delightful man—  
 be like the does  
 and like the fawns among the harts  
 upon the spice mountains.

## A Commentary on the Song

The following commentary divides the Song into small parts, most of which extend to no more than two sentences, and some of which are only a phrase in length. My treatment of each part contains the following elements, variously combined and in various proportions.

First, a translation of the text, made from the Latin of the New Vulgate, as already discussed.

Second, an analysis of the text's surface features, coupled with a discussion of significant echoes of these features elsewhere in the Song and elsewhere in the canon of scripture. By "surface features" I mean those things evident at once to any ordinarily literate reader, including (at least) lexicon and syntax; speaker and addressee (often a difficult matter and one capable of generating several possibilities); diction, tropes, and themes; puzzles, ambiguities, incomprehensibilities, surprises.

The initial discussion of these surface features refers only to the lines under immediate discussion, but it then moves to the place of these lines in the Song as a whole, and especially to the resonances of the tropes and themes of the part of the Song under discussion to the Song as a whole. Where else in the Song is this vocabulary used or does this trope occur? Is this speech paralleled or reflected elsewhere in the Song? And so on. The first broader context for the explanation of a part is the whole of which it is a part, and so the first interpretive context for a line or word or speech of the Song is the Song as a whole. There are considerable pleasures and interesting puzzles at every stage of this first level of interpretation, and it is essential to pay them close attention.<sup>32</sup> A commentary could stop there. If it did, it would treat the Song as a closed book and would move outside the Song's text, if it did, only to explain or speculate about the Song's immediate environment, whether textual or otherwise. But this is a Christian theological commentary, and so it cannot stop there. Outside the text of the Song itself, the next context for its interpretation is the canon of scripture as a whole; and so this commentary will identify and discuss verbal, thematic, and tropological verbal consonances and dissonances between what is written in the Song and what is written elsewhere in the corpus of scripture. The principal purpose is to explain the Song as scripture.

Third, discussion of the text as theology, for which the most fundamental question is: What does this tell us about the Lord? Some theology will inevitably have been done in the course of the analysis described in the preceding paragraph, but in this third part, the theology is explicit. I draw for these discussions upon the commentarial tradition, both premodern and modern, as well as upon what I know of the resonances of the text with developed Christian doctrine and with its liturgical and dogmatic use by the church. The Song is, word for word, probably the most-commented-upon book of scripture in the West; this means that it is impossible to read more than a small portion of the commentaries upon it, and equally impossible to provide a systematic treatment of the deployment of the Song in liturgy or doctrine. I certainly attempt neither. What I provide in the way of quotation from or discussion of commentaries, liturgical texts, or doctrinal texts is illustrative only; and it is in the service of developing a theological construal of the Song as a whole and in its parts, not of a history of interpretation or churchly use. The relation between the Song and church doctrine, especially Marian and (therefore) ecclesiological doctrine, is rich and complex: I have learned how to read the Song more fully by learning something of what the church teaches and performs by means of it. It is not merely that the Song reprises and foreshadows what the church teaches (though this is true); neither is it that the church teaches more fully what the Song figures (though this also is true). It is, rather, that what the Song has to teach the church was not fully known to those who composed,

32. "We must begin with the *pleasures* of the Song before progressing to the *truth* of the Song"; Duane Garrett, *Song of Songs*, Word Biblical Commentary 23B (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 97.

edited, redacted, and canonized it; and that what the Song has to teach the church is not yet fully known to the church. That is why the Song must continue to be read by the church, and not only as an illustration of what it already teaches.

Fourth, and last (and often briefly), I write to you directly, in the second person, identifying what I tentatively take to be the import of the part of the Song under discussion for the ordering of your loves—loves, that is, of yourself, of the Lord, of other people, and of the world and what is in it. Every scriptural text, just because it is a scriptural text, has something of profound importance to say to each of those who read it. You and I are therefore present in it as implicit interlocutors in a way that is not true of any other text.<sup>33</sup> The text confronts us, you and me, demands something from us, and will reconfigure our thought and speech and appetite to the extent that our own particular sins and their concomitant damage do not prevent it from doing so. The beloved's passion in the Song, her desire and her anguish at separation from her lover, will, if you let it, become yours, and in becoming yours reform your loves—not by replicating hers, but by conforming yours to hers (the difference is very important): the text wants that of you, solicits it from you, precisely because it is a scriptural text. A theological reading of the Song ought to take account of this essential presence of the reader in the text, and to the extent that I am capable of doing so, my theological reading does. This text wants to seduce you: it is, in part, my task to return its kiss in such a way as to make it easier for it to have you and for you to be had by it. If the seduction is successful, then you will make your own what the beloved claims: you will know that you are for the lover and the lover for you (2:16; 6:3), and you will languish with love (2:5; 5:8). You are therefore present in my text as well, though of course very differently than you are in the text of scripture; I want to make that presence explicit by calling you out. The commentary's second person, then, is you, whoever you are, reading these words just now; but it is also me, the one who writes them. Every address to you, therefore, includes and implies one to myself.



Approaching the Song in the way just described is not the only way to approach it, and I have no interest in claiming it as the best way. What I offer is one reading among an infinity of possible readings, and one that, like all readings, deploys some controversial assumptions. Among these are the following (there are no doubt more).

I assume that figural reading of scripture is possible, interesting, and, for theologians, unavoidable. There are many reasons for this, among the more important of which are these: that scripture itself self-referentially performs and depicts such reading; that the practice and teaching of the church requires it; and that it is axiomatic for Christian theological interpretation that scripture as a whole and in

33. It is trivially true that every text, when read, has its relation to the reader as part of its meaning. But I mean more than this, as should be apparent from this paragraph.

each of its parts is first and last about more than what the surface of its text says. That more is always and necessarily the triune Lord and, necessarily, that Lord's incarnation as Jesus Christ.

But what, in more detail, is figural reading? One event or utterance figures another when, while remaining unalterably what it is, it announces or communicates something other than itself. Eve's assent to the tempter and her consequent taking of the forbidden fruit from the tree figures, in this sense, Mary's *fiat mihi* in response to the annunciation and the consequent incarnation of the Lord in her womb. The second event—the figured—encompasses and includes the first, without removing its reality. The first—the figuring—has its reality, however, by way of participation in the second.<sup>34</sup> This is in the order of being.

Ontological figuration may, however, be replicated at the level of the text, and in scripture it inevitably is. Here, a depiction of a person or utterance or event—say, the lover's praises of the beloved or the details of the construction and ornamentation of Solomon's bed—may figure a textual depiction of some other person, utterance, or event. Christian theological commentators on the Song, as on any other scriptural text, must, in seeking their text's scriptural reverberations, be attentive not only to the sheerly verbal, but also to the figural. Allegory—which may or may not be present in scripture, unlike figure, which necessarily is—differs from figure in that it dissolves the allegorical text into what it allegorizes. Following allegorical method strictly means that an allegorical text's literal sense must be ignored except in so far as it permits understanding of what it allegorizes.<sup>35</sup> The figural text's literal sense—like its ontological reality—does not dissolve in this way: Eve remains Eve, the lovers of the Song remain the lovers of the Song (as will be apparent, I do not read them as if they were figures in a parable), and the text of the Song remains what it is: a constant demand for interpretation whose results are not determined and which may, for Christians, often be uncomfortable.<sup>36</sup>

34. This formulation floats upon deep waters. A sounding into them may be had from Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Joseph de Finance, *Être et agir dans la philosophie de Saint Thomas*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Libreria Editrice de l'Université Grégorienne, 1960); Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo San Tommaso*, 2nd ed. (Turin: Società editrice internazionale, 1950); Brian Leftow, "Divine Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006): 365–80; Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); D. C. Schindler, "What's the Difference? On the Metaphysics of Participation in Plato, Plotinus, and Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 583–618; and Rudi A. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1985).

35. For a very clear statement of the necessity of avoiding ("abolishing") the literal sense in the case of reading the Song, see Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And from There You Shall Seek*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008), 151–53. Soloveitchik writes as a Jew, expounding the Mishnah and Maimonides on the question of how the Song should be read.

36. In this excessively brief characterization of the figural I follow quite closely Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11–76. This essay, though not by a Christian, should be read by all Christian theological interpreters of scripture. For a more detailed interpretation of the practice of Christian

So much, with excessive brevity, for figural reading. Second, and perhaps more controversial, is the assumption that any part of scripture may illuminate any other part. It is this assumption that makes sense of looking for verbal, thematic, and tropological consonances and dissonances between parts of the Song and other parts of the canon of scripture. Such reading has been the usual practice of Christian and Jewish exegetes of scripture. One interesting implication of that practice, rarely observed and discussed, is that it is best practiced by working with one among the versions (see introduction: “Confecting the Song”). This is because verbal reverberations are best sought within the bounds of a single natural language, and this means that I look for them within the bounds of the Latin text of scripture as given in the New Vulgate, since that is the locus of the Song I treat. Looking for consonances and dissonances in this particular Latin version therefore carries with it no prejudice against the many other versions of the corpus, whether in Latin or any other language; neither does it require any particular judgments about the authority of the text I use. The resonances and dissonances I find and comment on sometimes will and sometimes will not be reproducible by those seeking consonance and dissonance between other versions of the Song and other versions of the corpus of scripture.

When I read, for example, in Song 1:3, *oleum effusum nomen tuum* (“your name is oil poured out”) and look elsewhere in the corpus of scripture as found in the New Vulgate for connections between *nomen* and *oleum* and for the theological and semantic significance of both terms, what I find may or may not be found by those working in Syriac, Hebrew, Greek, English, Spanish, or what-have-you. That is why the tapestry of theological scriptural interpretation needs work on all the versions: only in that way is what the Lord says to his people by way of scripture asymptotically approachable. Further, in seeking these verbal/theological consonances and dissonances I am guided not only by the corpus of scripture itself, but also by those reverberations already found and given importance by the Western (largely Latin) tradition of commenting upon the Song.

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figural reading, with special reference to Origen, see John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Specifically on the Song as treated by Origen, see J. Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom’s Perfect Marriage Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Commentators on the Song with historicist or literary interests often dismiss figural reading along with allegorical reading on the dual ground that both (if any distinction is made between them) obscure the particulars of the Song because they treat it as piecemeal support for a general theory arrived at independently and because they advocate reading the text for itself, free from assumptions imported from elsewhere. Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 10–16, is representative (if a little extreme) in making these criticisms. But neither is defensible: figural reading, as defined, requires rather than calls into question attention to textual and literary particularity; and it is not possible to read a text for itself. See also Kingsmill 2009: 42–44.