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Comparing Jewish and Christian Mystical and Allegorical Commentaries to the Song of Songs during Late Antiquity

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Thank you.

I. Introduction

1. Competitive Biblical Interpretations

Many interpreters of the Bible insist that it only be understood in a "literal" sense, or the *peshat* level. Others maintain that there are hidden depths, such as the allegorical and mystical, awaiting those who could penetrate beyond the surface-level of interpretation. Although it would be easy for many today to dismiss the hidden or allegorical approach as convoluted and fanciful, it has served as an important method for linking ancient texts with the key issues of theology, philosophy, and mysticism.

Since the introduction of Christianity into the religious world, Jews and Christians have battled with each other over the proper interpretation of the Old Testament. During the early years of Christianity -- which also saw the birth of Rabbinic Judaism, both faiths were governed by Rome with an iron hand. One might have thought that neither faith was in a position to focus on matters of theological debate, what with their very existence always a matter of concern. The Jews were a political enemy of the Roman rulers, and the Christians viewed as an enemy of humanity.

That they didn't cooperate can be seen in many of the historical and other contemporaneous documents generated by the historians and theologians of this time period that recount the direct challenges to each other's faith. In addition, the struggle between the faiths manifested itself on many other and different indirect fronts, and along the understanding of virtually all of the books that comprise the Old Testament. And where the religious book consisted of the interpretation of a Biblical work, the

underlying agenda of the author is seen to have influenced his purported neutral interpretation.

With this paper, I hope to provide support for my position that this state of disagreement also extended itself to the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. Moreover, it almost seems that the Biblical interpreters were having an interpretative debate of the Book's meaning, centuries before formal direct disputations between the faiths would arise in the late Middle Ages. And it is the very nature of the interpretative model used for the Song of Songs that lends a greater arsenal to the interpreter seeking to advance his agenda. There is a great deal of latitude available to one who engages in allegorical interpretation. With virtually all interpreters of all faiths coming to see the Song of Songs requiring an allegorical or mystical understanding, the disagreements between the Jewish and Christian interpreters are further highlighted.

This paper is not just about bias between the faiths, but as well focuses upon the apparent debate and interaction informally taking place between the two faiths. As we view the differences in outlooks expressed by the differing commentators we can almost envision the following scene taking place in 3rd century Palestine: At a time when written communications to the broader public were unheard of, the competing perspectives were being laid out to the various publics in the marketplace with each view seeking to outdo the other in reaching into the hearts and minds of their listeners.

2. Song of Songs

The Song of Songs is unique in that it does not conform to the conventional model of Biblical works. The work consists almost entirely of passages of unarranged speech; snippets of monologue and dialogue, but without any narrative framework in which to help understand the speech. Among other challenges, one has to determine who is speaking to whom and whether the speech is related to anything else that has gone down previously.

The notion that the Song of Songs should be understood in its plain normal sense has been, for the most part, firmly resisted throughout most of history,[1] although there are literal understandings of some of the verses in the Song of Songs that find favor among the rabbis.[2] Indeed, Rabbi Akiva stated that "whoever warbles verses of the Song of Songs at a banquet and makes a kind of melody thereof has no share in the World to Come."[3]

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[1] Some scholars maintain that the allegorical meaning was given to the Song of Songs only after it was accepted for canonization. See, e.g., Pope, *Song of Songs* (Anchor Bible 1977), p. 89-93; Urbach, *The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origin on Canticles, and the Jewish Christian Disputation* (Magnes Press 1971), p. 249. Among the factors that lead to their conclusion was that the translation to the Septuagint, hundreds of years before the earliest allegorical interpretation was disseminated, was literal. However, a recent book suggests that the earliest allegorical interpretations were first disseminated soon after the final redaction of the Song of Songs, thus undermining the value of the existence of the Septuagint's literal translation. Moreover, the author suggests that it was the contemporaneous Greek or Hellenistic culture that initiated the Jewish allegorical school for understanding the Song of Songs. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (JPS 1991), page 3-17.

[2] See, e.g., Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:17 §1 ("Our panels are cypresses." Rabbi Yochanan said: the Torah teaches one proper conduct, that a man should make his ceiling of cedar and his floor of cypress.); Cf. 5:1 §1 ("Let my beloved come into his garden and enjoy its luscious fruits." Rabbi Yochanan says: the Torah teaches one proper conduct, that the bridegroom should not enter the bridal chamber until the bride gives him permission. What is the basis for this? "Let my beloved come into his garden."). These teachings indicate that the Song of Songs was also understood to give good practical advice.

[3] *Tosefta, Sanhedrin*, 12:10.

On the *peshat* level, it does not appear to deal with Israel, its history or its religion.[4] Rather, it appears to be devoted to the most private and intimate subject of an individual's concerns -- love. Yet despite containing no overt mention of God's name in the Book, and containing no overt expression of religious sentiments, it was included by the rabbis of the Talmud as part of the Jewish canon. Indeed, the Book enjoyed a status of enhanced holiness that sets it apart from the rest of the Old Testament. Rabbi Akiva championed the uniqueness of the Song of Songs during the discussion among the rabbis as to whether it should be accorded canonical status. The canonicity of the Holy Books is expressed indirectly by the doctrine that those books that qualify for canonical status "render the hands unclean," i.e., the improper handling of a "holy" book that qualifies for this consideration rendered the individual unclean.[5] Some of the rabbis claimed that the Book should not enter the canon because it did not "render the hands unclean." Rabbi Akiva responded:

> No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs, ... for the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.[6]

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[4] Although the same could be said with respect to the books of Job and Jonah, at least with respect to these books God plays a major role in these works thus conveying the "religious" concept and by derivation, its direct application to Israel.

[5] Jewish Encyclopedia, Bible Canon (http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3259-bible-canon). BT Shabbat, 14A.

[6] M. Yadayim, 3.5. There is some disagreement among commentators as to whether Rabbi Akiva was contending that the Song of Songs was the holiest book in the Bible, or just the holiest book among the *Ketuvim*. However, the fact that Rabbi Akiva was relying on the "the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel" suggests that just like Torah was "given" to Israel, he must have been comparing the holiness of the Song of Songs to at least the Torah, if not the entire Bible. There is another reference to Rabbi Akiva's subscription to the utter holiness of the Song of Songs which can be found in the following: "Had not the Torah been given, the Song of Songs would have sufficed to guide the world." *Aggadat Shir*

It is unclear as to why Rabbi Akiva reached this conclusion. Rabbi Akiva's conclusion that "the Song of Songs is holiest," appears to be based on his belief that the subject matter of the Book is the life of the Divine. An example of this understanding derives from the description of the lover contained in chapter 5 of the Book.[7] Indeed, the superlative, "song of songs" fits neatly into that other superlative mainstay of Judaism, the "holy of holies."[8]

The major Christian mystical commentator of Late Antiquity, Origen, affirms Rabbi Akiva's perspective, calling the Song of Songs "preferred before all songs."[9]

Ha-shirim, p. 5. Interestingly, while Rabbi Akiva casts the importance of the Book as entering the Holy of Holies, the Christian commentator Origen, who will be discussed in great detail below, cast this importance in the context of entering holy places generally, as opposed to the holy place within the Second Temple. See, Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies* (Newman Press 1957), p. 266.

[7] Song of Songs 5:9-16:

> 9. Why is your beloved more than another beloved, O you most beautiful among women? Why is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us?
> 10. My beloved is white and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand.
> 11. His head is like the finest gold, his locks are wavy, and black like a raven.
> 12. His eyes are like doves by the water courses, washed with milk, and fitly set.
> 13. His cheeks are like a bed of spices, like fragrant flowers; his lips like lilies, distilling liquid myrrh.
> 14. His hands are like circlets of gold set with emeralds; his belly is like polished ivory overlaid with sapphires.
> 15. His legs are like pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold; his countenance is like Lebanon, excellent like the cedars.
> 16. His mouth is most sweet; and he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.

[8] Notwithstanding Rabbi Akiva's ringing endorsement of including the Song of Songs into the canon, questions continued to abound about its inclusion. The debate about this issue is set forth in the very same Mishnah (M. Yadayim, 3.5) containing Rabbi Akiva's endorsement, showing that Rabbis Judah, Simon and Yosei – tannaitic rabbis of the generation after Rabbi Akiva, continuing to question the inclusion of the Song of Songs into the canon.

[9] Lawson, p. 47. Similarly, the Midrash also finds the Book to be the holiest of songs in Scripture, "the best of songs, the most excellent of songs, the finest of songs." Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:1 § 11.

Those other six songs[10] to which Origen refers, such as the Song of the Sea and the Song of Deborah, "were sung to the Bride while she was still a little child and had not yet attained maturity." In contrast, the Song of Songs is "sung to [the Bride] now that she is grown up, and very strong, and ready for a husband's power and the perfect mystery."[11]

Advocates of the allegorical view have been adamant that there must be some spiritual message to the book that exceeds the supposed earthly theme of human sexuality.[12] As a result, the allegorists have stressed a spiritual meaning that goes beneath the surface reading. The outcome of this method, however, resulted in a host of interpretations as numerous as those who follow this approach.

For the rabbis, the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs as a dialogue between God and Israel was for them the only, or at the very least, the "lowest" level of interpretation, thereby rejecting any *peshat* understanding of the Book. Its dialogue structure contributes to the unique religious intensity that it generates. While there is a general rule that no verse of the Torah may be divorced from its plain meaning, even when it is expounded exegetically,[13] this does not appear to apply to the Song of Songs:

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[10] The *Targum* relates that the Song of Songs is the holiest of ten songs in Scripture. So, too, does Song of Songs Zuta reference such a number of songs, of which the Song of Songs is the holiest.

[11] Lawson, p. 47.

[12] Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (InterVarsity, 1984), p. 21-24.

[13] BT Shabbat 63A.

> Those who recite a verse of the Song of Songs and render it a kind of song by singing it with a common melody, and one who recites its verses in inappropriate circumstances, bring evil to the world, because the Torah wraps itself in sackcloth and standing before the Holy One, blessed be He, and says: "Master of the Universe, Your children have treated me like a lute upon which the scoffers play."[14]

Rather, the rabbis' midrashic take on this Biblical work was an esoteric one that was more concerned with the mystical contemplation of the Divine, than it was with the love conversation between God and Israel.[15] [16]

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[14] BT Sanhedrin 101A.

[15] Muffs, *Joy and Love as Metaphorical Expressions of Willingness and Spontaneity in Cuneiform, Ancient Hebrew, and Related Literatures,* in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults* [ed. J. Neusner: Leiden, 1975], 3.21.

[16] Although this paper takes the perspective that the allegorical or mystical reading of the Song of Songs is the most acceptable method of understanding, there is strong support for the view that this method of reading the Book has lost favor. See, e.g., Greeley and Neusner, *The Bible and Us: A Priest and a Rabbi Read Scripture Together* (Warner 1990), p. 34 ("Contemporary Scripture scholarship has routed the allegorical interpretation: The Song is secular love poetry, a collection of love songs gathered around a single theme....It was placed in the canon of the Scriptures because it was so well loved by the Israelite people that the Scriptures seemed a good place to preserve it.")

II. Allegoric Understanding of the Song of Songs, Generally

One of the chief Jewish approaches to the Song of Songs was to see it as an allegory for the loving relationship of God to Israel, in which God was the lover and the people of Israel were the bride. This metaphor of a marriage for the relationship between God, the husband, and Israel, the wife, is very common in the prophetic books.[17] According to this view, the Song of Songs should be seen as a reunion and love between God and Israel -- a rebuke to the prophetic rebukes, and expressing the commitment of two lovers with each other.

The intensity and passion of the Song of Songs conveyed the ultimate importance of the relationship of the Jewish people and their God. The emphatic insistence of this understanding is convincing proof of the importance of this approach in early years of Rabbinic Judaism, and it has continued relatively unchallenged over the millennia.

Christian interpreters, too, early adopted an allegorical understanding of the Song of Songs. However, in contrast to the Jewish allegory, Christian interpreters have claimed that the book depicts love between Christ and his bride, the church, as will be developed in detail below with respect to the discussion of the views of Origen, the Christian interpreter analyzed here.

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[17] See, e.g., Hosea 2:18 ("And it shall be at that day, says the Lord, that you shall call me My husband ("Ishi"); and shall no more call me My master ("Baali")."); Jeremiah 2:2 ("Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus said the Lord; I remember you, the devotion of your youth, your love like a bride, when you went after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.").

1. Early Jewish Allegorical School

Traces of the Jewish allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs are found as early as the Mishnah.[18] Although the Mishnah was finally edited about 200 CE, some of its contents relate back to an oral tradition dating centuries earlier. This approach was also followed in the earliest works that help explain the allegorical understanding of the Song of Songs: the Targum and the Song of Songs Rabbah.[19]

A. The Targum

The Targum is a series of books that are designed to explain the Biblical works. The Targum "translated" most of the books in the Jewish canon into Aramaic, which was the *lingua franca* of the day, at least in the period of the 1st-8th centuries of the Common Era.[20] However, unlike other translations of Biblical works, the Targum should not be looked upon as a free-standing translation of the Biblical work. Rather, the Targum should be looked upon as a text to be read in conjunction with the original Biblical work. This is especially so with regard to the Targum for the Song of Songs.

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[18] M. *Ta'anith* 4.8. (In expounding upon the following verse in the Song of Songs, *"Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, and on the day of the gladness of his heart,"* the Mishnah states that Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel understands the verse as an allegory, in which it represents the second giving of the Law, and in doing so the Mishnah understands "King Solomon" as an allusion to God [*Melekh Shelomo* = *Melekh She'ha-Shalom Shelo*], and "his mother" as a reference to Israel.)

[19] Allegorical interpretation of the Bible is not limited to the Targum and the Song of Songs Rabbah but is also found in other Midrashic works.

[20] The only Biblical works for which there is no Targum are the books of Ezra/Nehemiah and Daniel, probably due to the fact that Aramaic language appears in these Biblical works.

Because the legends in it seem to be rather late, and because it includes quotes from the Gemara (the last part of the Talmud that was completed about 500 CE), the Targum on the Song of Songs is usually dated considerably later than much of the other Targumic material. Ginsburg argues for a date about the middle of the sixth century, when the Talmud would have already been complete, but Loewe would date it even later yet.[21]

The Targum interpreted the Song of Songs as expressing the gracious love of God toward His people from the Exodus until the coming of the Messiah.[22] The Targum takes a decidedly particularistic and Jewish approach, connecting various verses in the Book to episodes from Israelite history, such as the giving of Torah at Sinai, crossing of the Red Sea, etc. When one examines the Targumic material for the Song of Songs one can readily detect a rhythm in the relationship between God and Israel. We see a constant recurrence of a cycle of fellowship, estrangement and reconciliation; and the application of that rhythm to the relationship between God and Israel. This generates a corresponding rhythm of communion with God, followed by rebellion, sin and exile, but ultimately resulting in repentance, return and ultimately redemption. This pattern is based on the Bible, where the Israelites repeatedly are obedient, then disobedient, then repentant and reconciled to God, only to repeat the pattern again and again

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[21] Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Koheleth* (Ktav 1970), p. 28. Loewe, "*Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs*," in *Biblical Motifs*, ed. by Alexander Altmann (Harvard University, 1966), p. 163-69.

[22] Melamed, *The Targum to Canticles According to Six Yemen MSS: Compared With the Textus Receptus* (ed. De Lagarde), 12 Jewish Quarterly Review 57-117 (1921-1922).

Indeed, when one looks at the opening of the *Targum's* commentary on the first verse of the Song of Songs: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's," this particularistic perspective is underscored. The Targum provides a list of ten songs that were sung during the history of the Biblical world from Adam to the final eschatological victory, thus serving as a chronicle of the Jewish people.[23] This history then continues to unfold throughout the Targum by providing references to key events that transpired during the Israelites' progression, including various stops in the Wilderness, the Conquest of the Land, the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, the Hasmonean Rule, and the post-Second Temple exile and a vision of the ultimate Redemption.[24]

Thus, the Targumist has divided the "translation" of the Song of Songs into three great periods of Israel's relationship with God.[25] The first is the era that spans the period from the exile in Egypt to the building of the First Temple. The second period covers the exile in Babylon following the destruction of the First Temple through the building of the Second Temple and the Hasmonean rule. The third period runs from

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[23] Goldin, *This Song*, in S. Lieberman, *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: Central Press 1974), p. 539.

[24] See generally, Alexander, *"The Song of Song as Historical Allegory,"* in Cathcart and Maher (eds.) *Targumic and Cognate Studies in Honor of Martin McNamara* (Sheffield Academic Press 1996). Some significant omissions from the *Targum's* review of Israelite history include King David's reign and any narratives that relate to the Patriarchs, as well as the period of the Judges -- even though the Song of Devorah from the Book of Judges is listed within the ten songs mentioned in the Targum's comment to 1:1. In contrast, Origen's interpretation of the Song of Songs does not consider the work to be centrally concerned with the religious history of Israel, other than as a pretext for support of his supersession interpretations.

[25] The Song of Songs Rabbah also finds that the underlying work references three periods of Israel's existence: the redemptions from Egypt, Babylon and Edom when Rabbis Aibu and Judah analyze the first verse as follows: "Song" indicates one, and "Songs" indicates two, "making three in all," -- three redemptions. Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:1 §10.

the destruction of the Second Temple to the eventual building of a Third Temple. It is this history that the Targum finds hidden in the Song of Songs: the inner history of Israel or its spiritual history, which lies behind and which determines the external history. Thus, to detect this secret history embedded in the Targum's retelling of the Song of Songs is to understand what happened to Israel throughout history but more importantly, what awaits her in the future.[26]

However, the *Targum* does not appear to be a simple history such as the Book of Chronicles. Rather, it can be seen as a historical allegory. Moreover, the religious historical narrative contained in it suggests that it strives to achieve other purposes:

1. Connecting the uniqueness of the Book, with its absence of any overt reference to God or Israel, to the rest of Scripture and thereby supporting its selection into the canon. This is done through emphasis of God's covenantal relationship with Israel, and thereby providing an emotional explanation to the core events of Israel's history with God as described in the other Scriptural works.

2. Outlining a way of life capable of sustaining the Jewish people in their then-exilic status; and

3. Including the reader -- the Jewish people, in the history of Israel, and more specifically in Israel's praise of the Divinity. The Targum makes it appear that the very recitation of its interpretation of the Song of Songs by subsequent generations of Jews,

[26] See generally, Alexander, *The Aramaic Bible: The Targum of Canticles* (The Liturgical Press 2003), p. 13.

makes them actual participants in the relationship with the Divine, which commenced with the origin of the human race and will continue until its final chapter.[27]

B. Song of Songs Rabbah

The Song of Songs Rabbah was not finalized until about the 6th century CE, although its contents represent the words of sages living in Israel between the first and fourth centuries CE.[28] Within this collection, the entire gamut of stories from Abraham to the messianic redemption is included, although its primary focus is on the narratives of the Red Sea and Sinai. And as is the case with all *midrashim*, it expresses the views of many authors, even though the collection was probably edited by a much smaller group.

The Song of Songs Rabbah is an aggadic Midrash on the Song of Songs,[29] and for the most part is the product of Palestinian *amoraim*, although tannaitic statements are included as well. Like all midrashic texts, the Song of Songs Rabbah reads the Song of Songs as an interwoven set of texts. Thus, we pick up one text, and through various forms of associations, whether they can be meanings, sounds, etc., we can find "similar"

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[27] Evans, *Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Sheffield Academic Press 2000), p. 429-440.

[28] Jewish Virtual Library: Song of Songs Rabbah. http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0019_0_18885.html

[29] There are two other *midrashim* to the Song of Songs: *Aggadat Shir Ha-shirim* (also referred to as *Midrash Zuta*) and *Midrash Shir Ha-shirim*.

texts. These "similar" texts either serve as an ending point; or a launching point to continue a new association resulting in a new interwoven text.

This interweaving serves a more functional purpose in this work: to help understand the meaning of words on even a literal level. The Midrashist in Song of Songs Rabbah tells you that this is his objective, when he states:

> Ben Azzai stated that he was "linking up the words of the Torah, with one another and then with the words of the prophets, and the prophets with the Writings, and the words rejoiced as when they were delivered from Sinai..."[30]

Thus, we see the significant value attaching to the interweaving found generally throughout Midrash; but only explained here in the manner in which one who engages in the interweaving process becomes connected to Revelation.

Just as important as was Ben Azzai's linking of words of Torah to recreate the Sinai experience is the Midrashist's selection of Ben Azzai to perform this task. Ben Azzai is one of the four rabbis who entered *Pardes*, with only Rabbi Akiva among them being able to return. Questions abound as to what actually happened to the three others: Ben Zoma who lost his mind, Elisha ben Abuya who became an apostate, and Ben Azzai who lost his life. While there are clues in the Talmud explaining the fates of the first two sages, this reference in Song of Songs Rabbah appears to be the only explanation for Ben Azzai's experience in *Pardes*.

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[30] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:10 §2. This midrash also wants to emphasize that all three parts of the Tanach – Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim, can be interrelated to one another through the use of intertextuality.

Just prior to Ben Azzai's statement quoted above, the Midrashist tells us that it was in response to an observation made by Rabbi Akiva. Upon seeing Ben Azzai playing with the words of Torah and linking them up, Rabbi Akiva notes that "fire is flashing around him," and questioned as to whether he was "perhaps treating of the secrets of the Divine Chariot?" -- raising the question as to whether Ben Azzai was engaged in *Merkavah* literature. Thus, Ben Azzai's contemplation of the linked words, presented in the context of the Song of Songs, shows him to be a great mystic who gives his soul without reservation during a mystical revelation such as that experienced in *Pardes*, thus giving mystical importance to the combinations of words in the Song of Songs.

In sharp contrast to the Targum's approach to commenting on the Song of Songs as a holistic reading that emphasizes the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts, the Song of Songs Rabbah follows the pattern of all other midrashic works: it takes the underlying Biblical work on an atomistic basis, analyzing each verse in the Book -- or even each word or phrase -- on its own and explaining it with little reference to its context. Naturally, there is thus lacking an overall single theme running through the Song of Songs Rabbah, which is in sharp contrast to the other works discussed in this paper.

To be sure, there have been attempts to thematically summarize the collection of *mishnayot* in the Song of Songs Rabbah. For example, Boyarin proposes an understanding of the Work as one long parable or extended metaphor, broken up by

the images that are specifically depicted and thus conjure up a narrative of Torah.[31] Thus, he continues that the rabbis cleverly use the parable construct from the very outset of the Song of Songs Rabbah, making it clear to the reader that a series of parables will help understand the underlying Biblical work, citing the following Midrash as an example:

> Rav Nachman gave a parable: "It is like a great palace with many entrances, and all who entered it would lose the way to the entrance. A wise man came and took a rope and attached it to the entrance, and all would enter and exit by following the rope. Thus until Solomon came, no man can understand the words of Torah; but once Solomon had come, all began to understand the words of Torah..."[32]

The Midrashist continues by noting that "a parable should not be should not be lightly esteemed ... since by means of a parable a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of Torah."[33]

Even so, it is hard to find a unifying *substantive* theme to the work, a difficulty present with all midrashic works, and which differentiates it from the other allegorical works examined here.

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[31] Boyarin, D., *"The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash"*, contained in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. R. Schwartz (Oxford: Blackwell 1990), p. 224.

[32] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:1 §8

[33] Id.

2. Early Christian Allegorical School

A. General

Christian theologians quickly adopted the allegorical interpretations of the Bible found in early Judaism, and then added new layers. The early Christian school at Alexandria was noted for its allegorical interpretations; but the early Christian school at Antioch rejected the purely allegorical method and preferred the historical-philological approach, which they did not breach even for the Song of Songs.[34] For them, the love of God for Israel as found in the Jewish understanding of the Song of Songs signified -- for them, the more universal and intimate love of Christ for his church, and also the love of Jesus for each individual soul. Subsequent Christian commentators applied a similar allegorical method in their interpretation of the Song, viewing the bridegroom as Jesus Christ and the bride as his church. This has been the dominant Christian view for most of church history.[35] Exactly when this view was first embraced by Christians is not known, but it seems to have been first formulated by Hippolytus (ca. 200 CE), though only fragments of his commentary to the Song of Songs have survived.[36]

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[34] Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (InterVarsity 1999), p. 203.

[35] Murphy, *Patristic and Medieval Exegesis - Help or Hindrance?* Catholic Biblical Quarterly 43 (October 1981), p. 505-516.

[36] Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford University Press 1981), p. 55.

2. Origen

Origen was a Christian scholar whose life work was devoted to uncovering the meaning in Scriptures. Origen was born in Alexandria in 165 CE. From 234 until his death in 250, Origen lived in Caesarea, where he wrote most of his books. He undertook the expert study of Hebrew so as to be able to compare passages in their original language, thus overcoming an obstacle that his fellow Christian scholars met when arguing with Jews over the meaning of Scriptural verses. Origen's overriding principle of interpretation in pursuing the study and underlying meaning of the Scriptural texts was his thought that

> The Apostle Paul ...taught the church ...how it ought to interpret the books of the Law.... The Jews by misunderstanding it, rejected Christ. We, by understanding the Law *spiritually* show that it was justly given for the instruction of the Church.[37]

(Emphasis added by Heine). This foregoing reference to Origen's bias demonstrates his overriding theme: "Are you for us or against us?"

His second principle of Biblical understanding is whether the meaning given to a particular text is worthy and appropriate to serve as the word of God, as well as useful to the believer.[38] The corollary to this was that every word in Scripture has meaning, and benefit is derived from every detail.

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[37] Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church* (Oxford University Press 2010), p. 275-76.

[38] Husson and Nautin, *Origene* (Paris 1977), p. 136-37.

Finally, his third guiding principle, and one that stood him in good stead with his approach to the Song of Songs, was his belief that there are three levels of exegesis throughout the Bible. There is the literal or historical level which is essentially the basic layer, although it does provide some benefit to its reader. The second level is intended to provide meanings from which moral lessons can be derived. And finally, the highest level of meaning is the revealing of mystical truths.[39]

Origen championed the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. In addition to a series of homilies, he produced a ten-volume commentary on the book. Unfortunately, all but a small part of Origen's massive work on the Song of Songs have been lost or destroyed. Four books were translated into Latin by Rufinus (commenting on the Song of Songs until verse 2:15), and two of his homilies were translated by Jerome.[40] Origen's reliance on an allegorical view of the Book suggests that this type of interpretation was also a widespread phenomenon in rabbinical works being disseminated during his life.[41]

Indeed, it is the absence of any mention of the author's pedigree and place of residence in the Song of Songs, in sharp contrast to the other works purportedly authored by Solomon, that serve as the basis for Origen's conclusion as to the holiness of this work. Thus, while all three of Solomon's works "served the will of the Holy

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[39] Crouzel, *Origen* (T & T Clark Publishers 2000), p. 61-84.

[40] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 621.

[41] Urbach, p. 251-252, 275.

Spirit," the omissions of Israel, the seat of Solomon's reign, the royal status assumed by Solomon or his Davidic lineage, all contribute to the utter holiness of the Song of Songs.[42] The omission of these references found in Solomon's other two works demonstrate the "perfection" of all things after everything is shown to be within the God -- a reference to which he makes through the inclusion of the word "*shelomo*" in the opening verse, which is understood as the one to whom peace has been given.[43]

Origen saw the Song of Songs as the third book of Solomon, and equivalent to the third branch of learning: Proverbs delivered moral learning, Ecclesiastes delivered learning of the natural world, and the Song of Songs delivered contemplative learning. Thus, Origen saw the Song as an advanced course in spirituality, teaching that communion with God is to be found through love and charity. One must first learn moral values, and then learn to distinguish between what is non-corruptible (spiritual) and what is corruptible (earthly) and so renounce the world and everything in it. Only then is one suitably prepared to contemplate the mysteries of communion with God without fear of corruption. The Song's purpose is to instill into the soul the love of things Divine.

Origen easily saw the bride and bridegroom representing Christ and the Church, respectively, as being parallel to the Jewish allegorical structure of God and Israel,

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[42] Lawson, p. 51.

[43] Lawson, p. 53-55. This interpretation of Solomon's name as the one to whom peace has been given also has Jewish support.

respectively. Origen recommended that in trying to understand the allegories contained in the Song of Songs, one should take the role of the woman in the work.

> [L]isten to the Song of Songs and make haste to understand it and to join with the Bride in saying what she says, so that you may hear also what she heard. And if you are unable to join the Bride in her words, then, so that you may hear the things that are said to her, make haste at least to join the Bridegroom's companions. And if they are also beyond you, then be with the maidens who stay in the Bride's retinue and share her pleasures.[44]

Origen not only applied every text in the *Song of Songs* to the relation between Christ and the Church, but as well to the individual Christian.

Another recurrent theme of Origen's commentaries on the Song of Songs was his concern of Christianity's attitude towards Judaism. This view claims that Origen's reference to the Law was that it was given as a present to Israel, the bride, but that this was then replaced by God's gift of Jesus to the Jewish people. Origen then alternately progresses between the themes of the Book being an interpretation that denies any value to the gift of Torah to Israel and Israel's rejection of the Gospel emanating from Jesus.[45]

However, his most important general understanding of the holiness of the words in the Song of Songs is revealed by the following question

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[44] Lawson, p. 268.

[45] Clark, *The Uses of the Song of Songs: Origen and the Late Fathers* (in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith,* (Edwin Mellen 1986), 394-98).

> If these words are not to be spiritually understood, are they not merely tales? If they contain no hidden mystery, are they not mere tales?[46]

Origen thus contends that the literal carnality that is imbued within the Book disguises an allegorical or spiritual meaning: "all things visible have some invisible likeness and pattern,"[47] with the human body being a metaphor for the soul.

Origen was very concerned with the appropriateness of one not qualified to embark on the sexual imagery rampant through the work. He cautioned them not to try to enter its lofty heights without having undertaken significant preparations. He urged the potential reader who has "not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature to refrain completely from reading this book." And those that do read it should take care "not to suffer an interpretation that has to do with the flesh and the passions to carry you away."[48] Indeed, he seems to have a near-neurotic concern that the reader would be carnally aroused.[49]

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[46] Lawson, p. 270.

[47] Lawson, p. 220.

[48] Lawson, p. 23.

[49] Undoubtedly Origen's diminished view of human sexuality, so prevalent in that day, fanned the flames of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. There was hardly a dissenting voice over the years. Even the greatest Christian leaders such as Augustine adopted this manner of interpretation, genuinely espousing the view that the only purpose for intercourse is the bearing of children and that before the fall of Adam it was not necessary even for that. Ginsburg, p. 11.

Origen's caution might be seen to have been derived from a similar Jewish warning regarding the propriety of studying the Song of Songs that apparently had issued.

> For they say that with the Hebrews also care is taken to allow no one even to hold the book in his hands, who has not reached a full and ripe age....[50]

Indeed, Origen notes that the Jewish restriction on the study of this work is similar to that applied by the Jews to the first chapter of Genesis, and the first (concerning a description of God) and the last chapters of Ezekiel (containing the building of the Temple).[51] Origen's juxtaposition of the caution for the study of the Song of Songs with this other Biblical literature further confirms his mystical understanding of the Song of Songs.

Origen appears to have been influenced by Hippolytus; and may have also been influenced by the Jewish interpretation, or at the very least arrived at similar perspectives. For example, Origen cited a Jewish tradition that characterized the Song of Songs as a multi-room structure in which the keys to the various rooms have been lost.[52] Saadia Gaon, a later Jewish exegete, provides a description of the work when he described the Song of Songs as a lock whose key is lost.[53] [54]

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[50] Lawson, p. 23.

[51] Id.

[52] *Origen: Selecta in Psalmos*, LXXVII, PG, 1541c (cited in Levine, *Caesarea Under Roman Rule*, (Brill 1975), p. 205).

[53] *Hamesh Megillot* [Kafah, ed.] (Jerusalem 1962), p. 26

In contrast, the rabbis of the Midrashic literature regarded the Song of Songs as a hermeneutic key to the unlocking of Torah itself. The way in which the Song of Songs, specifically, and the *Ketuvim* generally, are to be understood, is as an interpretation of specific parts of Torah.[55] Although the Midrash, like Origen, understands the Song of Songs as having a deeper meaning, its interpretive method is different than his. For the rabbis, the Torah was (after God), the highest reality, whereas Origen elevated the abstract as the highest reality.

Or consider this similarity which Origen's work has with the Jewish allegorical works. According to one analyst of Origen's work, Origen concluded that the consummation of the union between Christ and the Church would only occur at the Incarnation or Revelation, even though the Church had existed from before Creation.[56] Indeed, it is very striking that Origen concludes that the Church had always existed, even before the arrival of Christ:

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[54] Even with an apparent Jewish influence, Origen was also a product of several philosophical forces at work in his day, namely, Platonism, asceticism and Gnostic tendencies that viewed the material world as evil. As Marvin Pope noted in his monumental interpretation of *Song of Songs* for the Anchor Book Series

> Origen combined the Platonic and Gnostic attitudes toward sexuality to denature the Canticle and transform it into a spiritual drama free from all carnality. The reader was admonished to mortify the flesh and to take nothing predicated of the Song with reference to bodily functions, but rather to apply everything toward the apprehension of the divine senses of the inner man.

Pope, p. 115.

[55] Boyarin, p. 105, 115-16.

[56] Lawson, p. 14, 149.

> For you must please not think that she is called the Bride or the Church only from the time when the Savior came in flesh: she is so called from the beginning of the human race and from the very foundation of the world...even before the foundation of the world.[57]

Compare this "Pre-Creation" reference in the Song of Songs to a teaching from the Midrash where Rabbi Berakiah noted that the Shabbat had no mate, but that the other days of Creation have mates: first day with second day, third day with fourth day, fifth day with sixth day. Rabbi Shimeon bar Yochai responded that the Shabbat has a mate: the Community of Israel, and that Shabbat has been waiting for Israel's arrival since before Creation.

> The Shabbat pleaded to Holy one, blessed be He: "All have a partner while I have no partner." "The Community of Israel is your partner," God answered. And when they stood before the mountain of Sinai, God said to them: "Remember what I said to the Shabbat, that the Community of Israel is your partner."[58]

Not to be undone, the Targum, too, finds within the Song of Songs its own institution that predates Creation: Torah. In providing an interpretation to the verse in the Song of Songs that reads, "Draw me after You, we will run; May the King bring us into his chambers" (1:4), the Targum recites:

> The righteous of that generation said before the Lord of the World: "Draw us after You, and we will run the way of Your goodness. Bring us near to the foot of Mount Sinai, and give us your Torah from out of Your heavenly treasure."[59]

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[57] Lawson, p. 149.

[58] Genesis Rabbah, 11:8.

[59] Targum to Song of Songs 1:4.

The "heavenly treasure" appears to reference the "good treasure that heaven is to give, namely, the rain for the land in its season" (Deut. 28:12). But instead of its containing natural phenomenon like rain, snow, etc., here the treasury contains the Torah, which was being stored up in heaven from before Creation and was being now revealed on Sinai.[60]

Thus for all of the allegorical works discussed here, there are worldly creations whose existence predates Creation: the Church, Shabbat and Torah. That they are identified here as having pre-existed Creation is not unique. But that all three would not find their mate until God's incarnation/revelation at Sinai, and that the only references to these Sinaitic unions arise in the various and differing allegorical understandings of the Song of Songs by these three apparently unrelated schools of thought, further helps appreciation of the uniqueness of the book.

In addition, Origen held a key position in the relationship between the Jews and the Christians.[61] Indeed, Origen is described as having had relationships with many different Jewish scholars, such as Hillel (the grandson of Judah the Prince), Resh Laqish and other rabbis in Palestine.[62] Thus, Origen's commentary could almost be understood

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[60] For more on the pre-existence of Torah before Creation, see Genesis Rabbah, 1:1; Kohelet Rabbah, 3:1 §1, which may date from a time earlier than that of the Targum

[61] See generally, Kimmelman, *Rabbi Yochanan and Origen and the Song of Songs,* 73 Harvard Theological Review, p. 567-595 (1980).

[62] Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London 1954), 155, n. 2; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York, 1965), p. 12.

as a response to the substantive positions articulated by his contemporary clergy, both Jewish and Christian, on the great theological issues of his day.[63] Indeed, Origen frequently mentions the disputes that he undertook with the local Jewish populations. His interaction with the Jewish population is also evidenced by the great lengths he took to understand the Hebrew Biblical sources directly without translation. [64]

We can see the dispute between the faiths arising with regard to the overall view of the Song of Songs. When we look at Origen's conception of the Song of Songs, we see it to be a nuptial event in the course of revelation at Sinai.[65] Thus the Book is written as a drama, in which the Song of Songs is divided into speaking parts and the setting of the drama is at an actual wedding, and cast against the backdrop of Israel's meeting with God and the giving of the Law.

In contrast, the tannaitic literature sees the Song of Songs as actually having been "sung" at the parting of the Sea of Reeds or at Sinai[66] -- the two greatest theophany moments in biblical history. [67] In the Song of Songs Rabbah we can see the interweaving of the verses of the Song of Songs with the dynamic of the events that

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[63] de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third Century Palestine* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 1, 13, who also argues that Origen had access to Jewish works.

[64] deLange, p. 123-32.

[65] Lawson, p. 46.

[66] Hirshman, *Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation* (SUNY Press 1996).

[67] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:2, §§ 1, 20-21. Alternatively, it has been suggested that it was recited at the Tent of Meeting (Rabbi Meir) or in the Second Temple.

were told in the Exodus narrative. This joint Biblical experience thereby causes the reader of the events of the Exodus to feel the intensity of emotion and thereby become participants in the Sinai drama.

Finally to be understood is Origen's structure of the Song of Songs. Origen's commentaries explain that the Song of Songs is a marriage-song presented in the form of a drama. He identifies four speakers or groups of speakers in this drama: the bride, the bridegroom, the maidens and the friends of the bridegroom, and assigns them lines throughout.[68] Most importantly, Origen's commentaries indicate that he understands that Scripture contains three levels,[69] all of which are represented in the Song of Songs:

1. The literal sense. Thus Origen's commentary on each verse opens with an explanation of the verse in its context of an actual story, and he places the characters within the dramatic situation.[70]

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[68] Lawson, p. 21-23.

[69] The three levels can be found in his commentaries. However, in Origen's Homilies, only the allegorical level is provided, in which the only understanding is based on a love story between Christ and the Church. The explanation for the differing treatment has been that the Homilies were addressed to "beginners" in the Christian world, whereas the Commentary was directed to the more advanced Christians. See Clark, p. 388.

[70] Interestingly, those who claim that Origen's allegorical and mystical readings served to encourage rabbinical readings along the same vein (See e.g., Urbach, p. 249), do not argue that Origen's literal reading generated a similar response. In any event, as noted above, there were some literal understandings among the rabbis to some of the verses of the Song of Songs. Unlike Origen, they were not then followed up by allegorical and mystical readings of those verses. The fact that the Song of Songs Rabbah contains all three levels of understanding within its corpus suggests that it was addressed to a large and varied audience, comprising both beginners and advanced scholars, as well as a non-scholarly audience.

2. Origen then proceeds to the inner meaning of the words, consistent with his overall understanding that it is an allegory of the longing of the Church community for Christ.
3. Finally, he proceeds with a spiritual or mystical understanding: a progression of the devout individual soul from its initial entry into the Divine mysteries to its final union with Christ.[71]

Origen adopted a very different form of arrangement than either the Targum or the Midrash. As we will see, however, many of Origen's comments on specific verses closely parallel yet sharply conflict with rabbinic comments on those same verses.

[71] Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (New York 1986), p. 54-57, 156-60.

III. Comparison of Allegorical Commentaries to Selected Verses[72]

1. Song of Songs 1:1 -- "The Song of Songs"[73]

This reference to the carnal relations expressed within the Song of Songs sets forth the basis for Origen's overall understanding of the Book. He asserts that the two creation stories in Genesis symbolize the external and internal manifestations of humans. This conclusion derives from his reliance on Paul's statement that there are two men in every single man.[74] Thus, the carnal expressions that we read about in the Song of Songs allude to the inner, spiritual man rather than the carnal love of the external person which is filled with corruption. Indeed, Origen appears to assert that the carnal references should be seen as a series of stumbling blocks that challenge the reader to seek a deeper truth and discover the hidden meaning contained within the Book.

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[72] I have restricted the selected verses to those at the very beginning of the Song of Songs. The selection is not necessarily without merit. A number of allegorical commentaries to the Song of Songs have restricted themselves to the early parts of the Work, either because the commentator ran out of steam, was bedeviled by the project, or found the redundancies in the underlying work did not necessitate a commentary to the entire work. See, for example, the Zohar which limits its formal commentary to Chapter 1 of the Book; or in the case of Origen, his commentaries beyond 2:15 of the Song of Songs have been lost.

[73] Origen does not provide a specific commentary to 1:1. The other commentators referenced in this paper provide a general commentary on the entirety of the Book or significant themes running throughout it, in their comments to this verse. Origen provides similar material, casting it as the "introduction" to his commentary on the substantive verses of the Book, as opposed to commenting directly on this verse. Like the other commentators he begins his specific substantive commentary with Chapter 1:2. Thus, I have treated this "introduction" as a commentary to this verse.

[74] 2 Corinthians 4:16 ("For if our outward man is corrupted, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.")

Moreover, he appreciates the difficulty about writing about "love" and the means by which one would try elucidate upon it. This difficulty is magnified by the ambiguities inherent in the word by the fact that Origen writes that "love" has two meanings: "love of the flesh," emanating from Satan; and "love of the spirit," emanating from God.[75] Accordingly, these two forms are mutually exclusive with no overlap.

Even so, Origen's use of the carnal and the spiritual meanings that they symbolize do not parallel each other but are actually opposed to each other, just as the body (carnal) is opposed to the soul (spiritual meaning). Origen's understanding of a perfect soul is that it has the power "to forsake things bodily and visible and to hasten to those that are not of the body and are spiritual"; and his method of exegesis parallels the mystical marriage, moving away from its carnal meaning, "renouncing what is earthly, [and] reach[ing] out for the invisible and eternal."[76]

Origen's fascination with the "love" in the Song of Songs leads him to discuss the meaning which the concept has in Scripture generally. The Bible generally refrains from elaborating on the sexual passion that is the heart of the Song of Songs, even when the context of a Biblical story demands it. Origen cites examples from the love stories of Isaac meeting Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Amnon and Tamar. In these instances, the Bible avoids any allusion to a passion that envelops the relationships, even though

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[75] Lawson, p. 23-24.

[76] Astel, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY 1990), p. 3.

we might otherwise have expected it. The one exception that he allows is that found in the Book of Proverbs:

> 6. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve you; love her, and she shall keep you.
> 7. The beginning of Wisdom is: Get Wisdom; therefore use all your means to acquire understanding.
> 8. Exalt her, and she shall promote you; she shall bring you to honor, when you embrace her.[77]

Indeed, Origen's fixation with the love concept embedded in the Song of Songs reflects his view of Scripture's message and its preoccupation with various aspects of "love," when he states that "it is impossible for human nature not to be always feeling the passion of love for something."[78] We have many Jewish and Christian references to love, such as the *Shema* and the Golden Rule, respectively. However, Origen appears to be taking this "love" principle to another level and uses it as the basis for the mystical contemplation called for in the Song of Songs.

Thus, Origen discusses the work on a higher level, as opposed to two other Biblical works that were also attributed to Solomon, namely, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. He asserts that these two latter works involve understandings related to ethics and nature. Both of these principles he views as necessary foundations for the mystical contemplation inhering in the Song of Songs. Thus, one who has been shown the difference between the purifying edifications provided by these two books and "between things corruptible and things incorruptible" is now prepared for the mystical

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[77] Proverbs 4:6-8.

[78] Lawson, p. 36.

contemplation afforded by the Song of Songs. The soul needs to be cleansed before it may consider the invisible aspects of the Divine, and is thus "competent to proceed to dogmatic and mystical matters, and in this way advances to the contemplation of the Godhead with pure and spiritual love."[79] At the same time, the Song of Songs Rabbah also holds with the notion that the Book was produced under mystical contemplation, but expands this Divine source for all three of Solomon's works.[80]

The Midrash on this verse introduces the Book by suggesting that it should be perceived as a description of the passionate love of the Jewish soul for God. Rabbi Yochanan relates that in all of the other songs of the Bible, either God praises Israel or they praise Him. However, in the Song of Songs, it is both: God praises Israel when the Book relates that "Behold, thou art beautiful, my beloved" (1:16); and they praise Him, "Behold, thou art beautiful, my beloved, verily pleasant." (1:17)[81] Rabbi Yochanan's interpretation of these verses raises a mystical understanding of them. First, he clearly articulates that God will "cause the holy spirit to rest upon us"[82] within the meaning of Revelation, which was understood as the highest stage of attachment to God that the human soul can attain.

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[79] Lawson, p. 44.

[80] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:1 §7 ("forthwith the holy spirit rested on him and he composed these three books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Songs.").

[81] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:1 §11.

[82] Id.

Equally important for understanding the Midrashic perspective on the Song of Songs generally, Rabbi Yochanan expands the "Law" beyond which Origen could have possibly entertained. By relying on the words "palate" and "mouth" separately appearing in verses in the Song of Songs, Rabbi Yochanan reads these two references as being the Written Law and the Oral Law having both been given at Sinai and both of them being part of the mystical experience described in the Song of Songs.[83] The Targum, as well, notes that the Oral Law was part of the Sinai experience.[8485] And, on another occasion, Rabbi Yochanan employs the existence of the Oral Law in a manner that can be seen as a rebuttal to Origen's "supersession" argument: the Written Law was not superseded by the New Testament, but instead was "completed" by the Oral Law.[86]

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[83] Cambridge History of Judaism, Katz, [Stephen, ed.] Volume 4: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period (Cambridge University 2006), p. 905.

[84] Targum to Song of Songs 1:4 ("Solomon the prophet said: "Blessed be the name of the Lord who gave us the Torah at the hands of Moses, the Great Scribe, both the Torah written on the two tablets of stone, and the Six Orders of the Mishnah and Talmud by oral tradition,...") The Midrash as well, connects the Written Law and Oral Law as part of the Sinai experience. In commenting on the verse, "Thy cheeks are comely with circlets" (1:10), the Midrash reads the word for circlets, "*torim*", and drashes them as follows: "with two *toroth*, the written and oral."

[85] The same thought, i.e., the Oral Law was part of the Sinaitic tradition can be found in *Avot*, 1:1.

[86] Solomon, *Judaism* (Oxford University Press 2000), p. 33.

2. Song of Songs 1:2 -- "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth"

For Origen, the kiss is understood to reference the experience of the soul "when she has begun to discern for herself what was obscure, to unravel what was tangled, to unfold what was involved, and to interpret parables and riddles and the sayings of the wise along the lines of her own expert thinking."[87] Since Origen's world of intellect and the world of spirit are the same,[88] the spiritual meaning behind the carnal words can be seen as the divine kiss that overcomes the "carnal desire [that] ultimately enables the soul to return to its original state," which, for Origen, is perfection.[89] [90]

Although the rabbis, too, see the kiss as a divine kiss, their overall understanding differs. For Origen, the meaning that attaches to the word "kiss" and its failure to include the "mouth" that receives the kiss, is that it references a particular spiritual

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[87] Lawson, p. 61.

[88] Astel, p. 4. Astel suggests that for Origen every "kiss" serves as a divine illumination of every obscure meaning contained in the Song of Songs.

[89] Origen separately notes that the soul's burdensome punishment that bedevils it becomes its remedy, thus enabling the soul to ascend to the pure spiritual state it once experienced. "So the Word of God ... exhorts [the soul] to arise and come to Him, that is to say: to forsake things bodily and visible and to hasten to those that are not of the body and are spiritual." Lawson, p. 234.

[90] Origen also has a separate explication of this verse that is worth noting. The references to "kiss" and "mouth" in this verse are an indication of the power of the Word of God "by which He enlightens the mind and, as by some word of love addressed to [His beloved Church] makes plain whatever is unknown and dark to her. ... It is of this happening that the kiss, which we give one to another in church at the holy mysteries, is a figure." (Lawson, p. 62) This appears to be a reference to the Church's liturgical practice during which an exchange of kisses of peace are made at the portion of the Mass known as "The Liturgy of the Eucharist." Thus the exchanges of kisses made at this time conjure up the kiss that Christ gives to the Church, and the verse's words of "Let him kiss me" constituting a demand from the Church, with Christ's kisses being the words of Scripture, and the Church's return kisses being the liturgy. Griffiths, *Song of Songs* (Brazos Press 2011), p. 10. In contrast, the Targum interprets the "kiss" as that given by God, through His servant Moses, to the Jewish people, through the transmission of the Torah and the Talmud.

sense rather than a body part. He therefore uses it to signify the power of the kiss to touch the human intellect and illumine it.[91] This derives from his underlying understanding that the body symbolizes the fall of the soul from God which one day is to be reunited with God.[92]

The rabbis however understand the recipient of the kiss as the actual mouth of the body.

> Rabbi Yochanan said: "An angel carried the utterances [at Mount Sinai] from before the Holy One, blessed be he, each one in turn, and brought it to each of the Israelites and said to him, 'Do you take upon yourself this commandment? .... The Israelite would answer him, 'Yes.' .... Thereupon he kissed him on the mouth; hence it says, "Unto thee it was shown that thou might know." (Deut. 4:35)[93]

Rabbi Yochanan connects the "kiss" with the Israelites' actual physical experience of literally seeing God. Thus, for the rabbis it was not a metaphorical "body" that receives God's kiss, or the soul that Origen's understanding provides, but rather the Israelites' physical body that received God's kiss, or at least the kiss of an angel.

Origen also employs the Christ/Church relationship and follows the doctrine first expressed by Paul that the incarnation of Christ superseded the Revelation at Sinai. The crux of Origen's interpretation of supersession lies with the use of an agency, i.e., an intermediary, to relate the word of God at Sinai; whereas the Christian experience of

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[91] Rudy, *The Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (Routledge 2002), p. 27.

[92] Boyarin, *Circumcision and the Carnal Interest, Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel,* Critical Inquiry, Volume 18, No. 3 (Spring 1992), p. 484.

[93] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:2 §2.

the Divine is now direct. Origen's perspective on 1:2 is that the "Law", i.e., the Old Testament, "is said to have been ordained by angels in the hands of a mediator." This is based on the verse, "The Law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator.[94] The Song of Songs is the

> song ... which the Bridegroom [Christ] *himself was to sing* as his marriage hymn, when about to take his Bride [Church]; in which the same song the Bride no longer wants the Bridegroom's friends -- prophets or angels -- to sing to her, but *longs to hear her Spouse [Christ]* who now is with her, *speak with his lips;* wherefore she says: Let him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth. [95]

(Emphasis supplied) Thus Origen cites this "direct kissing" allegory to buttress his position of Christian superiority through the fact that the Sinai revelation was mediated by Moses, as reported in Deuteronomy:

> The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire. I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to tell you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and went not up into the mount, saying, [the Ten Commandments...].

(Deut. 5:5).

Origen's claim of mediation is belied by the Midrashic explanation of Moses' involvement as nothing more than an introducing intermediary, who nevertheless bows out of the conversation once the principals -- God and Israel, have made direct contact, realizing that a match has been made:

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[94] Galatians 3:19.

[95] Lawson, p. 46.

> R. Yochanan interpreted the verse [Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth] as applying to Israel when they went up to Mount Sinai. It was as if a king [God] wanted to marry a wife of good and noble family [Israel], so he sent an envoy [Moses] to speak with her. She said: "I am not worthy to be his handmaid, but all the same I desire to hear from his own mouth." When the envoy returned to the king, he was full of smiles, but he would give no clear report to the king, lest the king should regard her request as belittling his majesty. The king, who was very discerning, said: ""This man is full of smiles, which would show that she consented, and he does not give any clear report, which would seem to show that she said that she wants to hear from my own mouth."[96]

Rabbi Yochanan is fully aware of the Sinai narrative in Exodus, in which God speaks through thunder and fire and Israel responds in terror and awe of God's voice.

However, in contrast, the immediately preceding Midrash further comments on the "kiss" verse from the Song of Songs in a manner which suggests that there was an intermediary.

> An angel brought forth the commandment from the presence of the Holy One blessed be He, and [the angel] took in turn to each Israelite and said to him ... and the Israelite answered him, Yea, Yea! Thereupon the angel kissed him upon his lips, ... by means of a messenger.[97]

Even so, this Midrash continues by stating that the "messenger" was not an "angel" that was asking the Israelites whether they would accept the many specific rules in Torah. Instead, it was the "commandment" itself that was asking for the Israelites' acceptance. In addition to overcoming the "mediation" problem raised by Origen, utilization of the "commandment" as the beckoning agent allows for the midrashic explanation to bolster

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[96] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:2 §3.

[97] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:2 §2.

the nature of the "kisses" adverted by this verse as being "direct" and without "mediation." The "kisses" -- plural, are now seen to be the first two commandments, "I am the Lord thy God" and "Thou shall not have...", directly communicated by God and heard by the Israelites. And to the objection that the remaining 611 commandments were mediated, the rabbis can note that the direct transmission of these two commandments is sufficient.

Yet here the narrative becomes an exquisite love game of a bride, vibrant with the tension between modesty and desire, and a groom, eager in his own desire, yet loving and responsive. This Midrash thus transforms Revelation into what the rabbis call the giving of the Torah, *matan Torah.* But their understanding of Revelation through the lens of the Song of Songs now revises the one way communication set forth in Exodus, to a narrative of giving and receiving between God and Israel.[98]

The Targum also weighs in on the mediation aspect but takes a line that thoroughly diminishes Origen's position of mediation. With regard to the "kisses of the mouth," the Targum provides that "the Lord, who gave us the Torah at the hands of Moses... spoke with us face to face as a man kisses his friend." Thus, the Targum "marries" the concepts of God's love for Israel and His election of Israel as his favorite

[98] Indeed this dialogue between God and Israel receives its clearest exposition in the Song of Songs in 2:16: "I am my Beloved's and He is mine," which allows the rabbis to unveil a theology of complete mutuality of reciprocal love and service between God and Israel.

people -- a decision which could only have been based on love since the Israelites did not "merit" being elected by God.[99]

3. Song of Songs 1:2 -- "For your love is better than wine,"

Origen reads the verse as saying "your *breasts* are better than wine," to mean that they have within them treasures of "wisdom and knowledge ... concealed in them." Origen uses the word "breast" as a translation of the word *dodekha*, because that is its translation in the Septuagint.[100] The wine is a symbol for the ordinances and teachings which the Bride (Church) previously received through the Law and the Prophetic works. But now with the advent of the Bridegroom (Christ) and the direct connection thus enabled -- the word "breasts" is that symbol of direct connection -- the Bride thus prefers the new direct arrangement with the Bridegroom to the old arrangement where the spiritual wine was mediated through the holy fathers and prophets.[101] Thus, this reading of the verse supports the claim that the "direct arrangement" entails adoption of the New Testament teachings to replace those in the Old Testament.

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[99] See Deut. 7:6-8 ("The Lord ... has chosen you to be His own treasure, out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people ...but because the Lord loves you....").

[100] The root of this Hebrew word, *Dod,* can also mean "breast." See Proverbs 5:19.

[101] Lawson, p. 65.

Origen's reading that underscores his emphasis on the supersession of the New Testament is parallel to a Jewish interpretation of this verse that also puts out the idea that the Old Testament has been superseded.

> The words of the scribes are as precious as the words of Torah ... The words of the Scribes are more precious than the words of Torah. As it says: "Thy loved ones are better than wine."[102]

Hence, this Midrashic explication could be understood as saying that the Oral Torah -- "the words of the Scribes" -- is superior or more precious than the Written Torah received on Sinai, a somewhat radical proposition to take.[103] Recall Origen's position on this verse: the visitation of the Bridegroom, i.e., Christ, and the resulting "divine" direct transmission of God's word, superseding the previous arrangement of reliance on mediated Law - and a view that is, of course, consistent with his basic presupposition that the "New Testament" superseded the "Old Covenant." This Midrashic explanation trumps Origen for it allows for another body of work to serve as the light for the future, the words of the Scribes -- the rabbis, to serve as an alternative "supersession" of the Written Law. Thus, the Oral Law could be symbolized by the "loved ones" as a mystical element that supersedes the Written Law. And more importantly from a Jewish perspective, it serves as a response to the claim by Origen that the Torah of Christ superseded the Torah of Moses.

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[102] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1.2 §2.

[103] While radical, not an altogether rejected position. "God made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of that which was transmitted orally." BT *Gittin*, 60B.

Notwithstanding their apparent disagreement about supersession, they are strikingly similar in their understanding of the evolution and the growth of man's love for God over the course of time. Towards the end of his commentary on this verse, Origen notes that during man's youth, he has yet to dedicate himself fully to God and thereby physically rejoice in the wine pouring out from God. But when he has offered and vowed himself to God ... [he] comes to the very breasts and fountains of the Word of God ... but with reference to these treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in the Word of God... he will say to Him, "Thy breasts are better than wine."[104]

When the rabbis review this verse, they, too, find that it suggests that one must reach an appropriate age before being qualified to learn the "Secrets":

> When the disciples are young, suppress words of Torah in their presence; when they have grown up and become scholars, reveal to them the secrets of Torah.[105]

4. Song of Songs 1:3 -- "Thy name is as ointment poured forth. For thus do the maidens love you"

Origen's continued arguments showing the superiority of the Christian theology can be seen in the comment to the next verse. In presenting his perspective on these words, he is mindful of another reference to an "aroma" in the New Testament:

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[104] Lawson, p. 69-70.

[105] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1.2 §1.

> For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?

(2 Corinthians, 2:14-15.) Thus, it is Christ whose name is poured out as an anointment through his presence, and in which that ointment will produce a "sweet fragrance" everywhere in the world.[106] "Now that the maiden has been able to smell the fragrance of the oils or of the spices, the oils being poured out represent "a prophecy uttered by the bride concerning the Christ in the future, when our lord and savior will come ... so that he will give forth a sweet fragrance everywhere." Further he explains, that the oil that is being poured out is "perfect" and hence to be understood as referring to the churches (at least when perfected). Origen then claims that the coming of Christ made the Torah and the Prophets known throughout the world, which is how he interprets "oil poured out."

> In all the earth is Christ remembered, in all the world is my Lord being preached about; for "oil poured out" is his name. Only now do we hear the name of Moses.... No Greek mentions him ...but no sooner did Jesus appear in the world than he brought forth with him the Torah and the Prophets and the verse "thy name is poured out."

With the supersession message in place, Origen can now employ it for his overall polemical efforts.

> "Thy name is poured out", like perfume, which upon being poured out spreads its fragrance abroad throughout its environment, even so is the name of Christ poured out.

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[106] Lawson, p.75.

In contrast, the contemporaneous Jewish reading of this verse uses Abraham, and not Christ, as the personage who will travel the earth and generate the "sweet fragrance."[107] That a Jewish reading might seek to put Abraham on a parallel understanding comparable to the Christian understanding of Jesus, can be seen from a number of sources that indicate Abraham's standing within the Jewish world as being unsurpassed;[108] or claiming that the merit of the Jewish people for all time derives from Abraham.[109] The benefit gained by the Jewish theologian that asserts Abraham as the holiest Jewish icon derives from the fact that the Christian depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus is seen as an updated binding of Isaac. Thus, since Abraham had "life or death" power over Isaac at the binding, then presumably one could see Abraham exhibiting such power over Christ at the Crucifixion -- and symbolically, Jews having similar powers over Christians. Equally, that Abraham had the capability of atoning for all of Israel's sins[110] also made him a perfect competitive force in this regard.

But in a more direct contrast to Origen's efforts, the rabbinic Midrash on this verse takes a more low key approach and instead focuses on the inherent holiness of the Jewish people. The Jews are "chosen" because other kingdoms try to cause them to sin and rebel against God. And the positive reference of the Israelites comes about from the

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[107] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1.3 § 3.

[108] *Sifra*, 85c, 86a.

[109] Genesis Rabbah, 12.9.

[110] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1.4 §3; Lev. Rabbah, 29.8

verse "therefore, the maidens love you," -- all of the kingdoms of the earth marvel at the Jews' compliance with the myriad set of laws.

5. Song of Songs 1:3 -- "For thus do the maidens love you."

This verse as symbolic of the martyrology of the Jewish people, and particularly, Rabbi Akiva, who died a most horrendous death for the crime of "loving God." This most fulfilling act of love for God is the supreme expression of the Jew's allegiance to God and thus gives rise to interpretations of many verses within the Song of Songs generally concerning the Jewish principle of martyrdom and the uniqueness of Israel among all of the nations of the world. Thus, Rabbi Akiva's statement that

> The nations of the world keep asking Israel, "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful of women?" (Song of Songs 5:9), that for His sake you die, for His sake you are slain, as it is said, we have loved you unto death (*od mut*), "for thus do the maidens (*'almut*) lov-you (Song of Songs 1:3).[111]

In contrast to Akiva's reading of the word "maidens" as Israel's martyrdom out of a love for God, Origen reads the word "maidens" as the followers of Christ. Of these "maidens," Origen notes that for their sake, "Christ "was in the form of God "emptied ... that he might no longer dwell only in light unapproachable and abide in the form of God."[112] By then making Christ of "flesh", "these maiden souls ...might not only love Him, but might draw to Him themselves." Thus this verse which literally speaks of a

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[111] Mekhilta, *Tractate Shirata,* Lauterbach, ed. (JPS 1933), p. 185.

[112] Lawson, p. 75.

handsome prince who makes women swoon, is transformed into an allegory that speaks to the reincarnation of the Word, and how Christ voluntarily humanized himself for the sake of these "maidens" -- Christ's followers.

6. Song of Songs 1:5 -- "I am black, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem."

Origen initially notes that eventually the Bride (the Church) will "progress to the point where there was something greater than Jerusalem... [f]or ... there is a heavenly Jerusalem..."[113] Origen then continues later by noting that present "Jerusalem ... is in bondage with her children, [b]ut that Jerusalem which is above is free ...", thus conveying the verses' limitation to Jerusalem's *current* state of imprisonment. In contrast, Origen then cites the Jerusalem in the heavens with a reference to Paul -- a shorthanded note that "supersession" is now being invoked. Origen then declares that those who tether their faith to Christ are within the kingdom of the "free" Jerusalem,[114] thereby implying that nonbelievers are consigned to the Jerusalem in bondage.

Origen further castigates the current residents of Jerusalem as a dying people who have not made the proper choice of following Christ in their lives.

> This Bride who speaks represents the Church gathered from among the Gentiles; but the daughters of Jerusalem to whom she addresses herself are the souls who are described as being most dear because of the election of the fathers, but enemies because of the Gospel (i.e., having rejected the Gospel).[115]

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[113] Lawson, p. 53.

[114] Lawson, p. 68.

[115] Lawson, p. 92.

Origen's bride accepts the "insult" of being black, but then asserts it as a badge of honor:

> I am indeed black, O daughters of Jerusalem, in that I cannot claim descent from famous men (i.e., parentage is from among the pagans), neither have I received the enlightenment of Moses' Law. But I have my own beauty, all the same. For in me, too, there is that primal thing, the Image of God wherein I was created; and, coming now to the Word of God, I have received my beauty.[116]

The rabbis' perspective on the present state of Jerusalem is far different from Origen's focus on the city of Jerusalem. Instead of Jerusalem's sorry state, the rabbis suggest that Jerusalem has nothing but good tidings in store for it. They comment on the word *benot* which ordinarily means "daughters" (and which Origen relies upon), but instead they revise it to mean *bonot* which means to build, i.e., that Jerusalem will be (re)built,[117] concluding that "Jerusalem will one day become the metropolis of all countries."[118] The rabbis focus on Jerusalem's status as being the "mother" of all other cities lying in her geographical sphere, as within a modern metropolitan area, a status that it enjoyed during the pre-Roman times.[119]

Unlike the rabbis that assert that this Jerusalem on Earth is the mother city to future civilizations, Origen had previously used this "mother city" as a reference to the

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[116] Lawson, p. 92.

[117] The rabbis make frequent use of this particular revision of the meaning of this word in this context. See, e.g., BT Berakhot 64A.

[118] Song of Songs Rabbah 1.5 § 3.

[119] Josephus, War, 7.8.7

city in heaven, "The Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all."[120] Indeed, Origen denies Jerusalem on earth any hopeful perspective when he posits that "if there is in heaven a city of Jerusalem, it follows that the cities of Israel have for their mother city the heavenly Jerusalem." And - again with a citation to Paul, "we must understand the Scriptures as speaking of the heavenly city,"[121] thereby excising the terrestrial Jerusalem from any biblical accounts.

An alternative Jewish reading of this verse derives from Rabbi Akiva's understanding that the daughters of Jerusalem are acknowledging their relationship with God as both a lover and a friend. A maiden is pursuing her lover -- God, through the streets of Jerusalem (Song of Songs 1:4) and is being beaten and wounded by the guards. The "daughters of Jerusalem" are being adjured to find the maiden's lover for her, in spite of her wounds, and tell her lover that she is lovesick for Him. They ask of her, why do you suffer so much for His love; instead, come join with us you most beautiful of women (Song of Songs 1:8).

Origen claims that comparison with the class of Ethiopians is a rebuke to the Jews. The rabbis pursue a 180 degree turnaround. Rather than focus on the "rejected" nature of Ethiopians referenced, the rabbis turn their attention to the "unique" nature of Ethiopians, and more importantly seize the opportunity to generate a positive association with "Ethiopian status":

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[120] Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.22.(http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/243-origen-de-principiis)

[121] Id.

> Ye are like Ethiopians in your estimation, but you are unto Me as the children of Israel, says the Lord ....I am black in this world, but comely in the world to come.[122]

Thus understood, the reference to the Ethiopian class was an expression of humility and in any event was a matter that merely affected external characteristics -- "black in this world," but didn't affect the inner spiritual soul reflected in the reference to the world to come.

The Targum, too, appreciates the difficulties that this verse provides for the characterization of the Israelites and that it could be used as a polemical tool against them. First, the Targum recognizes that the "blackness" of the individual is a reference to the people who committed the most sinful act in Israelite history:

> When the people of the House of Israel made the Calf, their faces became as dark as those of the sons of Cush....[123]

However, recognizing the consequences that would attach to the Jewish people as a result of this characterization and the mischief that could result by the Christians who often cited the Golden Calf episode to support their supersession arguments,[124] the Targum explains it away by noting that it was not really the Israelites who committed the sin.

> But while Moses their teacher was in the firmament to receive the two tablets of stone ... the mixed multitude among them arose and made the Golden Calf.[125]

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[122] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1.5 §2.

[123] Targum to Song of Songs 1:5.

[124] Bori, *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the Anti-Jewish Controversy* (University of South Florida 1991).

[125] Targum to the Song of Songs 1:12.

Even so, to insure that the Golden Calf episode would not permanently "blacken" the Israelites, the Targum goes on to identify three measures undertaken by the Israelites to become "comely", i.e., to erase any stain resulting from their Golden Calf experience:

-- "they returned in repentance";

-- They "made curtains for the Tabernacle" (i.e., performed good deeds); and

-- "Moses their teacher had ascended to heaven and made peace between them and their King" (Moses' prayerful intercession).[126]

7. Song of Songs 1:10 -- "Your cheeks are comely with rows, your neck with necklaces."

Here the Midrash finds allusion to the entirety of Torah and the possibilities that the Song of Songs has to penetrate and to link together the words of Torah that are otherwise disparate objects. It recites that the words of all three books of the *Tanach* can be joined together, and when they do "the fire flashes around them" and the "words rejoiced" as they did during Revelation, drawing upon the reference to the Sinai experience, "and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven" (Deut. 4:11).[127] The Midrash seems to understand the reference to the comeliness of the "cheeks" in the verse in the Song of Songs to be the community's way of reciting the words of Torah. Indeed, it is as if the Midrash is staking the claim that Torah speaks in the same way

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[126] Id.

[127] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1:10 §2.

that Midrash does: allegorically or symbolically through the linking of words between the three parts of the *Tanach*, and apparently denigrating the *peshat* level that one initially attaches to Torah.

Thus understood, the *midrashic* method of is not simply another level of intellectual understanding of Torah. Rather, it becomes the central understanding. And the "fire" resulting from the recitation of the words elevates the *midrashic* understanding to another Sinai experience, for as the Midrash points out, "the words rejoiced as when they were delivered from Sinai." The visual imagery of fire that we are so often exposed to in Exodus and Deuteronomy[128] serves as the meeting point between the Divine and the human which results from the effects of the language of Torah, as interpreted by the words of the Midrash.

Moreover the image of fire that this Midrash conjures up might have served as a symbol for *Merkavah* literature, especially given Rabbi Akiva's involvement here in this Midrash. When Rabbi Akiva asks Ben Azzai whether he was encountering with *Merkavah* matter, Ben Azzai replied that it was the linking of the ordinary words from the three sections of the *Tanach* that resulted in the fire and causing their rejoicing to be as "sweet as at their original utterance."

In analyzing this Midrash, Boyarin posits that it was as if the linkage of the words resulted in "recreating a new event of revelation."[129] The appearance of this

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[128] For example, the Burning Bush, the pillar of fire separating the Israeli and Egyptian camps just prior to the Sea of Reeds episode, as well as the fire on Sinai.

[129] Boyarin, p. 110.

Midrash in the context of explicating the words of the Songs of Songs thus suggests that this Book, and perhaps other *Ketuvim,* are to be understood as figurative explanations of the *peshat* found in the Torah. Accordingly, he then concludes that the intertextuality, linking of texts from the various parts of the *Tanach* found within Midrash generally, provide emotional realizations of the narrative situations described in the Torah itself. Based on this conclusion, he proposes that the Midrash understands the Song of Songs as a parable or metaphor through which we experience relational dimensions of the narratives in Torah.

Indeed, he reviewed an earlier section of this Midrash to further support his views that the Song of Songs, through the parables offered in the corresponding Midrash, as an explication of how we are to understand the relational aspect between the Song of Songs and Torah. He suggests that Torah was "like a thicket into which no one could enter" but that the Song of Songs opened it up as a result of the Song of Songs and the rabbinical midrashic explanation of it.

In this Midrash that Boyarin cites,[130] we find a series of five parables in which various rabbis note the impenetrability of Torah, or at the very least, the book of Exodus, until Solomon came along with his interpretative work.[131] While each of these parables creates a different interpretative model for understanding Torah, they are offered to show that the verses in the Song of Songs are essential to gaining access to the

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[130] Song of Songs Rabbah, 1.1 §8.

[131] Boyarin, p. 107.

most precious secrets in Torah. Indeed, the last parable in this collection is most illuminating of this principle:

> Rabbi Hanina said: Imagine a deep well full of water, cold, sweet, and wholesome water, but no one was able to get a drink of it, until one man came and joining rope to rope and cord to cord, drew from and drank, and then all began to draw and drink.

The waters referenced in this parable cry out as a symbol for Torah; and by "joining rope to rope," or the words of one book of the *Tanach* to the words of another book, everyone can now drink of the words of Torah.

In contrast, Origen's reading of the Song of the Songs is an allegorical reading of the work: allegorical identifications of Christ and Church.[132] Origen's reading of the Book can thus be understood as a progression from the concrete to the abstract, in contrast to the midrashic reading which flows from the abstract to the concrete. Origen makes it clear that the theory behind his allegorical method is founded on a combination of Plato and Paul and the relationship between the visible things of this world and the invisible things of God.

> [a]ll the things in the visible category can be related to the invisible, the corporeal to the incorporeal, and the manifest to the hidden; so that the creation of the world itself, fashioned in this wise as it is, can be understood through the divine wisdom, ... Because of certain mystical and hidden things the people is visibly led forth from the terrestrial Egypt and journeys through the desert [and] all these events ... have the aspects and likenesses of certain hidden things....[T]herefore ... it undoubtedly follows that the visible hart and roe mentioned in the Song of Songs are related to some incorporeal realities.... [133]

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[132] As compared to the Jewish allegorical understanding of the Song of Songs being symbolic of Israel and God, and discussed above.

[133] Lawson, p. 223.

Origen thus describes a perfect relationship between the metaphysics of this world and that of the text of the Song of Songs. In both, there is an outer shell and an inner meaning.[134] This is in sharp contrast to the Midrashic reading of 1:10 of the Song of Songs discussed above, for it does not claim to have achieved an original or hidden meaning of Torah. Rather, it claims to have repeated the original Sinai experience of Revelation, through the linking of texts in the *Tanach.* Accordingly, Boyarin concludes that the midrashic understanding of the text of the Song of Songs is that it is a parable of the Torah, or a series of readings in figurative language of the text of Torah, with the model for the midrashic rabbis being the marriage symbols found in earlier prophetic works.[135]

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[134] Boyarin, p. 109.

[135] See Jeremiah 2:2 ("Thus said the Lord; I remember you, the devotion of your youth, your love like a bride, when you went after me in the wilderness"); Isaiah 62:5 ("as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you").

In addition, the hidden meanings provided by both religious camps also serve to transport the reader to the events themselves, and to come away with a much greater and intense experience. Thus for the rabbis, the Song of Songs is not simply a love song between God and Israel. Rather, it also serves as an opportunity for the reader of their interpretations from any ensuing era of history to be transported to Mount Sinai, and thus fulfill the Midrashic view that all future generations of Israel were present in spirit at the Mount Sinai Revelation. Equally, for Origen, the experience of his readers could allow them to envision the Resurrection as if they, too, were there on that pre-Easter Sunday.

Indeed, Rabbi Yochanan's placement of the Song of Songs, and its mystical significance, within the heights of the Jewish world can be seen from this passage from the Bahir:

> And what is the reason that you said that the Song of Songs is beautiful? Yes, it is the most beautiful of all the Holy Scriptures. Rabbi Yochanan thus said: All Scripture is holy, and all the Torah is holy, but the Song of Songs is Holy of Holies. What is the meaning of Holy of Holies? It means that it is holy for the Holy Ones. What are the Holy Ones? They are the counterparts of the six directions that are in man. That which is holy for them is holy for everything.[138]

By juxtaposing the Song of Songs with the Holy of Holies, the holiest place in the Jewish world, and then attaching that holiness to the individual, Rabbi Yochanan makes it clear how much Jewish tradition treasured the Song of Songs; how it is understood as the most beautiful of the Biblical songs through the reference to its being the "most

[138] Kaplan, *The Bahir*, p. 67.

beautiful of all the Holy Scriptures"; and how it compared the "song of songs" to the "holy of holies." And most importantly, how it serves as a bulwark against the inroads made by Rabbi Yochanan's Christian adversaries, especially Origen, whose work has served as that faith's starting point for understanding[139] this most difficult of the Jewish canonical books.

[139] Lawson, p. 265. (Jerome wrote the following letter to Pope Damasus: "While Origen surpassed all writers in his other books, in his Song of Songs he surpassed himself.")