

Mitchell, Christopher W.

Song of Songs

Concordia Commentary Series

Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003. Pp. 1344. Hardcover. \$42.99.
ISBN 0570062896.

Dear Friends in Christ,¹

Dr. Mitchell has done us a great service by raising some essential questions regarding the hermeneutics of imagery, a method for metaphor—it is with this narrow focus that I wish to interact with this careful, thorough, and wide-ranging work.

But first, let me say that I resonate with Mitchell’s approach to the Song as a whole: “*The love of Christ for his church is in, with, and under the mutual love between this faithful husband and wife.*”² Is the song about *marriage* or about *salvation*? With Mitchell, I would answer, “Yes.”

With that in mind, let us look at the imagery of the Song. Mitchell’s method for determining *what* and, just as importantly, *how* the Song communicates is best seen in an example of his exegesis. Let me read to you from Mitchell’s translation of Song of Songs 2:2-3. It’s on page 665 of the Blue Book if you would like to follow along.

“[He:] Like a lily among thorns, so is my friend among the daughters.
[She:] Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
 so is my lover among the sons.
In his shade I dearly delight to sit,
 And his fruit is sweet to my palate.”

¹ This book review was originally presented at a meeting of the exegetical working group at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, MO on September 19, 2005.

² 17, emphasis original.

So far, the text. These two verses fall within a larger pericope, 2:1-7, and Mitchell provides us with lengthy and careful notes on the Hebrew and on specific translation choices he made and why. Let me say here that Dr. Mitchell's exegesis and Hebrew philology throughout this commentary are world-class. He is careful in his textual work and his translation is exemplary.

Mitchell's extensive notes already raise some hermeneutical questions, but most of these return in the accompanying commentary. Again, let me read you a selection. This time I will begin on page 692 and read excerpts from Mitchell's commentary on 2:2 and 2:3.

First, regarding the lily among *thorns*, Mitchell notes, in part: "Protologically, briars harken back to man's hubris in Eden, which incurred death for the whole creation (Gen 3:18) . . . Eschatologically, they signify impending divine wrath at the judgment . . . Yet where the curse abounded, grace now superabounds. God chose to appear in a burning 'thorn bush' to promise redemption (חנ<ס] , Ex 3:2-4). During his passion, the King of the Jews wore a crown of thorns, intended by the soldiers to mock his claim to royalty (Mt 27:29). But those briars signified that the Christ bore the world's sin as he was lifted up on the cross to ascend his throne . . ."³

Mitchell treats the apple tree in 2:3 with the same kind of technique: " 'Taste . . . that Yahweh is good!' (Ps 34:9 [ET 34:8]). Christ's cross is called a *xuvlon*, 'tree,' in several NT passages, probably alluding to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and/or the tree of life in Eden. The fruit of his crucifixion is access for all baptized believers to the tree of life in the new Eden (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14). Luther believes that the

³ 692-693.

apple tree, the most praiseworthy of trees, represents God . . . The apple tree's sacrificial self-giving of its sweet fruit (Song 2:3)—apples (2:5)—may be compared to the Lord's Supper . . . Developing another aspect of the tree metaphor, she professes, 'In his shade I dearly delight to sit' (Song 2:3). Shade provides welcome shelter from the searing sun and so is a metaphor for salvation . . .”⁴

These brief examples give us a flavor of one approach to metaphor that can take us, in three pages of commentary on two verses, from Song of Songs to Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Matthew, Mark, John, Ephesians and Revelation. Since Mitchell expressly ties himself to the particulars of the text in front of him—“[This commentary] . . . seeks to avoid allegory and limit associations to those supported exegetically by the Song's imagery and language. Thus it endeavors to remain anchored more firmly to the grammatical meaning and historical reference of the text.”⁵—we must ask the question, how does Mitchell get where he intends to take us?

Mitchell begins by noting particular imagery in the text. He notices that she is like a lily among thorns or he an apple tree. In metaphor, one thing is thought of in terms of another: she is like a lily; he is an apple tree. Lily and apple tree are what metaphor theory calls, “vehicles,”⁶ while the thing we are talking about in terms of the vehicle is called the “tenor.” When he says, “lily,” [vehicle] he is talking about *her* [tenor]; he is not talking about lilies. When she says, “apple tree” [vehicle] she is referring to *him* [tenor]; she is not referring to a tree. Vehicle and tenor, the distinction is important for our task at hand.

⁴ 693-694.

⁵ 25-26.

⁶ A good treatment of the basics of metaphor can be found in Caird, G. B. *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980.

Mitchell notes particular imagery in the text, like thorns or apple tree, and he matrixes the *vehicle* with other biblical texts and imagery. His matrix is clearly laid out in Figure 10 on page 266. There we see that the tree of life in the “Primeval Paradise” is matrixed with the apple tree in the Song of Songs, the cross under the category of “*Christ’s Earthly Ministry*,” “the preaching of the cross” in the “*Church’s Ministry*” and the tree of life again in the “*Eternal Paradise*.”

In Mitchell’s commentary on 2:3, the same kind of matrixing move is made with the thorns: thorns as a part of the curse in Genesis 3:18, thorns in Song 2:2, a thorn bush in Exodus 3, a crown of thorns in Matthew 27:29, and eschatologically thorns “signify impending divine wrath at the final judgment.”⁷ Note that the move has been made from *vehicle*—apple tree, thorns—to the broader Biblical matrix.

I would suggest another way of matrixing metaphors in the Song, of matrixing *any* Biblical imagery. Instead of moving directly from the *vehicle* to the canon, first start with the mechanics of the text itself: move from the *vehicle* to the *tenor* and then from the *tenor* to the Biblical matrix.

After all, the text isn’t actually talking about thorns or apple trees, it is talking about the Lover and the Beloved. Even though a tree may symbolize the cross and Solomon may be a type of Christ, *Solomon* does not stand for the *cross*. And when the text says “apple tree,” here the historical referent is Solomon, not an apple tree. You can’t move from *signifier* to *Biblical matrix* without first going through the *referent*—at least not without falling into the metaphorical equivalent of an illegitimate totality

⁷ 692.

transfer,⁸ where every possible meaning of an image is always present no matter what the specific context.

For my part, I'm not sure the curse in Genesis 3:18 or the metaphor for King Amaziah in 2 Kings 14:9⁹ really help me understand the image of the young bride as a lily among thorns. My hermeneutics of imagery differs from Dr. Mitchell. So how would I approach the imagery of Song of Songs 2:2-3? How would I preach this text?

Here I would have to go back to the outstanding work Mitchell has done in his textual analysis. Mitchell shows how she humbly refers to herself as one of the common and abundant flowers of the valley in 2:1 and he corrects her, "No, you aren't an everyday, ordinary flower; you are a lily among thorns." She is somehow unique, special.

And she finds her experience with him to be a surprise, a delight, refreshing and sustaining like an apple tree with its shade and fruit, an apple tree in a country known for its rugged and arid landscape.

These lovers experience each other as special, unique, a surprise, a delight, refreshing, pleasing, sustaining—and I'm not sure you have to fill in the blanks much further than that. Some sexual allusions are certainly present—Mitchell would interpret the apples as kisses¹⁰, others might be more erotic—but I'm not sure we are invited to map *all* of the specific details. In the same way, theological allusions may also be present without specific reference to particular dogma. Just as I would hesitate to make the reference to apples in Song 2:3 too concrete or anatomical in the marriage relationship, I

⁸ Also called an "unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field" in D. A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Baker Books, 1999) 60-61.

⁹ Mitchell references both of these, among other uses of thorn imagery, in his textual analysis on page 670.

¹⁰ 674.

would also hesitate to make them stand for something as specific as the Lord's Supper in the relationship between Yahweh and His people that this marriage reflects. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar and a vineyard just a vineyard.

So we have two people who delight in each other. So now what? Should I be preaching on married life together or Christ's love for the Church? As Wisdom Literature, the Song is a beautiful description of the way things work, the way things can be and are between a wife and husband who are in love.

Our *response* to the text then is something like, "Cool. When life together looks like that, that's good." If we are married, we might even remember a time or two when our experience with our spouse was something like that lily and that apple tree.

But since this text is in the canon (and here I readily admit that the canon is shaping my reading), I think we *must* make an additional move or we miss one of the most important aspects of the text. It reminds me of a close friend of mine in college who one day handed me a section of poetry from Friedrich Schiller that beautifully described how friendship, like spring, can blossom quietly until one day you wake up and the whole world has changed. Now it was normal in our friendship to share bits and pieces of particularly well-crafted verse, so my response to the poem *she* shared with me was, "Cool. When life looks like that, that's good."

Only later did I come to understand that I, perhaps comically, perhaps tragically, but no doubt totally, missed the point. She was saying, "Justin, *our* friendship is like that spring. *My* feelings for you have blossomed quietly. *My* whole view of our relationship has changed." And I said, "Cool. When life looks like that, that's good." That, my friends, is an inept and inappropriate response.

I submit to you today that if Schiller's poem were in the canon, Yahweh would in effect be saying to you, "*Our* friendship is like that spring. *My* feelings for you have blossomed quietly. *My* whole view of our relationship has changed." It is less than the desired response to say, "Cool. When life looks like that, that's good." When second-level discourse is being used as first-level discourse it demands a first-level discourse response (thanks, Gerhard Forde).

So if *I* were to preach this text, I would begin with Mitchell's basic assumption that "*The love of Christ for his church is in, with, and under the mutual love between this faithful husband and wife.*"¹¹ My sermon would have a lot to say about how and why it could possibly be true that *God* could be in love with *you*. I would want to explore ways in which God surprises and delights us. And I would speak words of comfort and amazing grace, that, in Jesus Christ, you actually surprise and delight God.

I might even go out on a *limb* (so to speak) and take the hearers through the experience of being tired and hungry in a hot, arid wilderness and suddenly finding a shady apple tree whose fruit is ripe and juicy and refreshing and whose strong branches shelter you from the noon-day sun. And then I would use that experience as a lens through which to view our faith walk, our life in the world, our quiet moments spent in God's Word, and yes, even the refreshment and rejuvenation that comes with the Sacrament and the intimate, tender, love relationship we have by grace through faith for Christ's sake.

And when I got done, I would hope that I had been faithful both to the way this particular imagery works in this particular text and to the implications of this particular text being in our canon.

And I would have found Mitchell's work helpful in my sermon preparation. He pointed me to major questions in text, he gave me a way of understanding the relationship between her claim to be a lily and his claim that she is a lily among thorns. He highlighted the parallel thought in verses 2-3, how lily is to thorns as an apple tree is to the trees of the forest. He helped me understand why $\div \gamma B e$ here is "among" and not "between." Perhaps most helpful of all, he gave me culturally relevant information on lilies and apples that helped me understand the external entailments that may have been received by an original audience or understood by an intended reader.

And if I were looking to preach a sermon series for Lent or Advent, Mitchell has done a lot of legwork for me already. Looking at the different ways the Bible portrays gardens or trees or even thorns might be a helpful way to keep people engaged week to week. But it would still be looking at the *different* ways the Bible uses gardens or trees or thorns.

It seems to me, when confronted with the rich imagery of Biblical texts, our first question should not be, "What could this possibly mean?" or "How many ways could you read this?" or even "What other Biblical texts use this same image?" Our first question, I think, should be, "How does this image work in this particular text?" In other words, "What markers in this text help me run with this image in the intended direction?" This is the first, and most important question.

And the second is like it, "What is the author's culture's understanding of this particular image?" That's actually more important than asking what [lilies or apples for example] are actually like in real life. It doesn't matter if gorillas are in all actuality mild

¹¹ 17, emphasis original.

mannered and gentle, if someone in our culture says, “That guy is a gorilla!” you understand the implication to be that the guy is fierce, aggressive, strong, and wild.

When dealing with external entailments, culture actually trumps reality.

“What markers *in this text* help me run with this image in the intended direction?” and “What is the author’s culture’s understanding of this particular image?” Ask these question early and often and I think our exegesis (as well as our preaching) will be careful, rigorous, and orthodox while at the same time being creative, fresh, and new.

Thank you.