

THE SONG OF SONGS:
SUMMARY OF THE HERMENEIA COMMENTARY

Roland E. Murphy (1917 – 2002), the author of this commentary, was a Roman Catholic priest and scholar of the Carmelite Order. He taught for many years at the Catholic University of America before taking a position at Duke University.¹ At the time this commentary was published, in 1990, he was George Washington Ivey professor emeritus at Duke. He served for many years as the editor of the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* and was a prolific author in the area of biblical interpretation, focusing particularly on Old Testament wisdom literature. Although he wrote a number of commentaries on various books of the Old Testament, he is probably best remembered for his editorial work (with Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmeyer) on *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968) and *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1999). The present volume was edited by S. Dean McBride, Jr., who at the time of publication was a professor at Union Theological Seminary (now known as Union Presbyterian Seminary) in Virginia.²

In the “Foreword” to this volume, Frank Moore Cross and Helmut Koester, members of the editorial board for the *Hermeneia* commentary series, tell us that “the series is designed to be a critical and historical commentary to the Bible,” utilizing “the full range of philological and historical tools.”³ The series aims to be both “international and interconfessional” and the editors

¹ The biographical information for this paragraph has been gleaned from two sources: Chicago Tribune, “Murphy O.carm, Rev. Roland E.,” http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2002-07-23/news/0207230094_1_catholic-biblical-association-biblical-literature-catholic-university (accessed November 16, 2011); James C. Howell, “Father Roland E. Murphy,” Heroes Found Faithful, <http://heroesfoundfaithful.blogspot.com/2010/11/father-roland-e-murphy.html> (accessed November 16, 2011).

² According to the Union Presbyterian Seminary website, McBride is now Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation: http://www.upsem.edu/academics/faculty_staff/mcbride_dr_and_mrs_s_dean_judy/ (accessed November 21, 2011).

³ Frank Moore Cross and Helmut Koester, forward to Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr., *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), xi. *Please note: all future citations of this text will occur in parentheses in the body of the essay.*

chose to “impose no systematic-theological perspective upon the series” (xi). The series, then, is intended (in Cross and Koester’s words) primarily for the use of “the serious student of the Bible” (xi). No attempt is made to appeal to a particular confessional Christian community. Indeed, no attempt is really made to appeal to the confessing church at all. The series is intended primarily for use in the academy—not the church.

The present work divides roughly into two parts. It begins with a lengthy introduction (3-105), which is followed by a translation and commentary on the Song (108-200). The introduction is divided into sections dealing with such issues as the “authorship, date, and canonicity” of the Song (3-7), its “history of interpretation” (11-41), a comparison of the Song with other ancient Near Eastern love poetry (41-57), the “literary character and structure” of the text (57-67), “aspects of composition and style” (67-91), and a discussion of its “meaning and theological significance” (91-105). Murphy recognizes, of course, that until relatively recently, both Jewish and Christian interpreters have read the Song as an “allegory,” or “parable,” which speaks of the “mutual love” between God and His people (11, 37-41). Nevertheless, after reviewing the history of interpretation and briefly commenting upon some examples of ancient Near Eastern love poetry, Murphy tells us that it is best to simply take “the text for what it seems to be—a delightful poetic exploration of human sexual love, unencumbered by mythological drama, marriage sacraments, or rites of fertility” (57).

In Murphy’s estimation, the claim that the Song is about “human sexual love” is warranted by the results achieved through the careful “application of established comparative, philological, and literary-critical methods of analysis” (91). These methods make it clear that, “in its literal sense and theologically relevant meaning,” the Song is about “human sexual fulfillment” (103). Nevertheless, as he brings his introductory comments to a close, Murphy is willing to concede that a “literal-historical” interpretation of the Song “need not negate the value of traditional interpretation” (103-04n396). He writes, “as modern expositors we should be open to the possibility that our predecessors, despite their foibles, may have caught a glimpse of theological reality that is not exhausted by the literal sense of the Song’s poetry” (103). What

does he think such a “theological reality” might be? The love of God for His people and their love for Him in return (104). This is a very interesting concession on Murphy’s part. However, it plays no role whatever in his actual commentary on the Song.

Murphy interprets the superscription, which attributes this Song to Solomon, as “a claim for the sapiential character . . . of the work” (121). Along with Childs, he thinks that this has the benefit of providing “the ‘canonical context’ within which the Song is to be interpreted” (122). In Murphy’s estimation, this makes it difficult to view the Song *either* as a purely “secular” piece of work *or* as a text in need of an allegorical interpretation, for as he observes, “the prophetic theme of God’s love for the covenant people is alien to the sapiential corpus of scripture” (122). Hence, Murphy agrees with Childs, that the Song should be interpreted within a context of “wisdom’s reflection on the joyful and mysterious nature of love between a man and a woman within the institution of marriage” (122).

Having established what he believes to be the appropriate context for correctly understanding the Song, Murphy proceeds to interpret the text strictly within the parameters which he has set for himself. He discusses the admiration which the lovers have for one another (135-36), reflects upon a visit the man paid to the woman (140-41), describes the scene in which the woman searches for (and finds) her lover (146), puzzles over what to do with the description of Solomon’s wedding procession (151-52), and refers to examples of ancient Near Eastern love poetry as a means of shedding some light on the man’s praise of the woman’s beauty (158-61). Although the author is quite familiar with how the Song has been interpreted by both Jewish and Christian scholars throughout history, he has no real place in his commentary for anything resembling either an allegorical or Christological reading of this text. His interpretation proceeds solely along the lines of a literal, historical, “this-worldly,” reading. The male lover in the Song, who is sometimes spoken of as if he were a shepherd (1:7-8), and is at other times referred to as a “king” (1:4, 12; 7:5), is nowhere viewed as Christ—or even as a type of Christ. Similarly, Murphy never suggests (in his actual commentary) that the female lover might in some sense be the church or the people of God. The lovers are viewed simply as individual human beings and

nothing more. This, in a nutshell, is how Murphy thinks the Song of Songs should be read and interpreted.