



Thinking of/With Scripture: Struggling for the Religious Significance of the Song of Songs

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Seeking Scripture between the Trees of Knowledge and Life

Peter Ochs and I have established a kind of "Scriptural Reasoning Ritual" over the past several years. Before I attempt a contribution to a discussion of our society, I always preface it with the statement that I still don't know what scriptural reasoning really is. This is met by a sincere nod of approval from Peter, which permits me to share my reflections with others more savvy than myself in the mysteries of scriptural reasoning. The ritual seems to have now been sufficiently internalized by all parties that I was invited to make a presentation, not only to offer my amateur comments on other people's presentations. Nevertheless, I hesitate to undertake the task without, once again, performing my ritual duty of reminding myself and the reader of my uncertainty regarding what scriptural reasoning really is. I shall therefore offer my own working definition, fully aware that it falls short of the nuanced post-modern philosophical articulation that governs some of the proceedings of our society. For the sake of the present paper, I shall conceive of scriptural reasoning as that process by which we think of and with scripture. "Thinking of" means how we conceive of Scripture itself, how we understand its message. "Thinking with" means how we allow scripture to shape us. Once understood for its message, Scripture can and should have the power to shape and mold our own thinking and experience. Scripture that once provided written expression for someone's life and experience now writes our lives and experiences.

In approaching Scripture, I would therefore distinguish two distinct, though interrelated, stages. The first stage involves the mind, discernment and critical thinking in an attempt to understand Scripture for what it is. While this is primarily an intellectual effort, it is also an effort of listening, involving the heart and the intuition along with the critical faculties of the discursive intellect. The fruit of listening and reflection then engages us. Through it we come to an understanding that helps shape our lives. What makes Scripture unique, unlike other forms of writing, including other people's Scripture, is our commitment to live by and to think with Scripture. What has been gained through the effort of mind and the inner ear now helps structure life, engaging our will, mind and heart, directing us through life. Scripture thus provides us with the deep structures, through which we structure reality. These teach us how to think, reflect and be in a manner commensurate with higher spiritual reality, captured in Scripture.

The process of "Thinking of" and then "Thinking with" Scripture may be simple in and of itself, but can become greatly complicated. If Scripture is the Tree of Life, we often go through the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in our attempt to access this Tree of Life. Our reading of Scripture often involves us in complicated mental exercises that obscure the spiritual sense of scripture, or at the very least make our access to the spiritual core, to the teaching of Scripture, more complex. The baggage with which we come to the reading of Scripture is varied. Perhaps it can roughly be broken down to two sorts. The one is the history of interpretation of our own tradition. This history of interpretation is at one and the same time part of Scripture itself and an enriching addendum that at times opens up and at other times eclipses the meaning of Scripture. The other kind of baggage with which we come to the reading of Scripture is the modern history of interpretation and understanding of Scripture. Unlike the former category, modern history of interpretation is not construed as part of the traditional sense of Scripture. It is therefore not synthesized as part of the wider meaning of Scripture in the same way as classical interpretation.^[1] Modern historical interpretation can also complicate our approach to Scripture. A range of historical, philological and comparative information is placed before us — The fullness of the Tree of knowledge. At times we are overwhelmed by this fullness, causing us to lose sight of the core teaching contained in Scripture.

Both kinds of baggage with which we come to the reading of Scripture can enhance our reading. But they can also cause us to lose sight of the spiritual quest for meaning that makes the approach to Scripture unique. Like the wild jungles that overrun the temples of Cambodia, excess knowledge and information can cause us to lose the ultimate core of that which makes Scripture *Scripture* — its capacity to transform our lives and guide them according to a higher vision contained in it. When the Tree of Knowledge gains the upper hand, we can at best aspire to "think of" Scripture. Often, such "Thinking of" will not be significantly different from how we think of any text or subject, having clouded the vision of that which makes Scripture unique through the aggregate of our hermeneutical information and historical knowledge.

The ability to draw from Scripture spiritual lessons, which can then form and transform our lives, is thus anything but self evident. A dialectic tension characterizes our attitude as scholars, seeking to gain direct access to the wisdom of Scripture through the accumulated knowledge of facts surrounding Scripture and its interpretation. Whether our vocation as scholars ultimately facilitates or hinders our spiritual lives, especially as these take shape around the quest for the wisdom contained in Scripture, is a question with which we must always struggle. The efforts of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning to establish a means of returning to Scripture as a consciousness-shaping factor are testimony to the continuing transformative potential of Scripture. Underlying such efforts, however, is the recognition that something has already been lost through the knowledge gained in the Academy, perhaps in life itself. We would like to believe that when we are able to rediscover the temple of Wisdom at the heart of the overgrown jungle, our vision of it will be all the richer for the path that we have traversed. Regardless, we must continue in our quest to rediscover in Scripture the life-giving force that can accompany us in our own lives, guiding us beyond the dualities of knowledge, shaping our minds, hearts and wills in accordance with the spiritual reality captured in Scripture.

The Song of Songs — What is at Stake?

As described above, the project of Scriptural Reasoning is to a certain, if not large, extent a project that grows from circumstances of crisis. While different practitioners might suggest various elements that

contribute to such a crisis, I have concentrated in my previous description upon the crisis of excess knowledge, especially critical knowledge, as the structuring crisis giving birth to the project of Scriptural Reasoning. It is from this perspective of crisis that I would like to enter the present discussion of the Song of Songs. In speaking of crisis I intend first and foremost a personal crisis. It is likely that other participants in the discussion may not share the same sense of crisis. In part, my sense of crisis is a consequence of factors that I share with other members of the Scriptural Reasoning community, factors that are historical-critical. In part, the factors are purely personal, touching upon my own understanding and experiences in the realms of spirituality, sexuality and love. It is perhaps appropriate to the subject matter, the Song of Songs, that a personal subjective element should so consciously shape the discussion. Still, I do not consider the questions that I shall set forth in this paper to be purely the accident of my own biography or spiritual leanings. I strongly suspect that the questions I ask are of relevance for other readers of the Song of Songs and for other members of our intellectual community. To a certain extent the relevance of what follows is a function of how much other readers will resonate with the difficulties as I set them forth. But even for the reader who does not share the same sense of crisis, I hope that my ability to clearly state the issues at stake for me in approaching the Song of Songs as Scripture will enable an adequate articulation of why for her the subject is problem-free.

The Song of Songs has been a problem almost since its recognition as part of Jewish scripture. An indication of the problematic status of the Song is found in ancient debates as to whether it should or should not be considered part of the canon.^[2] The history of interpretation of the Song of Songs is in many ways a history of the answer to the question of the religious meaning of the Song. Interpreters throughout the generations have interpreted the Song of Songs in accordance with their understanding of the values of the religious, spiritual and mystical life. In so doing, they not only legitimated the presence of the Song of Songs in the canon, but also found great spiritual treasures and wealth in the words of the Song. The rich history of interpretation of the Song certainly "saves" the Song, from a traditionalist perspective. Personally, I am very comfortable with many of the creative ways in which the Song has been read. I am at home with Rabbinic interpretation of the Song, with its mystical resonances in kabbalistic literature, with its poetic evocation in liturgical poetry, and (if quoted I will obviously deny that even) with the Christian mystical interpretation of the Song. And here is precisely the point. I am comfortable with all the ways in which the Song has been read, with the great treasures of the human spirit, with the flights of mystical love expressed by appeal to the words of the Song. But what impresses me in all this is the enormous wealth of the interpretive power, mystical imagination and religious passion of the two religious communities that have read the Song of Songs as Scripture. It is not the Song itself that touches me. Aware of the secondary nature of all such interpretation, and of the ways in which all readings function as ways of justifying and saving the Song, I am able to resonate with all, or most, secondary interpretive moves. The Song itself, however, is no longer visible to me as a unit of Scripture that conditions my spiritual life, providing it with meaning. Consequently, I am unable to find a way of "Thinking with" the Song of Songs. I may be able to "think of" the Song of Songs, through the lens of the Rabbis, Maimonides, the Zohar or Rav Kook. A wide definition of Scripture may allow me to consider all of these as part of my arsenal for Scriptural Reasoning, thereby shaping my consciousness and how I live the world spiritually. However, I will not be able to "think with" the Song of Songs. It will not be the Song of Songs that has functioned as a spiritual structuring force but what has been made of it through the history of interpretation. It is here that I locate my crisis in relation to the Song of Songs. This is perhaps the only biblical text of which I am unable to make spiritual sense on its own account and for which I am wholly indebted to the history of its interpretation. This already places me at one remove from Scripture itself. But no less significantly, I cannot really endorse any particular hermeneutical

approach to the Song as providing anything but an attempt, more or less successful, to come to terms with the presence of the Song of Songs in the biblical canon. I am painfully aware of the challenge that all interpreters faced, and am full of admiration for the multiple solutions they proposed. However, this awareness places the entire history of interpretation of the Song at a remove from the text itself.

There are several reasons why I am more aware of this gap with regard to the Song of Songs than with regard to other parts of Scripture. One reason is that I have devoted some of my scholarly attention to the question of the Rabbinic interpretation of the Song of Songs, thereby focusing my attention on this particular problem. Another reason seems to be the problems associated with this text in particular. It seems the Song of Songs poses a unique problem in this regard within the biblical canon. Hence, the greater difficulty of "Thinking of" and even more so of "Thinking with" the Song of Songs. This will become clearer as I move on to the next part of my presentation, in which I trace some key components of the interpretation of the Song of Songs.

Framing the Problem

My problems might have been a lot simpler had I subscribed to the work of some biblical scholars, who propose a cultic reading for the Song of Songs. Marvin Pope and others suggest the original function of the Song of Songs was cultic.^[3] The roots of the Song are pagan and it is the god and goddess who are described therein. If this is the original meaning of the Song, I could readily apply the kabbalistic arsenal at my disposal to translate what may have originally been a pagan piece to what to me are normative Jewish terms.^[4] However, I am unconvinced by the cultic reading. The common scholarly presentation of the Song of Songs as a series of love poems, originally referring to human love relations, and later assuming some alternative meaning, seems to me appropriate. Hence, the framing of the question: what is the religious significance of these originally human love poems? Framing the question in this way is not essentially different than what has been taking place for nearly two thousand years of interpretation of the Song. Almost all interpreters are engaged in precisely this task, though not all define the problem as explicitly as I have. The Song of Songs thus places before us a challenge that is perhaps unique in the biblical canon — providing religious significance for a human literary creation, a creation that celebrates humanity and one of its key expressions — human love relations.

Brevard Childs has proposed what to me is the most ingenious way of sidestepping the entire issue.^[5] Childs focuses on the ascription of the Song to Solomon. The solomonic attribution suggests the Song should be considered an expression of wisdom. Wisdom seeks to understand through reflection the nature of the world of human experience in relation to divine reality. The polarity of sacred and secular is foreign to biblical wisdom. The Song is wisdom's reflection on the joyful and mysterious nature of love between a man and a woman within the institution of marriage. This is a wonderful way of making sense of the Song of Songs. The Song is understood for what it is, namely: the celebration of human love. However, for Childs this is limited to the institution of marriage. It is thus conjugal love that is being celebrated. Perfect, but unconvincing. What is a perfect description of texts such as Proverbs 31 does not aptly describe the dynamics of the Song of Songs. Marriage is nowhere to be found in the Song. The value of eros so transparent in the Song of Songs does not seem well-contained within the proposed wisdom context. Nor does this reading make sense of the literary structure of the work. The series of love poems in which speakers change roles, and the multiple settings of these love poems, do not lend themselves easily to the wisdom reading proposed by Childs.

An alternative strategy to that proposed by Childs has been proposed by Ilana Pardes, and several

colleagues have suggested it in reply to earlier presentations in which I shared my understanding of the earliest religious significance of the Song of Songs. According to this understanding, the Song celebrates human love for what it is. Scripture would be incomplete if it did not have in it an expression of an aspect of life so germane to humanity, its pursuits and its happiness. What could be more natural, beautiful, and even spiritual, than the inclusion of human conjugal love as a value to be admired, praised and celebrated? Underlying this suggestion is possibly a particular notion of holiness. Unlike most of the history of interpretation that sees holiness as related in some way to separation and removal, and therefore must struggle with or account for the sexual component in the Song of Songs, this view considers holiness a form of fulfillment, integration and full expression. To express one's human love, even one's sexuality, is thus not only not incommensurate with a notion of holiness, but may actually fulfill such a notion. I admit that as a strategy of interpretation this is probably the most effective way of making sense of the Song of Songs as part of Scripture. The Song is read for just what it is, and that itself teaches us something about a scale of values. In fact, this reading would allow us to "think with" Scripture. Scripture would provide us with language, metaphor and attitude through which we could address human love and sexuality. A healthy sexuality, grounded in a biblical view of the joy and celebration of the life of the couple, emerges as part of the biblical legacy, thereby shaping our own attitude to these matters. Perhaps Childs himself intends just this in his suggestion. It is possible that his reference to marriage is meant simply to provide moral safeguarding, rather than to suggest that it is the institution of marriage that is being celebrated. Either way, here is a distinct way of making some kind of spiritual sense of the Song of Songs, placing aside the various contortions of its later history of interpretation.

While I admit the effectiveness of this strategy, it does not work for me. Why not? Perhaps I am too deeply influenced by the history of interpretation. Perhaps my conjugal experiences were never so successful as to make me want to speak of them in terms borrowed from the Song of Songs, let alone to ascribe to them such religious significance. Perhaps I am simply too much of a prude. Or perhaps my literary, rather than moral, expectations are too high. It is not sufficient for me to say that the Song of Songs captures an important dimension of human life. The Song does so through a series of literary strategies, poems, situations etc. None of these seem to be carried through when we simply consider the Song a reservoir for the expression of human love. And perhaps my understanding of "religious" is also too defined. In reading these love poems, like in reading any love poems, I am not stirred in ways that are recognizable to me as part of my spiritual life or progression. Granted, my entire life is part of my spiritual life, my love life not excepted. However, this does not turn all stirrings of love into forms of religious expression. To the extent that I am able to recognize the quality that is awoken in me through a literary work or a work of art, I cannot say that I am religiously inspired by reading these poems, when I read them as expressions of human love. I may be inspired and moved by a painting portraying human love at its most delicate. That stirring, however, is for me quite distinct from the spiritual stirring I know so well in other contexts.

The Song as an Allegory of Love

As a scholar of Rabbinic Judaism, I come to this project first and foremost through a historical study of what the Song of Songs meant to the Rabbis. The Rabbis are the Song's earliest interpreters.^[6] Hence, how they understood the Song is highly significant to what the Song could mean for us. In my study of Rabbinic attitudes to the Song of Songs, I have located four different modes that are relevant to a discussion of the Rabbis' understanding of the Song of Songs. Let me briefly present three of these, and

consider their implications for our present discussion.

The first mode is perhaps the most celebrated and well known approach to the meaning of the Song, as understood by the Rabbis. This is probably the most common understanding of the reason for the inclusion of the Song within the Jewish canon. It stems from the seemingly obvious understanding that the subject of the Song is love, and that in order for it to have religious significance, it must refer to classical religious subjects. In the case of ancient Rabbinic hermeneutics, God and Israel are usually presented as the subjects that provide the religious significance of the Song. This position has been articulated by various writers.^[7] The key to this understanding is that the subject of the Song of Songs is love, the love between God and Israel, as manifest in a variety of ways, in relation to cardinal religious concepts and key historical moments.

There is much appeal to this view. Indeed, I imagine that if I subscribed to this understanding on historical grounds, I may never have found myself writing the present piece. There are, however, in my opinion, serious difficulties with this position, that lead me to consider it untenable. I shall have to leave the work of arguing the point in detail to my forthcoming work on the Rabbinic interpretation of the Song of Songs. I shall simply spell out the main objections.

This view assumes love as the theme and subject of the Song of Songs, hence of its Rabbinic interpretation. However, this is never proven. The frequency, usage and appeal of love in Rabbinic interpretation to the Song of Songs are never measured, but are taken for granted. My own investigation of the subject has led me to the startling conclusion that love is not a primary value in Rabbinic interpretation of the Song of Songs. In other words, what the Rabbis highlight is not love, but a variety of topics, concepts and verses, typical of their interpretation of the entire biblical corpus. There is no indication that the Rabbis felt that love was the ultimate subject matter, hence next to nothing is said of love in their commentaries on the Song. There is nothing unique in their interpretation of the Song of Songs to single it out against the wider backdrop of their general hermeneutical practices. All references to love are imported by modern scholarship in its attempt to construct a framework from which Rabbinical interpretation can be appreciated. This imported framework obviously begs the question of the significance of the Song, and I therefore reject it.

Related to the question of the centrality of love in Rabbinic interpretation is the question of the mode of Rabbinic reading. The common understanding is that the Rabbis read the Song as an allegory, even if the literary allegorical practices are not as strict or developed as those found in hellenistic allegoresis. This assumption is fundamental to this understanding of the Rabbinic use of the Song of Songs. I fully share Boyarin's rejection of the relevance of allegory to the Rabbinic interpretation of the Song of Songs.^[8] The upshot of this rejection is the undermining of the understanding that how the Rabbis came to terms with the Song of Songs is by seeing it as an allegory of love.

Does the rejection of this understanding for the canonization of the Song of Songs necessarily entail a rejection of the thesis itself? This is an interesting question. It suggests that the earliest interpreters might have accepted, canonized, or even just interpreted the Song in ways that are less than its full spiritual potential, leaving the fuller potential to be realized by later generations. The suggestion is even more interesting in view of the fact that Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs, beginning with Origen, surely highlights love as the ultimate theme of the Song of Songs.^[9] That the Christian understanding of the Song of Songs might potentially carry greater spiritual value or serve as a source of greater spiritual inspiration is one of the interesting theoretical possibilities one has to contend with in discussing the

meaning of Scripture and its interpretation between Christians and Jews. Perhaps fortunately one does not need to unduly worry about crossing the lines, because later Jewish authorities certainly did read the Song as expressing love as its ultimate spiritual message. Perhaps the clearest articulation of such an understanding is found in the introduction of Rabbi Kook to the Song of Songs, in his commentary on the Siddur, *Olat Reayah*. According to Rav Kook, the Song is the fullest and finest expression of the tendency of the soul to love the absolute good. It expresses something fundamental about the soul, that could not be expressed but through the linguistic wealth of the Song. The finest and most sublime love thus finds expression through the love poems of the Song of Songs.

Rav Kook was a fine spiritual exegete. He did not, however, compose a commentary on the Song of Songs, leaving only isolated notes to individual verses. Perhaps had he composed such a commentary I could have found the balance between literary integrity, spiritual inspiration and hermeneutic authenticity I so long for in the interpretation of the Song of Songs. Lacking a hermeneutical implementation of the lofty overarching understanding of the purpose of the Song, I am left unable to read the Song with Rav Kook's fullness of faith and feeling. I find it hard to read the verses of the Song with the conviction that these are the words that express in the most sublime way my soul's yearning for God. I cannot bring myself to recognize that this is the most appropriate language through which I can speak of God. It is one thing to offer a historical or spiritual allegory. It is quite another to valorize the language of the Song of Songs to such a degree that it becomes the defining feature of the most noble form of spiritual expression. All the reasons I list above may once again be at play. But recognizing my shortcomings does not carry me beyond them to the lofty heights of Rav Kook's gaze upon the Song of Songs.

Christian readers, by contrast, have succeeded in reading the Song in ways that seem to me far more convincing, spiritually speaking. Origen and Bernard are the two writers whose work on the Song I am most familiar with. I am struck by the balance between the attempt to read the Song as an integrated coherent literary unit, the power of spiritual interpretation and the translation of these two into the riches of interpretation. Impressed, inspired, but obviously unable to fully enter into that mode of reading. For their readings are predicated not only on an acceptance of the New Testament as the key to understanding scriptures from the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps more significantly in our case, their interpretations are founded upon the belief in the incarnation, which in turn allows us to apply a particular language to God. The particular mix of celibate interpreters applying erotic language to an incarnate God is enormously potent, yet totally irrelevant for me as a Jewish reader.

There are, of course, numerous Jewish allegorical readings of the Song of Songs. Even if, following Boyarin's work as well as my own, allegory was not the hermeneutical key to the Song of Songs in the first instance, it certainly became so for many later Jewish interpreters. I have not read many Jewish allegorical commentaries to the Song of Songs. What little I have read has struck me, pardon the expression, as lame. Allegorizers are engaged in a transparent project of making the text work, and in so doing attempt to read a particular agenda into the text. Hence the allegorical interpretations of some of the philosophical interpreters of the middle ages, like Gersonides. For someone struggling with the religious sense of the original text, it is not sufficient to make it work by offering some spiritually or theologically correct reading. This is what allegorizers do. I remember how disappointed I was recently in reading Shlomo Alkabez's *Ayelet Ahavim*. I had expected the author of the mystical love poem "Lecha Dodi" to offer a no less inspiring reading of the Song of Songs. Instead I found a highly scholastic attempt to offer a consistent reading of the Song of Songs as relevant to one topic — the relation of the Torah to its student. In carrying forth his task, Alkabetz repeated so many familiar moves that I felt I was once again on Rabbinic turf, only more systematically expounded with a touch of philosophical

sophistication added.

I don't know if a great allegorical commentator will arise who will be able to demonstrate the power of divine love as expressed through the Song of Songs. I fear the stringency of demand placed upon such an interpreter, by the accumulated literary, linguistic, historical, interreligious etc. knowledge that we possess, will make it impossible to offer a Jewish spiritual reading that will work, in ways that Christian allegory has worked for so much of Christian interpretation. I am thus led away from the allegorical, love-based, understanding of the Song of Songs, in search of other ways of making religious sense of the Song.

The Intertextual Reading of the Song of Songs

Let me return to Boyarin. My own studies fully confirm the following paragraphs, reporting on his work. If allegory is not the key to Rabbinic interpretation, an intertextual reading of the Song is. Boyarin points to the fact that the Rabbis read the Song of Songs as a parable to various events in Scripture. We should take Scripture here in the widest possible sense. Its primary meaning is, of course, the Torah. But the Prophets, later historical events, key religious values, even the figures and the events of later Rabbinic times, are all part of the wider referents of the Song of Songs. The Song is significant because it points to other known religious and scriptural realities, that endow it with meaning.

It is important to note that the Rabbis never offer one consistent interpretation of the Song.^[10] Thus, each verse of the Song is applied in the different midrashim to various subject matters. Proponents of the allegorical reading usually ignore this difficulty, at times suggesting the different individual interpretations are but examples of the wider theme of the love allegory.^[11] What strikes the reader, however, is the diversity, rather than the unity of Rabbinic interpretation. Importing the unifying principle from outside the Rabbinic sources begs the question and should be avoided. Thus, the Rabbinic interpretations should be read individually, and not as part of a larger allegorical theory. The upshot of such an understanding is that each individual verse of the Song can serve as a prism, through which other aspects of Scripture, or of the spiritual reality of Israel, can be refracted. The Song is meaningful not because it has been decoded, or because some wider governing logic has been unveiled. On the contrary, it is significant because it is never read for itself. It is only read in tandem with other instruments of valuation — scriptural, historical, communal. These provide the Song with its religious meaning, illuminating its different verses in light of known values of the religious system. In the deepest possible sense, this is not an allegory precisely because it lacks coherent meaning as a whole. The Rabbis have taken apart the Song of Songs, and read it through its smallest units, the individual words or verses. Having done that, they have fully integrated the Song of Songs into their religious worldview, never even giving rise to the question of the religious significance of the Song of Songs. It has none, simply because in a sense it has ceased to exist. Thus, one cannot speak of a theory of the interpretation of the Song of Songs, any more than one can speak of a theory of the interpretation of the book of Job, Esther or Psalms. Biblical books are read unit by unit, and homologized to the greater theological whole of Rabbinic Judaism, focusing primarily on Torah interpretation. Scripture thus becomes one unit, delivering one coherent message. In that message, the uniqueness of the Song of Songs is lost.^[12] The Song of Songs operates hermeneutically like any other part of Scripture.

Song of Songs and the Language of Praise

There is another way in which the Song of Songs functions for the Rabbis, which has not yet been presented in the literature. In the intertextual bond of the Pentateuchal text and the text of the Song of Songs, it is not only the uniqueness of the Song that is lost. The intertextual encounter also transforms the text of the Torah. In order to appreciate this transformation, we must consider the category of praise. By addressing a passage of the Torah, or a central cultural value, by means of a certain scriptural passage, a value is transferred onto that Torah passage from the relevant scriptural passage. If the Song of Songs addresses other parts of scripture, one cannot reduce its function to simply telling or alluding to a particular passage of the Torah through a different linguistic expression. While the content of the verse for the Song may be reduced to the substance of the verse of the Torah, a value is imported by use of the verse from the Song to address the verse of the Torah. There is thus a reciprocal exchange between the two biblical texts. The text of the Torah provides the substantive meaning for the verse of the Song. The verse from the Song provides the valuation for the verse of the Torah. Because of its specific content, the Song of Songs provides one particular valuation: praise. Its language is most suited to convey praise. It thus has a unique contribution to make to the appreciation of the text of the Torah, or the values that the interpretation of the Song of Songs highlights.

We find praise as a controlling feature of the Rabbinic application of the Song. Thus, a hermeneutical rule is established, limiting the intertextual associations of the Song to biblical stories that praise Israel, rather than to verses that portray them in a negative light.^[13] Various verses of the Song are read as praises of God and Israel. Thus, the descriptions of the lover and beloved are understood as expressions of praise.^[14] Indeed, the entire Song of Songs is unique and special because it is so full of praise. Let me quote two relevant introductory passages to midrashim on the Song of Songs that present the significance of the Song in terms of praise.

In all other Songs either God praises Israel or they praise Him. In the Song of Moses [at the Red Sea] they praise Him, saying "This is my God and I will glorify Him" (Ex. 15,2). And in the Song of Moses [before his death] He praises them, as we read, "He made him ride on the high places of the earth" (Deut. 32,13). Here, however, they praise Him and He praises them. He praises them: "Behold thou art beautiful, my beloved" (Song 1,16), and they praise Him: "Behold thou art beautiful, my beloved, verily pleasant" (1,17).^[15]

Another commentary: Song of Songs, concerning this scripture said "He composed three thousand proverbs, and his Songs numbered one thousand and five" (1Kings 5,12)...^[16] For Solomon composed many Songs. And [why is it said Song of Songs in the plural]?^[17] Because it contains the praise of God, the praise of the Torah and the praise of Israel. God's praise whence? For it is said: His head is finest gold (Song 5,10). And of the Torah, for it is said: And his banner of love was over me (Song 2,4). And of Israel, as it is said: Like a lily among the thorns (Song 2,2). And the praise of the ingathering of the exiles, as it is said: Trip down from Amana's peak (Song 4,8).^[18]

The praises of God, Israel and the Torah are obviously related in the larger relational framework.. However, they are not presented in direct relation to one another, and there is no reciprocity in their praise. Once the Torah has entered as a third praiseworthy element, the door has been opened to any value to be praised by means of the Song of Songs. The inclusion of the ingathering of the exiles illustrates this. Praise allows for multiple foci. Israel and God may be frequent referents of the Song. However, they do not have a controlling position in the interpretation of the Song. Any value within the religious orbit of the Rabbinical worldview can be the subject of interpretation, and consequently, of the

praise of the Song of Songs. Here is the heart of the difference between the understanding that the Song expresses love and the understanding that the Song expresses praise. For the understanding that the Song expresses love, the love is contained within the relationship of God and Israel. For the theory that the Song expresses praise, anything of value can be praised. Praising is a function of ascribing value, and not of declaring love. Therefore, even when God and Israel are praised in Scripture, their praise is not the amorous exchange that characterizes the Song. It is not God that praises Israel, nor Israel that praises God. Rather, they are both praised by the objective voice of Scripture. Scripture serves as the vehicle by means of which the ultimate praise is conferred upon the leading values. The objectivity of Scripture's praise has displaced the subjectivity of the lovers' relationship.

Song of Songs and the Power of Language

Both the intertextual understanding and the recognition that the Song of Songs should be understood in terms of praise are the classical Rabbinic way of reading the Song. This has enormous significance both to the presence of the Song in the canon and to the history of its later usage. The Song of Songs never made it into the Jewish canon because of what it meant. It made it because of its purported solomonic authorship. Therefore, in making sense of the book, little was made of what the book meant in and of itself. What was significant for the Rabbis was not some theory of what the book meant, as proponents of the allegorical reading extolling love suggest. Rather, the Rabbis determined the significance of the book, by disengaging the book's verses from their original context. What the book had to offer lay in the realm of its linguistic expression, rather than in the realm of its message and content. In the reciprocal transference of meaning between verses from different parts of scripture, the Song of Songs offered poetic expression, beauty and inspiration. What it meant was up to the Torah, or the Rabbis, to determine. In addressing cardinal values of the Jewish religion, the Song of Songs could praise in ways that no other part of scripture could. Indeed, the Song does emerge as unique. But its uniqueness is a function of its linguistic wealth, the lush images, the seducing scenes, and not the story line, the quality of love or its humanity. Taking the book apart, allowing only its language to resonate, not its meaning, is the secret of how the Rabbis came to terms with the Song of Songs.

Is this strategy of reading a conscious attempt to undermine the book and overcome the challenge placed by its content? Not necessarily. The ways in which the Rabbis read the Song of Songs are typical of how they read scripture in general. Clearly, they did attempt to defuse the erotic charge of the book.^[19] But they did not devise a strategy of reading especially for the Song of Songs. Rather, they read the Song as they would any other part of the post-pentateuchal canon, thereby naturally eliminating all the difficulties that later Jewish and Christian interpreters would have to contend with.

Rabbinic hermeneutics did not cease with the Rabbis. The philosophers established a different hermeneutic, consisting of systematic reading and carefully worked out allegorical interpretations. But kabbalistic authors, especially the Zohar, comfortably continued Rabbinic interpretive practices. My impression of how the Song of Songs is utilized in the Zohar is one of great continuity with Rabbinic usage. The kabbalistic revolution of reading all of scripture in relation to the Divine obviously includes the Song of Songs as well. But, it seems to me on first examination, that the Zohar did not offer a different theory of the reading of the Song of Songs. It does not undertake a systematic exposition of the Song in light of its own particular theological worldview. Rather, the Zohar simply carries on Rabbinic hermeneutical practices. Given the significant shift in the Zohar's theology, it is natural to apply verses of the Song to various mysteries of the Divine union of God and the Shekhina. However, this does not

amount to a **theory** of how the Song of Songs should be read, any more than Rabbinic reading of the Song amounted to the allegorical **theory** of interpretation.^[20] Rather, it was natural and possible for kabbalists to read the Song as delivering a particular theological understanding, because verses could easily be detached from their wider context, and charged with the particular charge typical of kabbalistic theosophy. Like the Rabbis, the kabbalists could make the Song mean whatever they desired not because they had a theory, but because they had a mechanism of application. The popularity of the Song in Zoharic interpretation should, in my opinion, be construed as a spontaneous application of its enormous linguistic potential. The authors of the Zohar would respond intuitively to the wealth of language, imagery and erotic potential contained in the Song of Songs, recasting the original biblical verses in true midrashic fashion into their new divinely contextualized midrash. It is therefore futile to count the number of quotes from the Song of Songs in the Zohar as an indication of a theological understanding or the theological centrality of the book.^[21] Statistics only serve to confirm the enormous linguistic potential of the latter day intra Divine midrashists, who extended the midrashic method to address the life Divine.

Thinking with Scripture and the Power of Language

We can now return to a point in the presentation that we left off when we entered the detailed discussion of the Rabbinic interpretation of the Song of Songs. I stated earlier my profound discomfort with the Song of Songs as a part of Scripture. I am now in a better position to articulate this discomfort. Let us return to the distinction between "Thinking of" and "Thinking with". I have time and again in this essay pointed to my difficulty in accepting various forms of "Thinking of" the Song of Songs. While I would have liked to embrace a successful love-allegorical reading of the Song, I have yet to locate a reading that does justice to the text, provides spiritual upliftment and provides one with the sense of the propriety of erotic language as a means of portraying our relationship with God. But my own frustrations — constrictions, if you will — are only half of the story. The other half is the realization that how Jewish tradition operated in relation to the Song of Songs was precisely by sidestepping any attempt to offer a reading that would enable us to "think of" the Song of Songs. The text itself remains vacuous, only its interpretations radiate in the heavens of Jewish interpretation. And radiate they do. For terrific riches have been found through the application of the midrashic hermeneutic. Personally, I am quite happy subscribing to the images and processes described in the kabbalistic works. Yet, I can only do so through the midrashic deconstruction of meaning and the attendant valorization of language. If I were to look at the Song of Songs and ask: Can I regard this as a spiritual work because it aptly describes the relationship of God and His Shekhina, I would be forced to reply in the negative. I cannot bring myself to consider this the meaning of the text. Perhaps some kind of hermeneutic leap of faith beyond *peshat*, historical development and the historical problems of canonization would be in place. Perhaps it will be possible tomorrow, one more instance of my shaping my spiritual life in ways that are idiosyncratic and not accessible to most others. Indeed, further study and reflection may push me in this direction. Still, for the time being what I find in the kabbalistic reading is not the true key to elevating the Song of Songs beyond its human origins, but one more instance of the wealth of language offered by the Song being put to original and creative uses. Rabbinic, kabbalistic and hassidic interpretations could thus emerge as a continuum of applications of a core text, through the application of a given hermeneutic, that allows new meaning to emerge, in accordance with spiritual worlds to which one has grown accustomed to and with which one has grown comfortable. This I find, only this.

And here my problem emerges with full force — The Song of Songs is *only* read for its linguistic

potency, only understood through the lens of the interpreters, who approached the text with far less complexity and ambivalence than I do. The Song of Songs is perhaps unique in this respect. The problems of its human origins and threatening eroticism are unique. Its linguistic potential is unique. The lack of a core religious meaning to which one can refer and through which one's spiritual life can be structured is also unique. For what can the Song of Songs itself offer me? The power of the Song's language cannot shape my consciousness or orient my spiritual ways. When the Song's language is refracted through the interpretive lens of the Rabbis or the kabbalists it is the theology of the latter, their teaching and inspiration, that shapes my awareness, no longer the power of Scripture. This is why the Song of Songs is so frightening and perplexing. It is not its eros or its humanity. It is my inability to establish a core of religious meaning in the text itself, independently of the creative recasting of its creative language by later generations. The Song of Songs therefore doesn't mean anything. It only means what its interpreters make it mean. If this danger exists for all of Scripture, it is the defining feature of the classical interpretation of the Song of Songs. And if I cannot "think of" the Song of Songs, how can it ever gain the religious significance of shaping my awareness as I "think with" it?

Throughout this essay I have placed myself on the brink of assenting to a given interpretation of the Song, were it only that I could be hermeneutically convinced by it. Whether the love reading, as expounded by Rav Kook, or the theurgic reading, as expounded by the Zohar. My inability to acquiesce to such readings leaves me in the unique position of loving the great wealth of the Song, its language, its imagery and evocative quality, while hopelessly struggling to locate a core of meaning with which I could resonate religiously. Perhaps I must learn to let go. Perhaps I must come to realize that this is precisely the beauty of the Song of Songs. Not the fact that it celebrates the human body and human eros, but the fact that it can only be approached through the celebration of the human power to give meaning to Scripture. Maybe the Song of Songs is where I must learn the lesson that meaning resides in interpretation, rather than in the original intention of scripture, or in some balance of the two. Maybe the Song of Songs is where I must accept a wider meaning of what Scripture is, expanding its meaning to include the fullest history of interpretation. Maybe, then, the Song of Songs is where I must learn how to read Scripture as a Jew? Maybe.

[1] I am aware that various religious traditions may differ on this point. The distinction between classical and modern is possibly stronger in the case of Judaism than in the case of Christianity and Islam.

[2] Standard descriptions of the question can be found in introductions to the Song of Songs, like those of Roland Murphy and Marvin Pope. See also Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, Hamden, 1976, and Menahem Haran, *HaAsupa Hamikrait*.

[3] Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible, New York, 1977, p. 145.

[4] This seems to be the underlying logic of Arthur Green's recent study *Shekhina, The Virgin Mary and the Song of Songs*, *AJS Review* 26,1 2002, pp. 1-52.

[5] Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Fortress, 1979, p. 571 ff.

[6] The Song is found in Qumran, but there is no interpretation of it. There is nothing in Philo's writings regarding the Song of Songs.

[7] **The list includes Isaak Heinemann, Ephraim Urbach, Gerson Cohen, Judah Goldin, Shmuel Safrai, Jacob Neusner, Marc Hirschman, Art Green and more.**

[8] **Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Bloomington, 1990, pp. 105-116.**

[9] **I take sharp issue with a host of scholars who consider the Rabbis and Origen to be engaged in the same type of activity, namely: allegorizing the Song of Songs, the only difference between them concerning the referents of the allegory. This key spokesmen for this position are Ephraim Urbach, Reuven Kimmelman and Menachem Hirschman. In a recently completed study I take sharp issue with this classical position, arguing that no polemic existed over the interpretation of the Song of Songs. In my understanding, the Rabbis and the Christian writers are not doing the same thing, hence the entire basis of the reconstructed polemic is undermined.**

[10] **Lieberman had suggested that the tannaim interpreted the Song of Songs systematically. Thus, the earliest rabbinic interpretation would have been systematic, but it degenerated into eclectic collections. I take issue with Lieberman in my "Did the Tannaim Interpret the Song of Songs Systematically? -Lieberman Reconsidered," *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, forthcoming.**

[11] **A point beautifully argued by Joseph Bonsirven S.J., *Exegese Rabbinique et Exegese Paulinienne*, Paris, 1939, pp. 217-8; 224-5, who saw through much of the standard views on the Song. Yitzhak Heineman, *Darchei Ha'Agada*, Jerusalem, 1954, p. 156, attempts a defence of the standard views.**

[12] **Readers may wonder how one should interpret, in light of this suggestion, Rabbi Akiva's classical statement that the Song of Songs is holy of holies. It is conceivable that according to this understanding of the significance of the Song of Songs indeed it has no special status. However, several rabbinic passages suggest that even according to this understanding, the Song has special status. Rabbi Akiva's praise of the song is shifted from terms of holiness to terms of wisdom. See R. Eleazar Ben Azariah in Song of Songs Rabba 1.1.1., Song of Songs Zuta, Buber p. 2 and p. 7. I will deal with these texts in greater detail in my future work.**

[13] **Song of Songs Rabba 1.11.1; 2.4.1.**

[14] **Song of Songs Rabba 5.16.6.**

[15] **Song of Songs Rabba 1,1,11.**

[16] **Lacuna in the original.**

[17] **Completion by Wertheimer.**

[18] **Midrash Shir HaShirim, ed. Yosef Wertheimer, Jerusalem, 1981, p. 3-4.**

[19] **I know some readers suggest an opposite vector, whereby the rabbis intend to eroticize the rest of Scripture. The subject will have to be debated in another framework.**

[20] *pace* Green, whose argument seems to imply a continuity between the rabbinic love allegory and the kabbalistic rereading of this allegory in terms of intra-divine relations, thus a different understanding of the function of the Song of Songs. For this reason, Green devotes the third part of his article to a

comparative study of the Jewish and Christian reading of the Song of Songs.

[\[21\]](#) **Compare Green, p. 35. Green himself does not explicitly do so, though his argument tends in that direction.**

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