

Chaim T. Horovitz, *A Two Thousand Year History of the Influence of the Song of Songs on Religion, Literature, Music, and Art.*

The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter, 2010. Hardback; 426 pages; 36 images including 12 full colour plates; RRP US\$170
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To describe Chaim Horovitz's work as a survey of human endeavour inspired by the Song of Songs is accurate but incomplete, for it gives no indication that the book is also imbued with an overarching love for the erotic-symbolic poem whose precise genealogy still remains uncertain despite the work of many. Interpreted both literally and allegorically since its inclusion into the Hebrew *Tanakh*— probably before 200BCE – and subsequently taken into the Christian bible, many have created personal responses to the poem. Translations, analyses, art works, musical settings, and a myriad of other creative illuminations abound.

Horovitz himself, however, is not marching to the dramatic drum of creative response but rather to that of proficient maintainer, utilising a brush-on-snare technique to capture a wide-ranging sample of responses, distil the essence of each, and present them in categories that flow within the chapters of a well conceived and carefully constructed whole. Further, in the act of drawing the responses together, Horovitz provides relevant historical, philosophical and cultural contexts— particularly with regard to religion – that transforms a dry bibliographical resource into an engaging publication and adds further value to the works that he is presenting.

In amongst the précis of heavy ideology and scholarly exegesis, the reader learns, for example, that early Christian monks put on one-man shows, reading the text of the well-loved poem while displaying cards that told the audience which character of the Song was being represented at any given time. In modern times, the Song has featured in several movies including *Keeping Mum* (2006) in which one of the characters, Grace, adopts a literal stance towards the Song, openly defying allegorical interpretations by gleefully remonstrating that '[t]he Bible is full of sex!' (p. 313)

Tracking through the centuries, and the pages of the book, it becomes readily apparent that approaches to the Song have varied in accordance with the changing foci of the religions that have adopted the poem into their collections of sacred texts.

For example, Rabbi Akiba's (50-135CE) condemnation of the Song's continued laic use provides evidence that homiletic or allegorical interpretations of the Song had become hegemonic to Judaism by the second century BCE. Nonetheless, this was not a static position. Just as the Reformation spawned Protestants who preferred to interpret the song literally rather than allegorically, the mid-eighteenth century saw philosopher Moses Mendelssohn establishing a movement, the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) that, amongst other consequences, shunned mysticism. The *Haskalah* had similar results for Jewish interpretations of the Song to those of the Protestant reformers who were bent on reducing the iconic imagery of the Song and representing it in an entirely wholesome, this-worldly manner.

Conversely, literal interpreters have also met with significant resistance by those preferring allegory. At a time when virginity was understood by early Christians to be an eschatological asset, Jovinianus (d.c409) was condemned for pointing to the *Song* as proof of the sanctity of marital sex. Indeed, what was to become a renowned Catholic preference for allegorical interpretations which symbolically celebrate 'the mystery of love, the union of God and man prefigured in Israel and realized in the Incarnation of the Word through the nuptials of Christ and the church'¹ was well in place in the fifth century CE.

Horovitz acknowledges that, overall, allegorical responses have been the more common but he finds literal interpretations 'intriguing' and devotes a chapter to them. Exploring the links to ancient and near eastern love poetry, particularly erotic poetry, Horovitz also apprises the reader of rather less saucy responses, including linguistically-oriented theories, translation problems, feminist critiques, and the many literary studies of metaphors and imagery in the Song which show a particular predilection for the Song's twenty-four garden images.

Unsurprisingly, Christian and Hebrew responses to the Song dominate the book, with secular responses coming in a poor third, yet Horovitz does also treat briefly with other religious traditions, finding several parallels between certain verses and themes of the Song in both Confucian erotic poetry and in passages of the Qur'an. From a mystical perspective, Horovitz also identifies several scholars who have found that the Sufi assertion that love can only be understood by someone who has loved, is evocative of the Song. More globally, many have claimed that the Song has something for everyone including those with no faith or confession. Artist, Eric

Gill sardonically opined, for example, that it is a ‘poem of which atheists can see the beauty, even when they cannot see the meaning, and of which moralists can see the meaning, even when they cannot see the beauty.’²

Accordingly, Horovitz’s book also contains something for everyone. With chapters on the Song’s place in poetry and prose, in music, and in the fine arts, the final chapter explores the Song as it is reflected in everyday life, while the following ten appendices consist of lists of such things as Biblical translations, English translations, first printed separate editions, and refrains and repetitions within the Song itself. There is also a chronological list of 265 illustrated editions and a discography of 52 recordings of settings of the Song.

Boasting 24 black and white images, not to mention 12 full colour plates, each book is hand made with the specific Mellen Print Shop and Bindery employees responsible for the tasks of page layout and printing, sewing, end sheets, headbands and binding being credited on a simple red card that comes with the book. Dust jacket-free it quickly takes on the patina of age, and, in the occasional typographical error and the odd omission of a cited source from the 471-title bibliography, it exudes an idiosyncratic yet fully human cast.³ Similarly, although locating artworks and scholarship that have not been mentioned in the book is not difficult –Arnold Rosner’s *Nightstone* for voice and piano (1979) for example, and Dorothy S. Packer’s article *Collections of chaste chansons for the Devout Home 1613-1644* which elucidates the importance of the Song in this repertoire – this simply demonstrates the extent to which the Song has captured the hearts and minds of individuals and groups throughout time.⁴ More prosaically, it also demonstrates both the speed with which past and present publications are being digitised, and the ever-improving facility of search engines to deliver their titles within seconds to the screens of researchers.⁵

Ergo, Chaim Horovitz’s contribution provides a marked but welcome contrast to modern methods of data compilation and presentation. Moreover, in its selfless survey of the work of others, it is a humble gift whose form and function will be well appreciated by those who love the Song so much that, despite the evidence of all that has gone before, will remain compelled to create and promulgate their own individual responses; to contemplate its diverse meanings in yet one more study,

commentary, translation, poem, musical setting, or work of art. Such is the power of the Song of Songs. Such is the power of love.

¹As quoted by Horovitz on page 99, citing 'de Lubac, 1959:560-61'. The source does not appear in the bibliography but refers to *Exegesemédiévale: les quatresens de l'écriture*, (Paris, Aubier 1959-1964). Presumably the translation from the French is by Horovitz. The passage referred to appears in the English translation, *Medieval Exegesis: The four senses of scripture*, Vol 2, trans E. M. Macierowski, (Grand Rapids, Mich. : W.B. Eerdmans ; Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1998) p. 136.

² No specific source cited. See Horovitz p. 99.

³ Omissions identified were p. 86 Lawrence Cunningham (2006) (probably referring to his article published in *America*, 30 Jan 2006, http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=4588, accessed 7 October 2011; and, as noted above, Henri de Lubac (1959).

⁴ Dorothy S. Packer, "Collections of chaste chansons for the Devout Home 1613-1644", *ActaMusicologica* 61.2 (1989): 175-216.

⁵ Searching on 10 September 2011 for 'Song of Songs' in amazon.com's online book database, of the first 80 books listed Horovitz has referred to all but nine. These were: Craig Glickman *Solomon's Song of Love : Let a Song of Songs Inspire Your Own Romantic Story* (2003), Watchman Nee *The Song of Songs* (1995), Marcia Falk (b) *The Song of Songs: Love Lyrics from the Bible* (HBI Series on Jewish Women) (2004), Roland E. Murphy and S. Dean McBride Jr. *Song of Songs Hermeneia* (Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible) (Aug 1990), Robert Graves and Hans Erni *The Song of Songs* (Dec 1973). Duane A. Garrett *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (New American Commentary) (Jun 11, 1993), David G. Moore and Daniel L. Akin *Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs* (Holman Old Testament Commentary, Vol. 14) (Jul 1, 2003), Robert W. Jenson *Song Of Songs* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching) (2005), Dianne CSA Bergant, David W. Cotter and Jerome T. Walsh, *The Song of Songs* (BeritOlam (The Everlasting Covenant): Studies In Hebrew Narrative And Poetry) (2001)

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