

THE SONG OF SONGS: A PLEA FOR AN AESTHETIC READING

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Abstract. Although recent scholarship on the Song of Songs has turned to literary approaches, these have not reckoned with literary criticism's return to aesthetics. This essay outlines current theory of aesthetic criticism and suggests ways in which it could be applied to the Song of Songs.

Keywords: Song of Songs, aesthetics, literary analysis, poetics

Recent Song of Songs scholarship has been increasingly concerned with "literary analysis."¹ Such work no longer strictly seeks the historical context for the Song's composition, but explores the text itself synchronically. Studies that focus on the text as an object often explicitly invoke schools or trends in the field of literary criticism itself, including structuralism,² semiotics,³ formalism,⁴ and "New Criticism."⁵ Yet the lament of Clines and Exum decades ago holds true: "It is not surprising, nor even especially unfortunate, the Old Testament studies should adopt the methods of general literary criticism only a decade or two after they are developed outside our own discipline."⁶ What is absent in recent "literary" investigation of the Song of Songs is literary criticism's return to aesthetics.

Aesthetics, the study of sensory values or judgments of sentiment and taste that derive from the senses, was roundly rejected for some time in literary studies, derided as the artsy luxury of the bourgeoisie.⁷ But in recent years, an aesthetic turn has asserted that it has become an intellectual necessity to rethink the aesthetic and

¹ Thus, E. ASSIS, *Flashes of Fire: A Literary Analysis of the Song of Songs*, Library of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 503, T & T Clark, New York, 2008; P. HUNT, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2008.

² A. MARIASELVAM, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems*, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 1988, 28–32, 50–52.

³ D. LOMBARD, "Le Cantique des Cantiques (3,6–5,1)", in *Semiotique & Bible* 66, (1992), 45–52.

⁴ S. FISCHER, "Das Hohelied Salomos zwischen Poesie und Erzählung", *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 72, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2010, 19–20 and passim.

⁵ Y. ZAKOVITCH, *Shir Ha-Shirim*, Mikra LeIsrael - A Biblical Commentary for Israel, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1992.

⁶ J. C. EXUM and D. J. A. CLINES, "New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible", *JSOTSup* 143, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1993, 12.

⁷ I. ARMSTRONG, *Radical Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, 30–32.