

S O U T H E A S T E R N

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Overlooked Herder, and the Performative Nature of שיר השרים as Biblical Wisdom Literature

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Introduction

Exposition of שיר השרים (*The Song of Songs*) remains as fascinating and as contested today as ever before. The recent commentary by Daniel J. Estes (2010) supplements Marvin H. Pope's (1977) exhaustive bibliography of 55 pages on *The Song of Songs* with 25 more pages of especially professional articles by the current generation of theologians and critics who, from every perspective under the sun, lay claim to an insightful interpretation.

Hector Patmore, in critique of Michael Fox's popular treatment (1985),¹ states the old ideal: "We must strip away our deeply embedded assumptions about Canticles—its connection to the Egyptian songs, its obvious secular-sexual character—and re-engage with the text that lies before us."² But Patmore, like Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, recognizes—particularly since Wittgenstein and Derrida problematized any fixed end to "the play of signification"—*what* the text is that one takes to be the object before us depends upon where you stand to contextualize the piece.³ And then, rather than give up and take the position, as Kathryn Harding seems to do ("The point, I think, lies in the indeterminacy of the verses, and the possibility of multiple, conflicting readings..."⁴), it seems more hopeful to follow Ellen E. Davis' call for "interpretive humility [which] might begin with each of us identifying, as best we can, what factors in our personal histories conduce to a certain interpretative style."⁵ Put-down arguments from a presumed neutral (and hence au-

¹ M. V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

² Hector Patmore, "'The Plain and Literal Sense': On contemporary assumptions about the Song of Songs," *VT* 56/2 (2006): 249.

³ "In distinction to formalist literary criticism, a critical theory of rhetoric insists that context is as important as text. What we see depends on where we stand. One's social location or rhetorical context is decisive of how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical texts." E.S. Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL*, 107/1 (1988): 5.

⁴ Kathryn Harding, "'I sought him but did not find him': The elusive Lover in the Song of Songs," *Biblical Interpretation*, 16 (2008): 58.

⁵ Ellen Davis, "Reading the Song Iconographically." *The Scrolls of Love. Ruth and the Song of Songs*, eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 176.

thoritarian) position could be replaced with sharing of knowledge from self-critical, subjective viewpoints aiming at a communal encyclopedic reading.⁶

This article proposes to enter the fresh (neglected) voice of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) into the cacophony of voices interpreting שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים,⁷ and it shows that Herder's unorthodox, believing approach may help firm up a chorus among several of the more promising readings past and present which recognize the provenance of *The Song* to be "biblical wisdom literature,"⁸ or, as Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsburg put it, "a sophisticated poem, with a polemical purpose."⁹

First I shall give the gist of Herder's hermeneutic approach to the Bible formulated in his *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend* (1780–81), and show how it undergirds his unpublished 1776 version of *Die Lieder der Liebe* found

⁶ John Barton's "conclusion" in *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) settles on this point too, 204–7.

⁷ Except for the fine book by John D. Baildam, *Paradisaal Love: Johann Gottfried Herder and the Song of Songs* (JSOTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), and Thomas Willi, *Herders Beitrag zum Verstehen des Alten Testament* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1971), there have been only a few articles dealing with Herder's treatment of שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים: R.T. Clark, Jr., "Herder, Percy, and the Song of Songs," *PMLA*, 61 (1946), 1087–1100; Ulrich Gaier, "Lieder der Liebe: Herders Hohelied Interpretation," in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn (BZAW 346; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 317–37; John W. Rogerson, "Herder's *Lieder der Liebe* im Licht der modernen Bibelwissenschaft," in *Vernunft, Freiheit, Humanität. Über Johann Gottfried Herder und einige seiner Zeitgenossen*. Festgabe für Günter Arnold zum 65. Geburtstag, ed. Claudia Tazsus (Eutin: Lumpeter & Lassel, 2008), 250–60. Herder is overlooked by past and the recent standard, major commentaries on *The Song of Songs*: Daniel J. Estes, *The Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, volume 16 (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 265–444; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 2005); Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003); Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001); Duane A. Garrett, *Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary, volume 14 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 347–432.

⁸ M. Sadgrove, "The Song of Songs as Wisdom Literature," *Studia Biblica* 1978, ed. E.A. Livingstone (JSOTSup 11; Sheffield, 1979), 245–48; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1979), 573–9; George M. Schaab, *The Song of Songs' Cautionary Message Concerning Human Love*, Studies in Biblical Literature, ed. Hernchand Gossai, volume 41 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Katharine J. Dell, "What is King Solomon doing in the Song of Songs?" *BZAW* 346 (2005): 8–26; André La Cocque, "I am black and beautiful," in *Scrolls of Love. Ruth and the Song of Songs*, eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 162–71; Kenton L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs: Wisdom for Young Jewish Women," *CBQ* 70 (2008): 217–97; Daniel Estes (2010), 293–98.

⁹ Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsburg, *Solomon's Vineyard: Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 1.

in his posthumous *Sämtliche Werke*.¹⁰ Then as a philosophical aesthetician by trade, taking off from Herder's contribution, I posit a few suggestions on how, if we recognize the literary, performative character of the biblical text of *The Greatest Song*, theologians with all their critical expository knowledge of texts, could perhaps keep alive a "childlike" wisdom to help people in our post-literate age better hear God speak from this intriguing book of the Bible.

Herder's Hermeneutic of Empathetic Childlike Trust (1780–81)

In 1776 Goethe (1749–1832) paved the way for Herder to come to Weimar to be Chief Pastor and Court Preacher for the liberal Duke Carl August (1757–1828). The 1780–81 writing of Herder, *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend* (*Letters about the study of Theology*), was his attempt to give direction for the model school he was setting up in Weimar to train Protestant pastors.¹¹

Herder's doctrinal positioning at this time was a fluid, eclectic mash of undigested *theologoumena*, mixing up Spinoza, Savonarola, Rousseauan themes and Freemasonry, with biblical motifs. Still, he was ready to be scorned for attacking the ruling Enlightenment fashion on what theology should be and

¹⁰ References in the text to Herder sources will be as follows: Johann Gottfried Herder, *Lieder der Liebe, ein Biblisches Buch. Nebst zwei Zugaben* (1776) in *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8 (ed. Bernhard Suphan; Berlin: Weimannsche Buchhandlung, 1892), 589–658 [in this essay as (8:page)]; *idem*. "Lieder der Liebe. Die ältesten und schönsten aus Morgenlande. Nebst vier und vierzig alter Minneliedern (1778) as "Salomons Hoheslied" in *Herders Werke in fünf Bänden*, Band 1 (ed. Regine Otto; Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1978), 53–94, 396–99 [in this essay as (1:page)]; *idem*. "Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend," 2 A., in *Theologische Schriften, Herder Werken in zehn Bänden*, Band 9 (eds. Christoph Bultmann and Thomas Zippert; Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 141–607 [in this essay as (9:page)].

¹¹ In Rudolf Haym's first volume of *Herder nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, volume 1 (Berlin: Verlag von Rudolph Gaertner, 1880) and in the early section of volume 2:1–166 [*Herder nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken* (Volume 2; Berlin: Verlag von Rudolph Gaertner, 1885), Haym's careful, detailed analysis shows that Herder's "Bückeburger Exil" (1771–1776) was quite different in perspective from Herder's "Riga period" (1764–1769) and his "Wanderjahre" (1769–1771), sporting among the intellectuals of the *Aufklärung* ("Enlightenment"); and Herder changed back to an alignment with the Enlightenment temper when he came more under the influence of Lessing and Goethe in Weimar (1776 onward). So a decade of writings (1771–1781) have an anti-Rationalist character—supported by his scorn for "academics" in his Berlin Preisschrift, *Vom dem Einfluss der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften und der Wissenschaften auf die Regierung* (1780)—that is not characteristic of very early and later Herder. *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend* was conceived in the Bückeburg spirit, although published in 1780–1781. Haym states: "genug, er spinnt nur ab, was er längst auf dem Rocken hatte" (Haym, 2: 67). Robert T. Clark, Jr. seconds this assessment in *Herder, his Life and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 214.

do, because Herder held that the Bible was essentially “Ur-poetry”;¹² working out of Hamann’s cryptic conception that “Poetry is the Mother tongue of the human race,” polymath Herder believed that the original Hebrew (poetic) language from “in the beginning” was the simple well-spring of truth for us today.

Herder produced a theory whose extreme unorthodoxy made Michaelis’s rationalizations appear pale and reactionary, but whose emphasis upon the work as Oriental love poetry broke through the bounds of theology and rationalism and contributed towards a most fruitful conception of the function and significance of poetry in society. In an age of reason Herder sought to make the Bible live again.¹³

The best theological study—so runs Herder’s introductory thesis in *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend*—is *Bible study*. And the right way to read this divine book is humanly (1. Brief, 9: 145). One does not worship the book itself as if its printed letters are supernatural, produced by angels. Also, one should, according to Herder, take learned “biblical criticism” with a grain of salt, since such scholars may be expert philologists, but at the same time, be unable to understand the author and the message. Always keep your childlike naïveté and deep respect for the Bible as you thoroughly learn the original languages, even when you see the Bible desecrated by its critics (1. Brief, 9: 148).

The key thing in reading the earlier Old Testament, wrote Herder in this 1780 blueprint for the Protestant Weimar seminary, is for us Germans to catch the genius of this most ancient oriental Hebrew language. We need to live into its simple, pre-abstractional orality, and not anachronistically treat Moses and David’s writings as if they follow the rational rules of Batteaux or fit into Greek and Roman genres of literature. Biblical writings are not “artifice-like” fairy tales and fables but are natural living expressions, proclaiming what actually took place. That Adam and Eve are historical creatures—their creation, communal temptation and first experiences—could not be narrated for childlike ears of those earliest times in a more simple, more true, more understandable, historically truthful way than the *Genesis* account tells it (2. Brief, 9: 154). This earliest human history is presented in such a step-by-step children’s-story-telling way, that it cries out, “This is the truth! This is the truth! (2. Brief, 9: 158). The same is so for the story of Balaam with the talking ass, which saw the angel (Numbers 22–24). If a reader treats that tale as only a moralizing fable, then one has veritably betrayed the spirit of the origi-

¹² Cf. Haym, 1:534–5, 585, 631–9, 673–8; 2: 36–7, 130–5, 150. Christoph Bultmann and Martin Kessler give a comprehensive overview of “Herder’s Biblical Studies” and “Herder’s Theology” as a whole, in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, eds. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 233–75, but do not emphasize the special character of Herder’s 1771–1781 stance, and his radical changes in outlook amid his multiple interests in theology, literature, artworks, and especially his pioneering fascination with folk tales of the world.

¹³ J.D. Baidam, 303.

nal telling. One has misread the faith of the folk embodied in the account, who believed that even a foreign, unwilling shaman was subservient to the God of Israel (2. Brief, 9: 159–63).

Herder suggests that because Genesis 1–11 has been edited together from still earlier sources (*Urkunde*) shows Moses did not make it up. The story is not just a song and is not a scientific cosmogony, but is simply, like the fatherly voice of the Ancient of Days, a natural presentation of a primal look at the universe (3. Brief, 9: 168). A Bible reader should note the incredible range of tone to the diverse narratives: the confiding domestic style dealing with patriarchal vicissitudes; the more festive and strong, almost epical recounting of deeds of certain prophets; the sublime, majestic poetic speech of God, and God's intimate silences. But the truth and historical veracity of all these varied Bible stories reside in their utterly powerful simplicity (*Einfalt*). The telling is not overloaded and encrusted with poetastic devices. To read the Bible aright one needs a stillness, a kind of gentle morning quiet in which you just let the forthright story come over you in its childlike, youthful innocence. Read the books of the Bible preferably without learned commentaries; consult them only to comprehend difficulties and places which seem unintelligible (3. Brief, 9: 172).

The critical hermeneutic principle is to read every book in the spirit in which it is written, and that includes the Book of books, the Bible. So I adopt Voltaire's taunt, says Herder: "I am a Jew when I read the venerable, holy Hebrew Bible." Since it is clearly the Spirit of God breathing in the Bible from its beginning to its end, in its very tone and content, nothing could be more contradictory than to read the writings of God in a Satanic spirit, that is, subvert the most ancient wisdom with the most modern consciousness, cheapening heavenly simpleness with a fashionable witty banter (12. Brief, 9:257).

To come to the Bible with sophistic questions, cautions Herder, is to get lost in a black hole or be caught in a spider web of philosophical nit-picking, instead of just receiving and enjoying the lively godly effectuating voice (*Wirkung*) of the Scriptures. If you do not hear the soft lovely sound of the Bible's step, like the approach of a friend or a loved one, but slavishly want to fumble around to measure out the tread, you will never get to hear God speak (12. Brief, 9:259). On the other hand, Bible readers can be saved from the abyss of fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*) when they take to heart that *the basic thrust of the biblical writings is attesting to the ordinary historical deeds of God*. God's speech is the speech of deed: God speaks, it happens; the supernatural, divine speaking shows up in the most ordinary "natural" happenings. That is why the biblical account relates events, as it were, offhandedly.

Then Herder spells out the crux of his hermeneutic for reading these special, holy, biblical writings, building out from his fundamental credo that poetry underlies prose—"poetry" means Ur-revelational testimony—and working out of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742) which suggest that (ver-

nacular) speech is a transparent underlying medium of true thoughtful communication.

The Scriptures are inscribed poetry, history-telling, or letters, all of which are adulterated and subverted by turning them into paraphrases. A genuine letter (*Brief*) is one-to-one conversation, direct address, uttering out of your heart, unmediated reporting or telling. Such original poetic expression is ruined, contends Herder, by emasculating it into a paraphrase. Then the apostle Paul or Peter is no longer speaking to you face-to-face from the text in an immediate, living impression-making way, which provides an inexpressible pleasure; but the intuitive heart-to-heart knowledge presented by the communing countenance (*Geistes-Miene*) is displaced and distanced by inserting a go-between digest. So the active speech fades into the shard of a message, and becomes more like a tintinabulating partial echo of what was once possibly said (22. Brief, 9: 352–3).

To understand the biblical text, you must *learn to see it with your very own eyes yourself*, and not first get its message handed to you secondhand by someone wearing a different set of glasses (22, Brief, 9: 354–5). A good paraphrase can (maybe) have a limited use to help uneducated persons not lose their way, but for those learning to exegete Scripture you need to learn to walk on your own feet and not settle for *Gängelwagen* (walkers/crutches). Herder recommends to those who are training to be pastors and theologians: instead of consulting many distracting commentaries about the books of the Bible, be busy in your own little practice of Scripture translation. *Every good theologian has to work at translating his or her Bible for themselves*. One will learn much more theology, which is good for your study and your professional office of ministry, by doing Bible translation than by reading quantities of commentaries (22. Brief, 9: 357).

Two matters remain critical for good reading and translation of the Bible, according to Herder: (1) The spirit of the apostles' writings is not a worldly spirit, not the *Aufklärung* spirit of our age, but “the Spirit of God, a spirit of childlikeness, trustfulness and simplicity” (23. Brief, 9: 360). Trust the written text to be true to fact and needful for us now! (*uns jetzt*), and not just some antiquarian residue of an ancient past. So, one should not get stuck in details, but get the whole architectonic connection of the Bible story and the interrelationships of its ongoing structure. The sum-up of the Older and Newer Testaments is: Christ's coming with his invisible, everlasting Reign. What else has human nature to hope for, and been able to strive for, but this Kingdom which the prophets prophesied, that Christ himself brought to the world, and which whatever is good and true at all times has tried to bring about? (39. Brief, 9: 501–3).

(2) The Scriptures are couched in symbolic language, which has been misinterpreted and exaggerated horrendously. Luther correctly rejected, writes Herder, allegorical, tropological, and analogical antics as monkeyshine (*Affenspiel*), and came to read and translate Scripture with concrete idiomatic simplicity, packed with teaching, power, vitality and deft art (39. Brief, Beilage,

9:505). What we need is a correct, wise, sound implementation of the symbolical character of Scriptural writings, to bring back and highlight its fully natural, lasting, lovable and heartfelt telling language—the metaphorical language of the Hebrews (39. Brief, 9:502).

Herder's homiletic has the cash value of his hermeneutic: preaching is essentially proclaiming the will of God, laying out for human heart and conscience the Word and Counsel of God for our shalom. Preaching is not served by the rhetoric of Demosthenes and Cicero, but is called to be plain exposition of the Bible (*Auslegung der Bibel*), an unsophisticated, "homey" explanation, like Jesus' parables. *The listener must hear the Bible speak, the veritably live Bible (für sich belebte Bibel)*. The good result, then, is that afterwards, when one remembers what was preached, the listener will have only the text in consciousness as he or she strolls back along the running stream or pleasant pathway taken by the sermon (40. Brief, 9: 509). Biblical passages will spark different expositions at different times over the years because we humans are always swimming in the stream of changing times and our changing temperaments. Biblical texts rejuvenate themselves for our attention, and we ourselves grow younger with them (40. Brief, 9: 510).

Herder's Unpublished Original Rendition of *das Hohelied* (1776)

In this 1780 prolegomenal prospectus for the Weimar seminary, Herder was "preaching" so to speak, what he had himself been "practicing" in 1776: the direct presentation of the biblical שיר השירים in dithyrambic German verse, following up what Herder considered to be the fine, vividly clear and strong, sensitive translation Luther had made of *das Hohelied*.¹⁴ Herder tried, as best he could, in the spirit of Solomon's day and attuned to his other writings, simply, without any *a priori* hypotheses, to get at the meaning of what is objectively there in the biblical text: pure singing about love (8: 646). The biblical text is not giving hope to escape from hell; it is not teaching history of the Christian church; it is also not pandering to the prim sensuality befitting our current Crébillonic taste. This biblical book is purely celebrating the intense Eastern (*Morgenland*) human experience of loving and being loved. The book is not a constructed drama, but is *a cycle of single songs*, each with its own particular fragrance and individual color, each practically untranslatable in its vital sensing singularity, like a specific sigh or a kiss (8: 591–4).

In this unpublished treatment of שיר השירים, Herder detects 22 songs which he, rather than carefully translate, mirrors in highly exclamatory, poetic free verse. Each of the 22 German "songs" is given a title, and is followed by a brief prose comment on its tone, striking images, hinted import, and/or placement in the whole collection. For example, Song 2:7 is called a lullaby (*Schlummerlied*), which is repeated at Song 3:5 and Song 8:4, and always, says

¹⁴ Baildam has printed in his book, as Appendix A, both the unpublished 1776 and the published 1778 translation Herder made of The Song of Songs, in a handy parallel comparative form, pages 306–321.

Herder, ends a lengthy cohering “scene” (*jedesmal zu Ende einer ganzen grossen Scene*, 8: 602). Within a short song (*Brautsgeschenke*, Song 1:9–14) Herder can distinguish different gendered voices: the royal kingly voice offering golden jewelry (Song 1:9–11), and the compliant woman voice bearing henna blossoms from the gardens of En Gedi (Song 1:12–14).

After the first lullaby song is sung, sealing the dreamy sleep of the beloved, notice, says Herder, how carefully the editor of this Bible book tied together, wherever he could, the intentional threading together of the sequence of songs: she is awakened by the voice of her lover singing, “Arise, beloved, my beautiful one, come wander away with me” (Song 2:8–14).¹⁵ And then, after a *Scheuchlied* (shepherd working song) about chasing foxes away from the ripening gardens (Song 2:15), and a song about her shepherd lover working in the pastures far away during the day (Song 2:16–17), the beloved sings a song about finding and meeting him at night in her mother’s house (Song 3:1–4). So the lullaby song comes once again (Song 3:5) to mark a decisive “scene” (*eine entschiedene Scene*): every earlier song of budding love checked by a chaste modesty in the longing expressed, finally now—the editor places it here!—the beloved and lover come together at the mother’s bedroom (8: 607).¹⁶

As Herder reads it, after the fragment of Song 3:6 (“What is that coming up out of the distant grasslands?” which signals a new section),¹⁷ Song 3:7–11 introduces Solomon’s royal marriage bed, and all the descriptions of betrothed love-making which follow. The “newlywed” song [Song 4:1–5:1] describing naked body parts [Song 4:1–5] is interrupted at Song 4:6, as being somewhat improper (*da er sie körperlich nicht schildern sollte*, 8: 609), and is interrupted again at Song 4:16b, since the continuing (more respectful) speech (*Schwester-Braut*) is still too boldly excessive (*zu kühn*, 8: 611). But Herder excuses the passionate hyperbole in the love-talk as the forthright Oriental way of calling a breast “a breast,” and belly a “belly,” feeling out what a woman feels like as God’s creature better than we Westerners can, with our false modesty and “gutter-talk” (*Säuereien*) (8: 611).

Herder’s rendition of the disturbing nightmare in which the beloved loses her lover who would not force entrance to her, so she goes looking for him and is abused by the city watchmen (Song 5:2–7), yet then, in response to the question of what does your lover look like, describes him exuberantly as a glorious sculptured body (Song 5:10–16): Herder’s rendition of this single song scene Song 5:2–6:3 mimics every change—jagged, restless lines punctu-

¹⁵ “Der Anfang des Stückes macht offenbar, wie sorgfältig der Sammler band, wo er im Faden seines Buchs und Zwecks binden konnte” (8: 604).

¹⁶ “Stehet das Stück, so wenig es von aussen zu den vorhergehenden passt, so einzeln es ist, nicht trefflich im Licht? an seiner Stelle, an diesem Orte?—Alles Vorhergehende des Buchs ist Zubereitung zu diesem Funde, diesem Lohne” (8: 607).

¹⁷ In the 1778 published “*Salomons Hobeslied*” version Herder makes this remark regarding Song 6:10, which he applies to Song 3:6 and Song 8:5: “Es wird ausdrücklich eine neue Szene angekündigt, mit dem bekannten Anfange: ‘Wer ist die, die aufsteigt?’” (1: 84).

ating by dashes for Song 5:2–7, measured, eulogistic Pinadaresque verse for Song 5:10–16, ending with the quieted-down woman's short trimeter testimony [Song 6:2–3],

Mein Lieber, er ist mein,
 Mein Lieber, ich bin sein,
 Er weidet unter Blumen (8: 613).

About here in the book, with songs #15, #16, and #17 (Song 6:4–9, 6:10–13; 7:1–9), Herder seems to lose the thread of what he has been tracing, of how awakened love moving through desire reaches for passionate consummated bodily union. "I leave it to others," writes Herder, "to figure out why a Solomonic song [Song 6:4–9] talking 'fierce army' [Song 6:10], follows the tender pastoral ending of the previous song [Song 6:2–3]. This section [Song 6:10–13] is the murkiest in the whole book because we do not know what prompts the tangent juxtaposition of Deborah-like militant roughness and idyllic sweetness" (8: 618–19). Oh, well, continues Herder, more such strange oppositions occur, "always with larger-than-life, more audacious images."¹⁸

Song 18 entitled "Innocent love" [Song 7:10–8:3] is the climax of the book, says Herder, highlighting the fertility and fruit-bearing naturalness built into bodily committed human loving, with all the charm of country simplicity, graced with unsophisticated innocence, surrounded by brotherly love, the mutuality of a kiss, and the welcoming breast of one's mother (8: 623). Overcome by the truth of it all, Herder can't help but let his deepest heartfelt allegiance show and apostrophize Nature: "O Nature, Nature! You holy and desecrated temple of God! You are most profaned there where You should be for us the most wholly holy!" (8: 621). "Woe to anyone who does not feel the truth of the rapture of such delicate chaste love" (8: 623).

I almost wish the more gentle, peaceful song #20 [Song 8:5–7], says Herder, had concluded the book (8: 625). The true love extolled as "Fiery flames of the LORD," which holds past temptations and beyond death, has a mature, almost motherly caring, harvested richness to it, while recalling the pristine awakening of the first love (8: 624). In the denouement [Song 8:8–12] the sister tells her older brothers who had been anxious about her chastity, a little story (*Geschichtchen*), which is maybe about King Solomon's treasury of wives and vineyards (8: 626–7). And then the final #22 song duet [Song 8:13–14] rejoices with lover and beloved running off freely together like gazelle and a young deer to the sweet-smelling mountains.

"I am satisfied now," says Herder, "if simply unaffected, clear meaning has been shown, if the singular particularity of each song has been noticed

¹⁸ "Ich überlasse es andern, auszuspähen, warum das Stück jetzt folge? hier stehe? Gnug es folgen mehrere seiner Art: immer mit grössern, kühneren Bildern" (8: 617). Herder goes on to say, "Diese Gegend ist die dunkelste im Buch; nur aber dunkel, weil und sofern wir die nähere Veranlassung nicht kennen." (8: 618).

with its very own lineaments and bouquet, and *especially if the subtle thread on which the editor has strung these precious pearls has been detected* [my emphasis]. ...the editor seems at the same time to have had an eye for the most subtle nuances in these exceptional phenomena, to make perceptible *even the very sequence* [Herder's emphasis] of the pieces, and to deal with the many-sided, extremely rich playfulness of all the different situations, charms and timings of the cornucopia of love.[...] Whoever wants to find in these songs artful allegories, secrets and drama, or even amorous intrigues and confounding tales of envious love-affairs from the harem, go ahead; but not me—I don't find them!"¹⁹

Herder claims to be presenting only what these exquisite songs say, without adding any hidden meanings to what is stated. But all 22 pericopes Herder delineates and calls "songs" are too poetically complicated to be considered "folk songs" (as Song 2:15 indeed is): Herder finds different voices respond to one another in the same "pearl" of a song [Song 1:9–14, 1:15–2:6; 8:8–9, 8:13–14], and notes interruptions in the tilt of a simple song [Song 4:6, 4:16c], and finds questions with answers in a given "song" [Song 5:9; 6:1, 10; 8:5a]. "Song" for Herder is an honorific term certifying the impassioned (Ossianic) ancient historical originality, and therefore rhapsodical truth, of the biblical writing by the young king Solomon. So, although Herder ostensibly rejects the Catholic tradition of a fourfold (literal, moral, allegorical and anagogic) reading of Scripture, he does read into the "literal" (= "natural") gives a God-speaking instructional message, because Herder at this time believes that the Bible will always remain "the North star for our daily life, the Bible's everlasting history of images and zodiac (!) is that in which the sun of our destiny, nature, and morality basks."²⁰

In his remarks appended to this 1776 unpublished exposition of *das Lied der Liedern*, Herder says that God does not beat around the bush but God champions in this pristine *Hobelied* the pure, sensuous passionate, royal marrying love-pleasure on earth which Adam and Eve enjoyed in Paradise. This utterly good, innocent, *original* ravishing delight of loving given for our human nature—a love approved by mothers—is celebrated as God's order for our living wisely, to which the cramped, cosmeticized, hypocritical second-hand rubbish (*Trüdelkram*) of chastity-sermons and monkeyshine moralisms (*Affenmoralisieren*) are the cold-hearted antithesis (8: 632–5). The editor has

¹⁹ "Ist überall nur der *natürliche klare Sinn* gezeigt, die *Einzelheit* jedes Stückes in seinem eignen Licht und Dufte bemerkt, sodenn der *feine Faden* verfolgt den der Sammler bei *Reihung* dieser kostbaren Werken hatte; so bin ich zufrieden. ...der Sammler scheint zugleich im Auge gehabt zu haben, die feinsten *Nuancen* in diesem sonderbaren Phänomen, *selbst der Folge nach*, sichtbar zu machen und das *vielseitige reichste* Spiel von allen Seiten zu behandeln. ...Künstliche *Allegorien, Geheimnisse und Dramas* oder gar *Liebesränke* und verflochtne *Neid- und Bulergeschichten* aus dem Harem finde darinn, wer wolle; ich finde sie nicht!" (8: 628).

²⁰ "...so wird auch die Bibel *Polarstern* unsres Laufs, ihre *Geschichte* ewig der *Bilder- und Thierkreis* bleiben, in dem sich die Sonne unsrer Bestimmung, Natur und Sittlichkeit wälzet" (8: 629).

overseen and ordered the whole book, says Herder, from the first sighing to the last echo, as it were, around two purple threads—holy (bashful) desire and (fully loving) truth (8: 634)—which, “if Christendom would once upon a time open its eyes to see what she has in the Bible *on this very matter*, you would see how much, really how very much would change! and not for the worse” (8:637). One should not miss the first clear literal sense (*den ersten klaren Wortsinn*) of the text, and so misuse this Bible book, reading it as an allegory. “It is the very spirit of the Bible to make human for us everything godly: it is the spirit of mysticism, on the contrary, to suppress all (human) forms and configurations, and to deify and spiritualize (*hinaufzubahimmeln*) everything human.”²¹

*An important contribution Herder has made toward understanding שיר השירים is his reading of the whole book as an edited sequence of “scenes” of responding voices, which somehow play off of one another.*²² Not only does he credit the gendered voices (discernible by grammatical verb endings in the Hebrew language) of Beloved (*Liebe, Geliebter*) and Lover (*Lieber, Liebster*), but Herder has a poetic sensibility to catch hints of intuited connections and yet has the literary critical acumen not to exaggerate minor details (as many commentators have done with Song 2:15). Herder even has the daring imagination to suggest that the woman cuts off the haranguing “I’m gonna climb the palm tree” peroration [Song 7:1–9a] because it is made by a “love-drunken bridegroom”! (dem Liebetrunkenen Bräutigam) and out of touch with her soft loving response [Song 7:9b–12] (8: 621). Even if Herder confesses he cannot sense the relation of successive settings, he affirms that the editor does still make the connection, although it might be unclear to us, who are later readers. Herder takes this tack explicitly a couple of times in the later published 1778 version.²³ It is noticeable that especially at the passages in the series of songs where Herder in 1776 had trouble finding the threaded strings of the pearl necklace [Song 6:4–9, 6:10–13], in the subsequent 1778 published version Herder emphasizes there what he is unsure about: “I will show first of all the connection and the progress of

²¹ “Geist der Bibel ists, alles Göttliche für uns zu *humanisiren*, und Geist der Mystik, alle Formen und Gestalten zu verdrängen, alles Menschliche zu *vergötten* und *hinaufzubahimmeln*” (8: 638).

²² Cf. notes above, 16, 17, 19.

²³ Commenting now on how poorly he thinks the *Schlummerlied* (about Jerusalem daughters) at Song 3:5 goes with what immediately precedes in Song 3:4 (the mother’s bedroom) Herder says, “Ohne Zweifel setzte es der Sammler her, weil es Nacht ist and weil er ihr nächtliches Suchen und Streben jetzt mit süsser Ruhe krönen wollte” (1:66). Herder admits the bold eulogy of Song 5:10–16 sticks out against the tremulous nighttime dream of Song 5:2–7, but bows to the judgment of the editor: “Nur wiederhole ich, dass diese Gestalt mir zu der Landschaft des Nachtgesanges abstechend dünkt; beides scheint nur vom Sammler gebunden” (1: 79).

the whole song; the most stimulating attraction lies in the threaded-together succession."²⁴

It is this insistence by Herder upon *an (authoring) edited, imaginatively structured unity to the שיר השירים* which is, I believe, the key to a sound reception of the Bible book's revelation. If Herder's interpretation of the *Song of Songs* is known to later scholars, it is usually summarized by saying that Herder sees the book of songs "as a string of pearls."²⁵ That phrase comes from Herder's later 1778 published version, where he struggles to explain how the refrain adjuring the daughters of Jerusalem not to force love before it is ready [at Song 3:5] follows the account of a disturbing night dream [Song 3:1–4] and then continues. "Since night is on the docket, the editor lets other such individual night pieces follow [Song 3:6–11, see esp. v.8], which hang together no more than a row of beautiful pearls fastened on a string."²⁶ Such faint praise for connection at this troublesome spot for Herder has been wrongly generalized as his judgment on the unity of the whole book. Herder's 1778 published version shows much less struggle than the 1776 unpublished version to find the edited links between vignettes. Yet it is the subtle threading together of the "pearls" which was Herder's special fascination.

In contrast to the 1776 more interjectional, emotionally poetic, loose rendition of the given Hebrew text in an almost continual pitch of workshopping excitement and discovery with 22 song segments, the 1778 version reaching publication was more subdued, the German rendering was closer to a verse translation honoring the Hebrew parallelism of lines, and interconnected sequences were assumed rather than belabored. In 1778, the 22 fragmentary songs are present but not accented.²⁷ Herder now uses the key recurrent paragraph addressing "the daughters of Jerusalem" as a refrain marker of the four major sections of the book: Song 1:2–3:5; 2:8–3:5; 3:6–8:4; 8:5–14. In 1778 Herder is also on the look-out, as any aesthetically trained reader would be, for recurring metaphoric leitmotifs which tie things imaginatively together. Early mention of "apple tree" and "apples" by the Shulammitte girl [Song 2:3, 5] sets us readers up, says Herder, for the concluding importance of the apple tree, where the lovers first met in the mother-friendly countryside [Song 8:5bc] (1: 61).

In line with his over-all conviction that the narrative of the book moves from reciting love's first attraction through obstacles and uncertainties until the enjoyment of a chaste love union is reached, Herder, in both 1776 and

²⁴ "Ich will zuerst die Verbindung und den Gang des ganzen Gesanges zeigen; in ihm liegen die meisten Reize" (1: 84).

²⁵ For example, Carl Gebhardt, "Das Lied der Lieder," *Der Morgen* (Berlin: Philo Verlag, 1930), 6: 447–8.

²⁶ "Und da es einmal Nacht ist, lässt er noch mehr solche einzelne Nachtstücke folgen, die nicht mehr zusammenhangen als eine Reihe schöner Perlen, auf eine Schnur gefasset" (1: 66).

²⁷ Songs #16, #17, and #18 of 1776 are coalesced into one longer pericope in 1778 [Song 6:10–8:3]; cf. 1: 82–4.

1778 versions, seriously expositis the closing lines of the book as a conclusive ending (8: 625). The Shulammitte sister tells off her over-protective, controlling but negligent older brothers [Song 8:8–9; 1:6bc; 6:11–12], writes Herder, reporting that her virginity has been kept intact because her beauty, loving and honour were originally virtuous and able to persevere with their own God-given integrity [8:10] (1:94). Herder, who believed the שיר השירים was written by young Solomon before Solomon aged into the extensive harem and idolatry of 1 Kings 9–11 (8: 631), does gingerly just mention the sharp critique of Solomon which is inscripted at the conclusion of the whole round of songs and voices in Song 8:11–12, as if it were possibly a slight rabbinic cautionary note uttered *by the youth* (8: 626–7; 1: 94)...for the older “enlightened” folk to hear and take to heart.

Import of Herder’s Hermeneutic for Understanding the Literary, Performative Nature of Holy Scripture, and *The Greatest Song*

So Herder gave rigorous aesthetic, literary critical attention to this Bible book, especially in his first 1776 unpublished attempt to grapple directly and rhapsodically with the given Hebraic text. Herder’s reading of the שיר השירים also took its cue from his heartfelt response to Matthew 5–7 as the core of the Christian religion,²⁸ and was saturated by his highly Romantic Idealist posture of the Bückeberg years (1771–1776) and his most happy marriage with Caroline Flachsland (1773), as he stood up against the dominant Rationalistic parsing Enlightenment spirit of the day.²⁹ Despite his heterodox orientation—most probably without a sound biblical conception of sin—during this 1771–1781 decade of rejecting Reason as the North star for living and looking to the Bible *and* “Nature” (12. Brief, 9:260) for direction and wisdom, Herder has given theologians and Bible readers several crucial matters to reflect on, especially for understanding the heavily over-interpreted שיר השירים.

²⁸ In his pastoral letter of November 1771 to Prince Holstein-Gottorp, Herder confesses that Christ’s *Bergpredigt* was central to all his preaching. “Hier ist mehr als Platon und alle Weisen” (2: 96–7).

²⁹ Thomas Willi notes that Pascal’s *Pensées* were always on Herder’s writing desk in the Bückeberg years (115). And Hans-Joachim Kraus’ judgment is important: “Es ist das unverwelkliche Verdienst Herders, dass er die Eigenständigkeit der hebräisch-alttestamentlichen Welt erkannt hat—gegenüber einer orthodoxen Dogmatizierung und gegenüber einer rationalistischen Auflösung. ...Nach dem Taxen und Schwanken des Johann David Michaelis, nach den hemmungslosen Ausbrüchen des krassen Rationalismus und nach dem problematischen, vermittelnden Neuansatz Johann Salomo Semlers steht ein begnadeter Dichter und Theologe auf und *bringt gegen alle kritische Zersetzung die Botschaft von einer neuen Begegnung mit der Bibel, die dem klassistischen, romantischen, pantheistischen und humanistischen Geist der Zeit entgegenkommt, ja: ganz auf ihn eingeht.* Die Bedeutung dieses Ereignisses wird man kaum überschätzen können.” “Hebräischer Humanismus im Zeitalter der Romantik,” in *Geschichte der Historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Verlag des Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956), 110.

(1) Herder takes the biblical text to be poetic literature. Therefore, one must treat the Scripture, read its text, present it to others in its *literary* character. Otherwise you manhandle God's written Word.

Herder's ejaculating, seemingly almost improvisatory 1776 poetic recapitulation of the *Song*, as well as his 1778 more exacting translation of the book, both try to *give German voice in kind to the artistically minted Hebrew script*. And Herder's adjoining, interconnecting, running commentary paragraphs³⁰ try not to be a school-masterly addition to what was spoken so much as imaginatively highlighting features which draw out the subtle meaning of the pericope.³¹ Herder practiced his hermeneutic principle of bringing out the full allusive meaning of the literary Scripture, the tone and color, the vibrato of God's voice comforting and warning us people. Theologians who read the Bible often do it as (believing or unbelieving) theologians who mistake the inherently metaphorical concision of the biblical narrative for logical imprecision, and are concerned to harmonize logically what is given more elliptically, as if one needs a dogmatic propositional residue to relate and validate the God-speaking message given literarily.

Various contemporary women scholars emphasize this poetic quality of **שיר השרים** too. "The Song's poetic qualities are routinely praised but generally ignored in favor of the exegetical quest for explanation. [...] a question that invites paraphrase, as if poetic images could be reduced to what they signify."³² But the defining quality of the biblical text is "symbolical" (Herder, 39. Brief, 9: 502); its language is polyvalent and plurisignificant (Exum), and the connotations which inhere the meaning are as important as the denotations. Analysis does not make poetry come alive unless the patient analytic probing folds back into an imaginative repristination of the original literary text—this is what Herder did with the **שיר השרים**—thanks to an aesthetic act close to what Ricoeur is searching for with his depiction of "the second naïveté."

Theological scholarship is often tempted to rationalistic pedantry where the commentator gets lost in details that digress from the servant task of making the artistic text speak more eloquently, the kind of exhaustive scholarship the poet William Butler Yeats mentions in his poem which ends with "What would Catullus say!" about his "classical" expositors who apparently do not have an erotic muscle in their bodies. Chana Bloch notes that translation of the original **שיר השרים** can fail if one does not find "the proper register in English":³³ if you give medical precision to sexually nuanced matters ex-

³⁰ Ulrich Gaier calls it "commentarius perpetuus" (327).

³¹ Thomas Willi characterizes Herder's method as "schöpferische Nachbildung statt gehorsamer Auslegung" (51).

³² J. Chryl Exum, "How does the Song of Songs Mean? On Reading the Poetry of Desire," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok*, 64 (1999): 47.

³³ Chana Bloch, "Translating Eros," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 154.

pressed allusively, then you forfeit aesthetic fidelity for a scientific conceptual clarity that distorts the text that is there.

The fact that the biblical writings (especially כתובים) are literary in nature can tempt hermeneutic theorists to reject any determinative meaning for a passage, and so allow expositors to use texts as pretexts to validate their hobby horse. But a literary text, in my judgment, has imaginatively determined meaning: the epiphoric parameters and diaphoric limits to metaphoricity³⁴ fashion references that are not anything or everything, but which present a softly focussed known with its attendant field of a hovering penumbra of precise, suggestive associations.

A key to correct reading of (biblical) literature is to discern the over-all cohering thrust or story line of the piece, if there be one. A person's decision on this crucial matter depends on one's point of view. It is fairly well accepted today that nobody comes to the biblical text like a clear window pane or a blank disk on which the biblical text transparently imprints itself for dissemination. Everybody has their subjective *apriori* viewpoint—including Herder. As Gadamer has argued, everybody is prejudiced. Just try to get a good “prejudice” and learn to dialogue with all the others, world without end.³⁵

But are there any steps to take which would help readers approximate like a parabola to Herder's goal of *hearing what is first given there in Scripture*, to hinder exegesis from becoming eisegesis, to recognize and weed out intentional or an unwitting reading of Bible passages to support partisan causes? Certainly, like a Gadamarian bumblebee one can gather pollen from different flowers and weeds. For example, when Bernard of Clairvaux seems to erase any “literal” meaning of the text in his 86 sermons on the first two chapters of *The Greatest Song* in favor of its allegorical message, one can still catch the necessity of reading a piece of Scripture woven into the whole biblical tapestry of God's not condemning but loving the world so much that God sent God's Son here to save the world and all its creatures (John 3:17), but demur at Bernard's “spiritualizing” of bodily love.³⁶ Or, one can respect Herman Gunkel's search for the historical *Sitz im Leben* of a given psalm to preclude a reader's thinking Asaph's psalms just dropped out of heaven one sunny afternoon, but lament that Gunkel's followers seem to divert psalm study into

³⁴ Philip Wheelwright, “Two ways of metaphor” in *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 70–91.

³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 3 A (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck, 1962), 250–83. “Die Ausschöpfung des wahren Sinnes aber, der in einem Text oder in einer künstlerischen Schöpfung gelegen ist, kommt nicht irgendwo zum Abschluss, sondern ist in Wahrheit ein unendlicher Prozess” (282).

³⁶ In *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs: A Contemporary Encounter with Contemplative Aspirations* (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, M.A. thesis, 2007), Michael Mols admits that Bernard has a “propensity for claiming metaphysical significance of physical reality” (80), but argues that “Bernard delves deeply into rich, bodily descriptions in order to reach beyond the surface of the physical, for spiritual truths are to be found at the heart of corporeal existence” (79).

pigeonholing psalms into hardened genres, as if typing a psalm is the clue to hearing its wrestled prayer.

A careful review of intelligent works by respectable scholars seems to prove you get the fruit from whatever seeds you plant. Marvin H. Pope's unsurpassed, exhaustive 743 page Anchor Bible (1977) introduction, translation and commentary notes for the funereal mythic meaning of the Song of Songs, as he reads it, with examples of the long history of its widely diverging expositions, "disappears" the biblical givens into being a prompt for anything you ever wanted to know about the sexual ins and outs of Eastern fertility cults. The magisterial Concordia Commentary (2003) by Christopher W. Mitchell, of 1343 pages which, after 26 years, led the author to understand Christian marriage as an enfleshment of the great mystery Paul cites on the union of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:23), self-consciously reads the Song of Songs in a bold Christological way as being somehow about "divine love," and a worthy testimony to the truth of Lutheran sacramental theology.³⁷

Herder's literary approach of a loose cycle of songs but edited into a sequence of scenes as a divinely revealed paean for holy human love seems much closer to what is *given* in שיר השרים than what Pope and Mitchell "find." But Herder's disarming directness with the original poetic text can be affirmed, deepened, and given both historical and kerygmatic power by supplementing Herder's reading with Roland Murphy's (1949) approach that "The *Canticle* is essentially a parable," and Daniel Estes' (2010) judgment "that the Song of Songs is intended to be read as an extended proverb (משל) of ideal intimacy,"³⁸ and Noegel and Rendsburg's judgment that שיר השרים is a unified whole which "inveighs against Solomon," dated approximately 918–876 BC.³⁹ (cf. final section below)

(2) Herder believes the Bible has a revelatory *Einfalt* (simplicity) and needs to be read in the holy spirit in which the *Ur-poetic* text is inscribed. That means for Herder that interpreters of the Bible must make its truth and *Wirkung* ("effectuating transformation") transparent, directly heard and imbibed by the laity, not kept as a preserve for academics.

This tenet of Herder will be harder today for both orthodox theologians and professional critics to work with, since Herder does not affirm a special inspiration for the Bible but claims it is naturally divinely revelatory of truth. Baildam notes astutely that "Herder was not secularizing religion, but rather sanctifying poetry."⁴⁰ From my own tradition of the catholic faith transmuted by the historical Reformation carried on by Martin Luther and Jean Calvin, I take Herder's cue to be an off-beat recognition of the kerygmatic nature of the Scriptures. The kerygmatic nature of the Bible asks for its performative

³⁷ Cf. Christopher Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 4–7, 20–6.

³⁸ Roland E. Murphy, "The Structure of the Canticle of Canticles," *CBQ*, 11 (1949): 382; and Daniel Estes, 275.

³⁹ Noegel and Rendsburg, 171–4.

⁴⁰ Baildam, 94.

presentation, because the literary biblical script is effectual and geared to galvanize a response. Because it is a performative text, the Bible needs to be heard; the Holy Scriptures need simply, intimates Herder, to become oral. This is a crux of the hermeneutic task and points to what Paul Ricoeur is after with his “second naïveté.”

In line with folk song specialist Herder’s tack, one does well to approach the Ur-original biblical writings as a revelatory musical score or dramatic script⁴¹ which the interpreters play as best they can. And it is wise counsel to realize that the biblical script presents God speaking, God proclaiming the good news of Christ’s kingdom a-coming. So Bible interpreters best fulfill their task by becoming dummies for the ventriloquist Holy Spirit to open the ears of would-be Bible hearers. Serious biblical theologians need to learn the original languages well and make their own faulty but dedicated translations of the holy Scriptures for themselves, as Herder suggested for prospective pastors (9: 357), because then you are as close to the source of revelation as you together with other saints, living and dead, can get. *Translation is the primal interpretation.*

And then one must read aloud the translation with correct intonation, pauses, accent, and sober imaginative, empathetic flair that is due literature—*reading aloud is the interpretive follow-up to translation.* One reads 1–2 Kings with a different inflection than Psalm 42–43 or 88, and the gospel according to Mark has a lilt quite unlike the Letter to the Hebrews. Translation and reading aloud are the basic, most elemental hermeneutic activities, long before one starts to put the message into other explanatory words. An oversimplified “translation” or a deadpan, lacklustre, or hurried reading of Scripture is hermeneutic murder.

Reading aloud Bible passages, like wrestling for their translation from the original languages: to be done rightly, both must have a *Hineinlebenshaltung* (*adsorbing* participating-in) quality, reading *with* the grain of the text, not against the grain. These primal and secondary interpretations should have the character of a blind person touching, feeling, intimately probing the features of someone else’s whole face to decipher the deepest secrets its contours betray, but one does it more like a lover than a medical doctor, and processes the knowledge gained intuitively rather than demonstratively. The project of making a vernacular translation of Holy Scripture is called to recapitulate the original, say it again with love that brings out imaginatively nuances of what one finds, but refrains from importing amplifications into the text or excising meanings by making the translation more exact and explicit than the original.

Standard commentaries—a tertiary interpretive activity, because a person inserts his or her own explanatory thoughts *about* the message that has been

⁴¹ Cf. David Scott, “Speaking to Form: Trinitarian-Performative Scripture reading,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 77/2 (1995): 143; and Stephen C. Barton, “New Testament Interpretation as Performance,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52/2 (1999): 171.

inscribed, alongside its translated presentation—can be more useful than crutches; Herder recognized this too (9: 355). A careful studious commentary can invite you into the communion of saints throughout the ages who have tried to unlock the speech of the biblical book by assembling their learned contributions in digest form. But a commentary is pernicious if instead of listening and serving as a trustworthy prolegomenon, it tries to talk the biblical text into submission and, like a bad book review, acts like a pre-emptive strike, a substitute, so you do not have to go meet the original text firsthand yourself. Many scholarly commentaries on the Bible also seem to lose the sense of their extraordinary privilege to be reflecting on being spoken to by God in the script. Ricoeur’s “virtuous circle” is pertinent: “You must understand in order to believe, but you must believe in order to understand.”⁴² If the worded comment about the biblical text has not been convicted by the κηρύγμα—if the piercing Word has not gone through the commentator’s heart, soul, mind and strength, and the tertiary interpreter has not come to *own* the living Word, the resultant commenting dissertation on the text easily becomes a weighty pillar of salt losing its savor.

To become a trustworthy theological interpreting servant of God’s Older and Newer Testament scripted Word, one does well, with all the getting of philological and cultural historical knowledge *focussed toward literary critical mastery of the text* which has been selected and is being read to be understood: one does well to get the wisdom to corral the painstaking scholarship toward making the script speak to other persons face-to-face.⁴³ A sound tertiary Bible commentary must not be devoid of exhortational overtones, lest it deny the kerygmatic quality of the text at hand. This matter is close to the practice of a sermon: a good sermon—Herder would chime in—is not a lecture, even though it may provide historical setting about the inception of the passage, quote the local poets as the apostle Paul did in Athens (Acts 17:16–34), subtly use oratorical figures of speech as Paul did in writing the Corinthians.⁴⁴ A

⁴² “No interpreter in fact will ever come close to what his text says if he does not live in the aura of the meaning that is sought. ...the second naïveté that we are after, is accessible only in hermeneutics [...] hermeneutics proceeds from the preunderstanding of the very matter which through interpretation it is trying to understand. [...]his second naïveté is the postcritical equivalent of the precritical hierophany.” Paul Ricoeur, *The Hermeneutics of Symbols: I*, 298.

⁴³ This principle is in line with both Herder’s and! Fiorenza’s brief to “enable students...to overcome the institutionalized dichotomy between graduate training in the university and ministerial education in schools of theology” (15–16). To do justice to the ancient biblical texts demands one exposit their meaning for just public life today.

⁴⁴ Paul’s disclaiming that his speaking was καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν λόγου (1 Cor. 2:1) strikes me as a litotes the Corinthians would appreciate. Anybody so skillful in style as to write the letter to the Romans was not a crude speaker. The Jew Paul meant he did not trust (Stoic or Epicurean) Greek rhetorical devices to upstage the convicting power of God’s Spirit (1 Cor. 2:4).

good sermon is only echoing and extending a good reading aloud of the Scripture passage put in Luther-gutty current language that surprises listeners with the cross-referenced resonances of the whole Bible speaking to pressing needs. A good sermon is like Jesus *explaining* one of his deceptively simple parables.

Theological hermeneutical scholarship is most faithful when its centrifugal encouraging outreach has the centripetal force of performative oral interaction with another person with an I-to-Thou affecting presence. Theologians need to take seriously the apostle Paul's statement: *faith comes from hearing, and the hearing by the spoken word* (ῥήματος) *of Christ* (Rom. 10:17)...preached! (κηρυσσους) (Rom. 10:14). Therefore, for those who understand a metaphor: one should read, study, and interpret the Bible on your knees.⁴⁵

Considering שיר השרים to be a Book of Wisdom Literature in Critique of Late Solomon, Witnessing to the Joy and Jealousy of Bonded Erotic Love

A way to update Herder's fresh contribution, resolve some of his difficulties with the שיר השרים, and to unite a swath of contemporary studies of the *Song*, would be to tap into the long-standing tri-alogue conception of the fabric of *The Greatest Song*⁴⁶ and a growing consensus that the *Song* is best understood in the form of biblical wisdom literature.

J. Cheryl Exum has finally dared to say that "only by reading the Song as a whole can we do justice to its poetic genius."⁴⁷ Kenton Sparks hedges his judgment by declaring the book to be somewhere between an anthology and a "coherent composition," thanks to an editor who is "very nearly an author."⁴⁸ Iain Provan comments that there are clear indications of "three main characters (the woman, her lover, and the king) rather than merely two....

⁴⁵ Ellen Davis states it so: "...the Song is essentially a mystical text, a text that emanates from religious vision and invites—even requires—prayerful reading" (178).

⁴⁶ Marvin Pope recites the history of the "dramatic" approach taken by Origen (200's AD), Ibn Ezra (1100's AD), John Milton (1642), Heinrich Ewald, (1867), Franz Delitsch (1885), S.R. Driver (1897), H.H. Rowley (1937), and many others, including myself (1967), Pope (1977), 34–7. Driver's extensive treatment, comparing the two-persons and the three-persons conception, is most worth scrutiny, in his *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 436–53.

⁴⁷ J. Cheryl Exum, "The Poetic Genius of the Song of Songs," in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs / Perspektiven der Hoheliedauslegung*, ed. Anselm Hagedorn; Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 346 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 80, note 8.

⁴⁸ Kenton Sparks, "The Song of Songs: Wisdom for Young Jewish Women," *CBQ*, 70 (2008): 293.

When one understands this, it is a relatively easy matter to go on to articulate a coherent reading of the whole Song.”⁴⁹

Scholars like Marc Brettler still question the “unity” of the *Song*, even though its edited title, *שיר השירים*, calls it one single song; “interpreters that speak of ‘the Song’ and treat it as a whole are problematic.”⁵⁰ Other commentators, like those critics who could not fathom how a psalm which began *de profundis* but ended in exaltation might be a unified poetic piece, contend that the *שיר* is “clearly” a collection of brief, atomic “poetic units,”⁵¹ never supposing the juxtaposition of the deft sentiments might bear a dialogical “connection.” And the most egregious rejection of any “narrative unity” to the book is by those who pan “the dramatic reading” because, as Estes formulates the thesis, quoting D.M. Carr, “there is no clear plot or logical sequence” to what is said, and a “dramatic unity” is foreign to the Semitic peoples and among the Hebrews in particular, and is certainly not found in the biblical Older Testament.⁵²

However, how does one account for the fact that the lovers often address one another in the *שיר* as if immediate and present, and there seems to be “a kind of women’s chorus” addressed by a refrain; and there are grammatical imperatives, jussives, cohortatives, and participles indicating on-going interaction?⁵³ As Chana Bloch says, “Though the Song is not a drama...it is dramatic in effect.”⁵⁴

The missing key to interpret the opposition and confrontational tone of the lyrical rhapsodies of love in the book is to take seriously the evidence for the *critique* of Solomon throughout the piece, and to realize that a *paratactic back-and-forth recitation of voices*, characteristic of wisdom literature, is utterly at home in biblical teaching revelation. Once one realizes *The Greatest Song* is not an anthology of loose songs about love, but is a hanging-together structured whole in the “Yes, but” format of standard Older Testament wisdom literature,⁵⁵ one has a more sound approach to reading *The Greatest Song* as a cho-

⁴⁹ Iain Provan, “The terrors of the Night: Love, Sex, and Power in Song of Songs,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J.I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 158.

⁵⁰ Marc Brettler, “Unresolved and Unresolvable: Problems in Interpreting the Song,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 187.

⁵¹ Franz Landsberger, “Poetic units within the Song of Songs,” *JBL* 73/4 (1954): 207–8.

⁵² Daniel Estes, 281–282, 290.

⁵³ J. Cheryl Exum, “How does the Song of Songs Mean? On Reading the Poetry of Desire,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 64 (1999): 48–50.

⁵⁴ Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, afterword by Robert Alter (New York: Random House, 1995), 16.

⁵⁵ Cf. Calvin Seerveld, “Proverbs 10:1–22: From poetic paragraphs to preaching,” in *Reading and Hearing the Word, from text to sermon: Essays in Honor of John H. Stek*,

rus of voices, and will not find the opposition of a Solomon voice and a shepherd voice so strange.

Proverbs 1–9, for example, pits the Woman Wisdom voice (Prov. 1:20–33) against the conniving wicked swindlers (Prov. 1:10–14), and tells a graphic parable of exemplary temptation (7:6–23) leading to a formulated warning (Prov. 7:24–27); and chapter 9 has Woman Wisdom and Woman Foolishness each voice their similar invitations to youth to come in for a delicious meal (Prov. 9:1–6, 13–18). Later on in the Older Testament there are the extensive speeches of false counsel by Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, plus Elihu, contesting the integrity of Job: such a jumble of aphoristic, epigrammatic poetic set pieces and chorus of contesting voices is the paradigmatic rabbinic way to provide תורה to the next generation. To dismiss such “dramatic tension” of the script because it lacks a Sophoclean plot line and “logical” (!) cohesion outlined by Aristotle, is narrow-minded, bad aesthetics. There is much more presentation power in voicing such “wisdom” text than is dreamt of in many a theology.⁵⁶

Herder was on the cusp of affirming this integrative interpretation in 1776 in his attempt to offer a live-wire biblical text freed from rationalizing theologoumena when he acknowledged that the different “scenes” were “edited together,” even though Herder identified only two main figures, believed the piece had been written during the heyday of Israel’s flourishing peace under Solomon, and missed the significance of the refrain.⁵⁷ That is why Herder, for example, had trouble fitting together the switching back and forth in the pericopes of the book between Solomonic pomp and circumstance next to pastoral shepherdess and motherly homey simplicity. Herder’s rather lame explanation in 1778 is that the conjunction of a rough Mahanaim (army) dancing pleasure and gentle apple blossom contentment [6:8–13] is normal for the Eastern (*Morgenland*) take on love matters, albeit rather foreign to the morals and mores of us nice, non-Oriental people (1:87–90).

ed. Arie C. Leder (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary and Christian Reformed Church Publication, 1998), 181–200.

⁵⁶ G. Lloyd Carr’s repeated, off-colour judgment that my oratorio translation and version of *The Greatest Song* “is unactable” because of his “considerable experience in theatrical production and direction” (“Is the Song of Songs a ‘Sacred Marriage’ Drama?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 22:2 [1979]: 113; *The Song of Songs, An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984], 34) seems simply foolish to me, since my translation of שיר השרים has been powerfully performed many, many times from 1967 to 2012, in Canada, the Netherlands, Greece, Australia, Spain, and the United States. Cf. Calvin Seerveld, *The Greatest Song in critique of Solomon*, freshly and literally translated from the Hebrew and arranged for oratorio performance (Gregorian style song by Ina Lohr) [Chicago: Trinity Pennyasheet Press, 1963, 1967 / revised second edition, Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1988], www.seerveld.tuppence/html.

⁵⁷ Gaier, 334; Rogerson, 256.

Although Herder had the poetic antennae to sense a change in voices at 7:9b, cutting off the 7:1–9a rant of a “love-drunken bridegroom” which needed to be interrupted (8:621; cf. *supra* also ms.18), Herder seemed to miss the deep difference in spirit between the “lusty” calculating character of the body-parts speech in 7:1–9a (half repeating the stilted 4:1–5 address) and the delicate, tasteful homage to a betrothed woman in 4:8–15 (echoing the lovely poem in 2:10b–14). It is surprising that many more theologians than Herder have not taken offense at the rehearsed, frontal, body-part cataloging text of 7:1–9a as a lascivious affront to a woman, compared to the respectful yearning male voice celebrating the beloved’s sweetness, clothes and aroma as a lovely sheltered garden.⁵⁸ The שיר presents two quite vividly contrasting approaches to the woman, and it makes literary *and* site-specific historical sense to assign the domineering making-love voice to a Solomonic figure, and the deferential sister-bride-to-be male voice to a shepherd lover.⁵⁹

The careful (archaicizing) reference in the edited title—אשר לשלמה—is a clue that the שיר is not authored by Solomon, but is the *Song* “which concerns” Solomon, is “about” Solomon.⁶⁰ What has blocked theologians from hearing the *Song* “*in critique of*” Solomon is this:

An additional difficulty is that the three-person approach necessarily makes Solomon a villain who tries to seduce Shulammith, which would conflict with his status as the exemplar of wisdom in biblical thought and later Jewish and Christian theology.⁶¹

But the actual biblical assessment of Solomon is different than the theological tradition Estes cites: Solomon went bad in later life, as reported in 1 Kings 9–11. One should not miss either the disapproving point of the chronicler’s laconic note that Solomon spent twice as many years building his own house (13 years) as it took to build God’s house (7 years) (1 Ki. 6:37–7:1). And most readers miss the chill in Christ’s remark that “Solomon in all his glory was not dressed up” as well as a simple wild flower in the field (Matt. 6:28–29; Lu. 12:27).⁶²

⁵⁸ Noegel and Rendsburg read the exaggerated praise in the שיר *against* the backdrop of Arab *tasbib* and *hija* poetry which they cite to support their contention that such utterings in the text, for example, Song 1:9, are ironic praise, a kind of invective (133–40).

⁵⁹ Exum (2005) thinks Song 5:10–16 in the Song has a woman adopting “the gaze” too (89); but Harding correctly notes that unlike the direct second-person confronting address of the male voice (Song 7:1–9a), the Shulammite’s *wasf* is cast as a third-person description of her lover’s appearance *in absentia* (55).

⁶⁰ Cf. Noegel and Rendsburg, 140–1.

⁶¹ Daniel Estes, 282.

⁶² The only other reference to Solomon in the Newer Testament is also not complimentary but criticizes the blinding esteem in which Solomon was held by the misled masses; Matt. 12:42, Lu. 11:31.

Once one is prepared to think critically of late Solomon, then you detect how the *שיר השירים אשר לשלמה* deftly criticizes the historical Solomon for boasting about his Egyptian horses [Song 1:9]—a violation of God’s command for Israel’s kings⁶³—and for traveling around with exaggerated royal pomp [Song 3:6–11]. When the Song of Songs openly rejects Solomon’s having an extensive *harem* [Song 8:11–12], that wisdom needs to be taken seriously even though it is literarily formulated. That ringing statement does not “problematize the book as a whole” (which Elizabeth Huwiler ranges among “Loose Ends”),⁶⁴ but follows up the climactic systematic point of Song 8:6–7 with the Song of Song’s historical *Sitz im Leben*.⁶⁵ Rather than try to explain “Tirzah” [Song 6:4] as a mistake,⁶⁶ one can better take “Tirzah” as evidence of the time and place God had *The Greatest Song* inscribed...by the elderly rejected counselors (wise men) of Rehoboam, those who had known the debauched orgy days of old King Solomon, and knew that abduction of pretty girls for old King David (like Abishag the Shunammite) whom Solomon inherited and for whom Solomon had Adonijah murdered, to keep his inheritance of David’s throne legally intact (1 Kings 1 and 1 Ki. 2:13–25),⁶⁷ did happen historically in Israel at that time, and God was not pleased.⁶⁸ So God’s Spirit had “the wise” literate persons of the day—and it could have included wise women⁶⁹—when Tirzah served as Omri’s capital of the North-

⁶³ King Solomon violated the explicit instruction for Israel’s kings not to trade in Egyptian horses, noted in Deut. 17:14–17. Cf. 1 Ki. 4:26 and 10:26–11:8.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Huwiler, *Song of Songs*, in *New International Biblical Commentary on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 288.

⁶⁵ “We conclude with our summary position: the Song of Songs was written circa 900 B.C.E., in the northern dialect of ancient Hebrew, by an author of unsurpassed literary ability, adept at the techniques of alliteration and polyprosopon, able to create the most sensual and erotic poetry of his day, and all the while incorporating into his work a subtext critical of the Judahite monarchy in general and Solomon in particular,” Noegel and Rendsburg, 184. Noegel and Rendsburg, however, do not take the final step of recognizing two contrasting male voices (172).

⁶⁶ Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, 558–60.

⁶⁷ Absalom’s violation of fleeing David’s rump *harem* left behind, upon the counsel of the wise Ahitophel, also was a way to validate his usurping acquisition of the royal throne (cf. 2 Sam. 16:20–23).

⁶⁸ Cf. Seerveld, *The Greatest Song, in critique of Solomon*, 67–94.

⁶⁹ Professional wise woman were integral and a respected group in Israelite society from the time of General Joab and King David who “consulted” them at critical moments (cf. 2 Sam. 14:1–24; 20:14–22) until the time of Jeremiah (called *החכמות*, Jer. 9:16–20). So thoughts of womanly writers among those “wise counselors” whom God had compose *The Greatest Song* is apropos (and does not need the edge of “resistant” reading). Cf. articles by S.D. Goiten (1957), Athalya Brenner (1985), Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Fokkelen van Dijk (1987) collected in Part II of Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Songs of Songs* (Sheffield Academic press, 1993), 58–97; and Jannie H. Hunter, “The Song of Protest: Reassessing the Song of Songs,” *JOT* 90 (2000): 114. Many years ago (ca. 1950’s) the Dutch philosopher

ern kingdom (920–875 BC) and would be compared to Jerusalem, book this exquisite poetic literature. Literature is not unreliable “fiction” because poetic “figures of speech” ruin its factual information. Literature is intrinsically metaphorical prose which is able to recount historical deeds, disclose unpleasant truths, and provide sound directives *within* its sheath of imaginative exuberance, allusivity, and ironic quality.

Then the strange opposition Herder feels bewildering in the whole piece makes good narrative sense, and other “songs” also fall into place (for those willing to use their imagination): that the Shulammitte country maiden was abducted by palace officials [Song 6:11–12], taken into Solomon’s *harem* precincts, the Daughters of Jerusalem [Song 1:4b–7], forced to endure Solomon’s affected seductive advances while she communes in her musing and dreams with her absent, betrothed shepherd lover...until in the whole story the lover confronts the royal captor and captive [Song 6:8–9], and after Solomon’s final appeal revealing lust [Song 7:1–9a] is repulsed, the country lovers pledge their vows of jealous true love [Song 8:6–7], a critique of (old) Solomon is voiced [Song 8:11–12], and the agile lovers are blessed to be free...together.

So the שיר השירים ingeniously testifies and discloses again, in fallen historical circumstances, God’s original, marvelous creational gift and call (Gen. 2:18–25) for a woman and a man to enter freely into mutually pledged erotic joy that knows the jealous union of flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. The nuptial vows enunciated in 8:6, which Solomonic magnates of every age have defaulted on, present in capsule the poignant wisdom thrust of this whole Bible book,⁷⁰ summing up the back-and-forth struggle for genuine love (=mutually giving away your very bodied self to an other for whom you are saved) versus its simulacrum of getting physical self-satisfaction.

Hold me as a seal (חותם) to your heart;

keep me as a signet ring upon your finger.

For love is as permanent as death,

and the passionate drive of love as all-consuming as the most terrible power!

Its flames are flashes of fire—

a pure fire of the LORD God!

Just as the poetic paragraph of Prov. 5:15–23 serves like *halakah* on the Genesis 2 passage affirming bonded erotic pleasure (before there were parents and before sin spit on God’s good handiwork), so the שיר השירים acts

theologian, K.J. Popma, who specialized in Older Testament wisdom literature, told me he thought it likely that שיר השירים was inscribed by women.

⁷⁰ Exum (1999) credits Song 8:6–7 as the “one didactic statement” in the piece. Sadgrove says these verses “which are “possibly a *masbal*” serves as the climax of the *Song* (246).

like *haggadah* extrapolation on God's Genesis-revealed approval of and blessing upon human passion sealed by a vow.⁷¹ The exultant joy experienced by *two persons*—a man and a woman, like Adam and Eve—sexually to become *one flesh*, celebrated and praised by this *Greatest Song* reveals deeply the exuberant merciful wisdom of the LORD God who created for us humans the possibility of such shalom.

Then one can hear the refrain (Song 2:7; 3:5; [5:8]; 8:4)—introduced by *השבתי* (“I plead/I charge you to swear to me that”) as pledging an oath.⁷² And the mention of *חתום* (an “authoritative seal,” or “signet ring”) acknowledges the covenanting permanence which is normative for such committed love action. That reality sets up the obedient, later prophet Hosea's deed of marrying a prostitute in order to try vividly to teach God's people how the covenantal LORD felt about their idolatries.⁷³ And underneath these prophetic developments lies the basic revelation of *שלהבת יה* (“a flame of YAH!”) which heightens both Genesis 2 and Proverbs 5 to show what is at stake for us humans in our lifetimes: if human erotic, passionate love is not enflamed by the very LORD God! what does it profit you? Paul Ricoeur seconds Beauchamps's judgment that if *יה* is not taken to mean “Yahweh,” but is reduced to an adjective like “vehement” (RSV) or “raging” (NRSV), one has missed the capstone significance of this concluding passage and its tie-in to Wisdom.⁷⁴

Conclusion

My brief has been: “We can learn from overlooked Herder's hermeneutics and treatment of *שיר השרים* that if you go to Scripture initially as a dogmatic theologian, you will misconceive what God asks of you as biblical theologian.” The logical distillation of Scripture's tenets comes afterwards. First, one must know how to approach the Bible as literature and read the biblical literary text with a faith couched within the biblical canonic framework, and be aware of the biblical text as a performative (God-speaking) script. Otherwise one may forfeit taking in the Bible the way the Scripture is truly given, and thus garble its direction and wisdom for our daily human lives.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Herder hints at this connection (cf. *supra* ms. 10), and this insight was explicated early on by Phyllis Tribble in her formative book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), where the *Song* is read as a corrective midrash on Genesis 2–3; cf. chapter 5, “Love's Lyrics Redeemed.”

⁷² Sadgrove, 24.

⁷³ Conversely(!), the apostle Paul uses the intimacy of Christ with the church to help teach converted pagan men how to respect women in marriage. Cf. Eph. 5:21–24 leads into Eph. 5:25–33.

⁷⁴ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “La métaphore nuptiale,” in André Lacocque et Paul Ricoeur, *Penser la Bible* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), 452, note 37.

⁷⁵ I offer this article with respectful thanks to librarian Isabella Guthrie-McNaughton (Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto) and Marcille Frederick (Trini-

ty Christian College, Palos Heights) for help in obtaining documents, and to Sean Purcell for an interactive note on Ricoeur. I also thank colleagues Barbara Carvill from Calvin College and Arie Leder from Calvin Seminary, Michigan, for offering critical counsel on my written thoughts.