As part of the Berit Olam series, this commentary on the Song of Songs (according to the dust jacket) focuses on the final form of its Hebrew text, approaching it as a literary work. The Berit Olam series purports to bring “to all interested in the Bible, be they lay people, professional biblical scholars, students, or religious educators, the latest developments in the literary analysis of these ancient texts.” With reference to this particular volume by Bergant, the following is claimed on the inside flap of the dust jacket:

This commentary views the Song of Songs as a collection of love poems that pays tribute to mutual love, and it carefully examines features of Hebrew poetry in order to uncover the delicacy of their expression. It is unique in the attention that it gives to the obvious feminine perspective of the poems and to their ecosensitive character. Whether it is the woman in awe of the strength and splendor of her lover or the man praising her physical charms, the descriptions all call on elements from the natural world to characterize the feature being described.

This commentary fairly lives up to this claim with respect to the examination of Hebrew poetry and its expression in the Song. However, the same cannot be said of its claim to be “unique” in its attention to the feminine perspective and ecosensitive nature of the poems.
As commentaries on the Song of Songs go, Bergant’s does not come close to rivaling the treatments of these aspects in Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*. In fact, one is hard pressed to find anything in Bergant’s commentary that is unique and cannot be found elsewhere in more depth. Perhaps this is to be expected, given the broad appeal sought by the Berit Olam series.

Bergant’s commentary on the Song is divided into eight chapters. Although each of these is not formally designated as a “chapter” per se, this review will nevertheless refer to them as such. The first chapter provides an introduction, and the rest of the chapters work through the text of the Song according to Bergant’s understanding of its literary structure. Her English translation of the Hebrew is based on the NRSV unless otherwise noted. Describing the poetic structures of the various poems in the Song occupies much of Bergant’s attention throughout and is indeed her strength. However, her views on these are not usually argued with reference to any other views on the structure. Bergant sees the Song as consisting of a superscription at 1:1 followed by six poetic units: 1:2–2:7; 2:8–3:5; 3:6–5:1; 5:2–6:3; 6:4–8:4; and 8:5–14. This last unit is said to be a collection of disparate poems. After the commentary proper, there follows a list of thirty-five “Works Cited” and three indexes, one of which is a general subject and author index, while the other two indexes are devoted to Hebrew words and scriptural references, respectively. Throughout her reading of the Song, Bergant sees only two lovers being portrayed, and they are neither married nor betrothed.

Chapter 1, Bergant’s introduction to the Song, divides into two sections. The first briefly discusses canonicity, authorship, and interpretation of the Song. The second section introduces Hebrew poetry. According to Bergant the very name of this biblical book (*šîr haššîrîm*) “both reveals and obscures its identity” (vii). She reasons as follows: “It is a *šîr* or lyric song, but not a *mizmôr* or religious poem, as are most of the biblical psalms that are also classified as *šîr* (Psalm 46 is an exception to this dual identification). Religious poems are frequently lyric in form, and so the Song of Songs can rightfully be considered either a religious work or a secular composition” (vii). When Bergant goes on to compare the Hebrew use of *lamed auctoris* with Ugaritic poetry—where the Ugaritic preposition (according to Bergant) simply means “concerning”—she finds that the relative clause “which is Solomon’s” (*’āšer lišlômôh*) is also ambiguous. Indeed, Bergant reasons, “Thus, the very construction implies that the Song of Songs can be regarded as either actually coming from the Judean king, or dealing with issues that were somehow associated with him” (vii).

In regards to the history of interpretation, Bergant concludes that the poems constituting the Song of Songs “may have been secular in origin, but they have clear links with both the cultic and sapiential traditions of Israel, thus conferring religious significance on their
erotic content” (ix). This conclusion is based on references to the Song in rabbinic writings, the placement of the Song among the Megilloth, and the reference to Solomon’s songs and knowledge of nature in 1 Kgs 4:32–33 [MT 5:12–13]. After a brief discussion of the allegorical, liturgical, and dramatic interpretations of the Song, Bergant credits critical scholarship with bringing us back to a literal reading of the Song. Her perspective is that the Song is a collection of love poetry in which “sensuous imagery and its depiction of an erotic affair celebrate the passion of heterosexual love” (xi). Bergant claims that three features set the Song apart from other biblical works: (1) the sexuality within it is explicit and erotic; (2) there is no mention of God in any of the poems; and (3) while the focus of the Song is on human behavior, it neither passes judgment on that behavior nor offers any moral teaching. Bergant recognizes that even among those who regard the Song as a collection of love poems, views differ regarding its literary design and the number of poems it contains.

Turning her attention to introduce Hebrew poetry, Bergant briefly deals with its terseness, parallelism, meter, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, paronomasia, enjambment, chiasm, inclusion, and merism. Recognizing the importance of metaphor in the interpretation of the Song, Bergant elaborates on the three elements of vehicle (the member of the comparison to which the characteristic naturally belongs), referent (the other member, about which the comparison is made), and tenor (the analogue, the actual characteristic of comparison). She rightly distinguishes between “representational” and “presentational” relationships between vehicle and referent. In the former, “a feature of one object represents a feature in an otherwise unrelated object,” whereas in the latter, “the association of ideas is based on emotional response rather than physical similarity” (xiv).

Curiously, Bergant’s discussion moves seamlessly from a discussion of the Song’s “metaphors” to its “images.” She writes,

The imagery found in the Song of Songs is as diverse as is the experience of love. Though most metaphors are drawn from familiar fauna and flora, others call on the arts, crafts and architecture, as well as the military realm. Some imagery is based on social position, while other images are derived from familial relationships. Several images appear to be more prominent than others; but a single image can be said to operate as the organizing principle of the entire collection, namely human passion. (xiv–xv)

This transition runs the risk of making the terms “metaphor” and “image” practically synonymous. Consequently, when Bergant identifies the “image” of human passion as the organizing principle of the entire collection, her own interpretation of the Song as
human love poetry is logically threatened. In other words, if the Song is actually about human passion (as both Bergant and this reviewer would agree), and if this human passion is going to be referred to as an “image” in the Song, then Bergant needs to clearly differentiate it from the Song’s other images (which Bergant also identifies as metaphors), in order to avoid undermining her emphasis on a literal reading of the Song as human love poetry over against the allegorical interpretive traditions.

Near the end of this introductory chapter, Bergant admits that identical themes and imagery cannot serve as an adequate basis for claiming the literary unity of the Song. Nevertheless, she does find that the repetition of words (e.g., “my loved one” in 1:13, 14, 16, etc), phrases (e.g., “like a gazelle” in 2:9, 17; 8:14), and patterns or refrains (e.g., “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem” in 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4) indicates significant homogeneity. Bergant’s rationale for structuring the Song into a superscription followed by six poetic units is based on the identification of speakers and literary patterns. Form-critically, Bergant makes the following genre classifications: poems of yearning (1:2–4; 2:6; 7:9b–10 [MT 7:10b–11]); self-descriptions (1:5–6; 8:10); poems of admiration (1:9–17; 2:3; 4:9–15; 6:4–5a); accounts of some experience (2:8–10a; 3:1–5; 5:2–8; 6:11–12; 8:5b); characterizations of the physical charms of the beloved, similar to the Arabic wasf (4:1–7; 5:10–16; 6:5b–7; 7:1–7 [MT 7:2–8]); and invitations to a tryst (2:10b–14; 4:8; 5:1; 7:11–13 [MT 7:12–14]).

Chapter 2 is devoted to the superscription at 1:1. Bergant finds that the name of Solomon, mentioned six times in the book, functions as a symbol of wealth, a standard of comparison, or a fictitious way of according special honor to the man in the Song and not as a reference to actual authorship. At this point, Bergant alerts the reader that “[t]he commentary that follows will show that the poems actually describe the woman’s perspective in the love relationship and not the man’s” (4). It must be said, however, that Bergant’s commentary fails to demonstrate this. She does not explain those passages where the man speaks apparently on his own and not in the context of being quoted by the woman. Indeed, on pages 75–92 we find Bergant discussing the man’s words of admiration in 6:4–10 and 7:1–9 (MT 7:2–10) with no attempt to relate this to her earlier thesis. Those readers interested in a more nuanced discussion of the Song as the woman’s song should look elsewhere.

It is also in Bergant’s discussion of the superscription where we are informed of her view that the tendency of many commentaries to refer to the man as the “lover” (the active one in the relationship) and to the woman as the “beloved” (the one receiving the love) not only reflects gender biases but also inaccurately represents the character of the poems. This, she says, is because both the man and the woman are portrayed as passionate lovers, and, therefore, each is also beloved to the other (4 n. 3).
For Bergant, the superscription most likely intends to convey Solomonic authority on the message of the book, and such sanctioning places the Song in the category of ancient Israelite wisdom literature. The primary interest of the wisdom tradition, Bergant claims, is instruction in the proper ways of living. She equates the sages with what we today would call “humanists.” She asserts,

Though religious people, [the sages] were concerned with human affairs and attentive to human welfare, values and dignity rather than the things and activity of God. They taught that whatever benefited humankind was a good to be pursued, and whatever was harmful should be avoided and condemned. (4–5)

Bergant’s description of the sages indeed speaks of their concern for upright living but manages to do so in a way that seems to leave the whole subject of their interest in morality largely untouched—or at least it gives the impression that their perspective on morality was thoroughly relativized. Bergant claims that “[a]lthough the wise men and women believed that there was a proper way of behaving, they did not insist on a rigid standard that would fit every circumstance” (5). Bergant’s failure to highlight the sages’ interests in the existence and fate of the righteous vis-à-vis the wicked risks misleading the uninitiated reader concerning the character of ancient wisdom traditions, especially the biblical traditions. Bergant also fails to document her understanding of the sages and the sapiential enterprise. Not a single reference to ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, biblical or otherwise, not even a single work of scholarship, is cited to support Bergant’s description of what the sages believed, thought, and promoted.

Bergant admits that placing the Song within the wisdom tradition makes a bold claim: “For it to be wisdom teaching, it must contain more than a report of the romantic escapades of the king. It must contain insights beneficial for right living, insights that will enhance human life” (5). Bergant adds that a “careful examination of these erotic poems will illuminate some of the lessons it has to teach.” However, Bergant’s own examination will rarely draw out such lessons.

Chapter 3 takes up Bergant’s first poetic unit of the Song, namely, 1:2–2:7, which she entitles “Mutual Yearning.” Bergant divides this unit into two subsections. The first consists of 1:2–6, a lyric poem spoken by the woman and entitled by Bergant as “Love Is Better Than Wine.” This is further divided into a romantic soliloquy, wherein the woman fantasizes about her lover (1:2–4), and a discourse directed at the daughters of Jerusalem (1:5–6). Bergant takes 1:7–2:7 as the second subsection consisting of a series of poems of mutual admiration and passionate yearning entitled by Bergant as “A Beloved beyond Compare.” Here Bergant views the setting as moving from the vineyard to the fields of the shepherds (1:7–8), then to the world of the pharaoh (1:9–11), and finally to a trysting
place of intoxication (2:4–6). In this chapter Bergant reveals her facility in structural and poetic analysis that will continue to be displayed in subsequent chapters of the commentary.

Bergant explains the shifts in grammatical person found in 1:2 as reflecting the poetic technique of enallagē. However, for her to say that this technique is “obvious” (7)—a word frequently used by Bergant in this commentary as the basis for her interpretations—in Ps 23 perhaps overstates matters and fails to admit the difficulties posed by texts with a history of cultic use. Bergant goes on to take Hebrew dōdim as “lovemaking,” and she is particularly strong at unpacking the wine metaphor used in this poem to describe it. However, she probably overinterprets when she takes the metaphor a step further:

Besides a sense of intoxication, [the metaphor] also suggests vulnerability and trust. Since the mouth is a gateway to the physical interior of the person, passionate open-mouth kissing literally opens the lovers to each other. It suggests a willingness to take another into oneself and to make that other one’s own, as well as the desire to enter into the other and lose oneself within that other. Only unfeigned trust can dispose one to such vulnerability. From the outset, the Song of Songs paints a picture of human passion at its best, mutually trusting and open to the other in unguarded love. (9)

Bergant finds that that the woman of 1:2–4 is portrayed as already familiar with her lover’s lovemaking and wanting more. Bergant takes this occasion to complain about how “too often the sexual yearnings and sense of passionate exhilaration of women have either been denied, or minimized as insignificant, or condemned as inappropriate.” According to Bergant, “[t]here is none of that groundless chauvinistic bias in this opening proclamation” (10).

Bergant takes the woman’s reference to her “vineyard” in 1:6 and elsewhere as a “symbol of the woman’s sexuality” (15). She cites the works by Pope, Fox, Falk, Murphy, and Bloch in support. However, Murphy understands the girl’s vineyard simply as “her own self” (Song, 128), while Fox speaks of it as a reference to the “young woman as a whole” (Song, 102). Although Bergant takes opportunity to point out how the Song’s depiction of the lovers does not perpetuate gender stereotyping, she nevertheless refers to the description of lovemaking in 2:6 as “the classic position in which lovers are portrayed” (26). Finally, an important feature of Bergant’s overall interpretation of the Song is that she understands the refrain of 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4 as an adjuration not to interfere with the lovers and their lovemaking rather than as a warning not to arouse love (26, 59, and 94).
Chapter 4, entitled “An Opportunity Lost, Then Found,” focuses on the unit of 2:8–3:5. This unit is also divided into two subsections. The first is 2:8–17 (“The Springtime of Love”), which is the woman’s account of a verbal exchange between herself and her beloved. Bergant argues for a sort of chiastic structure in 2:8–17, thereby indicating that the springtime of love in 2:11–13b is the major focus of the chiasm and the central theme of the first subsection (27–28). The second subsection consists of 3:1–5 (“Whom My Soul Loves”), which gives the woman’s own report of her search for a meeting with the man. This subsection is further divided into three segments: the woman’s search for her beloved (3:1–2), her encounter with the sentinels of the city (3:3), and her reunion with her beloved (3:4). The adjuration of 3:5 (incorrectly referenced on page 34 as 3:6) is said not to belong to the poem but to serve as the ending of the entire unit. Bergant rejects reading 3:1–5 as a dream or romantic fantasy, thinking that, despite the uncharacteristic behavior of the woman, “it sounds like an account of an actual event” (34). Whether Bergant actually intends to suggest historicity here is unclear. When discussing the woman’s venture into the city, Bergant launches into a description of patriarchal societies that is sweeping in its generalizations and offers no documentation. At the beginning of this chapter in her commentary, Bergant observes that only the woman speaks in 2:8–3:5, and she goes so far as to claim that this “demonstrates the fact that the love affair depicted in the Song of Songs is described from the woman’s point of view” (27).

Chapter 5 treats 3:6–5:1 as a unit entitled “Ravished by Beauty.” It is divided into three poems. The first is delineated as 3:6–11 (“Solomon’s Procession”), which is “a poem describing the extraordinary character of a phenomenon that comes out of the wilderness” (37). Bergant is unable to attribute this poem to any particular voice and finds it to be an unusual segment compared to the entire collection of poems, because it is “a straightforward description of things rather than a metaphoric characterization of the charms of the lovers or of the passion that they share” (37). She also avoids deciding whether mi̇zō’t ʿālā should be taken as “Who is that rising?” or “What is that coming up?” Bergant recognizes that there are other commentators who read this introductory exclamation as a free-standing exclamation with no connection to the description of the litter and that some of these commentators argue that the litter is really a stationary bed with no wedding procession being described (on this point she cites Fox and Bloch). According to Bergant, in their rendering, the exclamation simply calls attention to the luxurious couch of the king (38). However, Bergant fails to note here that Fox (Song, 119) argues that 3:5 does not even go with the poem of Solomon’s litter but rather concludes the preceding unit and is a response to the adjuration of 3:5. Bergant goes on to find a chiastic pattern determined by parallel structure rather than content in 3:11, which highlights the middle bicola stating that the king was crowned by his mother. Although
Bergant thinks that the content of the poem of 3:6–11 is out of place in the Song, she nevertheless argues that it contains features that link it with the other poems of the book.

Bergant sees the second and third poems of 3:6–5:1 as attributed to the man. They are delineated as 4:1–7 (“An Ode to Her Body”), which she categorizes as a wasf, and 4:8–15 as a poem of admiration. The segment of 4:16–5:1 is treated as a short romantic exchange between the lovers. In this part of the commentary, some confusion is evident in Bergant’s interpretation of 4:3 when she writes,

The Hebrew word midbār can be translated as “speech” or as “lips,” organs of speech. Both the character of the wasf itself, the vehicle of the metaphor (crimson thread), and the addition of the homonym (mouth) clearly indicate that the primary reference here is to her lips, though the secondary meaning (speech) opens the metaphor to another level of interpretation [Fox, Song, 129–30 is cited on this point]. (45)

In actual fact, Fox argues that midbār can be translated as either “mouth” or “wilderness.” It is these two potential meanings for midbār, coupled with the potential to hear nā′weh (“lovely”) as nāweh (“habitation”), that serve as the foundation for Fox’s interpretation of ʿumidbārēk nā′weh as a clever pun suggesting her mouth is like an oasis.

In chapter 6, entitled “One of a Kind,” we find Bergant taking up 5:2–6:3 as a unit, which she divides into the two subsections of 5:2–8 (“A Search at Night”) and 5:9–6:3 (“An Ode to His Body”). Bergant points out that the latter is the only example in the Bible of a woman employing a wasf in celebrating the physical beauty of a man.

In chapter 7 (“The Admiration of a Lover”), Bergant directs her commentary to 6:4–8:4, the longest unit in her structuring of the Song. She divides this unit into six subsections: 6:4–10 (“A Woman of Singular Beauty”); 6:11–12 (“Signs of Spring”); 6:13–7:5 [MT 7:1–6] (“An Ode to the Dancer”); 7:6–9a [MT 7:7–10a] (“The Desires of Love”); 7:9b–13 [MT 7:10b–14] (“Desire Realized”); and 8:1–4 (“A Secret Rendezvous”). Throughout this section Bergant’s commentary is basic but generally well done, providing summary treatments of mythological components and other features of the poetry. Major exegetical options are at least mentioned even if not adopted. However, when it comes to the meaning of təšūqâ (“desire”) in Song 7:11 and Gen 3:16, Bergant claims that “[i]n both cases the meaning is clearly a sexual one” (90). While the sexual meaning of təšūqâ is clear in the Song, this meaning in Gen 3:16 must at least be considered in the light of the very close semantic parallel in Gen 4:7 (the only other Old Testament occurrence of təšūqâ), where its meaning is certainly not sexual. The sexual meaning of təšūqâ in
Genesis is not as obvious as Bergant would have her readers believe. One senses that Bergant’s ideological orientation limits her lexical study at this point.

Chapter 8, entitled “Love Affirmed,” takes up the last literary unit, 8:5–14. It is divided into five subsections: 8:5a (“Out of the Wilderness”); 8:5b–7 (“The Power of Love”); 8:8–10 (“The Little Sister Matured”); 8:11–12 (“Solomon’s Vineyard”); and 8:13–14 (“The Final Exchange”). Bergant describes the unit as a whole as “a composite of disparate questions and poems with catchwords and declarations that recall earlier scenes from the Song of Songs and that bring the entire collection to a conclusion” (95). In light of Bergant’s frequent emphasis throughout this commentary on the self-differentiation of the woman and the mutuality of the lovers, it comes as a surprise that this last chapter would find Bergant with an interpretation of 8:6a that seems to present the woman as giving up her own identity in the love relationship: “She wants to be the seal herself. She wants the union that they share to be so intimate that she might represent to others the very identity of her beloved” (97). On the other hand, this picture does accord with her earlier interpretation of mouth kissing as suggesting a desirer to “lose oneself within that other” (9). In any case, Bergant does not view the comparison of love’s strength with that of death and the grave in 8:6b as negative: “The tenor of the metaphors can hardly be the destructive power of death, for that would be a total contradiction to all the metaphors describing love as life-giving or life-enhancing. . . . [The poem] claims that just as death and the grave are tenacious and undaunted in the pursuit of their goals, so love is single-minded and undeterred in its pursuit of its goals” (98).

In the final analysis, this commentary is recommended most for its handy treatments of poetic structures in the Song. Otherwise, there is little that is new in the way of exegesis. It does, however, bring together in one brief volume many of the better contributions made by major works on the Song (not all of which are styled as “literary approaches”), even though these are often inadequately cited and synthesized by Bergant.