

## Lost in Translation

Adam S. Miller. *The Sun Has Burned My Skin: A Modest Paraphrase of Solomon's Song of Songs*. Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2017. 68 pp. Paper: \$7.95. ISBN: 0998605255.

*Reviewed by Robert A. Rees*

In my review of Adam Miller's wonderfully imaginative and provocative book of criticism, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (2012), I stated: "At times, Miller seems as much poet as theologian. Essay after essay does what Robert Frost says poetry is supposed to do: 'begin in delight and end in wisdom,' although at times Miller's essays begin in wisdom and end in delight. In reality, Miller's writing is often theology as poetry."<sup>1</sup>

Miller's newest rewriting and reconfiguring of a sacred text (albeit one not universally regarded as scripture) causes me to slightly alter that assessment: "Miller's writing is sometimes poetry as poetry." In other words, his riff ("a rapid energetic often improvised verbal outpouring"<sup>2</sup>) on Solomon's Canticle or Song of Songs owes as much to his poetic as to his critical skills. Like Miller's midrashim on Romans and Ecclesiastes (respectively, *Grace is Not God's Backup Plan* and *Nothing New Under the Sun*), *The Sun Has Burned My Skin* both renews and expands our understanding of the text.

The Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) has a long and controversial history. When so many books were thrown out of the canon, one wants to ask why a text so overtly sexual and erotic was kept in, although the answer is obviously found in the question: this ancient Hebrew love

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1. "Theology as Poetry," review of Adam S. Miller's *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology*, *Dialogue* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 178–87.

2. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/riff>.

poem has proven too desirable and delicious for the keepers of the canon over the millennia to excise it. Much better to rationalize it, knowing that any defense was an obvious rationalization. Thus, the arguments put forth by the rabbis that the book is an extended metaphor for God's relationship with Israel, or by Christian clerics that it is a metaphor for Christ's love for the Church, was likely transparent to all but hardened fundamentalists and sexual puritans. Women who read it (if they were permitted) or knew of men reading it must surely have rolled their eyes or winked at one another. Some might have wondered (and rejoiced) at the post-reading ardor it inspired! The fact that it is told through the voice and vision of a woman makes its narrative point of view nearly as remarkable (and rare) as its subject.

From the outset, Miller acknowledges, "Solomon's Song of Songs is canonized erotica. It's scripture about sex" (1). Citing Joseph Smith's assessment when he was working on his revision of the Bible—"the Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings"<sup>3</sup>—Mormons do not consider it scripture and in reality seem to pay little attention to it, even though it confirms an important teaching that, at least in the nineteenth century, tended to separate Mormons from Catholics and Protestants. As the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states, "In LDS life and thought, sexuality consists of attitudes, feelings, and desires that are God-given and central to God's plan for his children. . . . The purposes of appropriate sexual relations in marriage include the expression and building of joy, unity, love, and oneness. To be 'one flesh' is to experience an emotional and spiritual unity. This oneness is as fundamental a purpose of marital relations as is procreation."<sup>4</sup>

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3. This assessment was made in the JST manuscript. See note regarding the title of the Song of Solomon, available at <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/ot/song/1?lang=eng#note>.

4. Terrance D. Olson, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, online edition, s.v. "Sexuality" (New York: Macmillan, 1992), available at <http://eom.byu.edu/index.php?title=Sexuality&oldid=4918h>.

Miller refines the traditional view about the Song of Songs, affirming that it “isn’t just about sex. It’s also about love. . . . [It’s] about what happens when a billion years of blind, reproductive pressure gets packed inside the fragile walls of a single human body—and then it’s about what happens when this blind pressure is alchemically paired with the disarming specificity of an enduring love for just one other person” (1).

Miller’s retelling of the Song is, as he acknowledges, “not a translation. It is a loose paraphrase.” And, as his subtitle states, “modest”: “What you’ll get here is that ancient, feminine voice refracted through the heart of a long-married, middle-aged, bourgeois, first-world, twenty-first century white guy with literary pretensions and three kids.” Acknowledging such limitations and qualifications, he adds, “Such a refraction comes with real costs. My renderings are, inevitably, skewed by my masculinity and tinged by my domesticity. Important parts of the original are lost along the way” (5).

Something is lost in Miller’s retelling, especially some of the more explicit eroticism and sensual imagery of the original. But not all of it, by any means. And his use of modern English makes the imagery more naked to the reader:

The Woman alludes to the amour and aromas of after love-making:

I fear everyone I meet  
will catch the scent of you  
lingering on my hands,  
between my breasts,  
tattooed like blossoms  
up and down my arms. (20)

Miller repeats some biblical imagery of love and intimacy (lilies, roses, pomegranates) and invents some of his own (or makes biblical imagery fresh):

*The Woman*  
You are an apple tree  
in a forest of pines

I tuck into the shade of your boughs  
the tang of fruit on my tongue. (25)

*The Woman*

Where do you go?  
What lost sheep are you looking for? (16)

*The Man*

Come, fold your flocks with mine.  
Rest in the shepherd's tent. (17)

He changes Elizabethan biblical phrases into modern colloquial language: "I was faint with love" becomes, "My head spins / and my knees are weak" (26).

Anyone who has been in the clutch of love, anyone who has felt that "billion years of blind, reproductive pressure . . . packed inside the fragile walls of a single human body" (1) will recognize the urgency of the man and woman burning with passion that Miller captures in such phrases as:

Hurry—take my hand.  
Forget the sun  
and come back to bed. (13)

Quick—we're already home. (22)

I needed you.  
When you finally came  
through the door  
I didn't wait. (35)

I've pulled off my clothes,  
washed my feet,  
and slipped into bed. (47)

I want you to wake  
in the night  
burning,  
and reach for me. (59)

The ice is cracking,  
winter has passed. (29)

Hurry—take my hand.  
It's time. (68)

The Supremes sang, “You can’t hurry love,” but this poem reveals that sometimes you can’t slow it down or stop it either!

Miller skillfully employs imagery of sexual desire and luxurious ecstasy, including the imagery of spices, flowers, and aromas; phallic and yonic imagery such as keys and locks, mountains and valleys, a dove and a cleft of a rock; as well as secret gardens, hidden wells, and sealed springs. He uses such conventional imagery for sexual passion as lightning, rain, storms and warm sheets, but uses it in fresh ways.

In short, Miller provides glimpses of the beauty and passion as well as the sensuality and sacredness of love, of coming together and parting, and of tasting and remembering. The following is one of my favorite poems from this small but enticing book. It is like looking at a painting or photograph of specific and intimate love:

You are beautiful.  
I wake early to watch you sleep—  
The lock of hair tucked behind your ear,  
The laugh lines around your eyes,  
Your crooked tooth and parted lips,  
How the sheet clings  
In the gray morning light  
To the curve of your hip.  
I lay my head on your breast and  
Listen to your heart,  
Your breath warm on my neck.  
You stir and pull me closer. (39)

Such lines cause one to rejoice in a poet-philosopher who celebrates a theology that not only jubilates sexual intimacy in mortality, but elevates it to the realm of the holy, and gives glimpses of its promised eternity.