

# Martin Luther's Political Interpretation of the Song of Songs

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**Abstract:** Martin Luther argued that the Hebrew Bible's Song of Songs was "an encomium of the political order," a praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of temporal government. Luther's political interpretation of this book was unique in his age, and remains so in the history of biblical commentary. This paper offers an account of Luther's peculiar interpretation, as well as its place in his interpretation of the Bible and in the history of biblical commentary, by arguing that it exhibits the foundational idea of his political thought that secular authority is a precious gift from God, and that the Song of Songs, as a praise of conjugal love, provides for political authority a fitting biblical encomium.

## Introduction

In the first line of the preface to his commentary on the Song of Songs, Martin Luther bluntly stated his objections to past interpretations of the poem: "many commentators have produced all manner of interpretations of this song of King Solomon's—and they have been both immature and strange."<sup>1</sup> Yet it is strange that such an opening statement is followed by such a unique commentary. Far from the general contemporary view that the poem is simply about the "sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover,"<sup>2</sup> Luther argued that it was a song in which Solomon thanked God for the gift of government, and that this thanksgiving was so emphatic that it deserved to be called an "encomium of the political order."<sup>3</sup> It seems

I wish to heartily thank the editor and anonymous readers for their very helpful criticism and insightful comments in their review of this article.

<sup>1</sup>LW 15:191; WA 32 II:587. All English textual references and excerpts are from *Luther's Works (LW)*, American Edition (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Presses, 1958–1986). German and Latin references to Luther's texts are from the authoritative *Weimarer Ausgabe (WA)* editions (Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1883–1993).

<sup>2</sup>Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>3</sup>LW 15:195; WA 32 II:595.

stranger still when we consider that Luther rejected patristic allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, yet argued that the “simplest sense and real character of this book” was an allegory for the divine gift of temporal government.

However, Luther’s interpretation of the Song of Songs, while unique, is not so strange. In this “brief but altogether lucid”<sup>4</sup> commentary we are introduced not only to Luther’s criticism of previous commentators of scripture but also to his ambitious criticism of patristic and scholastic theology and interpretation. Luther’s original method of biblical interpretation, one greatly informed by medieval methods, though clearly also influenced by the methods of sixteenth-century humanism, is also shown in this commentary. Most importantly for understanding Luther’s political thought, his commentary on the Song of Songs argues that temporal power was a divine gift, though also one in need of restoration from apostate forces that had rendered it subservient to ecclesial authorities.

### Luther’s Political Thought and Its Interpretation

This restoration of temporal government was at the core of his political thought for his entire career as a reformer. Though this career began with protest against the sale of indulgences in 1517, and soon thereafter expanded into a general protest against the Roman Church, Luther (and fellow reformers) discovered that because of the intense opposition from the church, effective reform was impossible without the aid of secular authorities. But his opponents in the church and the new radical reformers rejected such a role for secular authorities, and hence Luther (and the “magisterial” reformers) had to re-theorize the role of the secular magistracy in the Reformation and restore it to its status as a divine gift, independent of the church. Looking to the time of the apostles and early church fathers, Luther saw that temporal government had once been independent from the spiritual authority. For Luther, the spiritual authority, particularly the office of the pope, had over the ages usurped the authority of temporal governments, and therein lay the greatest obstacle to effectual church reform: the magistracy did not rule its own God-given domain. Thus Luther sought to restore temporal government as part of his efforts to reform a corrupted church.

Luther’s restoration began with the argument found in his most significant political works:<sup>5</sup> that there were *Zwei Reiche* or “two kingdoms,” each given

<sup>4</sup>Part of the full title of the commentary, “Dr. Martin Luther’s Brief but Altogether Lucid Exposition of the Song of Songs,” LW 15:194; WA 31 II:589.

<sup>5</sup>The most seminal are the earliest writings that explain this teaching: *Christian Liberty* (LW 31:327–77; WA 7:1–38) and *Temporal Authority* (LW 45:75–129; WA 10:374–417).

by God, to which all Christians were subject. The spiritual realm was ruled by Jesus Christ through his Word; however, the temporal or secular realm was ruled by kings and magistrates through law and coercion. Its proper responsibilities were peace, order, and the protection of life and property. For Luther, secular government was not intrinsically Christian, but he did argue that the two realms were not only divinely ordered but also biblical. The two realms were two complementary means through which God directed humanity. In the temporal realm, God ruled indirectly through law and worldly authority and thus demanded obedience to secular power. Luther argued for a strict separation of the kingdoms: just as popes and priests had no business with human law, secular authorities had no authority in the affairs of the church. However, for Luther exceptions could be made in times of emergency, particularly when caused by the resistance of the Roman Church. Thus he believed that a secular magistrate could conduct affairs in the spiritual realm as a *Notbischof* or "emergency bishop," but this was only for Luther a temporary means to the full restoration of temporal government as a means of divine governance alongside a complementary (but otherwise separate) ecclesial realm of spiritual authority centered on grace alone in Jesus Christ.

Despite the general simplicity of Luther's restorative project, his political thought has been interpreted in sundry ways, often reflecting more the interpreter's preoccupations than the reformer's ideas. Recurring interpretations see Luther as an apologist of authoritarian states or a defender of the freedom of conscience. In two recent biographies, for example, Luther is presented as the forefather of both modern authoritarianism and the modern enlightened state.<sup>6</sup> Such persistent (and contradictory) anachronisms have met much scholarly criticism; as David Whitford summed it up, "Martin Luther is not the ogre of unlimited government and tyranny, nor is he the liberal-minded Enlightenment democrat."<sup>7</sup> Recently a body of scholarship on Luther's political thought has emerged that places particular emphasis on its theological underpinnings within a closely examined context of the sixteenth century's ecclesial and magisterial reform.<sup>8</sup> The result of this

<sup>6</sup>Examples of each point of view are, respectively, Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Derek Wilson, *Out of the Storm: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther* (New York: St. Martin's, 2008).

<sup>7</sup>David M. Whitford, "Luther's Political Encounters," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 190.

<sup>8</sup>Most notable and useful has been James Estes, *Peace, Order, and the Glory of God: Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon, 1518–1559* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); see also David Whitford, "Cura religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the Lectures on Genesis," *Church History* 73, no. 1 (2004): 41–62; John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the*

scholarship has been to retrieve the primacy of Luther's theology in his political thinking, particularly stressing the central idea that secular authority was a divine gift demanding our respect and (within certain limits) obedience. This growing body of literature is not free of scholarly disagreement; for example, scholars continue to debate the degree to which Luther's political thought developed or changed on issues such as the right of resistance (particularly armed resistance) to magisterial authorities at odds with the reformed cause,<sup>9</sup> and the extent to which secular authorities were deemed responsible for the religious affairs (often called the right of *cura religionis*) within their territories and principalities.<sup>10</sup> However, there is general agreement on the importance of Luther's political thought as a major branch of his theology; this general consensus has also encouraged a keen interest in contemporary Reformation historiography and its implications for the study of Luther's political thought.

This essay continues in this recent mode of interpreting Luther's political thought by placing the emphasis on the theological foundation beneath it; moreover, this essay argues that the Song of Songs is a unique source of Luther's political thought, as it exhibits not only the foundational idea of his political thinking, namely, that secular authority was a gift of God, independent of spiritual authority yet soundly based upon biblical revelation, but that it does so with an emphasis on the worldly goodness of this gift, just as the gift of conjugal love is praised in the Song of Songs. Hitherto, political theory has largely neglected this commentary, and biblical scholars have largely dismissed it as a strange and unreasonable allegory. Both points of view are mistaken: it introduces a central idea of Luther's political thought and remains a thoroughly intriguing interpretation.

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*Formation of Evangelical Identity*, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies 80 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), esp. 73–140; James Estes, "Luther on the Role of Secular Authority in the Reformation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (2003): 199–225; Ralph Keen, *Divine and Human Authority in Reformation Thought* (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: De Graaf, 1997). A classic introduction to Luther's political thought remains W. D. James Cargill Thompson, *The Political Thought of Martin Luther* (Sussex: Harvester, 1984); unfortunately this volume was published posthumously from manuscript notes and remains slightly underdeveloped, yet it remains very useful.

<sup>9</sup>See David Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeberg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001); Cynthia Grant Shoenberger, "Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (1979): 3–20. This issue is particularly focused on Luther's reaction to the Schmalkaldic League and the wars between the newly named "Protestant" territories and the Catholic lands of the Holy Roman Empire in the 1530s.

<sup>10</sup>See Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God*, and Whitford, "Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms."

## Luther's Commentary on the Song of Songs

Throughout his career, Luther had a regular duty to lecture on the Bible at the University of Wittenberg. The commentary on the Song of Songs was based on notes from lectures he had given during the winter and autumn of 1530 and the spring of 1531. In 1539, the commentary appeared in print, including a new preface. The historical context of Luther's lectures does not appear to have much influenced the substance of the commentary. The lectures on the Song of Songs were preceded by lectures (and a printed commentary) on Ecclesiastes, and Luther believed these books were related: both were (he believed) written by Solomon, and the message to trust God in the household, in politics, and in educating the young was present in both books. Aside from this specific and explicit link, the context of the work's composition does not greatly inform us about Luther's interpretation. However, the political significance of the period (1530–1539) cannot be understated: Luther had experienced and reflected upon many political events, including the new "Protestant" resistance to the Holy Roman Emperor and the maturation of the magisterial reformation. But specific references or allusions to the period are absent in the commentary, and so his political interpretation of the Song of Songs appears *sui generis* and uninspired by an immediate political event or controversy.

Yet Luther's claim that the Song of Songs was an "encomium of the political order" clearly stands both for the importance of this particular commentary in his political thought and for the understanding of his political thought in general. That Luther could take one of the most popular subjects of biblical commentary as a political book *and* also claim that the secular realm had been given an encomium tells us that the secular realm for Luther was divinely ordained and deserved the greatest praise and deepest thanks. Moreover, it also means that this commentary, inasmuch as it states the foundational idea of Luther's political thought and does so with biblical sanction, deserves a much more prominent place in what are considered his political writings.

Luther's commentary begins by sweeping aside millennia of interpretations, both Christian and Jewish, allegorical and plain text.

For we shall never agree with those who think it is a love song about the daughter of Pharaoh beloved by Solomon. Nor does it satisfy us to expound it of the union of God and the synagogue, or like the tropologists, of the faithful soul. For what fruit, I ask, can be gathered from these opinions? So even if this book, amidst all the variety of scripture, has had its place in the shadows until now, yet by pursuing a new path, we shall not depart from the substance of the thought even if we may perhaps err on the details.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>LW 15:194–95; WA 31 II:590.

It is important to stress that this “new path” to understanding the Song of Songs was not yet another allegory that set aside or transcended the obvious eroticism of the text; for Luther, the allegory of the book was vitally founded upon the earthy surface meaning. Unlike the traditional allegorical interpretations, Luther saw that the song’s eroticism was not to be explained away as symbolic or transcended to a spiritual symbol, but neither was it the book’s only meaning, and certainly not the most important one. For Luther, the overall meaning of the song would have to satisfy both its surface meaning and its instruction to the faithful as a revealed text. For Luther, the “fruits” of his interpretation seemed to him to be best, for he saw, alongside the song’s praise of love between the lovers, the praise of temporal government. Being both earthly and yet divinely created and thus divinely sanctioned, a song praising conjugal relations was for Luther the perfect vehicle for the allegorical praise of temporal government. Government thus being also divinely created and sanctioned, the song’s best interpretation would teach the faithful to love both gifts as a divine imperative.

For as those who wrote songs in Holy Scripture wrote them about their own deeds, so in Solomon this poem commends his own government to us and composes a sort of encomium of peace and of the present state of the realm. In it he gives thanks to God for that highest blessing, external peace. He does it as an example for other men, so that they too may learn to give thanks to God in this way, to acknowledge His highest benefits, and to pray for correction should anything reprehensible befall the realm.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Luther’s commentary on the Song of Songs became a work of political thought. It concentrates on several political ideas and themes: the difficult nature but divine sanction of statecraft and biblical examples of it (in this case, Solomon); the restoration of politics from apostate forces (both papalist and radical) that had in his view rendered temporal authority subservient to ecclesial authorities; and finally, his emphatic teaching that temporal power was a gift from God, worthy of the highest praise and honor.

For Luther, the Song of Songs showed both the great challenge and the divine sanction of statecraft. The challenge of managing government was reflected in the character of the song: there are many ups and downs, great consolations, complaints, exhortations, and praises. Just as governments and the lives of magistrates and subjects vary up and down, so too does the “order and course” of the Song of Songs. Luther noted that “in public affairs new storms, new disturbances, and alarms arise constantly,” followed by brief periods of peace, only to be followed by “other tumults and calamities.”<sup>13</sup> Solomon’s response in the Song of Songs, Luther believed, was to encourage the magistrate to hope and pray, not dwelling on the difficulties

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>LW 15:200; WA 31 II:609.

that inevitably follow the task of statecraft, but rather dwelling on the divine sanction and calling of the statesman. Thus Luther considered the calling of the statesman one of the most difficult in Christendom. Maintaining a steadfast faith in the midst of troubles with the temptations of power and wealth at his disposal was no simple life. In his most famous treatment of political ideas, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, Luther argued that the Christian prince was a very rare person, even though under a truly Christian regime, in which good order was kept and the church allowed to flourish, both ruler and subjects lived best.

But the Song of Songs told Luther that even when life for a Christian prince was unhappy, he had divine consolation. In verse 1:8, Luther interpreted the consolation of the "bridegroom"<sup>14</sup> as a consolation of a statesman. Just as this loveliest of women overlooks her own endowments amidst the yearning for her lover, so too does the world-weary magistrate tend to forget his great divine gift of political authority because of "immediate sorrow or emotion" over the tumult of political affairs. And just as the woman is to find her way again by following the tracks of the sheep and grazing her goats, so does the magistrate find his way again by the steadfast leading of his flock. Even amidst the tumult, he is confident in the blessing of God; "for pastures exist for the sake of sheep," Luther wrote, "and the state is established principally for the sake of good men."<sup>15</sup> Such a consolation, according to Solomon in verse 1:17, is as solid as a house of cedar.<sup>16</sup>

For Luther, statecraft was an art not unlike the art of living as a Christian in general (but perhaps to an acute degree): learning to take comfort in the preaching of the grace of God in the midst of evils and calamities. Luther wrote, "this [learning to take consolation] is the highest art in all our trials."<sup>17</sup> The magistrate must be comforted (like the beloved in 2:5 who is comforted by the small delights of fruits and blossoms when her lover is absent) not by the splendor of nations, power, and wealth, but in the sure knowledge that political authority is a divine calling, and this knowledge blesses his rule more than the powers and wealth of any other government unaware of and unconcerned with its divine sanction.<sup>18</sup>

In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Luther presented Solomon as a model statesman. However, Luther's praise of Solomon must not be understood simply as an endorsement of any specific policies or practices that the Bible had recounted. In fact, according to the account of Solomon's reign in 1 Kings, though renowned for riches, wisdom, and unified rule, it was not a reign that endured long past his lifetime (as the kingdom dissolves

<sup>14</sup>Modern interpretation considers this verse to be the words of the woman.

<sup>15</sup>LW 15:205; WA 31 II:621.

<sup>16</sup>LW 15:210; WA 31 II:631.

<sup>17</sup>LW 15:214; WA 31 II:643.

<sup>18</sup>LW 15:216; WA 31 II:648.

under his son Rehoboam) nor was it without serious transgressions. For example, 1 Kings 11 describes Solomon's love for foreign women, a love that turned his heart from following the God of Israel and caused Yahweh to raise up several nations to be his adversaries. But these transgressions entirely fit with Luther's praise of Solomon. Solomon was a wise king, and his reign was strong and endured, *insofar* as he was mindful of the divine calling of his kingship. When he was mindful of the divine origins and guidance of his office, his reign succeeded and he wrote his books that reflected this wisdom. Thus Solomon was a model of statesmanship because he, for a time through both pains and successes, led a kingdom that served God by believing that all government power is created and ordained by him.

According to Luther, the Song of Songs did make specific references to Solomon's reign and his regal institutions, and certain successes. For example, he argued that the entire third chapter of the song—consisting of the woman's dream (3:1–5) and the wedding procession (3:6–11)—was about Solomon's own period and government.<sup>19</sup> In this chapter, Luther saw a statesman who desired peace and tranquility (like the dreaming woman who desires her lover) and attained it through the consolation that God is the source and sanction of his authority; with that consolation, Solomon became a confident administrator and a prudent enforcer of the law. The large wedding procession of sixty mighty men with their swords drawn (3:7, 8) Luther interpreted as Solomon's wise statecraft in both his delegation of authority and his unflinching willingness to use force when necessary.<sup>20</sup> Thus Solomon's specific successes, even in the use of deadly force, only followed from the consolations of God who had created and ordained his office.

The use of deadly force would often prove necessary for the godly magistrate, for as is often noted in the commentary, temporal government was constantly threatened from apostate forces. These apostate political forces did not consider temporal government a blessing of God but merely an instrument of bald ambition or lust to dominate, and thus could not correctly assess the godly vocation of the magistrate or the role of temporal government in general.

For before the revelation of the Gospel, what station of life was there, I ask, that men could assess correctly? Not husband, not wife, not children, not magistrates, not citizens, not menservants, not maidservants were sure that they were established in a way of life that was approved by God. So they all took refuge in the works of monks.<sup>21</sup>

These apostate forces, specifically for Luther those within the universal Church of Rome, devalued temporal authority while extolling ascetic

<sup>19</sup>LW 15:223–26; WA 31 II:666–73.

<sup>20</sup>LW 15:225; WA 31 II:670.

<sup>21</sup>LW 15:201; WA 31 II:613.



withdrawal. Luther's objection is not only political; in devaluing the magistrates and making them subservient to the church, these forces greatly injured the gospel. But these apostate forces were not for Luther exclusive to the Roman Church. His commentary on verse 2:15, in which the woman calls on her lover to catch the foxes that raid the vineyards, considers these canine raiders to be the "false brethren in the church," heretics, and planners of sedition.<sup>22</sup> These apostate forces were also found in the reform movement: the name "false brethren" was the label given to Luther's radical opponents on the reforming side of the growing divide of European Christendom. The radical reformers behind the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 fit Luther's "foxes" of verse 2:15; they (at least in Luther's view) violently disregarded legitimately instituted authority, revolted in the name of the gospel, and thus injured both church and government. Thus Luther's commentary on the Song of Songs speaks to a major component of his political thought in general.<sup>23</sup>

Luther's rejection of the traditional interpretations of the Song of Songs shared common ground with his career-long rejection and excoriation of monasticism, clerical celibacy, and the radical Reformation's shunning of secular politics. Thus from Luther's point of view the radical political theology of Thomas Müntzer (a leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 and early follower of Luther) and the Roman Church's privileging of clerical celibacy and monastic withdrawal both denigrated the sacred and very worldly gifts of God (such as temporal government). Luther thought these worldly gifts could not be demoted by asceticism without jeopardizing salvation in the next world by upsetting the reception of the gospel and disordering the rule of good laws. Thus it was for Luther that the asceticism of monks, the radical politics of Anabaptists, and the sundry interpretations of the Song of Songs were spiritually dangerous by hindering the gospel and useless (if not harmful) to the right ordering of this life by demoting temporal government beneath ecclesial authority. For Luther then, the most convincing interpretation of the Song of Songs would affirm the best gifts of God to the created world (marriage, government) while affirming the gospel message of salvation by God's grace alone. "The purpose of Scripture," wrote Luther in his prefatory remarks, was "to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness." For him a proper commentary must

<sup>22</sup>LW 15:221; WA 31 II:663.

<sup>23</sup>The topic is far too large to treat adequately in this article. Luther's reaction to the Peasants' Revolt and the radical reformers behind it can be seen in his *Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia* (LW 46:3–43; WA 8291–334), *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (LW 46:45–55; WA 18:357–61), and *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants* (LW 46:57–85; WA 18:384–401). For an excellent overview of Luther and the "false brethren," see Mark U. Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975).

“instruct us with doctrine useful for life,” and previous commentaries in his view had failed to do so.<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, as Luther argued in the introduction to his commentary on the second chapter, the magistrate must be on his guard against any “hatred of the world.”<sup>25</sup> Earlier in the commentary, Luther likened the dismissal or devaluation of temporal government to a child’s hatred for its mother, in that both are utterly contrary to the mandate of God.<sup>26</sup> But how exactly the magistrate is to rule so as to maintain his subjects’ respect was largely left unsaid in the commentary. These vital topics of Luther’s political theory must be found elsewhere in his corpus, such as his 1523 work *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*. However, some echoes of these teachings are perceptible in the commentary. For example, the lover’s praise of his beloved’s scarlet lips in verse 4:3 reminded Luther of the beautiful and lovely pair of “Law and Gospel” and its centrality in the right teaching of the affairs and roles of ecclesial and temporal authorities.<sup>27</sup> The good magistrate is one who is wholly concerned with maintaining peace and the rule of law (and so punishing and using force when necessary) in order that his government may keep subjects aware of their sinfulness and so be pushed toward the unearned grace proclaimed by the church. But in this commentary, we have no other practical political teaching. The commentary simply states that both church and government are, like the yearned-for embrace of the lovers in verse 2:6, wholly necessary to human life on earth and divinely instituted for the salvation of God’s people. The lack of more practical teachings was entirely appropriate for his interpretation of the song: this was only a poem of praise. Unlike the more practical and instructive books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs was a praise of God for the gift of government, and so his commentary is concerned not with many practical matters but only with the exposition of the central message of praise.

Therefore the commentary is abundantly filled with Luther’s most emphatic political teaching: that temporal power was a most precious divine gift. Moreover, it is through this final point that Luther’s political interpretation of the Bible’s most erotic book becomes entirely fitting. The passion between the lovers matches the political message they are meant to extol. For Luther, the lover’s praise of his beloved’s breasts in verse 4:5 was not to be shunned, and needed no warning against impure thoughts: “for the Holy Spirit is pure and so mentions women’s bodily members that he wants them to be regarded as good creatures of God.”<sup>28</sup> The shunning of the literal meaning was the mistake of past interpreters of the poem that

<sup>24</sup>LW 15:192; WA 31 II:588.

<sup>25</sup>LW 15:211; WA 31 II:634.

<sup>26</sup>LW 15:203; WA 31 II:616.

<sup>27</sup>LW 15:229; WA 31 II:680.

<sup>28</sup>LW 15:231; WA 31 II:686.

led them to their “immature and strange” interpretations. Luther was pleased by the literal earthiness of the poem, for it validated his political interpretation: “there is nothing in this book that pleases me more than the fact that I see Solomon speaking in such sweet figures about the highest gifts which God has conferred upon His people,” for it was in order that “an outstanding example of gratitude should be placed before us here.”<sup>29</sup> Commenting on the lover’s praise of his beloved’s thighs in verse 7:1, Luther wrote that only our concupiscence misuses our genital members, and so they—especially as the organs of fruitfulness and creation—are blessings of God’s good order.<sup>30</sup> So too was temporal government a great blessing, and thus Luther’s political interpretation of the Song of Songs, though clearly allegorical, was wed to the erotic meaning of the text.

### Luther’s Song of Songs and His Biblical Interpretation

There is a temptation to dismiss Luther’s commentary as yet another attempt to scurry around an erotically charged biblical text, lest he accept its literal meaning and be forced to question its canonicity. Such a dismissal would be groundless for two reasons. First, Luther simply did not share the theology of Origen or Jerome, which privileged monastic asceticism and virginity over marriage and conjugal relations. Since his discovery of *sola fides* and his subsequent career as a reformer, Luther was emphatically opposed to monastic asceticism and strongly encouraged familial life for the “priesthood of all believers” (and so both clergy and laity) lest celibacy be turned into a work of righteousness and the blessings of conjugal love and the rearing of children be neglected.<sup>31</sup> Second, Luther showed little restraint in questioning the canonicity of a biblical book if he believed it to contain teachings contrary to the gospel, or felt it was bereft of sound teachings in general. For example, Luther’s problems with James and Revelation were well known and publicly promulgated; in fact, in the order of New Testament books Luther placed Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end because of their doubtful apostolicity. Simply put, these books for Luther may have contained good sayings and teachings, but they did not teach the “Law and Gospel” that Luther believed united the biblical canon and warranted the inclusion of the books therein. In his preface to the New Testament Luther called the

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>LW 15:249; WA 31 II:736.

<sup>31</sup>For example, in one of the most controversial works of his early career as a reformer, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther famously rejected marriage as a sacrament, precisely on the grounds that this turned it into works of righteousness and robbed secular government of its proper domain (LW 36:92–106). See Luther’s *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage* of 1519 (LW 44:7–15; WA 2:166–171) and the 1522 treatise *The Estate of Marriage* (LW 45:17–49; WA 10 II:275–304).

epistle of James “an epistle of straw” because it had “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the epistle of Jude was to be valued but could not be considered a book that contributed to the firm foundation of Christian faith.<sup>33</sup> In his 1522 preface to the book of Revelation, Luther argued that it was “neither apostolic nor prophetic” and that furthermore, “Christ was neither taught nor known in it.”<sup>34</sup> Thus Luther had no qualms about judging a biblical book unworthy of the canon. Yet even though some reformers and theologians throughout the ages questioned the status of the Song of Songs, Luther did not; this love poem was an encomium of the political order, and for him to neglect this clear meaning was also in part to ignore the gospel and the priceless gift from God, temporal government.

How did Luther arrive at this “new path” to understanding the Song of Songs, and how did he believe it to be distinct from the misguided allegories of previous patristic and medieval commentators and the plainly literal meaning of an erotic love poem? Luther’s interpretation was, like his interpretations of all canonical books, based on a revision (though not entirely a repudiation) of the prevailing medieval hermeneutical approach to the Bible. The scholastic *Quadrigo* or “fourfold sense of scripture” sought, whenever possible, to find four meanings in biblical passages: the *literal* meaning, or the events described or the face value of the text; the *allegorical* meaning, or the doctrines or articles of faith derived from the unnatural meanings of words that were otherwise obscure or unacceptable; the *tropological* or *moral* meaning, or the ethical lessons and moral prescription; and the *anagogical* meaning, or the hopeful message of a future fulfillment of divine promises.

Luther’s early hermeneutical revision began by following the early prominent sixteenth-century humanist Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (1450–1536). Like the French humanist, Luther argued that even the literal sense could be understood in two ways: in a given passage there could be the literal-historic meaning, and the literal-prophetic meaning.<sup>35</sup> Hence in his preface to his glosses on the Psalms—early writings of towering importance for Luther’s reformation “discovery” of *sola fides*—Luther contrasted meaning given by “the killing letter” against the meaning of the “life giving spirit.” Under the distinction of letter and spirit, plus the scholastic fourfold meaning of scripture, Luther derived eight possible meanings of the phrase “Mount Zion.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup>LW 35:362; WA DB VI:10. These words on James, among many others, did not ever appear in Luther’s complete Bible, nor in editions of Luther’s New Testament after 1537. See LW 35:358n5.

<sup>33</sup>LW 35:398; WA DB VII:387.

<sup>34</sup>LW 35:398–99; WA DB VII:404.

<sup>35</sup>Bainton, “The Bible in the Reformation,” 25; Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 152.

<sup>36</sup>LW 10:4; WA 3:11. See Gerhard Ebeling, “Der vierfache Schriftsinn und die Unterscheidung von litera und spiritus,” *Lutherstudien* 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1971), 51–61.

	<i>"the killing letter"</i>	<i>"the life-giving spirit"</i>
<i>literally/historically:</i>	land of Canaan	people of Zion
<i>allegorically:</i>	synagogue or prominent person in it	church or prominent person in it
<i>tropologically:</i>	righteousness of the law	righteousness of faith
<i>anagogically:</i>	future glory in the flesh	eternal glory

Luther's application of the humanist distinction between letter and spirit to the fourfold meaning of scripture allowed him to see that a Christological interpretation of the Bible was always its supreme meaning, one that the fourfold hermeneutic did not privilege. But this supreme meaning was also literal, and not for Luther (in the case of Origen's interpretation of the Song of Songs) an open-ended invitation to read in meaning when the "killing letter" meaning was not particularly or obviously theologically compelling. When Luther later ceased to use the fourfold hermeneutic altogether, this lesson remained. Meanings other than the literal-historical cannot be valid "unless the same truth is expressly stated historically elsewhere"; otherwise, Luther argued, "Scripture would become a mockery."<sup>37</sup> Thus the previous interpretations of the Song of Songs were erroneous, not because they were completely implausible, but because by ignoring both the literal letter and the literal spirit of scripture they departed at once from scripture's own character as the literal history of the historic people of Israel and the literal prophetic meaning of scripture that culminates in the salvation of Jesus Christ. In short, the previous commentaries failed to interpret it in light of the Bible's overwhelming message of salvation and grace through the ages ending in Jesus Christ.

For Luther, the Bible cohered in Christ.<sup>38</sup> It is not that Luther ignored the many styles of literature including prayers, laws, and prophecies; rather, for Luther, all these seemingly disparate works, including the Song of Songs, gained their unity either in the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Word of God or the prophetic coming of that Word. Yet all of scripture was not simply gospel, or the good news of Christ's salvation; the Bible also contained law. But this law, especially in the ethical teachings of the Old Testament, could only be fully understood and interpreted through Christ. The Old Testament contained, for example, ceremonial and judicial codes that only had immediate significance to the Hebrews; but these same codes for Luther were best understood not only as historical artifacts from ancient Israel but also as integral parts of a coherent body of scripture that admonished sin, promised salvation, and ultimately (in Jesus) fulfilled that promise. The laws and ethics of the Old Testament prepare humanity for Christ by driving it from sin and pushing it towards faith in grace alone.

<sup>37</sup>LW 10:4; WA 3:11.

<sup>38</sup>See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 74–78; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 81–83.

The Song of Solomon was for Luther an example of the legal and ethical drive of the Old Testament that prefigured and pointed to Christ. By praising the divine gift of temporal government the Song of Songs was praising law and order given by God for the greater purpose of peace in this world and salvation in the next. Luther's interpretation therefore was in his thinking soundly based in the whole "Law and Gospel" thrust of scripture.

Luther also thought that his interpretation of the Song of Songs fit the book's immediate biblical context as one of three works by King Solomon (an authorship he never questioned, and since he found unity among the three books, he was not compelled to question). For Luther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs were all ethical books. Considering Solomon's God-given wisdom, the ethical teachings of these books must be closely considered. As Luther tells us in his introduction to the commentary, Proverbs "deals mostly with the home and sets forth general precepts for behavior in this life."<sup>39</sup> The other two, however, are books on political ethics. Luther believed that Ecclesiastes directed political leaders to fear God, vigorously perform, and remain unfazed by various difficulties and public ingratitude.<sup>40</sup> The Song of Songs, Luther argued, "rightly belongs with Ecclesiastes, since it is an encomium of the political order, which in Solomon's day flourished in sublime peace."<sup>41</sup>

### Luther and the Historical Interpretation of the Song of Songs

Luther's commentary on the Song of Songs added to an already very crowded field. No other single, small book of the Hebrew Bible has, as one biblical scholar put it, "received so much attention and certainly none has had so many divergent interpretations imposed upon its every word."<sup>42</sup> For example, the Song of Songs was one of the most popular books in the Middle Ages, boasting over thirty known commentaries from the twelfth century alone.<sup>43</sup> This great diversity has made the task of both interpreting the work and understanding the history of its interpretation an overwhelming task.<sup>44</sup> However, despite the massive amounts of interpretation over

<sup>39</sup>LW 15:195; WA 31 II,594.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Marvin H. Pope, ed., *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 89.

<sup>43</sup>Roland E. Murphy, "Book of Song of Songs," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 6:154

<sup>44</sup>Roland E. Murphy, *A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 11; Harold H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," in *The Servant of the Lord, and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 197.

thousands of years across Jewish, Christian, and secular divisions, generally two categories emerge: traditional allegorical interpretation, which considers the Song of Songs to be an allegory for the love of God and God's people (or something of the sort), and the more generally modern, plain-meaning interpretation which considers it to be essentially about human love.<sup>45</sup> Luther's interpretation stands out in that it criticizes both. Though his interpretation is essentially allegorical, and thus fits within the traditional category, Luther strongly opposed traditional interpretations, and was inspired to write his own unique commentary criticizing what he considered to be the serious shortcomings of Origen's and Bernard de Clairvaux's famous interpretations. Yet at the same time, against the literal interpretation category (mindful that, notwithstanding a few notable exceptions through the ages, this is largely a post-seventeenth-century perspective on the Song of Songs), Luther implicitly criticized it as vacuous but also believed that the erotic earthiness of the book was an essential part of his interpretation. Luther attacked celibacy in monasticism because he believed the discipline led not only to the heretical idea that divine grace could be merited through self-denial but also to the devaluation of the sacred gifts of marriage and child rearing. Similarly, Luther saw in this "political encomium" the biblical sanction for a restoration of secular government from the heretical forces that subsumed it under spiritual authority and the powers of the pope.

As he says in both the preface and introduction of his commentary, Luther aimed to turn his interpretation into a corrective for past traditional interpretations of the Song of Songs. At first glance, Luther's commentary appears to represent a typical stance among reformers with respect to previous allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs.<sup>46</sup> Reformation theologians looked upon late medieval and Renaissance commentaries, with their rigorous systems of allegory, rhetoric, and scholastic philosophy, as at least needlessly extravagant, if not outright prohibitive to the reception of God's revelation. This denunciation meant not that the Protestant Reformation rejected the rich patristic and medieval exegetic tradition before it, but that it rejected a certain strand of exegesis from the late medieval age.<sup>47</sup>

But Luther's stance against past interpretations of the Song of Songs was not so typical. While he seems at the outset to reject medieval allegorical interpretations, Luther's own interpretation remained essentially allegorical. Luther did share in the Protestant critique of late scholastic biblical exegesis, but he is emphatic in his introduction to the commentary that the previous interpretations failed to bring out the ethical teaching of the poem, and

<sup>45</sup>Murphy, "Book of Song of Songs," 154; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 89; Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 29.

<sup>46</sup>George L. Scheper, "Reformation Attitudes toward Allegory and the Song of Songs," *PMLA* 89, no. 3 (1974): 552.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 552.

hence failed to be what Luther argued his commentary would be: an interpretation “useful for life and for a right appreciation of the good gifts of God.”<sup>48</sup>

Luther did not explicitly mention interpretations he wished to supersede. However, considering both the unique interpretation he gave the book and the scorn he had for the unspecified commentaries that had in his view “so far” rendered the book’s meaning obscure and neglected, Luther implied that *all* previous commentaries on the book had come up short. Since the Song of Songs had become one of the most popular subjects of interpretation, his plenary rejection of all previous commentaries sought to overcome those of some of the most influential men of early Christianity and the Middle Ages, as well as the rich tradition of allegorical interpretations and more marginal literal interpretations of the poem in the history of Christian and Jewish exegesis.

Luther was first challenging the allegorical interpretations of the song that had dominated the Middle Ages. Foremost among these was that of Origen (ca. 185–ca. 284), the Alexandrian ascetic and church father whose commentaries and homilies on the Song of Songs exercised a wide influence on subsequent Christian interpretations.<sup>49</sup> Origen’s interpretation was, like his own spiritual life, ascetic and mystical, and it is tinged with neo-Platonic and Gnostic influences from late antiquity. For Origen, the erotic exchange of the lover and beloved in the Song of Songs was an allegory of the mystical union of the divine with the church and the individual soul. Thus for Origen the plain meaning of the text was transcended by a spiritual allegory. However, the plain sense of the text was the foundation for the allegorical and theological drama between the marriage of Christ and his church (and the soul).<sup>50</sup> But the allegory transcended this plain sense because for Origen the conjugal relations between man and woman, though divinely given, were diluted and piecemeal imitations of the union of the soul or church with God. Dwelling on the plain meaning of the Song of Songs, as well as conjugal relations and the pleasure of sexual intercourse in general, was for Origen dangerous because it could dull the soul’s ability to recognize the preternatural joy of union with God that it was truly fitted for.<sup>51</sup> Hence, the literal meaning of the Song of Songs was transcended in Origen’s commentary and homilies by the spiritual allegory of the union of the church or soul with God.

The interpretation of the Song of Songs as a spiritual allegory was repeated in the influential commentaries of several Greek fathers such as Athanasius

<sup>48</sup>LW 15:194; WA 31 II:589.

<sup>49</sup>See Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957). Only part of Origen’s commentary survives.

<sup>50</sup>Murphy, *Commentary on the Book of Canticles*, 18.

<sup>51</sup>Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 172–73.



(ca. 296–373) and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395).<sup>52</sup> Influential Latin Church fathers, such as Jerome (331–420) and later Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604; Pope from 590), fixed Origen's allegorical interpretation as the standard.<sup>53</sup> To be sure, Gregory's commentary did not shy away from the erotic character of the poem; however, much like Origen's commentary, Gregory's interpretation saw the celebration of conjugal love as a call or invitation of the soul to yearn even more for the eternal love of God.<sup>54</sup>

Ancient Jewish traditional interpretations on the Song of Songs were, with several notable exceptions, remarkably close to their Christian counterparts, despite the sometimes great differences in exegesis. Thus Luther's challenge took on these Jewish interpretations as well. Both the Targum (ancient Aramaic interpretive renderings of the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible) and the Midrash Rabbah (commentary from the Middle Ages), for example, considered the Song of Songs to be an allegory of the history of Israel and God's love for his chosen people.<sup>55</sup> This Jewish allegorical interpretation of the book, especially in the period leading to its canonization, had to struggle with the paradoxical instance that God was aniconic and radically transcendent, yet also anthropomorphized and personalized throughout Hebrew texts. Thus the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs in the early Rabbinic is a striking reconciliation of the earthiness of human experience with the transcendent love of God for Israel.<sup>56</sup>

The traditional allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs reached its high-water mark in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who delivered eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs from 1135 to 1153, never reaching past the first two chapters. Bernard's sermons generally saw the Song of Songs as an allegory of the union of the soul with God, and so they are commentaries that are as much vehicles of his own spiritual doctrines (beckoning the reader's soul to pursue the joyful union with God) as they are allegorical interpretations. Luther's interpretation challenged all of these traditional commentaries.

Luther's interpretation of the Song of Songs also challenged any understanding of the book that considered it to be no more than an erotic song about human love. Even though the literal interpretation rose to dominance centuries after Luther (particularly with the advent of historical criticism and links made between the Song of Songs and wider ancient Near

<sup>52</sup>For a concise summary of these interpretations see Pope, *The Song of Songs*, 117–19; Murphy, *Commentary on the Book of Canticles*, 21.

<sup>53</sup>Murphy, *Commentary*, 22.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>55</sup>Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 29–30; Bernard Grossfeld, ed., *The Targum to the Five Megilloth* (New York: Hermon, 1973), 171–252.

<sup>56</sup>Gerson D. Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: Ktav, 1974), 279.

Eastern literature), it is not a wholly modern approach.<sup>57</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), against the allegorical interpretations of his fellow Eastern church fathers, gained notoriety for his interpretation of the Song of Songs as Solomon's love proclamation and defense of his marriage to his Egyptian princess.<sup>58</sup> In the Latin West, Jovinian (d. ca. 405), who challenged the view that virginity was a higher state than marriage and was censured by the likes of Jerome and Augustine for his views on the Virgin Mary, also considered the Song of Songs to be no more than a love poem.<sup>59</sup> Evidence from Rabbinic period sources suggests that some popular and scholarly Jewish understanding of the Song of Songs was also in the literal mode.<sup>60</sup> The Reformation era also had examples of literalist interpretations. Most notable of these was the interpretation of humanist reformer Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563), according to which not only was the Song of Songs to be understood literally, this literal meaning precluded its canonicity. Castellio's views on the book, among other things, cost him his good graces with John Calvin and ordination and citizenship in Geneva. Upon Castellio's departure from the reformed city, Calvin and the ministers declared that the principal dispute between them and Castellio concerned the Song of Songs because "Castellio said it was a lascivious and obscene poem in which Solomon described his indecent amours."<sup>61</sup>

With interpretations like Castellio's, Luther vehemently disagreed: the erotic love vividly described in the Song of Songs was not to be explained away as symbolic, and it was not the poem's only meaning (or certainly not the most important one). Luther's political interpretation of the Song of Songs was vitally connected to its literal account of erotic love between the lover and the beloved and sought not to transcend it altogether but to use it to point to temporal government, the "most precious jewel on earth."<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Although it is quite clearly the category of interpretation most widely accepted today. See William E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 1 (1974): 82–100.

<sup>58</sup>Theodore's views on the biblical interpretation and the Incarnation were condemned by the councils of Ephesus (431) and Constantinople (553).

<sup>59</sup>Pope, *Song of Songs*, 120.

<sup>60</sup>Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 30.

<sup>61</sup>Roland H. Bainton, "The Bible in the Reformation," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 8. For a detailed account of the dispute and Castellio's life, see Hans R. Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio, 1515–1563: Humanist und Verteidiger der religiösen Toleranz im konfessionellen Zeitalter* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997).

<sup>62</sup>LW 46:238; WA 30 I:153.

## Conclusion

Against the earlier, allegorical and literal interpretations of the poem, Luther provided a hybrid interpretation. Political authority, like the love between a man and a woman, was a divine gift. It was to be emphatically affirmed as a station of the highest calling in maintaining worldly order not only for the sake of peace on earth, but also for the sake of facilitating the reception of the gospel for the salvation of all humankind.

Though fellow reformer Johannes Brenz agreed with Luther's interpretation and a few sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentaries refer to it,<sup>63</sup> there is otherwise scant evidence that Luther's commentary on the Song of Songs had any significant influence on subsequent interpretations of the poem or on Reformation political thought. Moreover, recent scholarship in Reformation history and political theory has either dismissed or ignored it altogether: Martin Brecht's monumental biography of Luther summarily dismissed it as an "incorrect interpretation"<sup>64</sup> whereas Quentin Skinner's famous study of Luther and Reformation political thought does not mention it.<sup>65</sup> Modern biblical scholarship has generally dismissed Luther's interpretation as unfounded.

But Luther's political interpretation of the Song of Songs was not an attempt to allegorize an otherwise erotic book. It was an attempt to expose what he believed to be a major teaching behind the entire biblical corpus: like the divinely sanctioned and creative union of male and female, political authority was divinely instituted and sanctioned. Insofar as political authority respected this sanction, it must be honored and obeyed, because it was the natural and divine order and because one of the most fascinating (though albeit misunderstood) books of the Bible in his view clearly said so. Therefore, considering his theology and the political theory that was derived from it, Luther's interpretation of the Song of Songs was not so strange after all.

<sup>63</sup>Pope, *Song of Songs*, 125–29.

<sup>64</sup>Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 249.

<sup>65</sup>Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).