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Song of Songs – Current trends in research

ABSTRACT

This article reviews recent developments in Song of Songs scholarship with a focus on publications within the South African context. The article provides an overview of the interpretation of the Song of Songs and describes the main lines of research. Research on the Song of Songs continues the trends of recent years, with an emphasis on literal interpretation. However, there is renewed interest in patristics, allegorical interpretation as erotic or intertextual allegorisation, and reception history. Interpretation in the context of a myth seemed outdated, but it is also back. Southern African studies have contributed to these fields and to contextual studies.

1. NEO-ALLEGORICAL APPROACHES

An allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs has dominated exegesis for many centuries. In the 1960s, the allegorical approach seemed to have come to an end – not in the church – but in academia. Rudolph (1962:89, my translation) put it succinctly: “Nothing else can be found as the subject of the Song of Songs but the love between man and woman.” The allegorical interpretation was replaced by a profane, literal interpretation. Allegorical interpretation was understood as a secondary development of Jewish and Christian religious communities, developing no later than the 1st century AD (Gerhards 2016:54). Recently, however, it has been the subject of renewed discussion, and it has been suggested that the Song of Songs was composed as an allegory.



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For this, Heereman (2017:32, published 2021) introduced the phrase ‘neo-allegorical approach’ in her monumental doctoral thesis.

1.1 Intertextual allegorisation

Schwienhorst-Schönberger is a prominent advocate of allegorical interpretation. He and Schellenberg (2016) had a friendly argument in their jointly edited monograph: “Interpreting the Song of Songs – literal or allegorical?”. According to Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2016:46),

[i]t is not impossible at all that the original setting of individual songs of the Song of Songs could have been a purely secular one. In its current context, however, these songs probably did have the loving relationship between God and his beloved bride, his people, in view from the beginning.

He argues for a theological and at the same time allegorical interpretation with reference to texts that use the same metaphors for the relationship between God and Israel (for example, the vineyard song in Isa. 5). Even when he succumbs to a secular interpretation, he defends an allegorical interpretation through intertextuality. He does not present a new argument, but it is still a new trend to interpret the Song of Songs allegorically again in an academic context, and to justify it by an intertextual reading of similar metaphors in the prophets and other texts. The small number of recurring metaphors (especially the vineyard and marriage metaphors) makes the allegory appear to rest on a weak foundation. While allegory as a secondary interpretation is common, he claims it as the original intention of the text.

1.2 Allegory in a cult mythological context of the Ancient Near East

Heereman (2017:32) includes mythic symbolism among the neo-allegorical approaches. It developed from a cultic interpretation that had gained some prominence with references to the god Tammuz (Meek 1922). The goddess Inanna and the Song of Songs were interpreted as the sacred marriage of a spring god (Schmökel 1956). Nissinen (1998) analysed Mesopotamian love songs in relation to the Song of Songs, especially the love lyrics of Nabu and Tashmetu. In contrast to Egyptian love songs, Nissinen’s (2008) study of the Song of Songs and sacred marriage emphasises the religious context of Mesopotamian love songs. He observes that

love imagery did not arise only from extrabiblical but demonstrably also from biblical literary tradition ... [and that] the Song of Songs can be understood against the background of the divine-human marriage matrix (Nissinen 2008:215; see Nissinen 2006).

He concludes that this “gender matrix gave the text an interpretive framework, that was available to its readers from the very beginning” (Nissinen 2008:215) In his view, a religious reading was present from the beginning. Consequently, Heereman (2018:418) reads Song of Songs in the “framework of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) royal ideology [...] as a divine-human love song after all”.

1.3 Erotic allegorisation

Ausloos and Lemmeljin (2010:8) coined the phrase ‘erotic allegorisation’ and explained that

a new sort of allegory is apparent. Whereas the theological-allegorical reading thought it could point to an underlying religious meaning for almost every term in Canticles, the anthropological-allegorical reading goes in search of allusions to human genitalia and sexual behaviour. ... Just as there are no indications in Canticles that the text should be read theologically-allegorically, so too in the anthropological/erotic-allegorical interpretation one must give free reign to one’s imagination.

Erotic allegorisation dissolves the image by equating individual aspects such as the garden with a part of the female body. Loader, In his article “Exegetical erotica to Canticles 7:2-6”, Loader (2001) highlights several erotic motifs. Scheffler (2024:30) follows his lines, seeing the woman in 7:1 as a stripper “with almost explicit references (7.3a) to her vulva (a round bowl or crater) and breasts”. Heereman (2017:117-118) exposes this approach as an allegory:

Ironically, modern exegesis that treats the metaphors of the Songs in this manner differ in no fundamental way from the traditional allegorizing interpretation. The only difference is that neither God nor his people are suspected to be “hidden” underneath the metaphoric covering of the Song’s poetry. Instead, the metaphors are treated as word-allegories (theory of substitution) designating the body - parts of a naked woman and a male’s lascivious desire. The exegetical technique remains the same.

1.4 Reception history: Allegory and typology

The history of the reception of the Song of Songs itself has become an object of research. Allegorical and typological interpretations are analysed in their different historical and cultural contexts.

In Schellenberg’s (2023) extensive volume, *The Song of Songs through the ages. Essays on the Song’s reception history in different times, contexts, and genres*, several essays are on the Song’s reception history in different times, contexts, and genres and show how allegorical interpretation has been prevalent in various forms. In Christianity, the first extant commentary derives

from Hippolytus. He interprets it as a prophecy fulfilled in Christ incarnate. He is the bridegroom, and the beloved represents the church (Heil 2023:13). Birnbaum (2017:127) analyses early Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs and their threefold purpose, namely the “spiritual development of its readers”, “the ascent of the human soul to God”, and the love that “characterises the relationship between God and humankind” and concludes that “pre-hermeneutical presuppositions inevitably led to an allegorical understanding”.

LaVere’s¹ (2016) careful dissertation focuses on scholastic exegesis in the medieval period when the Song of Songs was at the centre of interpretation. At that time, scholars commented on the Song of Songs allegorically, as a communication between Christ and the church. Some emphasised an active, apostolic life of preaching, modelled on Christ himself. They taught the church by putting words in Christ’s mouth, preaching to the people as Christ spoke to himself. Anselm of Laon, for example, was concerned with the moral life of preachers. He also initiated the Gloss, a collection of various sources from the church fathers, showing their agreement in valuing contemplation as superior to preaching. Another aspect is the prophetic view that the church and the synagogue are ultimately united to make the Word of Christ known and to oppose the heretics who destroy the church like foxes the vineyard (Cant. 2:15). In sum: the moral life, contemplation, preaching, and a prophetic interpretation were the dominant ones. In the Middle Ages, a mystical interpretation as an individual allegory was common. Allegory and typology are related interpretations. Some medieval commentators such as, for example, Peter Olivi and Nicholas of Lyra were in line with rabbinic interpretation, taking the Exodus as its historical context. Kaplan (2023:37) summarises the rabbinic approach of the identification of the woman with Israel and the male with Israel’s God.

[They] interpreted the Song typologically and correlated it to an idealized vision of Israel’s history and practice found in the period of the exodus, Sinai Theophany, and wilderness wanderings. While this mode of interpretation is neither erotic [n]or sensual, the rabbis employed the Song in order to characterize this relationship as one marked by deep affection and mutual devotion.

1 A revised edition of her doctoral thesis (2009) is published as LaVere 2016.

2. SHIFTS AND CHANGES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF SONG OF SONGS

In her recent introduction and study guide, Exum (2022:1-59) summarises the main exegetical approaches and readings of the Song of Songs. She gives the impression that these topics are closed. In fact, some of them such as allegory have experienced a renaissance.

Exum (2022:60-112) devotes half of her small book to the topic of 'current issues' with seven themes, namely the nature of looking; the metaphoric descriptions of the body; the garden, the city and other spaces; feminist criticism, masculinity studies and challenges to heteronormative readings; race and ethnicity; deconstruction; reception criticism, as well as the role of the reader.

She provides a useful overview of issues that have become important in recent decades. Some of these developments are still part of current trends. These are also considered below.

2.1 Different approaches from past to present

In the second half of the 20th century, the literal interpretation of human love, as promoted by Herder and Goethe, became dominant.

In the 18th century, the two German doyens Goethe and Herder were friends and had a similar view of the Song of Songs. Herder read the Song of Songs as a folk song. He accepted allegorical interpretations as references to the people of Israel as equally moral and poetic or philosophical uses, but they should not reflect or suppress the natural meaning of the word as its primary intention. Even if they have different and independent origins, they are arranged by the collector in such a way as to show the development of love from its tender beginnings to its blossoming (Herder 1778:110-111). Goethe observed the double scenery of the biblical poem of rural and urban landscapes and emphasised the oriental realm where both are interwoven (see Shahar 2023:114).

Another non-allegorical approach with a different understanding of the text's intention, the dramatic interpretation, became prominent in the 18th and 19th centuries and was developed into a love triangle hypothesis set in the context of marriage. Birnbaum (2023:363-364) mentions three historical reasons for this interpretation: abandonment of traditional thinking and the primacy of human reason; a new concept of marriage and love meant that sexuality, marriage, and love were united for the first time in history, and a new perspective on the Hebrews, who were viewed as a people of the ancient Orient.

For her, the heart of the drama lies in the fact that Solomon is a contrasting figure, against whom the “unimpeachable lovers ... served to highlight the true love of the married couple even more” (Birnbaum 2023:383).

An important contribution was made by Wetzstein (1873:288), who observed funeral and wedding customs in Syria. He drew parallels from a variety of individual observations, so that the Song of Songs fits in aptly, suggesting that the stability of conditions there, the present can serve to illustrate the past. He identifies the *waṣf* as a physical description of the perfection of the bride and groom, as well as the *waṣf*. as a descriptive song.

His argument strengthened the interpretation of the Song of Songs in the context of marriage; not an allegorical marriage, but a literal marriage, whether read as a drama or as a more or less independent folk song. Vijař (2019; 2021; now under the name Volkonski 2024) took up these observations in preparation for her doctoral dissertation. She places Song of Songs in the context of pre-Islamic Arabic poetic songs and identifies further genres (*hiġā* [lampoon], *tašbīb* (amatory poetry) that shed light on the understanding of the text.

2.2 The shift to a literal interpretation

A literal interpretation is difficult to establish from the outset, but it has not been viewed as contradictory to a more spiritual interpretation. A literal interpretation as profane love songs received much support from comparative studies with Egyptian love songs. Most importantly, White's (1978) doctoral thesis “A study of the language of love in the Song of Songs and ancient Egyptian poetry” and Fox's (1985) book on the Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian love songs. Later, Fox (2016:11) summarises:

Love is not only emotion but also vision, but love makes one see the world differently. The strange metaphors in Canticles' Praise Songs divert us from the actual appearance of the lovers and make us look *through* them to the world beyond them, the world created by the imagery itself. From this we learn less about how the lovers look than how they see.

It is secondary whether the Song of Songs is a loose collection of love poems, or whether it is linked by keywords and structural references, or even has a narrative character. There is some agreement among scholars with Fox (2016:10) who reads in the lines of Herder “Canticles as a single song whose unity lies in a network of repetends (repetitions with variations)”. In a literal interpretation, the woman and the man could still interact with the other figures

of the text (brothers, mother, daughters of Jerusalem, watchmen, and so on), especially if the narrative character of the Song of Songs is emphasised. Nevertheless, the main point is the love between a man and a woman.

A literal reading opens new perspectives because the relationship between the sexes can be redefined as Verde (2019) does it in his exploration of conceptual metaphors. He analyses the concept of masculinity and the mutual desire of lovers in the field of love and war (Verde 2020).

Meredith (2013) undertook an analysis of spatial concepts. She promotes the textual space of a poetic text. James (2017) is concerned with the treatment and representation of landscape. She argues that poetic attention to landscape points to an awareness of the viewer and overcomes a dichotomy between landscape and nature. Wilke (2017) has a socio-spatial approach. Space is also the subject in two articles of Fischer and Dantonel 'Song of Songs in sense, sound and space' (Fernandes *et al.* 2024).

Song of Songs can even be read as a contrast to the Garden of Eden story, as Hügel (2013:172) concludes in her article on queer readings, because the

erotic collection of songs can be read as a moving testimony to sexual pleasures. Sexual pleasures that challenge patriarchal norms in the context of prevailing marriage models.

Moore (2001:27) already pointed to the implicit homoeroticism in an allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, as the male reader identifies with the bride, since God or Jesus Christ is the bridegroom.

3. AN OLD WISDOM DEBATE AND A NEW APPROACH TO WISDOM

3.1 Song of Songs as a non-wisdom text

The Song of Songs has been associated with wisdom through its attribution to Solomon as the wisest king, a great poet,² and an intense lover.³ It might suffice to subsume the Song of Songs as part of a broader understanding of wisdom, but for modern scholarship, the Song of Songs did not meet the standards to be classified as wisdom, because wisdom was defined as a particular type of literature, distinct from wisdom as a genre, "which might include evidence of wisdom influence in a predominantly non-wisdom text" (Dell 2005:8). The

2 According to the tradition of 1 Kings, he created a multitude of songs and proverbs, 1 Kgs 5:10-12.

3 A thousand wives, 1 Kgs 7:3; referred to in the royal experiment of Eccl. 2:8.

narrow definition of wisdom excluded Song of Songs. Murphy (1990:106) takes this distinction up: "Needless to say, the Canticle is not a wisdom book; it is a collection of love poems." Clines (1989:269) summarises:

All the wisdom books are so called because of their didactic contents; among the books of the Old Testament, they are distinctive in that they deliberately set out to be instructional about right living or right thinking.

3.2 Song of Songs as a wisdom text

Oosthuizen (2014) challenged the view of Song of Songs as a non-wisdom text. As early as 1983, in his doctoral dissertation, which focused on the canon, at the University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, Riekert (1983:207) observed the responsive character of the literal exegesis of Song of Songs: "Canticles is didactic in one sense: although it does not teach, it wants to invite some response."

Oosthuizen goes much further. In her masters thesis, she develops a coherent methodology for all the characteristics of wisdom and applies it to the Song of Songs. Following James Crenshaw, who identifies four initial markers of wisdom (literary corpus, similar texts in Egypt and Mesopotamia, attitude, and thematic coherence), she analyses the underlying premise of ancient wisdom according to Crenshaw's three elements (order, fear of the Lord, and authority). Following Crenshaw, she summarises the characteristics that define wisdom (general characteristics, literary characteristics, characteristics of content) and adds other important themes, namely sages, Solomonic tradition, scepticism, and revelation. She proves that most of the characteristics of wisdom literature are present in the Song of Songs, even though it does not formally belong to the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible (Oosthuizen 2014:63-64).

A prominent proponent of the Song of Songs interpretation as wisdom is Andruska, who argues, in her 2017 Cambridge dissertation, published in 2019, that the Song of Solomon is to be read as wisdom instruction. She summarises her arguments in her recent chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature*. Andruska (2022) emphasises the performance setting and points out that it is important to view the song as a unified work in terms of content (repeated words, phrases, verbal echoes) and structure. She emphasises the instructional character of the choruses (2:7, 3:5, 8:4) and the intended character transformation of the audience.

Scholars with a narrower definition of the wisdom genre do not count the Song of Songs as wisdom but those scholars who emphasise the wisdom of Song of Songs read it in a wider context. There are other aspects that shed new light on the wisdom of Song of Songs.

3.3 The woman between Lady Folly and Wisdom

Intertextual relationships between Song of Songs and Proverbs 1-9 have long been observed. Imray (2013) summarises the research in her article on reading the Song of Songs through Proverbs 1-9. This leads to an intertextual reading of wisdom not as an allegory but as a wisdom reading, especially when it is linked to the Lady Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs who built her house “the only place where true sapiential nourishment can be found” (Loader 2014:384). A non-allegorical intertextual reading of the bride sheds new light on the wisdom of the Song of Songs and picks up on older research. Dell (2005:25) mentions the medieval Jewish scholar Don Isaac Abravanel, who “saw the characters of the Song not as God and Israel but as Solomon and the Bride who represented Wisdom.”

3.3.1 Shulamite as role model for a new wisdom

Doukhan (2019:viii) takes a fresh look at the woman as Shulamite and finds a deeply personal and feminine wisdom of love. Provocatively, she says that it is good news that Shulamite has lost her way:

She is herself “damaged goods” having lost her virginity, thereby shaming her brothers. She has herself ventured outside of the protective walls of patriarchy in her approach to love and brazenly continues to do so with her present lover in the Song. She has broken every rule of engagement and courtship as well as the more implicit and delicate laws of modesty and discretion. And yet, she finds lasting love. ... Our Shulamite has rejected the wisdom of the ancients, but, in the tumultuous throes of her love, she begins to craft her own wisdom; she has left behind the protection of patriarchy but awakened to her own inner strength and courage.

Further, Doukhan can also be considered an advocate of a new mysticism and turns the classification of the sexes upside down by identifying, in an allegorical interpretation, God not with the lover but with the woman. Doukhan (2019:105) suggests

that God is better embodied by the woman of our Song than by the man. Doing this, however, reveals a whole new facet of the persona of God. No more endowed with the traditional male traits of aggressivity, power and control, we meet, through the traits of this African woman, a passionate, reckless, yet shy God.

4. BEYOND THE ALLEGORICAL AND NON-ALLEGORICAL DISPUTE: NEW RELIGIOUS READING

4.1 Allusions to God and religious motives

The Song of Songs can be read as a religious work, even without an allegory. In the adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem, God may be alluded to by the wordplay of the gazelles or wild goats (Cant. 2:7; 3:5), which resemble, as has often been noticed, God as Zebaoth (the Lord of Hosts) and Elohim. This is a light-hearted oath, even if it sounds like a conventional way of swearing an oath ... but it lacks the solemnity that such an oath assumes (Exum 2022:34).

There is also the short form Jah in “Love is a flame of Jah” (Cant. 8:6), although it has the function of a superlative: “Love is an intense flame” (Cant. 8:6). In both instances, even though God might take on a protective role in the invocation or be a force of love, he is not a figure of the text but might point to a mythical background. Furthermore, in 8:6-7, there might be a “weak echo of the once mighty” Canaanite God Resheph (Mathys 2019:129). Possibly, God may be indirectly present in the external omniscient voice (Cant. 5:1b) that supports the consuming and intoxicating love of the lovers. The voice of God is present in the intimacy of the garden (Fischer 2011:67). The garden with its plants, fruits, spices, rivers, and flowing water is a reference to the Garden of Eden (Landy 1983:189-265). Through lovemaking, the lovers regain paradise. Religious motifs are “in the background and do not constitute the Song’s message” (Fox 2016:10).

4.2 Religiosity of the Song of Songs

In her commentary, Exum (2005:47-67) argues for a non-religious reading of literature. This view has been challenged. Religious motifs are intrinsic to the world view and are found in many places. Van der Zwan explored this in his 2012 dissertation at UNISA on the religiosity of the Song of Songs. He developed this alternative approach further by conducting an in-depth psychology analysis of the texts, moving from religion to the human dimension of religiosity. In doing so, he arrived at an anthropological perspective that incorporates features of the history of religion within a transpersonal psychological framework. The interpretation of personality stages as levels of religiosity is a classical task of the psychology of religion. Van der Zwan evaluates the nature of religiosity in application to the Song of Songs and shows that “transitions from awakening to being passionately alive in various states of consciousness are repeatedly brought to the fore” (Van der Zwan 2012:231).

For example, on the archaic level of religiosity in the pre-egoic stage, he discovered that, in the new body theology, an experience of the divine is revealed in ordinary and extraordinary bodily experiences, such as abound in the Song of Songs, and that the magical level of religion is accounted for in the worship of the star, the well, and the tree in the Israelite religion, all three being comparisons for the beloved. In a more recent article, Van der Zwan (2017:493) further explores the religiosity in the aesthetics of Song of Songs, suggesting that the

frequent mention of incense and other fragrances ... conjures up religious associations. It is as if the lovers experience religious impressions but do not have the religious expressions for them.

In the Song of Songs, he rediscovers God in the broader sense of religiosity. This is in keeping with the *Zeitgeist*, which is torn between secularism and a new religiosity. This interpretation as a non-allegorical but still religious book places the literal understanding of the love songs in a broader world view.

Kotzé (2017:584) emphasises the ancient Near Eastern background of the Song of Songs and observes superstition. In his article on the evil eye in the Song of Songs, he concludes

the specific request of the beloved not to be looked at in chapter 1:6 is best understood against the background of the evil eye belief.

Recently, Kotzé (2023) built on hyleme analysis and investigates

mythological elements in the identity and actions of the beloved by means of a comparative hyleme analysis [to explore] the identity of the beloved as a possible type of ancient Near Eastern deity.

He bases his analysis on cult mythological studies and observes the religious implementations but he does not draw any allegorical conclusion.

4.3 Recent renewal as spiritual direction

In 2012, Lam wrote a Master's thesis at the University of South Africa, entitled "The canticle of spiritual direction: A transformative approach to the Song of Songs". A summary is available in an article (Lam 2015). She reads it as a "biblical paradigm for Christian spiritual direction based on the poem's human dynamics, theological poetics, and mystical aesthetic" (Lam 2012:v). She identifies the vineyard metaphor as the hermeneutical key and understands the plain and obvious sense of the text as entry level, the level of eros, and claims that "the poet uses a 'live metaphor' to organically connect multiple dimensions" (Lam 2015:5). The "Song's mystico-poetic vocation finds epiphany in contemporary human lives" (Lam 2012:175).

4.4 Resonance of relations and the divide between sexuality and spirituality

In her doctoral dissertation (2021, published in 2022) on the resonance of relationships, Swadosch builds on the work of sociologist Hartmut Rosa and applies his sociology of world relations. She examines the account of resonance in the Song of Songs as a radicalisation of the idea of relationship and interpersonal and divine-human relationships in the Song of Songs (Swadosch 2022:15). She also explores the Song of Songs in terms of its resonance-theoretical and erotic dimensions, thereby revealing transformative processes of self-world relations (Swadosch 2022:18). The dynamic of love in the Song of Songs creates new self-world relationships by turning towards each other and the world in love. The ambivalent choice of words helps us understand love not only as interpersonal, but also as transcendental (Swadosch 2022:283).

Oosthuizen (2014) addressed this transcendence theologically and explored it further in a recent article and claims that the “time has come to bridge the divide between sexuality and spirituality” (Oosthuizen 2023:17). In another article, Oosthuizen (2019:263) calls for

contextual consciousness, which refers to both the personal context of the interpreter (religious tradition, theological presuppositions, ethics, etc.) and the context and needs of the community served by the interpretation.

Swadosch and Oosthuizen show that sociological and theological methods complement and inspire each other beyond the debate about allegorical or non-allegorical interpretation.

5. SONG OF SONGS IN AFRICAN SCHOLARSHIP – CONTEXTUALISING SONG OF SONGS

In the previous section on current trends, reference was made to various publications from South Africa as an often-unnoticed voice in the international discourse of Western theology. In addition, a new discourse of African scholarship has emerged in the 2010s.

5.1 A decade of intensified research and problems of publication

In 2012, Lombaard (then at the University of South Africa; now at the University of Pretoria) and I started a series of annual international conferences on the Song of Songs, bringing together senior and junior scholars, mainly from Europe and Southern Africa. Interdisciplinary approaches were encouraged.

This resulted in several articles in the *Journal of Semitics* and three volumes on Song of Songs (Fischer & Lombaard 2014; Fischer & Fernandes 2019; Fernandes *et al.* 2024). Unfortunately, several papers presented at the conferences have remained unpublished.⁴ However, academics must deal with this reality, as Mangayi addressed in his 2014 article “Why do African Old Testament scholars not write on SoS?”. Mangayi (2014:823) mentions the main reasons as

- (i) cultural constraints, (ii) technical reasons (e.g., lack of skills to interpret Song of Songs in culturally accepted language), and (iii) doctrinal (e.g., doubt about the content of Song of Songs).

Ndoga In the same volume, Ndoga (2014:802) stresses the cultural constraints:

First, love and eroticism are subjects that are not openly discussed in African cultures. The author’s first language (Shona) does not have a functional language in which such erotic matters can be discussed ... Such reservations have made allegorical approaches to the Song of Songs convenient.

The challenging academic and personal circumstances of some colleagues, who often have part-time ministries and jobs, particularly in agriculture, to support themselves, can make it difficult for them to attend conferences and concentrate on publishing. Access to recent publications and technical infrastructure is often limited, although the Society of Biblical Literature’s online book project has been available for over a decade. The International Cooperation Initiative has provided access to several publications. Despite these difficulties, research on the Song of Songs in Africa continues to be successful.

5.2 Newer African contextualised studies

In addition to the publications mentioned earlier, which follow the Western tradition of interpretation, there are also some contextualised studies.

5.2.1 Juma

In 2014, Juma from Kenya graduated from the University of Stellenbosch with a doctoral thesis contextualising the Song of Songs with her Kenyan background: “Encountering the female voice in the Song of Songs: Reading the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women”. She made explicit use of Kenyan women’s poetry. Juma examines the role of sexuality in shaping identity and expands on this idea by contextualising it within the socio-economic and developmental experiences of Kenyan women. She also

4 For example, in 2013, Vengeyi from the University of Zimbabwe, Harare, presented a paper on ‘ZimDanceHall’ music as a contemporary version of Song of Songs: A lyrical interpretation.

interprets the voice of the woman in the Song of Songs as courageous in a patriarchal environment, presenting issues of gender and sexuality from a new perspective. In patriarchal societies, women's poetry can serve as a hermeneutic approach to amplify women's voices, as noted in the Song of Songs and Kenyan women's poetry. This "has the potential to inform and therefore to transform the patriarchal framework of Kenyan society" (Juma 2014:iv). It can also be a vehicle for social change.

5.2.2 Kavusa

Kavusa wrote a doctoral thesis at the University of South Africa, on "The life-giving and life-threatening potential of water and water-related phenomena in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature: An eco-theological exploration" (2015) and observed "the significance of 'water in garden motif', such as Song of Songs 4:12-15 or Genesis 2:5-6" (Kavusa 2015:52). He developed the thesis into an article where he interprets the metaphor of the locked garden (Cant. 4:12-15) as a metaphor for the ecological sustainability of nature (Kavusa 2022).

5.2.3 Mtshiselwa

Mtshiselwa published an article on a comparative study of the Song of Songs and a popular African song (Brenda Fassie's 'Nakupenda'). He explores the liberating potential of both texts for oppressed women in South Africa to express their views, concerns, and interests. He further emphasises that

acts of violence against women are evident in both the SoS and the South African (con)texts, and it is critical that we read the portrayal of a loving male partner in contrast to the gender-based abuse perpetrated by the strangers in the SoS (Mtshiselwa 2016:423).

6. CURRENT TRENDS

In recent years, research has seen a surprising renaissance of allegorical exegesis. Other older research approaches such as cult mythological, have also been taken up again. Authors from the African context have contributed to the exegetical discussion. New contributions to the debate on wisdom and religion have emerged, and individual works contribute to the relevance of the Song of Songs for our own present by way of contextual studies. It remains problematic that important findings, especially from contextual studies, do not find their way into the academic discussion. Some examples show that African scholarship has an important contribution to make. This new development needs more attention and support at various levels.

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