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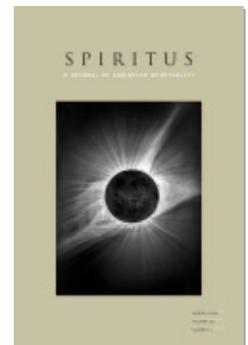
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*The Song of Songs and the Fashioning of Identity in Early Latin Christianity* by Karl Shuve, and: *Out of the Cloister: Scholastic Exegesis of the Song of Songs, 1100–1250* by Suzanne LaVere (review)

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*The Song of Songs and the Fashioning of Identity in Early Latin Christianity.* By Karl Shuve. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 256pp. \$105.00

*Out of the Cloister: Scholastic Exegesis of the Song of Songs, 1100–1250.* By Suzanne LaVere. Leiden: Brill Publishing. 196pp. \$135.00

The central role of the Song of Songs in the history of Christian spirituality and mysticism is well known. The history of allegorical interpretation (Bernard McGinn referred to it as “the traditional reading”) has been the subject of much scholarly attention over the last century. Biblical commentators feel compelled to include some kind of survey of this history before turning to their attention to the text itself. The homilies and commentaries of Origen and Bernard of Clairvaux have been the subject of countless studies through the years. More recently Gregory of Nyssa’s work on the Song has gained the attention of theologians. E. Ann Matter, Ann Astell, Denys Turner and others have produced widely read surveys of the Song’s role in ancient and medieval Christian spirituality, and Bernard McGinn’s ongoing multi-volume history of Christian mysticism provides excellent analyses of how many of the individual figures included in his work treated the Song. In recent decades, many feminist and queer Biblical scholars have turned to pre-critical and mystical readings of the Song as, perhaps, offering insights that might produce generative and liberating readings of the text in a post-modern era. In other words, the ancient and medieval commentary traditions—especially from the West—have been fertile fields of study for understanding Christian biblical interpretation, Christian mysticism, monastic spirituality and exegesis, and the role of the erotic in Christian spirituality. One might wonder, given the vast amount of scholarship on this subject, whether this well plowed ground can yield any more harvest.

The two books under review here demonstrate that this tradition remains a fertile field. While Karl Shuve and Suzanne LaVere address a commentary tradition that has been well studied, each author challenges some conventional wisdom established in past scholarship regarding the allegorical reception of the Song of Songs in Christian spirituality, and each offers provocative new readings of the material they address.

Shuve offers a fresh account of the prominence of the Song of Songs in medieval Christian spirituality by focusing on how ancient Latin writers treated the Song. This approach challenges the widely assumed predominance of Origen’s influence on the trajectory of interpretation. Questioning what he characterizes as a reduction of Western Song of Songs interpretation to “a history of the transmission of Origen’s thought” (2), Shuve does not deny the great Alexandrian exegete’s influence. However, he argues that there were other influences as well, and that many early Latin treatments of the Song did not appropriate the affective / mystical framework that sees the Song as an expression of the passionate love between Christ and the soul that has become the prevailing perception of its history. Instead, they used the Song to establish Christian identity, marking the boundaries of the church in one interpretive thread, and marking the boundaries of the ascetic body in another.

One of Shuve’s valuable insights is that Song reception scholarship has too often limited itself to formal commentaries on the Song. Since there are few extant

commentaries from the period in question here (the third and fourth centuries), this approach obscures a prominent strain of Song interpretation that was transmitted through numerous citations and allusions in other types of literature: letters, polemical treatises, catechetical works, instructions about liturgy and the sacraments, etc. The authors Shuve treats include Cyprian of Carthage, Ambrose, Augustine, Tyconius, Gregory of Elvira, and Jerome. None of these authors figure prominently—if at all—in the standard roll calls of Song of Songs interpretation history. This approach is significant and welcome in that it makes room for a fuller account of the role of the Song in the history of Christian spirituality, theology, and church practice. It suggests that a history of reception approach to the Song can provide a more complete understanding of its influence than traditional history of exegesis approaches.

The first section of the book is comprised of three chapters dealing with the Song of Songs in North Africa and Spain. Cyprian of Carthage is the first subject treated, Shuve claiming that Latin exegesis of the Song begins with him. Shuve wryly notes at the outset that Cyprian is “a figure who is almost never identified with the history of the poem’s interpretation” (23). This is no exaggeration. Cyprian used the Song to “negotiate the boundaries of ecclesial identity during a period of great tumult in the North African church” (23). In the wake of persecution and schism questions about whether those identified as heretics or schismatics could perform baptism, and whether or not those who had been baptized in schismatic communions had to be rebaptized were pressing. Cyprian insisted that the church was entirely sealed off from the world, the saving waters of baptism were not available outside of the true church, and that those wanting to become a part of the true church did, indeed, need to undergo rebaptism. Cyprian employed images like “a garden enclosed and a sealed font” (Song 4:12) and the dove (Song 6:8) to make his case about the separation of the church from the world—the dove because it was said to be set apart from other animals because of its purity. Eventually, Cyprian employed the Song to support his position about church unity in relation to the bishopric and apostolic succession. Thus, genuine Christian spirituality consists of a faith lived within the communion of the one true church and nourished substantially by the sacraments rightly administered in that body.

Cyprian did not write a commentary on the Song; rather, his interpretations are found in his letters and treatises on the unity of the church. Naturally, he adopts an ecclesiological framework for interpreting the Song as an account of the relationship between Christ and the church. One of Shuve’s most interesting claims is that Cyprian’s writings demonstrate an understanding of the Song that was taken for granted in his time; it seems to have been common wisdom that the Song would be read as a dialogue between Christ and the church and Cyprian does not seem, in any way, to “neutralize” the text’s erotic imagery (36). To think otherwise—as is common wisdom—suggests “the startling disjuncture between ancient and modern conceptions of the ‘plain sense’ of particular texts” (36). One of Shuve’s stated aims for the book is to try to hear the language and experience the imagery of the Song as its ancient readers and interpreters did, rather than as we moderns do; that is, to set aside post-Freudian assumptions about anxiety over the erotic content of the book leading pre-critical interpreters to sublimate or sanitize it. This argument has some merit, although commentaries like Origen’s, and many others’, contain enough warnings about how the seeming carnality of the Song might lead astray

those immature in faith that we must assume there was *some* anxiety about its eroticism at some point. However, Shuve may well be onto something if we understand a genre of sorts developing after earlier efforts to establish the parameters of proper interpretation, and later interpreters adopting the assumptions about the actual subject of the text.

Other chapters in the first section deal with variations on the purity and exclusivity of the church theme—authors he treats include Pacian, Tyconius, Augustine, and Gregory of Elvira. But in claiming that Cyprian is the “Father of Song exegesis in the West” (37), Shuve says that his interpretation established the parameters for understanding the Song for more than a century.

The second section of the book consists of three chapters on the Song of Songs in Italy in the late fourth century. The emphasis in Song interpretation there shifts somewhat, as it was employed in debates over the marriage, celibacy, and asceticism. While the emphasis on purity and boundaries remained, more emphasis was placed on the individuals, especially consecrated virgins, who came to be identified with the bride in the Song. Ambrose is the focus of chapters four and five as Shuve claims that the Bishop of Milan “fundamentally altered the trajectory of the Song’s interpretation in the West” (109). Like most of the authors treated in this work, Ambrose never penned a commentary on the Song; rather, it is a key text in his writings on virginity, in which he identifies the bride with the individual Christian rather than with the whole church, and specifically the individual virgin. Whereas Cyprian used the Song’s imagery to argue for the bounded purity of the church, Ambrose used it to promote sexual renunciation and the purity of virgin bodies. This notion of virginity extends to his ecclesiology as Ambrose develops “an ascetic account of Christian identity, in which the *literal* celibacy and enclosure of the consecrated virgin was extended *symbolically* outwards to the church and all of her members” (110–111). Thus, virginity becomes the foundation of Ambrose’s whole theology: “Virgin bodies, virgin souls, virgin church.” For Ambrose, the explicitly sexual Song of Songs bespeaks an ascetic norm for Christian identity.

Shuve takes up Jerome in the final chapter. Jerome, of course, translated Origen’s seminal commentary on the Song. As with Ambrose, Jerome never produced a commentary of his own, his interpretation of the Song appearing in his works on virginity. While Shuve sees Origen’s influence on Jerome, he shows Jerome pushing the Alexandrian’s identification of the bride to focus on the physical body of the consecrated virgin, rather than simply the soul. Thus, asceticism, physical virginity, becomes a primary locus for experiencing Christ. The final section of the chapter takes note of Jovinian’s resistance to what he perceived be a hierarchy of holiness advocated by Jerome which privileged monastics and ascetics over the married. Jovinian employed the Song to argue for the goodness of marriage. Shuve’s epilogue summarizes how the figures and texts examined throughout the book laid the foundations upon which medieval interpreters built, “opening up a panoply of interpretive possibilities [of the Song] that might otherwise never have arisen” (212).

LaVere’s work takes up the medieval period toward which Shuve points, concentrating on the years 1100–1250. This period is widely regarded as a “golden age” for Song of Songs interpretation, owing to the classic mystical treatments of the book by Cistercian and Victorine commentators, especially the exuberantly affective / contemplative works of Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, and Hugh of St. Victor. Like Shuve, LaVere shifts the focus away from the well-

known and well-studied contemplative works and concentrates on lesser known works in the history of Song reception. LaVere claims that “an entirely new species of commentary” (1) emerged from scholastic contexts; this type of commentary is distinguished from the monastic treatments that had dominated Song interpretation to that point by their lessened emphasis on contemplation and the promotion of the apostolic life. Like Shuve’s subjects, LaVere’s scholastics employed the Song to combat heresy and mark the boundaries of the church. For these interpreters, the Song became a text that encourages readers to take up the work of preaching, teaching, and conversion. In so doing, they were adapting a well-known and important text to new circumstances and advocating a new form of spirituality that emphasized action over contemplation. Also as with Shuve’s subjects, the scholastic interpreters emphasized the ecclesiological interpretation of the Song. While the ecclesiological and individual interpretations had both been present, often comingled, in Christian Song interpretation since the time of Origen, the former now took on primary importance as the scholastics stressed the urgency of the task of preaching in protecting the church from heresy and strengthening it. In fact, action, in this view, becomes the ideal form of imitating Christ.

One of the real contributions LaVere makes is to give extended and, at times, detailed treatment to some Song commentaries heretofore little examined by scholars: most have never been translated and several remain unedited. She begins at Laon, treating Anselm and the *Glossa Ordinaria* in the first two chapters. LaVere credits Anselm as being the originator of the scholastic interpretation of the Song, first by writing a continuous commentary and, subsequently, by exerting significant influence on the Gloss. Finally completed in the early twelfth century, the Gloss exercised enormous influence on students of the Bible in the middle ages. Anselm’s commentary emphasizes the work of preaching and urges a vigorous defense against heretics. Much of his work, with this emphasis, was adopted into the Gloss on the Song, ensuring that generations of theology students would encounter it. To be sure, the Gloss contains other passages emphasizing the contemplative nature of the Song: Origen, Gregory the Great, and Bede are frequently cited in the Gloss. However, LaVere argues against conventional wisdom that the *Glossa Ordinaria* is simply a collation of patristic sources with little or no original content; she posits that there are numerous “new glosses” not found in any other ancient source, making a case for the apostolic readings in the Gloss as innovations in Song interpretation. Thus, passages with different emphases sit alongside one another—some interpreting the Song as a contemplative text, some interpreting it as advocating the active life of preaching and conversion—indicating the varied reception of the enigmatic book according to the particular needs and concerns of various readers.

Subsequent chapters treat other texts that receive little attention in the standard histories of the Song of Songs in Christian spirituality: the Parisian Peter the Chanter’s “practical commentary” emphasized the moral preparation of theology students who were urged to take up the apostolic life in the world, and was written in the latter part of the twelfth century. Stephen Langton, possibly the Chanter’s student, produced what LaVere terms a “super commentary,” by which she means that Langton attempted to explain the *Glossa Ordinaria* itself. In it, he emphasized and expanded on the themes of preaching and the active life, while ignoring other prominent currents in Song interpretation of the time, such as the burgeoning Marian readings. Hugh of St. Cher is the subject of chapter 5. The postills produced by

the thirteenth century Dominican and others under his guidance took the scholastic interpretation even further than their predecessors, arguing from the Song of Songs for the superiority of the mendicant life. In an epilogue, LaVere notes how the scholastic emphasis on action over contemplation begins to fade by examining the commentaries of two Franciscans, Peter Olivi and Nicholas of Lyra. These commentaries retain the ecclesiological emphases of their predecessors, but they also take up earlier emphases on the mystical life, returning once again to the advocacy of a life balanced between contemplation and action.

A troubling theme shows up repeatedly throughout the two works: the sad history of Christian anti-Judaism. In both the ancient and medieval periods, the Song was employed to disparage or attack Jews, the Synagogue, and Judaism. As theologians and exegetes sought to mark the boundaries of the church or inspire the faithful to preach for conversion, heretics and Jews are scorned over and over again. Shuve and LaVere each note where these attacks appear, but leave them unscrutinized. This is an issue calling for further work: identifying the ways in which Christian spirituality and exegesis—especially as related to the Song of Songs—has been entangled with anti-Judaism.

No review, even a lengthy one like this, can do justice to all of the arguments, insights, and nuances of either of these works. Each book is full of detail that commends them scholars of Christian history and spirituality. These two significant books demonstrate that the history of Song of Songs reception remains a fertile field for research. Not only do they remind us that there are many treatments of the Song that have yet to be explored by scholars, but each work shows that there have been forms of spirituality inspired by the Song that are more diverse than we have previously imagined. Each work also makes a contribution to our understanding of how Scripture and other classic texts are received, adapted, and appropriated in light of the interests, perceived needs, and lived experiences of diverse communities in particular contexts.

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*Spiritual Friendship after Religion: Walking with People while the Rules Are Changing.*  
By Joseph A. Stewart-Sicking. New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2016. 130 pp.

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Stewart-Sicking's *Spiritual Friendship After Religion: Walking with People while the Rules are Changing* is an erudite and provocative book on a matter of great importance. How does culture influence spirituality? What is spiritual friendship, why is it important, and how might one be good at it today? The purpose of this book is to answer these questions. It is also to render accessible recent scholarship on culture and spirituality for academic classrooms like Stewart-Sicking's own: vocationally diverse, spiritually eclectic, and ambivalent toward religion. His central thesis is that in order to practice the needed ministry of spiritual friendship today, Christians should accept the invitation from culture to change, practice paying attention to God in ways that are grounded in but ultimately transcend the Christian tradition, and make room for those who are truly Other