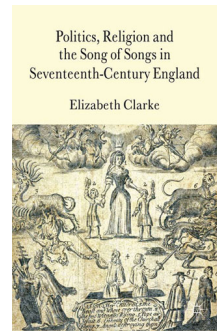


Politics, Religion and the Song of Songs in Seventeenth-Century England, by Elizabeth Clarke

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The task of reviewing this book is daunting. My hesitation stems from the fact that I am most likely not the intended reader of the book. I am a biblical scholar interested in the ways in which the Hebrew Bible has been interpreted throughout the ages. This book, however, is less about how the Song of Songs (henceforth Song) has been *interpreted*; rather its focus is on how it has been used. Elizabeth Clarke seeks to explore “the application of the Song of Songs to English political life in the seventeenth century” (12). The word order in the title hints at this goal: the author is more interested in politics and religion than in the Song. Clarke’s book is well-researched and can definitely be recommended to the



historian and the scholar of English literature. Yet, due to no fault of Clarke, the average biblical scholar will find reading this book to be hard work.

What makes this book difficult for the aforementioned biblical scholar is the sheer amount of knowledge that the reader is expected to be familiar with. I consider myself to have a rudimentary understanding of the key issues in seventeenth-century England, yet I struggled to keep the Presbyterians, the non-conformists, the Independents, and the Purists apart, and I need to confess that my grasp of Arminianism and its doctrines is vague. Further, the reader is supposed to be able to place the events in England against their European background without further ado. For instance, Clarke never refers outright to the Thirty Years' War, even though it is crucial for understanding the discussion of the events in England in the 1620s and 1630s. Another potential problem is the amount of detail in Clarke's book. Details are what give backbone to a scholarly book, yet for a non-historian, the many details are somewhat overwhelming. Finally, as a non-expert of English literature, at times I found the structure of the individual chapters confusing. Clarke frequently moves from discussing one author to discussing the next and then back again to the first one. Given my lack of familiarity with most of these authors, I often struggled to keep to the main thread of the argument.

To make this book more accessible to a less specialized audience who are interested in the use (and misuse) of the Bible throughout the ages, it would have been useful if the book had included a short introduction to the various Protestant groups on the British Isles in the seventeenth century and how they differed from and related to each other. It would also have been helpful to have at least a rudimentary discussion of the key political and religious matters that lead up to the English Civil War.

Speaking as a biblical scholar, I had looked forward to more in-depth discussions regarding the hermeneutical principles and manners of exegesis of the actual biblical text. Clarke provides ample textual examples from literary works which reuse the themes and metaphors found in the Song, but never really offers anything akin to in-depth analyses of the hermeneutical principles and/or the theological constraints behind these usages. It could be that the extant textual evidence does not allow for such discussions, yet this purported lack in itself would have been interesting to know more about.

The following review is written from the perspective of a biblical scholar. I will try to do justice to Clarke's intent, yet I will inevitably highlight those areas in the book that captured my attention (and inadvertently also reveal my own shortcomings in other areas). In short, I cannot evaluate Clarke's

discussions of the politics of the English Civil War, the ins and outs of the debate within the Anglican Church, and the merits of the different examples of English literature.

Clarke's book is organized roughly chronologically. Clarke sets out to explore the significance of Song for mainstream (here defined as the spirituality common primarily to the aristocracy and the gentry) readers in seventeenth-century England (and Scotland).

The Introduction discusses very briefly how the Song has been interpreted in Christian traditions. The Song was never read as a collection of texts about human, heterosexual love. Instead, it was assumed, *a priori*, that it was an allegory about God and his church, or God and the individual Christian soul. Clarke highlights how the biblical book was adopted by the authors of the Reformation and made to speak about the Protestant struggle against Catholicism. The woman in the Song becomes a type for the Bride in Revelation (which, in turn, draws on the sexual and marital metaphors in the Hebrew Bible, e.g., Hos 1–3), and she is pitted against the Whore (also from Revelation) who represents the Pope and/or Antichrist. This interpretative tendency continued, yet also metamorphosed, as time went on. The Song came to be a book about “us” and “them,” i.e., who is within the church and who is “the Other.”

The first chapter, named “Royal Brides and National Identity,” looks at the use of the Song in the years 1603–25. At this time, the Bride in the Song was commonly understood to represent the Reformed Church of England, joined with Christ by the spiritual bonds of matrimony. Protestant England was clearly a nation favoured by God, as evident by the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. Clarke discusses that both vicars (e.g., Thomas Jackson) and authors (e.g., Joseph Hall) used select passages and metaphors from the Song in their own preaching and/or writing. In particular, the Song was often employed as part of Protestant propaganda in favour of Henry Frederick, the Prince of Wales, who aspired to lead a Protestant alliance in Europe against the Catholic forces. The Song was likewise employed in support of the princess Elizabeth, who later married Frederick V, the Elector Palatine and eventually became queen of Bohemia.

Clarke then explores—in more detail—the ways in which George Gifford, John Donne, and Robert Aylett made use of the Song in their writings. These three men, each in their own manner, emphasized the total depravity of the human soul. As a result of Calvinist doctrine in which Christ does all the work of election, justification, and sanctification, they furthermore

described the Bride as completely passive. As the inevitable result, the love imagery of the Song is transformed into a relationship between two utterly unequal partners. The imagery in Song 5:2 where the beloved is knocking becomes a figure for Christ's actions on behalf of his followers. While Gifford's sermons emphasize Christ's gentleness, Donne's poetry transforms the image into one of brute force (Holy Sonnet 10). As the human soul is wholly corrupt, Christ cannot "seduce" it. Instead, he has to employ force. The sexual language of Song allows Donne to expand the image of gendered violence further. The sexual language is, after all, merely the vehicle of the metaphor, not its tenor.

At one point, the polemical use of Song was widened to incorporate not only Catholics but also other Protestant (and even other Reform) movements. For example, Clarke shows that the royal chaplain William Loe employed the images and wordings of the Song in his polemic against Arminianism. In contrast to Calvinists, Arminians believed that humankind was not irredeemably sinful, that God's election was dependent on his foreknowledge, and that Jesus died for all and thus salvation is freely available to all. The Calvinist conflict with the Arminians reached a peak when William Laud, future Archbishop of Canterbury, was made a bishop of St David's (Wales) in 1621. He was firmly supported by Charles I, and later beheaded during the Civil War.

After the death of the crown prince Henry, Charles became the new Prince of Wales. His father James I sought to stay out of the growing conflict between Protestants and Catholics in continental Europe, which soon escalated into the Thirty Years' War. James I's peace-keeping strategies involved trying to marry his son to the Spanish (and thus Catholic) Infanta. According to Clarke, this strategy causes anew the Song to be employed polemically against the Catholics. In parallel, other poets, for instance George Wither, published lyric verse lauding the princess Elizabeth as a new Queen Elizabeth I who would rally to the defence of true Protestantism.

In the second chapter, titled "*The Mystical Marriage, Martyrology and Arminianism, 1625–40*," Clarke outlines the different moves, for and against Catholics and Arminians, by authors and clergy of the time, and how the image of the Bride was used to denote the "true" church, while "the little foxes" (Song 2:15) came to convey her enemies. Clarke notes how Donne's use of the Song in his sermons and poems flouts the conventions of the day. For instance, Donne endeavoured to detach the imagery of the mystical marriage between Christ and his Bride from the conflict between Catholics and

Protestants. This move was probably triggered by Charles I's marriage to the Catholic Henrietta Maria. Donne's message was that even the Catholic Church can be a true Bride of Christ.

Clarke also looks at the work by Francis Rous called *The Mystycall Marriage*, which conceptualizes the entire Gospel in terms of the marriage between Christ and the Christian soul. His work articulates many of the tenets of Calvinistic theology, against those of Arminianism. Clarke shows that Rous used the sexual terminology of Song to convey the relationship between God and the Christian soul, and that he described the pending marriage between the two in the language of romance.

In parallel, Clarke demonstrates that the concept of the mystical marriage came to be used for martyrdom. The death of a martyr was equated with the consummation of the mystical marriage. The Christian, awaiting death as a martyr, looked forward to the ultimate joining with Christ at death. Later on, the same rhetoric of martyrdom was employed by Henry Burton, John Bastwick, and William Prynne (three prominent Puritan opponents of the church policy of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud) to describe their suffering and persecution. Although the three men were imprisoned and their ears were cut off, none of them was actually martyred. Clarke argues that, through their writings, the Song came to be understood as a text which preached independence from earthly authorities.

The third chapter, named "Emblematic Marriage at the 1630s Court," looks at how the Song was used in the court circles of Charles I and Henrietta Maria. For obvious reasons, the Puritan doctrine of the mystical marriage was not the dominant mood in which they read the Song. Instead, the Catholic queen propagated her own kind of piety, centred on portraying the monarchs as model figures of Christian devotion. One source of influence was Henry Hawkins and his book *Partheneia Sacra* which links the Virgin to a garden. The enclosed Garden of the Song (e.g., 4:12) was understood as an emblem of the Virgin herself, and the idea of beauty, expressed in the Song 4:7, was applied to the Virgin.

Clarke contrasts Hawkins's so-called Emblems with (the royalist) Francis Quarles's book *Booke of Emblemes*. While the Catholic Hawkins treated the Song as a complex sign system around the Virgin Mary, that needed to be decoded, the language of Protestant Quarles is significantly more straightforward as he describes the sexual acts between the Divine husband and his earthly Bride. According to Clarke, Quarles was allowed to be that explicit, given that everybody knew that only emotions, not physical bodies, were in-

volved in the love-making. This may in fact have been the reason for Quarles's popularity. In his writings, the sensuality of the visual image remains and serves to remind the reader of the beauty and complexity of the Song.

The fourth chapter, called "From Annotations to Commentary: New Spectacles on the Song of Songs," looks at the use of the Song in the Commonwealth of England (1649–60). This time period saw the dawn of an overall increase in Bible reading, as well as the composition of several commentaries on the Song. The increasing fractioning within the Church led to an increased number of interpretations. As a result of Laud's loss of power in 1640 and his subsequent death in 1645, books such as the Geneva Bible with the accompanying Geneva Notes which had hitherto been banned were allowed again. Rather than reinstating the Notes, however, the Committee for Religion commissioned ten scholars to write a new set of Annotations to go with the Authorized Version of James I. The Annotations to the Song agree with the allegorical approach, and state that the text speaks of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Clarke discusses the characteristics of the Annotations to Song 1:1–5 which make clear that Christ and the Church are betrothed but the marriage is yet to be consummated, and she compares them with the earlier Geneva Notes. Likewise, Clarke notes that the Geneva Notes and the Annotations alike endeavoured to extract the doctrine of Grace from Song 5:1–7. Further, Song 5:6 is understood to speak of the important Calvinist doctrine of the juxtaposition of God's absence and presence. The interpretation of the watchmen in Song 5:7 is also significant. While the same figures in Song 3:3 are neutral figures, the watchmen in 5:7 are false teachers, i.e., Catholics.

Clarke then discusses how the commentaries by Thomas Brightman and Nathanael Homes treat the Song as a religious-political allegory which predicts the future of the church. Clarke finally explores the interpretation of the Song in the commentaries by the two Presbyterian scholars Matthew Poole and Matthew Henry. In particular, she notes how Henry's commentary from 1711 meant the end of political interpretations of the Song, as well as of the typical Presbyterian understanding of it as a love song between Christ and the individual soul. Instead, the book speaks about the spiritual transactions between God and his church.

In the fifth chapter, "The Seventeenth-Century Woman Writer and the Bride," Clarke looks at how the Song influenced and inspired women to become writers. Clarke notes, however, that only few became poets and writers of fiction. Instead, most women tended to write spiritual journals which

narrated the author's spiritual life and her devotion for Christ. For example, Anne Wenn kept such a journal, as did Elizabeth Turner and Julia Palmer. They used frequently the language of the Song to describe their relationship with God. The medium of a journal enabled a woman to write without publishing, something which was considered to be inappropriate for women to do. It was private writing and only published after its author's death. For many of these women, Christ replaced their husbands as the object of devotion. In their relationship with him, they could explore their feelings which often were denied them in their earthly marriages.

In other cases, select women saw themselves as prophets. Anna Trapnel, for example, used the Song to validate her own writings. Employing the language of the Song, she depicted herself as having the same role as the Bride. Other women, like the anonymous author "Eliza," called her poems her "babes," i.e., the offspring of her marriage with Christ. In a few cases, female authors also employed the Song to oppose male authority. Notably, Anna Wentworth used her perceived position as the Bride to resist her husband and the leaders of the Baptist church.

The sixth chapter, titled "Politics, Metaphor and the Song of Songs in the 1670s," looks at ways in which Anglican clergy, committed to the Restoration of the Church of England, related to the aforementioned kinds of political readings of the Song. They regarded the reading of the Song as an account of Christ's love for the individual Christian to be erroneous, and they objected to what they considered to be unbridled metaphorical readings of the book. Clarke focuses her attention on the clergyman William Sherlock's critique of the treaties on the Song by John Owen (Independent) and Thomas Watson (Presbyterian). Both men had been respected figures in 1657 during the Commonwealth, and their treatment of the Song had been much in line with the Reformed tradition. During the Restoration, the two men fared less well. Clarke outlines the content of their treaties, how Sherlock attacked their treatment of biblical metaphors and the doctrine of the mystical marriage of every true believer with Christ, and how Watson and Owen, as well as other authors such as Robert Ferguson, responded to Sherlock's critique.

The Epilogue discusses how the Song plays an important role in the allegories by Benjamin Keach. In particular, Clarke notes how Keach refers to the abundant care of Christ for his spiritual Bride as he takes upon himself all her debts and incurs the penalties himself. Kerch continues to draw on the Song in his major work *The Glorious Lover*, as he speaks of the Bride in terms of a romantic heroine.

Clarke ends her book with the reflection that Anglican interpretations of the Song had changed a great deal over the seventeenth century. At the end of the century, the Song was no longer a significant factor in the construction of the self or of the enemy. She suggests that this change walked hand-in-hand with the increased religious and political stability in England.

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