

## Theological Interpretation of the Song of Songs: A Test Case

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### Introduction

In my various interactions with “Theological Interpretation of Scripture” (TIS), I have found its most salient feature to be its elusiveness. The primary proponents of TIS seem conspicuously averse to producing a clear definition, and they tend to describe TIS more in terms of what it *is not* than what it *is*. Vanhoozer states in the introduction of his OT survey that theological interpretation of the Bible *is not*

- an imposition of a theological system or confessional grid onto the biblical text.
- an imposition of a general hermeneutic or theory of interpretation onto the biblical text.
- a form of merely historical, literary, or sociological criticism preoccupied with (respectively) the world “behind,” “of,” or “in front of” the biblical text.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of succinctly defining what TIS *is*, Vanhoozer lists three premises held by all of the contributors to his survey: theological interpretation of the Bible

- is not the exclusive property of biblical scholars but the joint responsibility of all the theological disciplines and of the whole people of God, a peculiar fruit of the communion of the saints.
- is characterized by a governing interest in God, the word and works of God, and by a governing intention to engage in what we might call “theological criticism.”
- names a broad ecclesial concern that embraces a number of academic approaches.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than attempt to sort through the “is” and the “is not” of TIS, this paper will bypass the realm of the abstract and “cut to the chase.” What has TIS produced in the way of biblical scholarship? However its proponents choose to describe it, what kind of fruit does “theological interpretation” bear for the spiritual nourishment of the church?

The Song of Songs is a fitting “test case” for *theological* interpretation of Scripture. One of the most long-held charges against the plainly interpreted Song is its alleged lack of theological content. Garrett has articulated the perceived theological problem concerning the Song of Songs and plain interpretation:

The demise of the allegorical interpretation appears to have left the Song of Songs a theologically impoverished book...Is a ‘theology of sexuality’ all that the Song has to

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2008), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible,” 20-23.

offer? Does Song of Songs have any real theology? Is it a nontheological love song from which one can get a theological message only by an exegetical tour de force?<sup>3</sup>

In fairness to Garrett's line of questioning, it is not necessary to believe in God to agree that "love and sex are good." There are surely any number of atheists in the world who get married, remain faithful, and enjoy sex. If an atheist husband and wife can see *their* emotional and physical love for each other reflected in the poetry of the Song of Songs, then where exactly is its theology?

This paper will look at two recent TIS works on the Song of Songs to see how they attempt to interpret the Song "theologically."<sup>4</sup> The first is a (somewhat) exegetical commentary; the second is more of a theological meditation. Both authors align with TIS – the first by association with the commentary series to which he is contributing, the second by explicit statement. Each work will be assessed on the basis of how the author arrives at a "theology" or theological contribution of the Song, followed by a response from the perspective of plain interpretation.<sup>5</sup> The conclusion will be a defense of plain interpretation against "theological interpretation," with particular reference to the Song of Songs.

## TIS Interpretations of the Song

*Brazos Theological Commentary* (Paul J. Griffiths, 2011)

According to series editor R. R. Reno, "The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture."<sup>6</sup>

Reno further states, "The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation...Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of Scripture – or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory."<sup>7</sup>

According to an archived personal web site, Paul Griffiths converted to Catholicism from the Anglican church in 1996,<sup>8</sup> and the perspective of his commentary is unambiguously Roman Catholic. He does not hold to a single author of the Song; he believes that the Song is a

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<sup>3</sup> Duane Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, Vol 23B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 2004), 97-98. Interestingly, Garrett derived his proposed Song theology of "transformation of the soul" by what can only be described as an exegetical tour de force based on the premise that "love and sex are good...falls short of a profound theology" (107ff).

<sup>4</sup> Another current TIS commentary series is "Two Horizons," but as of this writing no volume on the Song has been published.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper I use the term "plain interpretation" to refer to the method of biblical exegesis practiced by dispensationalists (see Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007], chapter 5). I prefer to avoid the term "literal interpretation" because of the pervasive misunderstanding of the different meanings of the term "literal."

<sup>6</sup> R. R. Reno, Series Preface to *Song of Songs*. Brazos Theological Commentary, by Paul J. Griffiths (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Reno, "Series Preface," xv.

<sup>8</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20190527005754/https://pauljgriffiths.net/> (accessed 06/22/2023).

collection of Hebrew lyrics that began to be assembled sometime after the Babylonian exile and were eventually finalized in the form we have it today.<sup>9</sup> He also believes that a translated text is no less authoritative:

There is, textually speaking, no real thing: there are only versions, all of them confected, some involving translation from one natural language into another and some not...Hearing the Song in English is not second best to hearing it in Hebrew: both are confected versions, and each is fully the word of the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

Griffiths identifies three voices in the Song: “I call them, to begin with, the lover (a man), the beloved (a woman), and the daughters (a group of women).”<sup>11</sup> His view of the referents of these voices is best quoted in full:

...it is the unanimous witness of Jewish and Christian commentators before the modern period (and to a considerable extent after it) that the unnamed characters of the Song are figures, which is to say that in addition to being themselves they point to and participate in and reveal, in part, others: the people of Israel, the church, the individual beloved by the Lord, Mary, she whom the Lord has most desired and with whom he has entered into the greatest intimacy. The romance and desire of the Song, on these views, are not only, and perhaps not at all, about two unnamed lovers; they are also, and perhaps principally, and perhaps even only, about the desire of the Lord for his Israel, for his church, for Mary, and for you and me.<sup>12</sup>

To summarize his allegorization, the male protagonist (the “lover”) ultimately points to the Lord (which could be either God the Father or Jesus the Son), and the female protagonist (the “beloved”) ultimately points to Israel, the church, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the individual believer. However, he does not opt for allegory *only* as Origen did but insists on retaining the plain meaning along with the allegorical referents:

On this allegorical view, the human beloved and the eroticism of the text vanishes, is neutered and absorbed. Better, certainly more fully Christian, is to read in such a way as to preserve both the text’s figures and what they figure.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, xxiii-xxiv. He uses the term “confecting” to describe the process by which the Song was composed: “to confect is to make something sweet and beautiful by judicious mixing of ingredients; it may also imply a co-making, an act of making in cooperation with other makers” (*Song of Songs*, xxiii).

<sup>10</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, xxxviii. Griffiths chose to exegete a Latin translation of the Song (the *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*) rather than any version of the Hebrew text. His reasons were both ecclesiastical and liturgical – a Latin text because of the primacy of the Vulgate in Roman Catholicism, and an updated version of the Vulgate because it has become the standard text in Catholic lectionaries and other liturgical materials (*Song of Songs*, xlii).

<sup>11</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, xliii.

<sup>12</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, xlvi.

<sup>13</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, xlix.

In other words, the Song is about “erotic” human love *and* the relationship between the Lord and the aforementioned “female” referents. Griffiths refers to this as “figural” reading, which appears to mean allegorizing or typologizing without abandoning the plain meaning:

One event or utterance figures another when, while remaining unalterably what it is, it announces or communicates something other than itself.<sup>14</sup>

He concludes his introduction with this rhetorical question:

Why not read the text just as a series of lyrics about love and desire? Well, of course that is possible. But to do that would not be to read the Song as a scriptural book; neither would it be to take seriously the weight of the Song’s readings by Jews and Christians over two thousand years.”<sup>15</sup>

The commentary itself contains a “surface” interpretation of each verse concerning the “erotic” relationship of the male and female lovers followed by his “figural” interpretations concerning Israel, the Church, Mary the mother of Jesus, and individual believers. His “surface” interpretation of Song 1:2 (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth...”) appears to throw the question of gender and “the habituated shape of your sexual desires” wide open:

You, whether you are male or female, are, then, identifying with the Song’s beloved when you resonate with the Song’s first-person voice. But the questions of sex and gender – yours as hearer and that of the Song’s voices, male and female – are not of central importance here. You, whatever your sex and whatever the habituated shape of your sexual desires, will find as you hear the Song, whether for the first time or the fiftieth, that you resonate and identify differently at different times; and the text of the Song forces those shifts upon you. If you are female and habituated to love of and desire for males, this does not mean that you can resonate only with the Song’s beloved’s expressions of desire for her male lover and delight in his male body. Neither, *mutatis mutandis*, if you are a male habituated to desiring the female. The Song’s layers of figuration require, if you attend to them closely, transpositions here: as you come to see the beloved as a figure for the Lord’s Israel-church and yourself as a member of that body, then her desires come to figure yours, whatever your sex and gender and habits.<sup>16</sup>

It is not difficult to see Griffiths’ lack of biblical clarity on gender identity and sexual morality. He is on record affirming the inherent “good”-ness of homosexual acts “motivated by love” in a 2014 book review:

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<sup>14</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, lxix. Daniel Treier discusses different views on “literal,” “allegorical,” “typological,” and “figural” reading in *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008): 42-54.

<sup>15</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, liv.

<sup>16</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 8-9.

On homosexuality and homosexual acts, by contrast, I think Rodriguez much closer to being right than not. Insofar as such acts are motivated by and evoke love, they are good and to be loved; insofar as they do not, not. In this, they are no different from heterosexual acts.<sup>17</sup>

Griffiths consistently conflates the “erotic” relationship of the two lovers with the spiritual relationship of God and His people. Song 5:1 refers to the consummation of the couple’s marriage on their wedding night, and Griffiths perceptively notes that the text of Song 4:16-5:1 “draws a veil” around the actual act of sexual intercourse so as not to sound like either a biology textbook or a trashy romance novel.<sup>18</sup> Then he gives this additional reason for the “veiling”:

...if sexual intercourse, specifically the extended present of orgasm, serves in the Song (inter alia) as a figure for your full embrace by the Lord, an embrace of greater intimacy than which there is none, then the occlusion of its particular sensations and motions coheres well with the difficulty of representing that divine embrace in language.<sup>19</sup>

It is not clear whether Griffiths thinks that an orgasmic “embrace by the Lord” refers to a believer’s initial experience of salvation or ongoing spiritual union (or perhaps both). He holds that the last colon of 5:1 (“Eat, friends, drink and imbibe, lovers!”) is spoken by the “daughters,” and he sees this as “figuring” the reality that other people are usually involved with the salvation of individual believers:

Further yet, your own lovemaking with the Lord is not only yours: you have been prepared for it by the people of the Lord, whether Jewish or Christian, anointed by that people as the Lord’s lover. When – and this is the Christian version – the oils of baptism and confirmation stream luxuriously from your head into your eyes, you are being embraced by Jesus: and the congregation acclaims your embrace, a communal acclamation figured by what the daughters say in 5:1 to the couple. And, lastly, when Mary received the Lord’s embrace and as a result conceived the Lord in her womb, that too was marked and acclaimed by others: angels, shepherds, magi, and, eventually, the church. In their acclamations can be heard echoes of the daughters’ delight.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, “Uterior Lives: A Review of *Darling*,” *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/04/uterior-lives> (accessed 06/26/2023). Later in this review he writes: “But if you think...that we live in a devastated world in which no sexual acts are undamaged, free from the taint of sin and death and the concomitant need for lament, then the fact that homosexual acts have their own characteristic disorder is no ground for blindness to the goods they enshrine. Gay men should, of course, darling one another; those of us whose darlings are of the opposite sex should be glad that they do, and glad of instruction in love by the ways in which they do.”

<sup>18</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 115.

<sup>20</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 116.

I am not sure how the Catholic Church would feel about the idea that the Immaculate Conception was an orgasmic experience for Mary; but this level of “figuration” is ever-present in Griffiths’ work, alongside his Catholic understanding of soteriology.

To summarize Griffiths:

- There is no objectively identifiable “original text” of the Song; therefore, any faithful translation is “fully the word of God.”
- There is no reason to think that the Song (or any text, Scriptural or otherwise) has only one meaning.
- Plain interpretation without additional “figural” reading does not treat the Song as Scripture, nor does it take seriously the weight of church history.
- “Figural” reading of the Song allows (and even encourages) male readers of the Song to “resonate” with the female lover and female readers of the Song to “resonate” with the male lover, regardless of one’s biological gender and the “habituated shape” of one’s sexual desires.
- The “erotic” experience between two human lovers – more specifically, sexual intercourse and orgasm – are “figural” of the spiritual experience between God and individual believers, especially the experience of salvation from sin, when believers are “embraced” by God for the first time.

## Response

I will limit this response to two specific points. The first point is Griffiths’ rather astounding claim that to interpret the Song plainly is *not* to read it as a scriptural book. My answer to that is, “Says who?” When did sin-tainted humanity become the exegetical arbiters of God-breathed scripture? If we believe in the general principle that God intended for His Word to be understood, then plain interpretation is the *only* way to read the Song as a scriptural book. If the Holy Spirit chose to breathe love poetry, then our task as interpreters is not to exhale our own spiritual “carbon dioxide” into it by inventing reasons why it must be something else.

Griffiths also claims that plain interpretation “does not take seriously the weight of the Song’s readings over the last two thousand years.” Aside from the fact that there have been plain interpreters even as early as the Patristic era (Theodore of Mopsuestia), biblical exegesis is not determined by majority vote. The church has gotten a lot of things wrong down through the centuries – that’s why there was a Reformation. An error that gets repeated for 1,800 years is still an error. An error that is believed by several billion people is still an error. Historical theology does not consist of repeating the same error over and over again “because church history.”

The most relevant question is, *why* did Origen, Augustine, and others feel they needed to bypass the plain meaning of the Song? The most likely answer is their erroneous Greco-Roman dichotomy between “the flesh” and “the spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Here is a representative statement from Origen’s commentary:

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<sup>21</sup> Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 545-547. He cites a number of studies on the Greek philosophical worldview of the church fathers.

But if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach it, to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust!<sup>22</sup>

Origen does have a point that a professing Christian not walking in step with the Holy Spirit could read the Song and get the wrong ideas. But the solution to this problem is not to separate the material world from the immaterial, especially when Genesis 1-2 declares all of God's creation, including the one-flesh union between husband and wife, "very good" (Gen 1:31). The solution is to understand, from God's perspective, what sexual purity means before *and during* marriage.

The second point is Griffiths' conflation of marital lovemaking with our spiritual lives as Christians. There are a number of places in Scripture where biblical authors appeared to put marital lovemaking and true worship in different categories of experience.

Exodus 19: As the newly liberated people of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai to enter into covenant relationship with their God, Moses gave specific instructions on YHWH's behalf for how the people should prepare themselves. These instructions were: do not touch Mount Sinai (Exod 19:12), wash their garments (Exod 19:14), and do not "draw near to a woman" (Exod 19:15) – a euphemism for sexual relations.<sup>23</sup>

This did not necessarily mean that YHWH considered sexual relations among His married people to be unholy – the creation mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) was still operative. But the fact that YHWH commanded His people to abstain from sexual relations in advance of the formation of their spiritual covenant is telling. If YHWH had wanted His people to *associate* marital lovemaking with spiritual communion, there could have been a command (or at least an encouragement) to have all the sex they wanted for two days before meeting with Him to enter into their spiritual "marriage covenant." Instead, YHWH commanded His people to spiritually separate themselves *to* Him by separating themselves *from* sexual relations for a short time.

1 Corinthians 6-7: Paul quoted Gen 2:24 to illustrate the seriousness of sexual relations outside of marriage: "Or do you not know that he who cleaves to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For he says, 'The two will become one flesh'" (1 Cor 6:16). Sexual relations outside of marriage are much deeper than the physical act – the two individuals are united in a way that God has reserved for husbands and wives.

By way of contrast, in 1 Cor 6:17 Paul wrote, "but the one who is joined to the Lord is one spirit [with Him]." The contrast to sexual immorality is not "becoming one flesh with the Lord" but rather becoming one *spirit* with the Lord. Believers in Christ enjoy a kind of spiritual intimacy with our Lord Jesus through the indwelling Holy Spirit, but Paul made a specific point

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<sup>22</sup> Origen, *Origen: The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. R. P. Lawson. Vol. 26. Ancient Christian Writers (Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 1957), 22.

<sup>23</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus*. Vol. 3. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), 265.

of *not* describing this intimacy as some kind of marital “sex life” with Jesus – not even in direct contrast to sexual immorality.

In chapter 7, Paul drew a distinction between marital lovemaking and prayer. In response to ever-present temptations to immorality (from which at least some of them had been saved [1 Cor 6:9-11]), Paul commanded the married couples to have sexual relations on a regular basis in order to counteract these temptations (1 Cor 7:2-3). The only reason Paul allowed for marital abstinence was for a couple to devote themselves to a temporary season of prayer – followed by a resumption of sexual relations (1 Cor 7:5).

This did not mean that marital lovemaking was unholy or even unspiritual; but it does reveal a category distinction between the communion of a believer and God through prayer and the communion of a husband and wife through lovemaking. It is true that in the broadest sense our entire lives are an offering of worship to God (Rom 12:1), but we are not supposed to think of worship as somehow becoming “one flesh” with God.

Song of Songs: As many commentators have noted, the use of metaphor and imagery was necessary to allow the author of the Song to write about nakedness and sexual intercourse without sounding vulgar or pornographic. But what *kind* of imagery was used, and what kind *could* have been used?

The imagery of the Song mostly points back to Eden – gardens, trees, flowing streams, fragrances, beautiful animals, choice fruits. Could the author have used a different kind of imagery, perhaps “cultic” imagery based on the language and ritual of Leviticus? In Song 7:11-13 the wife invites her husband to come away with her to the vineyards in the countryside, where she will give her lovemaking to him. Why not have the wife invite her husband to come away with her to the temple and be a “love-offering” to YHWH upon the altar? The author’s choice of Edenic but *not* Levitical imagery strongly suggests that no such association between lovemaking and worship was intended.

*Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther* (Chloe Tse Sun, 2021)

Sun states in her introduction, “I will adopt theological interpretation as the primary method of this book. By theological interpretation, I borrow the analogy of digging from Kevin Vanhoozer.”<sup>24</sup> I find this to be a fascinating (and deeply revealing) metaphor for biblical studies. It implies, among other things, that the meaning of the text is not visible “on the surface” – you have to dig pretty far in order to find it.

Sun’s work is more of a theological reflection than a straightforward exegetical commentary:

The goal for this book, then, is to examine, meditate, and reflect theologically on the Song of Songs and Esther in relation to the theology of absence and inquire how these two books function in Old Testament theology.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Chloe Tse Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 3. Vanhoozer compares TIS to the 1848 California gold rush, with “knowledge of God” being the desired “theological gold” (“Introduction: What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible,” 16).

<sup>25</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 2.



She understands theological “absence” in this way: “By absence, I do not mean nonexistence. Rather, absence refers to an aspect of God that escapes human comprehension.”<sup>26</sup> She quotes a phrase from a scholar named Godzieba that “absence signals the otherness of God” and cites his definition of “absence” as “God’s excess that outruns our human ability to adequately ‘name’ and conceptualize the characteristics of the personality of God.”<sup>27</sup>

It does not appear from Sun’s work that she sees the protagonists of the Song as allegorical in the same way as Griffiths. Her work does not contain much in the way of straightforward exegesis; she is primarily dealing with larger theological themes. The overall structure of her work is:

The first two chapters place divine absence in a larger context of Old Testament theology. The next four chapters address the issue of divine absence through four themes: time, temple, feast, and canon.<sup>28</sup>

Chapter 1 examines a number of scholarly views on theological presence and absence, including the “dialectical view” that presence and absence are not mutually exclusive but that God can be present in absence and absent in presence.<sup>29</sup> Chapter 2 focuses on wisdom, which Sun defines as “the search for the order of things in God’s created world.”<sup>30</sup> She sees the Song and Esther as “countertexts” to the rest of the OT:

...these two scrolls complement and supplement what is lacking in Old Testament theology in regard to the transcendent and mysterious nature of God. Therefore, these two books contribute to a fuller picture of who God is and how human beings relate to this God. Rather than remaining in the periphery as two small, festive scrolls, these two books push the boundaries, moving to the center of Old Testament theology, contesting, challenging, or even protesting the loud voices of divine presence in human history.<sup>31</sup>

Chapter 3 discusses the absence of God in relation to time. Sun perceptively notes that the Song does not follow a linear chronology – unlike Esther, which narrates a single chain of events. She sees a parallel between the apparent elusiveness of the male lover in the temporally “fluid” Song and the occasional elusiveness of the God who exists outside of time:

The implication is that there are times and there will be times when we feel that God is absent because God does not subject himself to human beings’ timeline, nor does he live inside the confinement of human time. In that sense, God’s presence is elusive from humanity’s experience.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony J. Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 38 (cited by Sun [*Conspicuous in His Absence*, 50]).

<sup>28</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 26-39.

<sup>30</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 135.

Chapter 4 not only draws connections between the garden imagery of the Song and the garden of Eden but also leans heavily on the idea that the garden of Eden was to be understood as a kind of temple:

In the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, temple symbolizes divine presence. Although God appears to be invisible in the Song, the presence of the garden-temple imagery indirectly suggests his presence.<sup>33</sup>

Chapter 5 discusses the place of the Song and Esther within the five “scrolls” that make up the “Megilloth” (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther). Each of these “scrolls” is read during a particular feast, with Passover being the initial feast at which the Song is recited. Sun argues that the association of the Song with Passover dates back at least as far as the allegorical treatments of the Song in the Midrash Rabbah and the Aramaic Targum.<sup>34</sup> On the connection between the absence of God in the Song and the celebration of Passover, Sun states, “The absence of God’s name does not prevent the celebration of God’s deliverance in the past, nor does it prevent us from entreating him for his mercy in the present.”<sup>35</sup>

Chapter 6 discusses the Song’s place within the OT canon. Sun sees the Song as both “resonant” and “dissonant” with the rest of the canon:

Song of Songs and Esther serve both as echoes and as counterechoes in relation to the rest of the Hebrew Scripture. As echoes, the motifs of both books resonate with other biblical texts; as counterechoes, they challenge, critique, and evaluate the normative motifs manifested in the rest of the canon.<sup>36</sup>

Sun holds to “canonical interpretation,”<sup>37</sup> which treats the canon of Scripture as a single entity in which intertextual “resonances” can go in either direction. For example, she sees Song 5:10-16 as both resonant and dissonant with the statue dreamt by Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2; and she also sees the sexual perspectives of the Song, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes as resonant with Genesis 2.<sup>38</sup>

To summarize Sun:

- The Song and Esther are “countertexts” that contribute a “theology of absence” to Old Testament theology.

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<sup>33</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 139.

<sup>34</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 187. The Song Rabbah is believed to have been composed between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, and Targum Song between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (Penelope Robin Junkermann, “The Relationship Between Targum Song of Songs and Midrash Rabbah Song of Songs.” PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2010, 46, 83).

<sup>35</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 211.

<sup>36</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 228.

<sup>37</sup> She further states (in agreement with Brevard Childs): “Since the focus of the canonical approach centers on its final form and the meaning of the canonical books for the faith community, the dating of the books and the order of the books become relatively insignificant” (*Conspicuous in His Absence*, 229).

<sup>38</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 263-264.

- In the Song (and also in the spiritual lives of believers) God can be present in absence and absent in presence.
- The Song is both resonant and dissonant with the rest of the OT canon.
- The “practical applications” of the Song are not primarily about the marriage relationship but rather the spiritual response of believers who feel the “absence of God” in their lived experiences.

**Response**

Perhaps the best way to respond is to look at the foundational premises of Sun’s theological meditation:

1. God is not mentioned in the Song of Songs; therefore, God is absent.

Does the mere fact that the *name* of God is absent in the Song mean that *God* is absent in the Song? It would be more accurate to say that God is “backgrounded.” Aside from the divine attribute of omnipresence, which is attested in the OT (Psalm 139:7-10, Jer 23:23-24), the Song gives three subtle hints of the “backgrounded” presence of God.

The first is Song 5:1c, the only words spoken from “outside” the Song. The identity of the speaker of this colon is not directly revealed, but the perspective is most definitely God’s. The imperative to the literary husband and wife in Song 5:1c aligns seamlessly with the creation mandate to all husbands and wives in Gen 2:24. Whether the speaker of Song 5:1c is YHWH Himself or the poet speaking from the perspective of YHWH, Song 5:1c is a statement of divine approval and blessing of the one-flesh union between husband and wife.

The second is the term שְׁלֵהֶבֶתֶיָּהּ (“most vehement flame / flame of YHWH”) in Song 8:6. Whether this term is an intensive form (cp. מְאֹפְלֵיָּהּ in Jer 2:31) or a short form of the Divine Name (cp. הַלְלוּ הָיָה in the “hallel” psalms), the comparison of monogamous love and jealousy with the “other-worldly” powers of death and Sheol suggest some sort of reference to the transcendent.

The third is the woman’s charge to the daughters of Jerusalem “by the gazelles or by the does of the field” (Song 2:7, 3:5). There is no apparent reason why an Israelite would swear by female animals. Israelites were commanded to swear by the name of YHWH (Deut 6:13) and forbidden from swearing by the names of false gods (Jer 12:16, Amos 8:4). The most likely explanation is that these are circumlocutions of two names of God, which would subtly point to the “backgrounded” presence of God without explicitly “sacralizing” the subject matter:<sup>39</sup>

צְבָאוֹת “gazelles”	→	יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת “YHWH of Hosts”
אֵילֹת הַשָּׂדֶה “does of the field”	→	אֵל שַׁדַּי “God Almighty”

2. The absence of God in the Song makes it a “countertext” to the rest of the OT that contributes to a fuller understanding of the nature and works of God.

Does the mere fact that God is not mentioned in the Song make it a “countertext?” That would depend on *why* God is not mentioned in the Song. If the Song is pointing back to God’s

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<sup>39</sup> Gordis (*The Song of Songs and Lamentations* [New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974], 28) and Davidson (*Flame of Yahweh*, 622-623) make the same connection.

good creation before sin entered into human experience, then there is no way that the Song could be “counter” to the nature of God or His work.<sup>40</sup> The Song is as orthodox as orthodox can be, even if God’s presence is in the background.

Why, then, is God “backgrounded?” The most likely explanation is simply that God does not intend for His people to conflate marital sex with true worship. Sun argues (similarly to Griffiths): “Just as the boundary between human sexuality and divine-human relationship in Proverbs 1-9 is fuzzy, so too is it in the Song of Songs.”<sup>41</sup> I would submit that this boundary is *not* fuzzy at any point in Scripture.

Even Jesus made the specific point that human marriage – and the God-ordained sexual relations that go with it – will not follow us into the resurrection (Matt 22:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:34-36). Our highest and most glorious relational intimacy in our eternal resurrected bodies will *not* be sexual in nature. If nothing else, this tells us that not all intimacy is of the same kind or category. It is entirely consistent with the rest of Scripture for God to “background” His presence in a book primarily concerned with an intimacy that belongs only to this life.

### 3. The primary theological contribution of the Song concerns the absence of God from the lived experiences of believers.

There may be some level of “resonance” between the perceived absence of God in the lament psalms and the absence of the male lover from the presence of the female lover in the Song. But for most of the Song the lovers are either together or anticipating being together. There are only two passages (3:1-5, 5:2-8) in the Song’s eight chapters in which the lovers are separated from each other unwillingly with no indication of when they will be together again. Are those two passages the primary focus of the Song’s theological contribution?

I would submit that the primary theological focus of the Song is the unashamed one-flesh union of which Genesis 2 speaks. Although there are sometimes obstacles to this union in the post-Fall world, the Song “fleshes out” (for lack of a better term) what God intends for every husband and wife to experience.

## **Conclusion – In Defense of Plain Interpretation Rather Than “Theological Interpretation.”**

Despite what Griffiths would have us believe, there have been a number of plain interpretations of the Song in the history of the church. Here are four from the last forty years:

*Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (G. Lloyd Carr, 1984)

Carr describes his interpretive approach to the Song as

...*natural* or *literal* interpretation. This approach interprets the Song as what it appears naturally to be – a series of poems which speak clearly and explicitly of the feelings,

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<sup>40</sup> Davidson similarly sees the harmony between the Song and God’s creation in Genesis (*Flame of Yahweh*, 621-622).

<sup>41</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 257.

desires, concerns, hopes and fears of two young lovers – without any need to allegorize or typologize or dramatize to escape the clear erotic elements present in the text.<sup>42</sup>

He preferred the term “natural” to “literal” because of potential confusion about the term “literal” applied to poetry that is rich in metaphor and figurative language. At the end of his introduction he summarizes the purpose of the Song:

The Song is a celebration of the nature of humanity – male and female created in God’s image for mutual support and enjoyment. There is nothing here of the aggressive male and the reluctant or victimized female. They are one in their desires because their desires are God-given. It is only a community which is uncomfortable with such a concept that excommunicates those who understand the Song in its natural sense, or those who, having understood it correctly, refuse to allow ‘such a book’ to be part of God’s revealed word.<sup>43</sup>

*Contributions of Selected Rhetorical Devices to a Biblical Theology of the Song of Songs* (Mark McGinniss, 2011)

McGinniss’ work, as the title suggests, has to do with the contributions of certain rhetorical devices to the theology of the Song. His approach to the Song is worth quoting in full:

Solomon wrote a song celebrating passion and desire between a man and a woman within the confines of marriage. This poem is not a narrative that traces a historical couple through the ups and downs of their love relationship. It is an artistic creation that places the two main literary characters into a lush and near perfect environment. In this garden setting the characters reveal themselves through their conversation. This sometimes erotically charged dialogue paints on the reader’s imagination the pleasure of fulfilled desire. For this couple, longing is only satisfied in the presence of the other. When absent from each other, they yearn for one another and their desire drives them over every obstacle to be one. The movement of the book from her first voiced longing to her final wish is achieved by this progression of absence to presence. For this couple presence produces shalom; absence is always to be struggled against. No good comes from absence except a desire to be present with the other.<sup>44</sup>

He adds:

While there is no appeal to the Law, no divine commands, no mention of priests or the temple, the astute audience understands that the Song calls for a reproduction of its

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<sup>42</sup> G. Lloyd Carr, *Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 36 (emphasis original).

<sup>43</sup> Carr, *Song of Solomon*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Mark McGinniss, *Contributions of Selected Rhetorical Devices to a Biblical Theology of the Song of Songs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 224.

message in the life of each married couple that is wise enough to hear the theological notes of this ancient love song.<sup>45</sup>

*Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (A. Boyd Luter, 2013)

Luter holds that Solomon is the male protagonist of the Song and an unnamed country girl called the “Shulammitte” is the female protagonist.<sup>46</sup> He maintains that this romantic episode with “Shulammitte” occurred during Solomon’s co-regency with David, around the time his son and successor Rehoboam was born to Solomon’s Ammonite wife Naamah (1 Kings 14:21)<sup>47</sup> – by which point Solomon’s harem already totaled sixty wives and eighty concubines (Song 6:8).

I’m not sure how it would be possible for Solomon to write a song claiming to celebrate his own monogamous marriage to “Shulammitte” when, by Luter’s own admission, Solomon practiced polygamy both before and after. By this reasoning, the theological message of the Song would be that it doesn’t matter how many women a man has “on the side” as long as he has one “true love.”

Although his “historical” interpretation appears impossible to reconcile with the known facts of Solomon’s life, Luter says this about the purpose of the Song:

...the presence in the Song of a number of reasonably clear echoes of the earliest chapters of Genesis infers that, even in employing a well-known ANE literary genre, “the finest of the songs that belong to Solomon” was intentionally crafted to portray God’s perspective on the romantic and sexual love between a man and woman.<sup>48</sup>

Whether the protagonists are historical or literary, Luter agrees that the purpose and message of the Song ultimately have to do with God’s plan for marriage and sex. I would only add that God’s perspective is that one man and one woman should cling to each other (Gen 2:24) and *resist* the temptation to have sexual relations with anyone else. God’s perspective would have been for Solomon *not to have* a harem – not for Solomon to delusionally imagine himself to be monogamous while simultaneously loving foreign women to the tune of 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:1-3).

*“Inner-Biblical Portraiture: The Use of Genesis 1-3 in the Song of Songs”* (A.W. Morris, 2022)

The substance of the argument of my dissertation is that the theological foundation of the Song of Songs is in the early chapters of Genesis, as Luter and Carr<sup>49</sup> both suggested indirectly. The theological message of the Song is not merely that marriage and sex are good; it is that

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<sup>45</sup> McGinniss, *Contributions of Selected Rhetorical Devices*, 224.

<sup>46</sup> A pastor named Tommy Nelson also holds this position. He preached a sermon series in 1991 that eventually became *The Book of Romance: What Solomon Says About Love, Sex, and Intimacy* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998). Nelson did not deal with Solomon’s polygamy any more believably than Luter did.

<sup>47</sup> A. Boyd Luter, *Song of Songs*. Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), unpaginated digital Logos edition, section entitled “Setting.”

<sup>48</sup> Luter, *Song of Songs*, section entitled “Purpose.”

<sup>49</sup> Carr similarly states, “In one sense, the Song is an extended commentary on the creation story – an expansion of the first recorded love-song in history.” (*Song of Solomon*, 37).

*God's creation* is good. The Song is about what God created, not what humanity figured out. Therefore, the Song is theological *by definition*.

Here are some major points where these plain interpretations of the Song agree:

- The Song is what it appears to be, which is love poetry set within the larger biblical context of sexual morality. The male and female protagonists are a married couple, and any dialogue about nakedness or sex occurs within their marriage relationship.
- The Song was written either by Solomon himself or one of Solomon's contemporaries.
- The antecedent theology of the Song comes primarily from the early chapters of Genesis, in which God set forth heterosexual monogamy before the Fall as His plan for marriage and sexual relations.
- Although the Song points back to pre-Fall Eden, the protagonists' marriage is set against the backdrop of the post-Fall world. This includes the possibility of emotional and physical separation as well as the temptation to sexual immorality.
- The Song's practical applications center around the emotional and physical relationship between husband and wife, and also the relational purity of the unmarried – in other words, plain *application* of plain *interpretation*.

I would submit the following reasons why plain interpretation is to be preferred rather than TIS:

1.) I still do not know what TIS is.

Two books might be a small sample size, but I am no closer to understanding TIS from reading these two authors than I was after reading Vanhoozer's (non)-definitions. Sun interprets the Song as primarily about the perceived "absence of God" in the lives of believers. Griffiths interprets the Song as simultaneously about an "erotic" relationship between two lovers and also the spiritual relationships between the Lord and Israel, the Church, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the soul of the individual believer. Contra Sun's view that God is "absent" in the Song, Griffiths states, "The Lord is not explicitly mentioned at all in the Song, but if the Song is read as a scriptural rather than a closed book, then he is everywhere in it."<sup>50</sup> Both of these authors are supposedly using the same method, but the results are not even close.

Now, to be fair, plain interpreters of the Song do not agree on everything. Luter holds that Solomon and one of his wives (rather than literary characters) are the male and female protagonists. None of us agree on the Song's macro-structure (or lack thereof). But we all agree on the aforementioned "majors," and any objective non-dispensationalist should be able to glean from these works a fairly clear idea of what plain interpretation entails.

2.) TIS appears to be a democracy of opinions.

Griffiths rhetorically asked, "Why should the Song or any scriptural text (or indeed any text at all) have just one meaning even when considered *ad litteram*?"<sup>51</sup> Aside from the

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<sup>50</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, xliii.

meaninglessness of the question (I could just as easily ask why any text should have more than one meaning), the impression I'm getting is that TIS values inclusiveness over correctness. TIS places a high value on interpreting the Bible "in community," which has a certain degree of wisdom to it. If a biblical exegete thinks he has discovered an interpretation that the entire church has completely missed for the last two thousand years, then that interpretation is probably suspect. But TIS does not appear to have any specific and objective criteria for evaluating the interpretations of any particular theological community.

For example, one of the most difficult verses in the Song is 5:7, which takes place during the woman's second "dream sequence." In Song 5:2-8 the woman dreams that she is sleeping alone, her husband knocks on the door of the room where she is sleeping (5:2), she doesn't open the door immediately (5:3), by the time she does open the door her husband is no longer there (5:6), and she goes out looking for him on city streets in the middle of the night (5:6), where she is struck and wounded by the night watchmen (5:7).

What are we to make of this incident, especially the public assault and humiliation in 5:7? Some plain interpreters see the watchmen's actions as divinely orchestrated discipline against the woman for being self-centered and unresponsive to her husband.<sup>52</sup> But does the text give any statement to that effect? No, it does not. As Carr points out concerning the watchmen, "No reason for their reaction is given in the text,"<sup>53</sup> nor do we find any moral commentary in Song 5:2-8 suggesting that the woman committed a punishable sin by hesitating to open the door to her husband instead of opening it immediately.

The most that can be said from a plain interpretation of this text is that everything about Song 5:2-8 is *wrong*. The husband and wife should not be separated from each other, especially at night. If he comes knocking, she should not refuse to open the door to him. If she does not initially open the door to him, he should not depart before she eventually does. If she leaves her home in search of him, she should not be assaulted by anyone. And if she looks for him, she should eventually find him. There is no way to interpret any of this as somehow *right*.

The reason the "divine discipline" interpretation of Song 5:7 is most likely incorrect is that the text does not support it. The interpreter is free to speculate about why the night watchmen struck the woman, but speculation is not exegesis. And if the interpreter's speculation lands on God being a wife-beater, then perhaps the interpreter should speculate elsewhere. But unlike plain interpretation, TIS would not be in a position to evaluate the "divine discipline" reading as incorrect as long as the interpreter can demonstrate that it is sufficiently "theological."

How do the two TIS authors interpret this verse? Griffiths sees 5:7 as "love wounds" that supposedly parallel the male lover's "wounds" in 4:9. This is based on a doubtful Latin translation of לִבִּי הִתְהַיְוָה לְךָ ("you have excited my heart" [Song 4:9]) as *Vulnerasti cor meum* ("you have wounded my heart").<sup>54</sup> He connects them to other "love wounds" in Scripture:

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<sup>52</sup> Nelson, *The Book of Romance*, 118-119; McGinniss, *Contributions of Selected Rhetorical Devices*, 218.

<sup>53</sup> Carr, *Song of Solomon*, 149.

<sup>54</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 124. He does point out that the terms used for the beating and crucifixion of Christ are different than those used in the Song (124n175), but he does not mention that the Hebrew terms used in Song 5:7 are completely different than those used in Song 4:9.



Love's separation wounds are everywhere in scripture and tradition: in Israel's exile, in Peter's tears, in Mary's grief for her dead son. The separation wound in which all these participate, around which they circle, is the wound of Christ crucified, a wound given verbal form in the cry of desolation on the cross (Matt. 27:46). The Song's love wounds, heard in the light of knowledge of that wound, are given their deepest possible resonance: hearing them in that way and interpreting through them your own separation wounds... The city's "guards" have beaten and wounded the beloved in her separation. They will beat and wound you too.<sup>55</sup>

He then connects the idea of "love wounds" with the literary protagonists of *Aeneid*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *King Lear*, and concludes:

All these participate in and figure Mary's separation from her son and her grief at his death on the cross. Love's separation wounds are incised deeply into all our bodies, and the Song's thematization of them permits them, rightly heard, to appear in their livid and bloody glory.<sup>56</sup>

Sun sees a "resonance" between Song 5:7 and Ezekiel 16, a prophetic judgment against the nation of Israel in exile. Israel's idolatrous worship of false gods was compared to both adultery and prostitution (Ezek 16:30-32), and YHWH's punishment of the idolatrous nation was metaphorically described as stripping Israel's clothing and stoning her to death (Ezek 16:37-40). Although the woman in the Song was not acting as a prostitute, Sun holds that she may have been mistaken for one based on a Middle Assyrian law quoted by Keel.<sup>57</sup>

She also sees a "dissonance" between these texts: "At the same time, these images in the Song also counter Ezekiel 16 by presenting a portrait of an ideal love of a woman who suffers for the sake of her beloved."<sup>58</sup> Her "theological" interpretation of Song 5:7 is that it is both resonant and dissonant with Ezekiel 16 based on a speculative case of mistaken identity because of an Assyrian law that was probably not followed in Israel and did not match the circumstances described in Song 5:2-8.

Plain interpretation can be tested and, if necessary, corrected. Wayne Grudem famously changed his position on divorce and remarriage because he realized that he had missed

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<sup>55</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 124-125.

<sup>56</sup> Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, 125.

<sup>57</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 255 (quoting Othmar Keel, *A Continental Commentary: The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994], 195). The Assyrian law in question reads, "A harlot must not veil herself; her head must be uncovered; he who has seen a harlot veiled must arrest her, produce witnesses, (and) bring her to the palace tribunal; they shall not take her jewelry away, (but) the one who arrested her may take her clothing; they shall flog her fifty (times) with staves (and) pour pitch on her head" (James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. with Supplement [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], 183). Even if the people of Israel considered this case law to be legally binding (and there is no indication from the OT that they did), it does not match the specific case described in Song 5:2-8.

<sup>58</sup> Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 256.

something in the text of 1 Cor 7:15.<sup>59</sup> TIS does not appear to have any specific and objective criteria for adjudicating between divergent interpretations.

3.) Plain interpretation is most conducive to exegetical humility.

The most problematic assumption behind TIS (and just about every other non-dispensational approach to interpreting Scripture) is that *we* get to choose how to interpret God's Word. Plain interpretation begins with the assumption that God has His own opinion about how we should interpret His Word. Peter made the specific point that the Spirit-led authors of Scripture were not trafficking in human opinions (2 Peter 1:20-21), and there is no reason to think that the meaning of God-breathed Scripture would ever be left to human opinion, whether of an individual or a community. We don't get to choose how to interpret the Song or any other book in the Bible. God has already chosen for us.

Plain interpretation is like railroad tracks. A train headed from Raleigh to Chicago will eventually reach its destination – if it stays on the tracks. But once a train derails, there is no way to control where it will go. No matter how much TIS proponents (or any other non-dispensational interpreters) might appeal to the inward assurance of the Holy Spirit or the weight of church history, the bottom line is that any non-dispensational interpreter is free to do whatever is right in his own eyes.<sup>60</sup> Once the exegetical train is off the rails, there is no way to control where it will end up.

This is not to say that plain interpreters always get it right. We are as sin-tainted as everybody else, but plain interpretation is at least aiming at the correct target. If we sometimes miss, we can humble ourselves and repent and seek further clarification of the plain meaning of God's Word.

4.) Plain interpretation is most conducive to exegetical contentment.

The underlying assumption behind every allegorical or typological interpretation of the Song is, "There *must* be more to it than *that*." TIS in particular appears to be characterized by an insatiable craving for "more." Rather than being content with what God has plainly given to us in His Word, TIS would turn biblical exegesis into an endless mining expedition for the "nuggets" supposedly buried beneath the "surface" of the text.

The problem is that this search for "nuggets" inevitably results in a craving for more and deeper "nuggets." Qoheleth's comment that "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (Eccl 1:8) is still true. Where does it end? How much mining will it take to satisfy our craving? This is not to say that any of us should ever think that we have "fully mastered" the Word of God. Paul prayed that the Philippians' love would grow in knowledge and depth of insight (Phil 1:9). But this growth consists of more fully understanding (and, more importantly, *applying*) the plain meaning of the text – not in endlessly searching for other meanings.

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<sup>59</sup> Wayne Grudem, "Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two," *Eikon* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 71-79.

<sup>60</sup> Ryrie makes the same point in his discussion of hermeneutics (*Dispensationalism*, chapter 5).