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THE ALLEGORICAL AND MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION
OF THE SONG OF SONGS

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DIGEST

The attempt of this study is to describe some of the important steps in the development of the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs.

In an early stage, during the period of the Tannaim, we find that some verses of Song of Songs are used as parables; they serve as proems to introduce the explanation of a Pentateuch passage. The method is so successful that very soon the Rabbis forget about the conventional use they have made of the text, and declare that the figurative meaning is not a derived meaning, but the original meaning itself of the text.

The Talmud and the Midrashim have taken the whole book as an allegory of the relationship of love between God and Israel. The Targum has systematized it, and it therefore constitutes the first complete commentary based on the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs.

Rashi and Ibn Ezra followed this interpretation, and insisted as the Targum did, on the history of the redemptive events of Israel or Heilsgeschichte of Israel.

In the twelfth century, when the philosophical movement developed among Jewish thinkers, and also caused an anti-philosophical reaction, a new type of interpretation arose, influenced at the same time by the traditional allegory and the philosophical ideas - and especially the Neo-Platonic ideas. This interpretation will be referred to the Secret wisdom of Israel, or Cabbala. We will only examine two

of these cabbalistic commentaries just to show how fruitful the allegorical method can be.

This development is certainly due to the richness of expression and the beauty of the symbolic images found in the book.

"I will seek him whom my soul loveth."

"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
that you stir not up nor awaken love
until it please."

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Song of Songs is a book filled with mysteries which two thousand years of exegesis have failed to clarify. The modern school of Biblical criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been no more successful than their predecessors in solving the enigma of this book. The question remains: Is it an allegory, a drama, a collection of profane love songs, or a series of mythologico-cultic songs?

There is still no definite answer capable of satisfying all minds. All these theories have their supporters today, but no unanimity exists even concerning points of lesser importance. A rapid survey of the most important of these theories will help us understand the dimensions of the problem. The following sketch is based partially on the article by H. H. Rowley which appeared in "Journal of Theological Studies," XXXVIII, 1937 (p. 337-363), under the title "Interpretation of the Song of Songs."

1. The Dramatic Interpretation

According to this type of interpretation, the book is considered as a drama with either two or three main characters: Solomon, sometimes in guise of a shepherd, and the Shulamite; in the case of the three characters, a distinction is made between the shepherd and the king, Solomon. The book consists substantially of mutual expressions of love on the part of these two, the shepherd singing to his beloved and reciprocally. This theory has been criticized because there is no development in the Song of Songs to justify its character as drama. Franz Delitzsch (1875) distinguished six acts and two scenes in each act.

2. The Wedding-cycle Interpretation

This theory was suggested by J. G. Wetzstein in 1873, and made famous by Karl Budde when his book "Das Hohelied" was published in Leipzig in 1898. Wetzstein had established a relation between the Song of Songs and the seven-day wedding festivities among Syrian peasants; on this occasion, the bridegroom and the bride are treated as king and queen and poems describing their physical beauty, called wasfs, are recited in their honor, with the bride performing a sword dance. On the basis of this tradition, Budde came to the conclusion that the Song of Songs was a collection of Judean wedding songs similar to those of Syria. He presented his theory so persuasively that it dominated the interpretation of the book for the next quarter century. But many important differences between these wedding songs and the Song of Songs have remained unexplained, and modern scholars are beginning to turn toward other interpretations.

3. The Secular Love Song Interpretation

According to this theory, the book is a collection of secular love songs; Theodore of Mopsuestia (360-429) was one of the first to adopt this attitude, attributing the songs to Solomon. A passage of the Talmud seems to indicate that in the time of R. Akiba, in the second century C.E., some people used to read parts of the Song of Songs in banquets.¹ Among those who adopted this interpretation of the book are Herder, Goethe, Reuss, Haupt and more recently Gordis. This last author argues that the book is an anthology of twenty-eight love poems, covering a period of five centuries, all the way from Solomon's reign to the Persian period in the fifth century B.C.E.

4. The Mythologico-Cultic Interpretation

According to this theory, the Song of Songs is "the survival in conventionalized form of ancient Hebrew New Year liturgies that celebrated the reunion and marriage of the sun god with the mother goddess, which in the ancient world typified the revival of life in nature that came with the return of the growing season. It is the literary residue of a myth, a liturgy of life; it harks back to the ancient fertility cult which in its many forms was found throughout the whole world." The wedding songs are thus connected with the hieros gamos of Oriental fertility cult. The "Sulamith" (7,1) is perhaps the fertility goddess herself, and the "Beloved" is the king as the cult-representative of the young god. The mythologico-cultic interpretation seems to be regarded with favor by many modern Orientalists, as

Theophile J. Meek for instance. But in the case of this theory too, many important facts and differences have found no explanation, and, in spite of the ingenuity of the theory, there are still scholars who prefer to remain in doubt rather than to assume a position which is purely hypothetical.

5. The Allegorical Interpretation

Since the days of Rabbi Akiba in the first half of the second century C.E., the Jewish Tradition has always proposed the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. It is the earliest interpretation of this book and it prevailed throughout Jewish and Christian circles for centuries. The Talmud and the collections of Midrashim have made constant use of this type of interpretation; it reached its full development in the Targum, probably around the sixth or the seventh century. The Targum is thus the first Jewish commentary on the entire book that has come down to us.

According to this type of interpretation, the bridegroom represents God and the bride, the Congregation of Israel כנסת ישראל; the book is the allegory depicting in detail the experiences of the Jewish people in its relation with its God, from the Exodus down to the coming of the Messiah and the building of the Third Temple. Saadia,² Rashi, Ibn Ezra followed this interpretation although they differ considerably among themselves in details. In the twelfth century, other expressions of the allegorical interpretation arose: a) the mystico-philosophical type, represented by Ibn Caspi,³ Moses Ibn Tibbon⁴ and by Immanuel ben Solomon,⁵ who maintained that "the Song of Songs

represents the union of the Receptive (or passive) Intellect with the Active Intellect," and b) the cabbalistic type which is best represented by Ezra of Gerona and the author of the Zohar.

In Christian circles, an allegorical interpretation has similarly been employed; Origen did admit that the Song might be an epithalamium on the marriage of Solomon with Pharaoh's daughter, but beneath this, he found a deeper meaning that was to be reached only by interpreting the book allegorically. The bridegroom is Christ and the bride, according to Origen's homilies, is the Church, while in his commentaries, it is the individual believer; this interpretation, of course, is nothing more than a transposition from the Jewish Tradition to the Christian. Jerome, Augustine, Theodoret and John Wesley followed the first manner; Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux and Moses Stuart followed the latter. In certain Roman Catholic circles, the bride came to be identified with the Virgin Mary, and for a time became a favorite theme for interpretation. The breasts of the bride, between which the bridegroom is resting (1,13), represent the Old and the New Testaments; according to the Midrash, they represented the Written and the Oral Law. The sixty mighty men (3,7) represent the sixty ancestors of the Messiah, from Adam to Jesus Christ.

Theodore of Mopsuestia was condemned in Constantinople in 533 for not subscribing to the allegorical interpretation. The fifth Oecumenical Council, in 553, rejected the naturalistic interpretation of the Song of Songs, and recognized the allegorical one, as the only acceptable. In 1545, Calvin expelled Castellio from Geneva on account of his opinions concerning the book; in 1567, Luis de Leon was tried by the Inquisition on similar grounds.

The Rabbis, as we have said, have always shown a preference for the allegorical interpretation. There are, however, different forms of such interpretations. Joseph Chayoun, Rabbi of Lisbon at the end of the fifteenth century, who expounded several books of the Bible, classified the rabbinical interpretations of Shir ha-Shirim in five categories. Here is what he says in the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs:⁶

- "This scroll has been interpreted in five different ways:
- 1) according to the Midrash, as was the case with Saadia;
 - 2) according to the Midrash and the literal meaning, as was the case with Rashi;
 - 3) according to the philosophical way, as was the case with Gersonides, for whom the allegory consisted of the love existing between the individual intellect and the Active Intellect;
 - 4) according to a combination of these three: an explanation of the words, and explanation of the literal sense of the text, and an explanation of the allegorical sense, as did Ibn Ezra;
 - 5) according to the method of the Cabbala- which has disappeared in our days- as was the case with R. Ezra, although he used also the method of the Midrash."

This introductory note by R. Joseph Chayoun is interesting for many reasons, and especially for its information that the author of the most famous cabbalistic commentary to the Song of Songs is R. Ezra and not another author as we will discuss later (p. 54); that the cabbalistic type of interpretation had already disappeared in the days of R. Joseph Chayoun, is also very significant.

The allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs does not find many followers today; with the exception of some Orthodox Jews and some Catholics, it is no more held as a correct view of the book. But the study of the Rabbinic and medieval commentaries upon it is still open and can even provide us with many moral, philosophical and historical informations concerning various trends of development in the religious thinking of the past.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ALLEGORY

The term allegory¹ means the "description of one thing under the image of another" according to its etymology; allegoria in Greek comes from allos, other, and agora, place of assembly. Its origin is usually attributed to the Greek philosophers, and particularly to the Stoics; these latter thinkers² had very high moral and ethical conceptions, and they were shocked by the immorality and the eroticism of many passages in the poetry of Homer, who had become the most praised among the classic authors. For this reason, they put their heart to interpret these passages in an acceptable manner and, by so doing, finally created the allegorical method of interpretation. Philo Judaeus,³ in the first century C.E. in Alexandria, was the first to apply this method systematically to the Scriptures.

A general definition of the allegory is given by Gershom G. Scholem in Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (p. 26) as follows: "Allegory consists of an infinite network of meanings and correlations in which everything can become a representation of everything else, but all within the limits of language and expression."

This literary device develops in two steps: a) the word or expression completely loses its original and natural meaning and becomes a mere sign or an empty shell; b) into this, then, different content is poured. The word is now invested with new meaning, and is made the equivalent of another word, its perfect synonym in the given context, to serve the particular purpose of the allegorist. The word "wine" for

instance, in Hebrew $\text{ל}''$ (the numerical value of which is seventy), has been interpreted in the Song of Songs to mean at least four different things by most commentators, and sometimes even by the same author. It can mean: a) the seventy names of God; b) the seventy names of the Torah; c) the seventy names of Israel; and d) the seventy nations of the world, as the Targum on Song of Songs (1,2 and in many other places) prefers to interpret it, probably on the basis of an old Jewish tradition which assumes that the nations of the world number seventy. It would seem that the commentators' only interest and connection with the word $\text{ל}''$ was its Gematria or numerical value. The word has become a mere sign ready to serve a new purpose.

"That which is expressed by and in the allegorical sign is in the first instance something which has its own meaningful content, but by becoming allegorical this something loses its own meaning and becomes the vehicle of something else. Indeed the allegory arises, as it were, from the gap which at this point opens between the form and its meaning. The two are not restricted to that particular form, nor the form any longer to that particular meaningful content. What appears in the allegory in short, is the infinity of meanings which attaches to every representation."⁴

Until the nineteenth century, the majority of Jewish and Christian commentators on the Bible have used this method, just as it has been described here. However, in the twelfth century, another type of interpretation arose among the mystics and especially among the Cabbalists. From mere sign, the word becomes a symbol, "a form of expression which radically transcends the sphere of allegory," as Gershom Scholem describes it.

"In mystical symbol, a reality which in itself has no form or shape, becomes transparent and, as it were, visible through the medium of another reality which clothes its content with visible and expressible meaning, as for instance the cross for the Christians. The thing which becomes a symbol retains its original form and its original content."⁵

Thus, the symbol of the relation of love between bride and bridegroom may retain its original meaning and, at the same time, point toward another reality beyond the sphere of human understanding.

"The mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which is beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us. A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its expression in the symbol."⁶

This symbolic method has also been applied to the interpretation of the Song of Songs, and has found its most elaborate development in the Zohar and the other cabbalistic writings. The commentary by Ezra of Gerona on the Song of Songs is entirely so conceived and based on this type of interpretation. Very often the symbol has been derived from a modified form of the word considered, or simply from its numerical value. In fact, there are three methods used by the Cabbalists almost systematically; they have been described by the Cabbalist Abulafia, born in Saragossa in 1240. He tells us that he has come into contact with "a conventicle, the members of which believed they could gain access to the profoundest secrets of mystical cosmology and theology by the three methods of Cabbalah, being Gematria, Notarikon and Temurah."⁷ The Notarikon is a method which consists in dividing words

in two or three parts, and in interpreting the new words thus created. The Temurah is another method which consists in changing letters in a word in order to create another word which has a close consonance and then, to base the interpretation upon the new word. The use of this mystico-symbolic method will lead us to fascinating interpretations of the Song of Songs.

Although the Gematria and the Notarikon were already known in the time of the Talmud, the method of the Temurah or חליף אותיות, as it is also called sometimes, seems to have become a systematic device of interpretation only in the sixth or seventh century. It is mentioned explicitly in the Sepher Yetsirah (the final redaction of this book is believed to have taken place in the sixth century).

Whatever may be the device apparently used to obtain it, the allegorical interpretation is always based upon an eisegesis of the text; a certain meaning is discovered in the text which nothing could have indicated in the style or the content of the verse itself. The Bible is more explicit in this regard; parables are very often used in the prophetic books, but the text itself tells us that it is a parable. We are not surprised or disturbed by the strangeness of a biblical passage when we know in advance that it is only an image; its lesson is more important than the illustration. This point is clearly made by Moses H. Segal in his book על פרשנות המקרא, Jerusalem, 1944 (p. 22):

"There is a difference between the parable and the allegory. The parable does not hide its intention to serve as such. It is meant as an illustration whose purpose is

to contribute to a better understanding of an idea; but the difference remains between the parable itself and what is meant by it. In regard to the allegory, however, the attitude is not the same; it represents the real sense of the text, its primary meaning. The text has a literal meaning until it is made an allegory; from then on, the literal meaning is completely forgotten. The allegory will reveal the true meaning of the Biblical expression which is hidden within the shell of the word."

This method of interpretation was first developed by some Rabbis called the *דורש' רש"י חסידות*, who applied their science to expound the *ספר' תורה*, the mysteries of the Torah.⁸

Morris Jastrow, in the introduction of his book "The Song of Songs," Philadelphia, 1921, (p. 9) says the following:

"The allegorical interpretation eased the conscience of the pious who were thus relieved of the embarrassment of apologizing for the presence of apparently secular poetry in a sacred collection. Once launched on the course of allegorical exegesis, the variation of the main "motif" were almost endless. Each commentator, as he arose, suggested modifications of the theory and introduced elaborations, which formed the bridge for semi-philosophical and semi-mystical interpretations. Aristotelian concepts were read into the dialogues between lover and beloved by the side of efforts to see in passionate longing of the youth for the maiden, the desire of the soul to be united with God."

The reason for all this is simple: the main preoccupation of the Rabbis has always been moral and religious "edification." Whether they found a ready text to support their teachings or not, they tried to establish some relation with the Scriptures. As the Sifre on Deuteronomy 11,22 says: "If you want to know the One by whose word the world was created, study the Aggada."

The Allegory in the Bible and the Apocrypha

The pre-exilic prophets did not hesitate to use the relationship between man and wife as a metaphor to illustrate God's love for his people. Jeremiah and Hosea have represented God as choosing Israel as a man selects his bride. The Covenant between God and Israel is often compared to a marriage contract between husband and wife. Ibn Ezra, in the introduction to his commentary to the Song of Songs, says explicitly the following: "Do not wonder that the Congregation of Israel is here compared to a bride, and God to a bridegroom; for this is the manner of the prophets." Let us then consider some of these passages briefly.

"I remember for thee the affection of thy youth,
The love of thine espousals;
How thou wentest after me in the wilderness,
In a land that was not sown." (Jeremiah 2,2)

This passage of Jeremiah thus describes the event of Sinai as "the espousals"; we should not be surprised then to find that every unfaithfulness and rebellion against God is described as an act of adultery or of prostitution.

"Plead with your mother, plead;
For she is not my wife, neither am I her husband;
And let her put away her harlotries from her place.
And her adulteries from between her breasts.
(Hos. 2,4)

But God will not break his Covenant of love with Israel and he pledges his troth anew:

"I will betroth thee unto me for ever;
Yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness,
and in judgment, and in lovingkindness
and in mercies.

I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord." (Hos. 2,21-22)

All these passages suggest that the allegory of love between God and Israel is a Biblical theme, and that it could therefore have been the true meaning of the book of Song of Songs. The only problem which would remain is that no indication at all is given that it is an allegory. In the chapter 5 of Isaiah, we have a good example of what we mean:

"Let me sing of my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard in a very fruitful hill...
And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard...
For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,
And the men of Judah the plant of His delight;
And he looked for justice, but behold violence;
For righteousness, but behold a cry." (Is. 5,1-5)

No doubt remains after the reading of that passage, for the image of the vineyard is used as a parable, and is in no way essential for the understanding of the text. Its meaning is made explicit, and the comparison is explained: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel!"

Some centuries later, these explanatory remarks will lack, and the comprehension of the text will therefore become ambiguous. Our question will be: to what extent is that mode of expression to be taken literally. An example of that nature is found in an apocryphal work of the end of the first century C.E., in the so-called Fourth Book of Esdras. It is even in direct relation with the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, for Israel is called a "lily," almost as in Song of Songs 2,1.

"And from all the flowers of the world, thou hast chosen one lily." And also: "And from all the birds that have been created thou hast named for thyself one dove." (Fourth Book of Esdras 5,24 and 26). We have thus established an interesting relationship between the Rabbinic interpretation of Shir ha-Shirim and the Fourth book of Esdras; shall we go further and say that this quotation of the latter work proves that the Song of Songs was already interpreted allegorically in the first century? It is possibly true.

Another example of an allegorical interpretation is found in the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon. This work, as we might think from the title itself, belongs to the category of books included in what is called the Wisdom Literature. Frequent allegories for Wisdom are present in these texts. In ch. 8,2, Solomon is represented as speaking to Wisdom:

"Her I loved and sought from my youth,
I sought to bring her home for my bride,
and I became a lover of her beauty."

This verse of course is no mystery for anyone, its meaning is clear from the context; it is a common pattern in the Wisdom literature. But it applies only to wisdom and to nothing else.

Thus we have seen that the allegory is a literary device which develops slowly from the Scripture itself, and which finds its place in the Prophetic books and the Wisdom Literature. Secondly, it is important to single out the fact, that the only allegory used in all these cases, is the allegory of love: the object of love is simply personified and compared to a bride. The symbolic character of this

allegory is essentially human and certainly the expression of the most refined feelings a human being can experience: love.

CHAPTER III

EARLY RABBINIC SOURCES

One of the earliest references to the Song of Songs to be found in rabbinic literature is the animated discussion which resulted in the canonization of the book (Mishnah Yadaim, 3,5).

"The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render unclean the hands... R. Simeon ben Azzai said: I received a tradition from the seventy Elders, on the day they appointed R. Eleazar ben Azariah, head of the Academy, that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render unclean the hands.

R. Akiba said: Far be it! No man in Israel has ever disputed (the canonicity of) the Song of Songs (by saying) that it does not render unclean the hands. For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies."

אין כל העולם כדאי כיום שנתן בו שיר השירים

לישראל לפי שכל הכתובים קודש ושיר השירים
קודש קידוש

Rabbi Akiba went even further and extended his decision by saying:

"He who sings the Song of Songs at a banqueting table, making of it a profane melody, has no part in the world to come."¹

רבי עקיבא אמר המצנע קולו בשיר השירים בבית המשתה
נעושה אותו כמין זמיר אין לו חלק לעולם הבא.

These statements seem to indicate that it has been largely the work of R. Akiba which influenced the inclusion of this book in the Biblical

collection. The allegorical interpretation defended by R. Akiba must have been an important factor in the decision of the Palestinian Academy; this latter event probably took place around 120 or 130 C.E. But this circumstance does not imply that the book had not been interpreted as an allegory before the second century. It is likely that R. Akiba did not invent this mode of interpretation, but that there was already an old tradition based upon it. R. Simeon b. Azzai and the seventy Elders knew it, and some passages of Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah indicate clearly that R. Akiba received this tradition directly from his teacher, R. Eliezer.

Wilhelm Bacher, in his Aggadot ha-Tannaim (vol. 2, p. 59), mentions three instances in which R. Akiba differs from his teacher R. Eliezer on minor points of detail. Let us consider one of these passages: the explanation of Song of Songs 2,14.

"O my dove, that art in the clefts of the
rock, in the covert of the cliff,
Let me see thy countenance, let me hear
thy voice;
For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance
is comely."

R. Eliezer (or Eleazar) interpreted the verse as referring to Israel when they stood by the Red Sea. R. Akiba interpreted the verse as applying to Israel at the time when they stood before Mount Sinai. Israel is described as a "dove in the cleft of the rock," because they were sheltered in the recess of the sea, according to R. Eliezer; according to R. Akiba, they are so called because they were hidden in the shadow of the mountain. Then follows an attempt to establish a systematic correspondance between the verse of Song of Songs and

passages of Exodus and Deuteronomy.

R. Eliezer

"Let me see thy countenance":
as it says: "Stand still and
see the salvation of the Lord"
(Ex. 14,13).

"Let me hear thy voice": as
it says: "Then Moses sang"
(ib. 15,1).

"For sweet is thy voice":
this refers to the Song.
"And thy countenance is come-
ly": because the Israelites
pointed with the finger say-
ing: "This is my God, I will
glorify Him" (ib. 15,2).

This discussion between R. Eliezer and R. Akiba echoes directly the interpretation given by the Mechiltah² of the verses of Exodus and Deuteronomy mentioned before, and in particular of the verse "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord" (Ex. 14,13).

"Stand still and see the Salvation of the Lord" ... To what were the Israelites at that moment like? To a dove fleeing from a

R. Akiba

... as it says: "And all the people
perceived the thunderings, etc."
(Ex. 20,15)

... this refers to what they said
before the Ten Commandments: "All
that the Lord hath spoken will we
do and obey" (Ex. 24,7)

... this refers to what they said
after the Ten Commandments: "And
the Lord heard the voice of your
words...and said.. they have well
said what they have spoken (Deut.
5,25).

...as it says: "And when the people
saw it, they trembled, and stood
afar off" (Ex. 20,15).

hawk, and about to enter a cleft in the rock where there is a hissing serpent. If she enters, there is the serpent! If she stays out, there is the hawk! In such a plight were the Israelites at that moment, the sea forming a bar and the enemy pursuing. Immediately they set their mind upon prayer. Of them it is stated in the traditional sacred writings (the Hagiograph): "O my dove that art in the clefts of the rock" etc. (Song of Songs 2,14). And when it further says: "For sweet is thy voice and thy countenance comely" (ibid.), it means, for thy voice is sweet in prayer and thy countenance is comely in the study of the Torah. Another interpretation: "For thy voice is sweet in prayer and thy countenance is comely in good deeds" (Mechiltah, Beshalah 2,2).

"And ye came near and stood under the mountain" (Deut. 4,11). Of them it is declared in the traditional sacred writings (the Hagiograph): "O my dove that art in the cleft of the rock" etc. "Let me see thy countenance," that is the twelve pillars erected for the twelve tribes of Israel; "let me hear thy voice," that is, when responding to the Ten Commandments; "for sweet is thy voice" after having received the Ten Commandments; "and thy countenance is comely," when: "All the congregation drew near and stood before the Lord" (Lev. 9,5). R. Eliezer says: "This may be interpreted as referring to the occasion at the Red Sea" etc. (Mechiltah, Yitro, Bachodesh 3).

Let us now examine carefully all these passages and see what conclusions we can derive from them in using some of the methods of form-criticism.

- 1) Both collections of Midrashim, the Mechiltah and Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, refer to two different circumstances in which the verse of Song of Songs could be applied: the event of the Red Sea and that of Mount Sinai.
- 2) The verse of Song of Songs is always brought in to support an interpretation which is primarily based on a verse of the Pentateuch, following the general pattern of the Midrash.
- 3) The Mechiltah, which contains the teachings of R. Ishmael, is the only midrash to use the expositional method of the parable: To what can Israel be compared? to a dove, etc. It is certainly the simplest and least elaborate form of presentation, and it must therefore be the oldest one. The ingenuous correspondence of verses which we have found in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah represents a later development of the original comparison of Israel to a dove. This theme in itself is well known in rabbinic literature as we shall see later.

We could multiply the examples of that kind in analysing the whole book of Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah. We would find that most of its elements are based on material taken from the Midrashe Haggadah and the Midrashe Halachah on the Pentateuch, that is to say: the Mechiltah, the Sifra, the Sifre, the Midrash Rabbah and the Psikta de Rav Kahanah.³ The mechanism has been the following: some verses of Song of Songs were first used as poems or as additional proofs from Scripture for the interpretation of a verse of the Pentateuch, and then the verse of the Pentateuch opened a way for a new interpretation of the verse of Song of Songs. This explains the fact that we do not have a

unique theme or a unique way of looking at the Song of Songs, but that there are as many interpretations of it as there are patterns of interpretations in the Midrashim to the Pentateuch. The author, we should rather say the compiler and final redactor of Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, devoted himself to the task of separating all the explanations belonging to the Song of Songs.

Before we leave the verse of Song of Songs 2,14, let us complete our demonstration in quoting another passage in which Israel is compared to a dove.

"Why is Israel compared to a dove? As the dove, when it is slaughtered, does not struggle, so the Israelites do not struggle when they are slaughtered for the Sanctification of the Name, and as the dove saves herself only by her wings, so the Israelites are saved only by the merit of the Torah" etc. .

Among the essential themes of Rabbinic theology are the three following: God, Israel and the Torah (the land of Israel is very often included in this triad). In fact these three entities are bound together in a relation of love and dependance. As the Rabbis say: "God, Israel and the Torah are one."⁴

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It is this theme which will appear again and again all through the Rabbinic commentaries, and with predilection in the commentaries to the Song of Songs. There are many reasons for this fact. First of all, there are only two books in the whole Bible which do not contain any mention of the name of God, the book of Esther and that of Shir

ha-Shirim. The Rabbis who could not easily accept that a book of the Holy Scripture could be devoid of any sign of divine presence, tried to find at least some references to God, either in an allusion or in the hidden meaning of a word. Concerning the book of Esther, they ascertained that the word "the King" was a reference to God. They did the same thing in regard to the Song of Songs. They made the assumption that all the mentions of "Solomon" or the "King" meant really God. Once they had accepted this assumption, all the allegorical interpretation of the book as we know it was ready to flow from the text. This decision was easy to make because it did not encounter any real difficulty. It is evident that the book is ambiguous and not very explicit concerning its style and presentation. We would never know who is speaking and who is addressed if we would read the book without the Massoretic punctuation. We have a reference to this fact in a Mishnah of Avodah Zarah.⁵ In consideration of these two facts and of the natural disposition of the Rabbis to include everything in the scope of their doctrine, they identified the beloved and the lover and then all the other symbols of the book with one or the other of these three entities, God, Israel or the Torah.

"Thou art beautiful, my love" (Song 1,15). Thou art beautiful through the commandments, both positive and negative, beautiful through loving deeds, beautiful in thy house with the heave-offerings and the tithes, beautiful in the field by the commands about gleaning, ... beautiful in the law of circumcision, beautiful in prayer, in the reading of the Shema, in the law of the Mezuzah and the phylacteries;

beautiful too, in repentance and in good works; beautiful in this world and in the world to come.

The unprecision and ambiguity of the text is characteristic of the Song of Songs, as we have said. This fundamental problem for the understanding of the book, is clearly stated and discussed in a Mishnah, and reconsidered in the Gemarah following:

The text of the Mishnah is found in Avodah Zarah 29 b: "... Ishmael, how do you read: 'For thy (masc.) love is better than wine' or 'thy (fem.) love is better than wine' etc. (Song of Songs 1,2). He replied: Thy (fem., in Hebrew ך'י'י'ך) love is better... He retorted: This is not so, as it is proved by its fellow verse: 'Thine ointments have a goodly fragrance, wherefore the maidens love thee' (ibid. 1,3)." This latter verse implies that the subject addressed is masculine and that the correct reading of "thy love" should be ך'י'י'ך (masculine).

The Gemarah which follows this discussion gives us the reason and the explanation of Ishmael's statement. "What is the meaning of the words: For thy love is better than wine? When R. Dimi came from Palestine, he explained it thus: The Congregation of Israel declared to the Holy One, blessed is He: Master of the Universe! The words of thy beloved ones (ך'י'י'ך) are more pleasant to me than the wine of the Torah." (Ab.Z. 35 a). Rashi explains the last expression (the words of the beloved ones) as follows: the verbal expositions of the Sages are better than the written words of the Torah. But the interpretation of R. Dimi is certainly very late and it does not really answer the question of the Mishnah.

Besides this dominant interpretation, we find a series of other comparisons. The Torah, or Israel on occasion, is compared successively with:

- a) the fragrance of ointments (1,3)
- b) the dove (1,15 and 4,1)
- c) the lily (2,2)
- d) the apple (2,2)
- e) the myrrh (3,6)
- f) the breasts (4,5)
- g) the leopards (4,8)
- h) the bride (4,11)
- i) the garden of nuts (6,11)
- j) all the parts of the body of the beloved in chapter 7.

From all these comparisons, the Rabbis will deduce some moral lesson, according to the general ways of the "mashal." They will use these explanations for purposes of edification.

What the Midrash has done is simply to explicit the thought contained in the text in adapting it to the understanding of their audience. Once we have assumed that the person addressed is the people of Israel, the question for the Rabbis is to know why the people of Israel are beautiful? And they enumerate all the merits of the observance of the Law. In doing this, the Rabbis are giving a moral and religious meaning to the adjective "beautiful" which was only an esthetic term before. Here again we discover the sign of the wonderful genius of these religious teachers whose purpose was to give always a religious dimension to every fact and expression of human life.

At the same time they are trying to answer the problems of the period of history in which they have lived. Their task is to bring comfort and to restore courage; another passage of the Mechiltah will serve as an excellent example of their adaptation to the conditions of life of their time. ⁶

"R. Jochanan b. Zakkai said to his disciples: All my life I have been reading this verse and I have not realized its full meaning: 'If thou know not, O thou fairest among women' etc. you were unwilling to be subject to God, behold now you are subjected to the most inferior of the nations, the Arabs. You were unwilling to pay the head-tax to God (according to Ex. 38,26); now you are paying a head-tax of fifteen shekels under the government of your enemies."

The direct and oral teaching from the Rabbis is better than the individual study from books. The written letter is in some way dead in comparison with the living teaching and preaching of the Rabbis. The verse of Song of Songs will serve the purpose for the later Amorah.

The scholars have a great responsibility; their teaching is like a sword over their head. Thus has been interpreted another passage of the Song.

"R. Samuel ben Nahmani said, reporting R. Jonathan: A judge should always think of himself as if he had a sword hanging over his head (lit.: resting between his flanks) and Gehenna gaping under him, for it is written:

"Behold, it is the litter of Shlomo (the Shechinah), and round about it three score of the mighty men of Israel (the Scholars): they all handle the sword and are expert in war (in debates) and every

man has his sword upon his flank because of the dread of the night (the dread of Gehenna, which is likened unto night) (Song of Songs 3,7-8).

Another midrash showing the responsibility of the Righteous men in every generation is found in the Tractate Shabbat (33 b).

"R. Joseph son of R. Shemaiah said: When there are righteous men in the generation, they are seized (by death) for the sins of the generation; when there are no righteous in a generation, school-children are seized for the generation. R. Isaac b. Zeiri - others state, R. Simon b. Nizra - said: Which verse (teaches this)? 'If thou know not, o thou fairest among women, Go thy way by the footsteps of the flock' (Song 1,8). and we interpret this as (referring to) the goats which are taken in pledge for the (debts of the) shepherds."

The idea that the righteous men or the children of a generation may die because of the sins of the Community of Israel is a well-known rabbinic concept; it is first taught independently and then connected to a verse of Song of Songs. The reference may be a very distant one, but nevertheless sufficient to authenticate the concept. This is the way of the Midrash. The idea does not need to spring forth from the verse, it is presented and explained for itself and then referred to some biblical verse. It is a device of preachers, the Rabbis were aware of it and ^{they} never tried to make a dogma of it.

Let us come back to a lyrical interpretation of Song of Songs to conclude our short sketch of early rabbinical sources.

"R. Joshua b. Levy said: What is meant by: 'My beloved is unto me as a bundle of myrrh That liest betwixt my breasts (1.13) The congregation of Israel spoke before

the Holy One, blessed is He, Sovereign
of the Universe! Though my life be
distressed (metsar) and embittered
(memar), yet my love lieth between my
breasts." 8

This interpretation is based upon the similarity in consonance of
certain words: $\text{לִי$ with $\text{לִי$, and $\text{לִי$ with לִי .
Here again the main theme of the permanent love of God for Israel is
applied to the historical situation of the Jews in the Diaspora,
enduring persecutions and suffering.

Israel and the Nations

The election of Israel is one of the important themes discussed in Rabbinic literature. God and Israel are bound in a Covenant of love for all generations. R. Akiba distinguished himself as an ardent defender of this doctrine. Here is a complete sermon preached by R. Akiba in the first part of the second century and based upon Song of Songs 5,9 and 1,3. It is found at least three times in the Tannaitic Midrashim, almost without any modification. 9

"R. Akiba said: I shall speak of the beauty and praise of Him, by whose word the world came into being, before all the nations of the world. They ask Israel and say, 'What is thy beloved more than another beloved that 'thou dost so adjure us' (Song of Songs 5,9), that you are ready to die for Him, and ready to let yourself be slain for Him?' For it is said: 'Therefore till death ($\text{לִי$ לִי instead of $\text{לִי$ לִי the maidens) do they love Thee' (1,3), and, 'For thy sake are we slain all the day' (Ps. 44,22). Behold they said, 'You are beautiful, you are mighty, come and

mingles with us.' But the Israelites reply to the nations of the world, 'Do you know him? We will tell you a portion of His praise; 'My Beloved is white and ruddy, pre-eminent above ten thousand' (5,10). When they hear Israel praise Him thus, they say to the Israelites, 'We will go with you', as it is said, 'Whither has your beloved turned him that we may seek him with you?' (6,1). But the Israelites say, 'You have no part or lot in Him,' as it is said, 'My Beloved is mine, and I am His' (2,16).

This midrashic sermon contains several motifs of great importance. A special relationship of love exists between God and Israel which is not shared by the other nations. Thus Israel refuses to join the nations because she is faithful to the Covenant. The children of Israel accept martyrdom for their faith with such a spirit of dedication that the nations are astonished and moved by their example. The message of this sermon is not to justify a chauvinistic particularism from the part of Israel; we would not quite understand why this special pride should manifest itself through martyrdom and sacrifice. It seems to be rather a reaffirmation of the permanence of the Covenant; although the Community of Israel is enduring all kinds of sufferings in a period of persecution and torment, it will remain faithful to its promise. The sermon contains also a message of consolation and comfort; even the enemies of Israel have recognized their faithfulness and their courage. Such a recognition corresponds to a sign of solace in their grief. Filled with admiration for the courage of the Jewish people, the nations are ready to accept their faith; but says the Midrash: It requires more than admiration to become a true

disciple of God. What do you know about God, you nations? And would you accept to walk into the paths of the Toran?

This Midrash as it is, may contain also a hint of a Judeo-Christian polemic,¹⁰ and some connection with the challenge offered by Greek philosophy. The important lesson for the Rabbis is that martyrdom may be considered as a positive proof of the permanence of the Divine Covenant and certainly not a denial of it. This argument is found repeatedly in the epistles of Paul and Dialogue with Trypho by Justin.¹¹ R. Akiba is aware of these arguments and his sermon is trying to answer them.

The Presence of the Shechinah

Most of the traditional themes of the Talmudic literature are found in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah as well as in the passages of the Talmud which deal with verses of the Song of Songs. One of them is represented by the Shechinah following Israel throughout its history in all its peregrinations.

"When Israel went down to Egypt, the Shechinah went down with them as it is said: 'I shall go down to Egypt with you' (Gen. 46,4). When the Israelites came up from Egypt, the Shechinah came up with them, as it is said: 'And I will also surely bring up again' (ibid.)... And so it also says: 'Scarce had I passed from them' etc. (Song of Songs 3,4).¹²

But if we are assured that the Shechinah will always dwell in the midst of Israel, we are taught that Righteous men, by their

obedience to the Law, can bring it closer to us, or cause its presence to depart from Israel (although never completely).

"R. Abba said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: When two scholars pay heed to each other in halachah, the Holy One, blessed is He, listens to their voice, as it is said: 'Thou that dwellest in the gardens, The companions hearken to thy voice: Cause me to hear it.' (Song of Songs 8,13). But if they do not do thus, they cause the Shechinah to depart from Israel, as it is said: 'Flee my beloved, and be thou like the gazelle' etc. (ibid. 8,14)." ¹³

Here again we are in the presence of a traditional teaching of the Rabbis; the lesson has already been deduced from many texts and is simply reiterated here. What makes this interpretation possible is the identification of all masculine "Thou" in the Song of Songs with God or its indwelling presence, the Shechinah. Once we have accepted this assumption, we are establishing a dialogue with God and every verse of the book becomes a religious message, an expression of holiness. This is what the Rabbis meant when they say: "The Song of Songs makes the hands unclean, because it is inspired." ¹⁴

Haggadah and Christian Doctrine

The haggadic interpretation may lead sometimes to very difficult problems. If we assume, for instance, that Solomon in the Song of Songs means God, then we will have to accept that everything which is related to Solomon is really related to God himself without exception. Leo Baeck had the merit to deal with this question in an article published in the M.U.C.A.¹⁵ We know that the Midrash has traditionally

interpreted the term מִנְיָן "palanquin," in Song of Songs 3,9, as referring to the Temple of Jerusalem which was built by King Solomon.

"King Solomon made himself a palanquin of the wood of Lebanon." This verse and the following became thus linked with the construction of the Temple, and used for example, in the sermons of Hanukah, for this latter holiday commemorates the Inauguration of the Temple.

The Pesikta de Rav Kahana opens with a sermon for Hanukah which is based on the interpretation of the following passage:

"Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion,
And gaze upon king Solomon,
even upon the crown wherewith his mother
hath crowned him on the day of his espousals,
And in the day of the gladness of his heart."

If we understand God by the term Solomon, we will have to accept the idea that God has been crowned by his mother on the day of his espousals, which is impossible of course. But on the other hand, we can well imagine some Judeo-Christian preacher taking this interpretation as a proof that God-Christ was crowned by his mother Mary.

Rabbi Isaac Nappaha, who is the author of this sermon, goes on to interpret the text in the following manner:

"The crown wherewith God, Shlomo, the King of Peace was crowned was the Tabernacle... The day of the Sinaic revelation was the 'day of espousal' and 'the day of gladness in his heart' was the day in which the Tabernacle stood ready."¹⁶

Following the interpretation given by the school of Akiba, R. Isaac comes to the conclusion that Solomon in this text cannot be the human

king but God himself.

"We have searched the entire Scripture, observes Isaac, and nowhere do we find that Bath-Sheva made a crown for Solomon, her son. The crown is the Tabernacle encircled with 'blue and purple and scarlet' (Exod. 26,1)."

Leo Baeck makes then the following observation in the article mentioned above:

"A delicate point, however, obtrudes at this juncture, a fatal weakness in that Tannaitic explanation which had saved the Song of Songs for the Bible. If Shlomo means God, then the text recognizes a mother of God! How inexpressibly shocking!"

Indeed, the Psikta de Rav Kahana mentioning this sermon, refutes immediately the idea in another sermon.

"The crown wherewith his (Solomon's) mother crowned him" (Song 3,11). R. Simeon b. Yohai asked R. Elazar b. R. Jose: 'Did you hear from your father what crown this was?' R. Elazar said: 'Yes.' R. Simeon said: 'How is it?' He replied: 'It is like a king who had an only daughter whom he loved exceedingly, and he called her, 'my daughter,' and his love for her did not cease growing till he called her 'my sister' and he did not cease growing until he called her 'my mother.' So God loves the Israelites exceedingly, and he calls them 'my daughter'... 'my sister' ... or 'my mother,' as it says: 'Give ear unto me, O my mother' (Isa. 51,4). Then R. Simeon arose, and kissed R. Elazar upon his head, and said to him: 'If I had come to hear only this one interpretation from you, it would have sufficed me.'"

This Midrash testifies that the Rabbis were aware of some of

the difficulties involved in the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs; but the very fact that they dealt with an allegory and not with the precise literal meaning of a text, gave them enough freedom of interpretation to overcome the problems they encountered. We know that the Midrash is flexible, and that the idea which is derived from it is more important in the eyes of the Rabbis than the way by which it is derived.

CHAPTER IV

THE TARGUM

The Targum to Song of Songs is the earliest complete commentary on the book that has come down to us. It contains all the characteristic elements of the so-called Targum Jonathan or Targum Yerushalmi,¹ as it should be called, and therefore must have been originally a Palestinian work. Geiger² demonstrated this point in showing that the language and style of this Targum was similar to that of the other Palestinian works of this type. Liebreich, quoting Zunz, describes this Targum as "an aggadic commentary... an allegorical Midrash in Aramaic, which bases itself squarely on the Hebrew text of the Song of Songs."³

The Targum to Song of Songs is made up of a series of Rabbinical homilies which include many interpretations taken from the Midrash and the Talmud. The fact that the author of the Targum knew the Talmud is clearly stated in the text itself.

"The prophet Solomon said, 'Blessed is the Name of the Lord who has given us the Law through Moses the great Scribe, written upon two tables of stones; and the six parts of the Mishnah and the Talmud (the Gemarah, according to another version) in its traditional form, who spoke with us face to face, as a man that kisses his friend, because of his great love wherewith he loved us above the seventy nations'"⁴ (Targum to Song of Songs 1,2).

The final redaction of this Targum must have taken place some time after the completion of the Talmud and probably immediately after the conquest of Palestine by the Moslems. This would indicate a date between the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth

century C.E. There are indeed two references in the text itself which seem to point to the fact that Palestine was recently conquered by the Ishmaelites (the Arabs or the Moslems, in rabbinic literature). Here are the two passages:

"Show me now (said Moses to God, before he departed from this world), how they (the Israelites) shall be governed and dwell among the nations, whose decrees are oppressive as the heat and the scorching sun in the summer solstice, and wherefore is it that they shall wander among the flocks of the sons of Esau and Ishmael, who make their idols equal to thee" (1,7).

"Then the Greeks, and sixty mighty kings of the sons of Esau, armed and mounted on horses, and eighty warriors of the sons of Ishmael mounted on elephants, and other people without number, arose; they appointed Alexander as their leader, and so they went to attack Jerusalem" (6,8).

If we understand Esau as representing the Christians and Ishmael as representing the Muslims, as is very often the case in Rabbinic literature, the first paraphrase would indicate that the Israelites were suffering from new "oppressive decrees" which Ishmael (the Muslims) had put upon them. This would correspond to the period which followed the conquest of Palestine by Caliph Omar some time between 640 and 650 C.E. The second paraphrase seems to confuse intentionally the names of the conquerors as is often the case in these texts because of censure purposes. The sons of Ishmael are nevertheless mentioned in this description as forming the most important part of the army which went to attack Jerusalem. (The mention of) Alexander and (of) the Greeks may just represent the typical image of the conquerors.

In any case, the final redaction of the Targum to Song of Songs must have corresponded to the period in which the reading of this Scroll was introduced in the Synagogue worship during the Festival of Pessah.⁵ There are at least two reasons for this institution:

a) the book of Song of Songs contains some beautiful passages concerning the coming of the spring season "For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over, etc." (2,11-13), and b) the allegorical interpretation of the book has connected it with the event of the Exodus from Egypt celebrated during the Festival.

The essential elements of this Targum are the following:

- 1) The Song of Songs is a prophecy of Solomon (but sometimes it is referred to Moses) concerning the life of Israel in exile among the nations, awaiting the coming of the Messiah.
- 2) God, the "beloved," is speaking to Israel, his "beloved," as it was the case in the Midrash.
- 3) Between God and Israel, and as a sign of the Covenant, is the Torah. The constant study of the Torah will enable Israel to survive in the exile.
- 4) The Messiah will come after the war of Gog and Magog, and redeem Israel from the sufferings of the exile; Jerusalem will become the spiritual center of the world in the messianic kingdom.
- 5) The message of this Targum is to inspire courage and comfort within the Jewish Community of the Exile which suffers under the rule of their oppressors.

The most characteristic element of this "allegorical Midrash"

is its messianic outlook. A whole chapter, from 7,14 to 8,14, is concerned with the Coming of the Messiah, the Resurrection of the dead, and the punishment of the wicked among the nations. An indication of this messianic tendency was already present in the introduction to this Targum (1,1).

"Ten songs were sung in this world, but this song is the most celebrated of them all. Adam sang the first of them when his sins were forgiven him... Moses and the children of Israel sang when the Master of the world divided the Red Sea for them... The ninth song was sung by Solomon, king of Israel, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But the tenth song will be sung by the children of Israel when they shall be delivered from their captivity, as it is written and explained by the prophet Isaiah: 'This song shall be unto you for joy as in the night in which the Feast of Passover is celebrated'..etc. (Is. 30,29)."

The expression "the Feast of Passover" is not to be found in the verse quoted from Isaiah; it is a rabbinic interpretation of it, whose purpose is to suggest that the Second Deliverance, the messianic Redemption, will be similar to that of the Exodus of Egypt. Another reference to this interpretation is found in the Mechiltah and Exodus Rabbah on Exodus 15,1: "Then will Moses and the children of Israel sing this song unto the Lord..." The Rabbis interpreted the future tense of "he will sing" as referring to the song which Moses will sing when the people of Israel will be redeemed from its last exile in the days of the Messiah.

The Targum to Song of Songs 7,14 gives us a complete description of this anticipated event:

"When the Will of God will be to redeem His people from the exile, He (God) will say to the King-Messiah: The end of the exile

אֲדֹכְרָא אֲסִיּוּבָא has come, for the merit of the Righteous אֲדִיּוּבָא אֲדֹכְרָא has reached Me as the fragrance of perfumes; for the Sages of the generation in their Academies אֲדֹכְרָא אֲסִיּוּבָא, are steadily absorbed in the study of the teachings of the Scribes אֲדֹכְרָא אֲסִיּוּבָא (the Oral Law), and the teachings of the Torah (the Written Law). Now, stand up and take possession of the Kingdom I have reserved for thee (Messiah)!"

The rabbinic doctrine of the merit of the Righteous, is the dominant feature of this passage and of the whole chapter eight which follows. The Righteous, by their merit and their part in the study of the Law, bring redemption to the world, and thus hasten the Coming of the Messiah. The Targum goes on to imagine the kind of reception the Messiah will receive in the time of his coming:

"Come, be our brother, let us go up to Jerusalem and let us learn together the deep meanings of the Torah" (Targum 8,1).
 "I will introduce thee, King-Messiah, in my Sanctuary and thou shalt teach me to fear God and to walk in his paths. There shall we have the Feast of Leviathan and we shall drink the old wine which has been hidden from the time of the Creation of the world and eat the pomegranates which have been prepared for the Righteous in the Garden of Eden."

Here is another rabbinical doctrine concerning the messianic period; an old myth, the feast of Leviathan, has been incorporated in it, and also the representation of the ideal Garden of Eden as the Paradise of the Righteous in the world to come. The person of the Messiah is pictured in human terms: he appears almost as a perfect reflection of the Righteous man or the Sage, who is conceived to be the ideal person of the Community, at this period. The Community of

Israel will welcome him, and they will study together (from him or with him) the Law of God which will remain the main purpose of man. The Coming of the Messiah will not abolish the value and the binding of the Law, as it has been taught by Paul and the Christian Church, but on the contrary, it will give a new impetus to its study. The Messiah will come into the Synagogue and teach the eternal Torah; he will not alter anything belonging to it. The Law will still be valid, indeed even more so. There is no doubt that there is a polemical intention behind these affirmations, because the rabbinic doctrine of the messianic time is not always described exactly in this manner in the Talmud. Certain laws may be abolished with the Coming of the Messiah.

In Targum to Song of Songs 8,4, the Messiah himself is speaking, thus becoming the subject of the expression "I adjure you, etc." Here is the message of the Messiah to the people of Israel:

"I adjure you, my people Israel; why fight against the nations of the world to be saved from the exile, and why rebell against the armies of Gog and Magog? Wait a little while and they will be destroyed, those peoples who were in war against Jerusalem. Then shall the Master of the world remember you for the sake of his love for the Righteous and He will deliver you."

In other terms, the people of Israel are asked to remain passive and patient; the end of the suffering will come, but there is nothing the people of Israel can do except to hope and to hold fast to the Torah. God himself will redeem Israel and deliver them from their enemies. This rabbinic conception may have originated after the complete defeat of the last Jewish revolt against the Romans under the

leadership of Bar Kochba in 135 C.E. The Rabbis had only to deduce the practical lesson from this historical fact.

Now comes a description of the event which will accompany the Resurrection of the dead. According to Targum 8,5, this is what will happen:

- 1) the Righteous men who were buried in the land of Israel will live again;
- 2) the Righteous men who were buried in the nations of the exile, will be transported under the ground to Israel⁶ and will come out from the Mount of Olives;
- 3) the wicked men who were buried in the land of Israel will be cast away as a man casts a stone with a sling-shot.
- 4) the idol-worshippers of the nations shall be burnt in the fire of the Gehinnom which was created on the Second day of the Creation.

Then shall all the inhabitants of the world be witnesses of these events and say: "How great must have been the merit of this people..." At this time, the children of Israel will enter Jerusalem and will address the Lord saying: "We pray Thee to place us as a seal upon Thy heart... so that we may no more be exiled, for our love for Thee is strong as death and the jealousy of the nations strong as the 'Gehinnam.'"

At this moment, the Master of the Universe will answer Israel saying: "Although the peoples are gathered against thee, as the waters of the sea, they will not be able to take away My love for thee" etc. Then follows a conversation of the angel Michael with the

other angels concerning Israel and to which Israel answers this way:

"I am strong because of the study of the Torah." (Targ. 8,10).

These quotations are sufficient to show to what extent the study of the Torah is hallowed and praised by the author of this Targum and probably by all the Rabbis of this period. We can find some more references to the essential role of the Righteous in other passages; let us consider some of them.

"When the people of Israel went out from Egypt, the righteous of that generation said: Lord of the whole world, draw us after Thee, and we will run in thy good way. Bring us to the foot of Mount Sinai, and give us Thy Law out of Thy treasury in heaven, and we will rejoice and be glad in the twenty-two letters with which it is written ... and all the righteous who do that which is right before Thee, shall fear Thee and love thy commandments" (Targum 1,4).

This whole Targum is really a collection of sermons. We can almost feel the directness of the oral style of it and some passages appear as complete individual sermons. We will take for example the Targum to Song of Songs 1,8.

"If thou knowest not, O fairest among women,
Go in the footsteps of the flocks,
And feed thy kids
By the tents of the shepherds."

"The Holy One, blessed is He, said to the prophet Moses: As you wish to know how the people of Israel will survive during its captivity among the nations, I will reveal it unto you. The Community of Israel, which is compared to a beautiful young woman, and which My soul loves, will survive by these merits:

- a) she shall walk in the paths of the Righteous men,
- b) she shall address her prayers according to the order fixed by the Judges (the Rabbis), and the religious leaders of the generation,
- c) she shall teach her children, who are compared to the kids of the goats, to go to the Synagogue and to the House of Learning.

By these merits, they shall survive in their captivity until the time when I will send the King Messiah; for he shall bring them quietly to their dwellings and to the House of the Sanctuary, which David and Solomon, the shepherds of Israel built for them."

The complete program of the religious life of the Jew until the coming of the Messiah has thus been entirely enunciated and derived from one verse only. Every term in this verse has been interpreted according to the traditional allegory, the "mashal" of the Sages; the Targum makes explicit this interpretation in introducing all the correspondences by the term למשל, meaning "which is the mashal for" or which is compared to. All these interpretations are found in the Midrash of course. The shepherds are the teachers, the kids are the children, the fairest among women is Israel and the tents can only be the Tent of Meeting or the Tabernacle.

Another important feature of this Targum is its emphasis upon the great religious events which the Jewish people encountered throughout its history. There is an attempt to create a "Heilsgeschichte" of the Jewish people, or a history of the redemptive events in the life of the Chosen People.

CHAPTER V

SOLOMON BEN ISAAC (RASHI)

The Man and the Commentator

Rashi has been the most brilliant representative of the German and French school of exegesis of the Bible. He was born at Troyes, in Champagne, in 1040, where he taught most of his life. He died there about 1105. His principal works are his commentaries to the Bible and the Talmud; they have become the most useful and popular guide to the study of these subjects. Ibn Ezra gave him the name of *אדונין* or "commentator of the law" playing on the meaning of the name Parshandatah, one of the sons of Haman.

Rashi affirms the principle of multiplicity of meanings of a text, but at the same time, he insists on the fact that a text can never lose its natural or literal meaning. Rashi thus follows the general attitude of the Talmud in regard to this matter. We can find a clear definition of this principle in the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs: "The Lord spoke once, and I heard two utterances." Rashi probably means that the imperfection of human language and understanding makes it necessary for us to use two or more words to express an idea which may have been contained in one divine word. But this does not mean, says Rashi, that every interpretation we will discover in a text represents really the primary intention of this text.

"A verse may be interpreted in a variety of ways, but it never departs from its

original meaning; and although the prophets have spoken by allegories and parables, it is always important to interpret a text according to its natural meaning and according to the place it occupies in its context. In regard to this book, there are many haggadic explanations; some contain an exposition of the whole book and others of separate passages only, but they are compatible neither with the language of Scripture nor with the order of the verses. So I decided to explain the book according to its natural meaning and to mention the major haggadic interpretations which are related to each verse. My opinion is that Solomon foresaw, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that Israel would be exiled in the future and carried on from one captivity into another; that they would then lament over their former glory, and recall the former love which God manifested for them above all the other nations. Then they will say: 'I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better for me than now' (Hosea 2,9)."

The Song of Songs is, according to Rashi, a prophetic description of the longing and nostalgia of Israel after the love of her youth, Israel had forsaken her husband (God) and she had been left alone as a living widow; she confesses now her guilt and hopes that God will remember her in kindness, and for the merit of some of her good works. God then answers Israel and promises to restore his relationship of love with Israel as before. The Song is a dialogue between the "beloved" and the "loved," God and Israel, on the subject of their past common experiences, from the time when Israel was brought out from Egypt until now. "The design of the book, says Rashi, is to make Israel aware that God has not afflicted her willingly, that though He did send her away, he did not cast her off; that she is still His beloved and that she will soon again be united to Him."

Rashi then follows the Midrash in all its paths, giving a special attention to the Targum. He accepts that the term "Shlomo" means the Holy One, blessed is He, the King of Peace, and also most of the symbolic system of the midrashic interpretation of the book. Here are some of its principal keys:

The "kiss" refers to the way by which God reveals himself to man; the "kisses of His mouth" represent the Torah with all its mysteries. The "companions of the beloved" are the pagan kings. The "daughters of Jerusalem" represent the nations of the world, because Jerusalem is to become the Metropole of the world in the days of the Messiah, and all the nations will then come to worship there... "I am black" because of my sins, but "I am comely" because I still have faith in the Covenant of God. "Do not look at me," nations of the world, for I will atone for my sins and God will surely forgive me.

In all his commentary Rashi indicates clearly that this particular explanation corresponds to the literal meaning of the text *וְהָיָה בְּיוֹם הַהוּא*, and that the allegorical interpretation is different; the expression *וְהָיָה בְּיוֹם הַהוּא* introduces this type of interpretation in most of the cases. As his predecessors, Rashi undertakes to describe the sacred history of the Jewish people in relation to God and the Covenant. The unfaithfulness of Israel has caused God to exile his people, but Israel has the possibility to redeem herself in confessing her sins and returning to God in a sincere repentance. The book of Song of Songs is meant, according to Rashi, to comfort Israel and to encourage her to realize the work which will bring redemption and salvation to her and to the whole world at the same time.

CHAPTER VI

ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

The Man and the Exegete

Abraham Ibn Ezra was born in Toledo in 1092. He spent the first part of his life in Spain, probably in Cordova, where he is known essentially as a poet and thinker. Joseph Ibn Zaddik and especially Jehudah Halevy were among his friends. In 1140, Ibn Ezra began to "lead the unsettled life of a wanderer," he spent several years in Rome (Italy), then in Provence and in northern France, a year or two in London and finally came back to Spain to die in 1167. If the first period of his life is chiefly occupied with poetry, the second part is devoted to all kinds of writings. As he says himself, he is everywhere "writing books and revealing the secrets of knowledge."¹ In Rome, he composes several works on Biblical exegesis. In 1158, when he is in London, he writes his philosophic work "Yesod Morah" in which he deals with the question of the Names of God and the attributes of God. But the exegetic works are the most significant contribution of Ibn Ezra.

The great scholar Wilhelm Bacher says of him: "His commentaries, although written far away from Spain, are the most important product, in the field of Bible exegesis, of the Golden Age of Spanish Judaism... for they combine altogether clearness and vivacity, wit and profundity."² Ibn Ezra explains his own exegetical method in his introduction to the Pentateuch commentary. He regards the traditional

exegesis of the Rabbis, as found in the Midrash, not an actual exegesis of the Bible text, but only a "suggestion," a "reminder" or mnemonic device. He distinguishes thus, between the "Derash," the homiletic manner of haggadic exegesis, and the "Peshat," the literal sense of the Biblical text.

"Through his clear separation of the Peshat from the Derash he accords only a limited place in his exegesis to the new Midrash, which introduces philosophy into the Bible text... Ibn Ezra endeavors to defend the Biblical text against everything that might injure its integrity."³ Ibn Ezra is regarded as the precursor of the literary Pentateuch criticism of today.

In his commentary to the Song of Songs, a subtle distinction is established between the literal sense and the Midrashic interpretation. Ibn Ezra is ready to accept the latter only with caution and reservation, and gives thus the impression of doubt concerning the exegetical value of the allegorical interpretation of the Rabbis.

"In order to be objective, says Ibn Ezra in the introduction to the commentary on Song of Songs, I have written three commentaries:

- 1) in the first I explained all the difficult words;
- 2) in the second, I explained the literal meaning of the book according to the Peshat, and
- 3) in the third, I explained the book according to the method of the Midrash."

Here are the most important passages of this introduction.

"This revered book is full of treasures. No other song among the thousand and five songs which Solomon composed, can be compared to it; it is to be placed above all

the other songs of Solomon, because a hidden meaning is sealed in it. It describes the history of the people of Israel; from the days of our father Abraham until the days of the Messiah; just as the Song of Moses (Deut. 32) begins with the words: 'When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of men, He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel.' thus describing the dispersion of the human family, and finishes with the narration of the return of Israel from the exile, after the battle of Gog and Magog."

Here again, we find the traditional scheme and purpose of the midrashic interpretation: an attempt to present the whole history of the people of God, the "heilsgeschichte" of the Ecclesia Israel.

"Do not wonder about the fact that the Community of Israel is compared to a bride, and the Lord to a bridegroom, for this is the manner of the Prophets."

ואל תתהלך בעבור שנמשלה כנסת ישראל
לכלה והחקים דודה כי כן דרך הנביאים

Ibn Ezra then mentions most of the biblical passages which utilize the same type of allegory, as we have seen in a preceding chapter. His attempt is thus to place the Song of Songs in an existing category of biblical literature, and thus to remove something of the mystery surrounding this book. But it can still not be accepted as a profane song as its natural meaning would suggest.

"The Song of Songs is certainly not a profane love-song השק but it is an allegory, a 'mashal,' and had it not been for its particular meaning as such, it would never have been included in the Scripture; there is no doubt that it is canonical."

After mentioning the fact that he has written three commentaries, in order to be objective, he goes on to refute some types of interpretations which he considers erroneous; among them is the philosophical interpretation of some of his predecessors.

"Philosophers וְהַפְּלוֹסוֹפוֹת have undertaken to explain the book in terms of metaphysics and in relation to the union of the spiritual soul with the body, which is on a lower degree (in the realm of the spiritual); others have explained it literally, but all their efforts were vain, for the true interpretation of that book is that which has been given by the rabbis and which I will present in my third commentary."

In the second introduction to the book, Ibn Ezra brings another argument for the allegorical interpretation, based this time on a reflection of common sense.

"The book must be an allegory, a 'mashal,' because no profane love-song would describe erotic desires in such an open manner."
לֹא יִתְכַנֵּן דְּבַר חֲשֵׁק בְּחִדּוֹת לֵבָי לִלְבָּאִים
 עַל כֵּן הוּא מַשָּׁל נִעֲרָה אֶת קִטְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר

The attitude of critical minded Ibn Ezra, however, differs from the traditional interpretation. Instead of making the preliminary assumption of the midrashic interpretation that the term "Shlomo" found in the book, means God (the King of Peace), Ibn Ezra holds that every mention of "Shlomo" refers to King Solomon himself except in one instance "Thou, O Solomon, shalt have the thousand" (Song of Songs 8,12) where it means the Messiah; it is called Solomon because he will be a descendant of Solomon. The traditional interpretation will not be considerably modified by this attitude, but it will certainly lead to

understanding the Song as a monologue of the Community of Israel rather than as a dialogue between God and Israel.

Here is a sketch of the allegory according to Ibn Ezra. The religious history of Israel began with Abraham whom God "kissed" (1,2) in giving him the Torah and the Commandments, "the kisses of His mouth" (ibid.) for "those who love Thee" (*אֵלֶיךָ*) will rejoice in Thee "for thy love is better than wine." Abraham proclaimed the works of God among the nations and instructed his generation concerning Him. Wherever he went, he called on the Name of God, as it is said: "Thy name was poured forth like oil" (1,3). Those who had no God, as the "maidens" have no husband, were brought under the wings of the Shechinah. God drew Abraham after him ("draw me after Thee") and took him into the land of Canaan and taught him all His mysteries as expressed in the verse: "The King hath brought me into His chambers." Then Abraham built altars in many places in order to "praise His love" (1,4).

When the Community of Israel was in Egypt, she said: although "I am swarthy" because of some evil deeds I committed, "I am still comely" (1,5) by my keeping of the Covenant and my faith in the Unity of God. "Look not upon me" for the exile in Egypt (the sun) hath tanned me. My mother's sons, the Egyptians, made me keeper of the vineyards, the religious beliefs of others, so that I may forsake my religion. But I returned to Thee in repentance, "O thou whom my soul loveth" (1,7). "Tell me" how the Patriarchs did walk after Thee so that I may follow their ways.

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Then the prophet (Moses) answered the Israelites that when they will arrive to Mount Sinai, "when the King will sit at His table," the world will be filled with their fragrance. And the Shechinah said: "My beloved (Israel) is unto me as a cluster of henna ... I will keep thee from evil as a lily among thorns!

The Community of Israel then answered the Shechinah: "If thou keepest me, I will dwell under thy shadow forever."

The voice of my beloved (God) was revealed to me in the burning bush and at Mount Sinai; He (God) watched over me "through the windows." "Rise up, Israel, for, lo, the period of the exile (the winter) is passed, the time of sorrow (rain) is gone; the Righteous men of Israel (the flowers) appear on the earth. The time to sing the Song of Deliverance has come and the voice of Israel (the dove) is heard in our land. The Temple, the Torah, the Land of Israel, the Throne of Glory and the celestial beings are then introduced in the narration of the whole history of Israel. The coming of the Messiah will depend upon the moral and religious conduct of Israel following the rabbinic principle:

אם ישראל תשובה תשובה נגאלין
 אם לא תשובה עליהם כלך שגזירות
 כגזירות המן ונגאלין

"If Israel repents, they will be delivered,
 and if they do not repent, I will place over
 them a king whose decrees will be as evil
 as those of Aman, and they will be delivered." 4

Ibn Ezra thus agrees completely with the traditional doctrine contained in this principle. Righteousness or the return to the stage of righteousness through repentance, is the essential condition of

Salvation. It is in the hands of men and it depends upon the people of Israel to hasten the coming of the Messiah.

Ibn Ezra's third commentary on Song of Songs can be linked to all the other allegorical commentaries of this kind. It is not different in content; it uses the same midrashic sources as the Targum or Rashi, but it is, however, different in its form of presentation. Song of Songs is only a prophecy of Solomon concerning the history of the people of Israel and should have no other pretention. Ibn Ezra has adopted the traditional meaning given to the book; he has decided to leave aside all the other interpretations on the ground that the concepts they use have no relation whatsoever with the Bible. He has understood the book as a prophetic work belonging to the same category as the book of Hosea, Isaiah, Ezekiel or Jeremiah. It still remains that Ibn Ezra presented this interpretation as a possibility only, making sure that the natural and literal meaning of the book will not be disregarded.

CHAPTER VII

EZRA BEN SOLOMON

The Man and his Mystical Doctrine

Ezra ben Solomon is, in the opinion of many scholars, one of the founders of the speculative Cabbalan. He was born at Gerona, Spain, in 1160, where he died in 1238. He was a disciple of Isaac the Blind, who had opened a school in this city where various mystical doctrines were taught. Gershom Scholem has given to this school of mysticism the name "Circle of Gerona." Ezra is very often confused with Azriel ben Menachem,¹ another disciple of Isaac the Blind and a follower of the same mystical speculations. Graetz² thought that they were two brothers, and other historians have even postulated that they were one person. Ezra wrote a commentary on the Aggadot דברי חזקוני, on the Sepher Yetsirah and also on the Song of Songs. This latter commentary has often been ascribed to Nachmanides, and was published under his name by mistake.³ The first printed edition appeared in Altona in 1764. The text used in the preparation of this thesis was printed in Pietrikov in 1911; it is corrupt in many places and contains a certain number of notes and suggested corrections by the editor, Aaron Friedmann.

The mystico-religious system of Ezra rests chiefly on the Neo-Platonic conception of God and the Universe. God is absolutely transcendant. He is the Unlimited or En-Sof אין סוף, and completely unknowable. He emerges as the God of Creation, who causes thus the

finite world to come forth from the Infinite Deity by the principle of emanation. In other terms, the universe, with its various manifestations, was latent in the essence of God, the En-Sof, just as the various sparks and colors which proceed from the flame were potential in the coal.⁴

The act of creation consisted in the transformation of potential existence into actuality. Thus there was not a creation ex nihilo in its literal sense, but a process of emanation, עצירת, "overflow" or "efflux." As in the metaphysical system of Plotinus, this efflux manifests itself through successive stages, from the pure intellectual sphere to the material world. These intermediary stages are known as the Sephirot, a word which can be translated by spheres or divine attributes. The first of these attributes is the Glory, קדוּשָׁה, and the last one the Kingdom, מלכות, or Shechinah, השכינה, the "indwelling presence of God" in everything; the Shechinah is also the archetype of the people of Israel. All the Sephirot depend upon one another, united like links to the first one, the Glory. We do not find a systematic description of the Sephirot in Ezra's commentary on the Song of Songs,⁵ but we have good reason to believe that they must have been approximately the same as those described by Azriel of Gerona, the co-disciple of Ezra in his own commentary on the Sephirot, and later by the author of the Zohar. At any rate, they are always referred to as well known conceptions. They differ only in that Ezra believes the first emanation of God to be the "Supreme Light," אור העליון, which was created on the first day of

Creation; this "Supreme Light" envelops all the Sephirot, and is the ultimate achievement toward which everything aspires. The "Supreme Light" or first manifestation of God is thus considered as the Source of All Life and the supreme goal of everything; from it all things come, and to it all things return. The terms "efflux" and "influx" have been used in reference to these two universal movements. Ibn Gabirol,⁶ another disciple of the School of Neo-Platonism, had already expressed a similar conception and precisely given to his most important treatise of philosophy the title *מקור חיים*, the "Source of Life" or "Fons Vita" as it was known among the Christians in the Middle Ages.⁷

Every lower stage in this system is striving to the higher, and to return to its original Source. The soul of man and the souls of all the spiritual entities in this universe, are aspiring to reach the stage of Communion with God, *דבק*, or "cleaving." This phenomenon of return or "influx" manifests itself by a constant "ascension"; as the souls ascend higher levels into the spiritual world of the Sephirot, the overwhelming splendor of the Supreme Light becomes more radiant and more intense, and causes the souls to rejoice in the supreme delight it provides them. The final goal of this ascension is the Communion with God, the highest degree of felicity for the soul.

The whole commentary of Ezra to the Song of Songs is dominated by these conceptions. Every expression of the biblical book becomes a cosmic symbol, a "gate" or a "path" of the Secret Wisdom, the

Cabbala. In this system, man assumes a most important role: he has the extraordinary power to redeem the world. By his prayer and his dedication to perform the will of God, man can cause the Glory to ascend or descend, and the Light of the Holy Spirit to come down upon the earth. This principle is clearly established in the system, and has therefore been incorporated in the Sephirot themselves; the ninth Sephira in Ezra's system is precisely TIO' , the "Foundation," or following its full expression DLYU TIO' P'TS , "the Righteous man is the foundation of the world." Thus, we can see what remarkable transformation the cabbalistic rabbis have accomplished; they have taken a cosmological and metaphysical system which had no special significance for religious life, and they have made of it an inspiring and most spiritual and symbolic representation of the Righteous man's universe in terms of faith and salvation. Commenting on Song of Songs 1,4, Ezra says:

"... Our Sages established prayers: the Blessing, the Sanctification, and the Proclamation of the Divine Unity, in order to cause the Source of Life to emanate and to further its efflux of Spirit upon the Principal Sephirot and from them to the others."

The words and intentions of man become thus capable to act upon the divine forces of the universe; they are given a fantastic power, a power to bring down the Presence of God as will be explained later when we will discuss the concept of Shechina.

Let us now consider some of the most significant passages of Ezra's commentary and try to distinguish the leading principles of his doctrine as they are found in his writings. "Let him kiss me from

the kisses (of his mouth)" (1,2); these are the words of the Glory longing and yearning to ascend and to cleave to the Supreme (hidden) Light, to which nothing can be compared.

This is a kind of inner thought of the Glory and it is therefore expressed only by allusion. The "kiss" is a symbol of the intense delight which the soul experiences through its cleaving to the Source of Life; the Holy Spirit then intensifies its presence on the soul, and increases its radiance of pure and sweet light upon it. The text is intentionally mysterious when it speaks about the efflux descending upon the Glory, subject which is the key for understanding (the gate) of all the system. This knowledge is only possible through the Science of I (I am the Lord...), which is a part of the secret science of the seventy Names of God and the seventy Branches of the Tree of Life (the Sephirot)

"For thy love is better than wine"; this refers to the emanation of pure light, a light which radiates in all directions." "Thine ointments have a goodly fragrance" (1,3). The fragrance is the symbol of the efflux (of abundant light) which flows from the Supreme Light to the Glory, the gate to all things; there the efflux is concentrated and from this stage, it descends upon the Branches (of the Tree of Life) which are seventy: there is a hidden mystery in that number. These branches are divided by the Meridian (which passes in the midst of them). From the seven Sephirot (and the ten divisions of each one, making thus seventy) emanate the seventy Names of God. They are united in the T... (probably Tif'eret, the sixth or seventh

Sephira, if the text is not too corrupted) whence it reaches the Foundation and the Kingdom (the ninth and tenth Sephirot), and finally comes upon Israel. Thus is Thy Name (Thy Holy Spirit) intensified in the world, producing a white and pure light which reaches the Shechinah enclosed and sealed in every thing."

"Draw me after thee" (1,4). These are the words of the Glory: "May it be thy will that I ascend to thee (God or the Supreme Light) and so cause the meridian and with it all the Branches (of the Tree) to be lifted up and to receive an increase in Blessing, נשגנ
נ נ נ נ."

"The king has brought me into his chambers" means: "My desire is to ascend so as to enter into the heavenly chambers; therefore shall I use the method of the thirty-two paths of the Secret Wisdom. And when my ascension will have increased the presence of Holy Spirit, "we will rejoice and be glad in thee"; as a consequence, the seventy Names of God will receive an increase of Holy Spirit,
הטבתה היא התעלה רוח הקודש לעב שמות של הקב"ה

"The righteous ones love thee"; these are the children and the sucklings (all the celestial beings which derive their existence from the Holy Spirit). They (the celestial beings) are pure and simple (not the product of a composition, which is a sign of degradation, and of the presence of evil), and their aspiration is to ascend and to cleave to the Source upon which they depend. For this reason, have the Sages established special prayers: the Blessing, the Sanctification, and the Proclamation of the Divine Unity; for these prayers and the

spiritual power which belongs to them, will activate the Source of Life to further emanation and efflux of Spirit on the principal Sephirot, and from them to the others.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RESPONSUM OF ISAAC BEN ABRAHAM IBN LATIF

Ibn Latif was a Spanish physician and cabbalist. Very little is known about his personal life except that he died probably in 1290. Among the writings he left is found the אגלת התשובה, a series of Responsa, which were addressed to Abulafia according to some or more likely Yedaya. The text of this letter is found in the collection Kovez al Yad, "Sammelband kleiner Beitrage aus Handschriften," Berlin, 1885, p. 61; this first publication was based on manuscript 335 Vaticanus. Another version of this Responsa is found in Salfeld, pp. 161-162, which very often presents a better reading than the former one.

Question: Tell us the reason for the Sages saying that the term "shlomo" in the Song of Songs means God (is holy), except in one place: "Thou, O Solomon shalt have the thousand" (8,12)? And why likewise do the Sages interpret the verse: "Shir ha-Shirim of Shlomo" (1,1) as meaning the Song which is said every day by the Holy One, blessed is He? For only you can appease my ardent desire for knowledge and I know that your merit is great.

Responsum: You, humble man, open your eyes and be attentive, and I will reveal unto you some of the Mysteries of the Shir ha-Shirim, so that you may understand everything with clarity. Shir ha-Shirim, that is the most beautiful song, the song which is superior to all the songs of the celestial beings (probably the Sephirot); all the pure and holy

souls which are the instruments of Divine Wisdom, are constantly purified by the beauty of its melody. The Divine Splendor shines upon these souls which ascend to the sphere of the Angels (by the effect of their songs). When the souls have reached this stage, the Angels spread their wings over them. This is the deep meaning given by the Sages of the Sublime and Awe-inspiring Science, when they say: "It is the Song which the Holy One, blessed is He, recites every day!"

The "kiss" (1,2) is a symbol of the cleaving to God or נִקְּחָה . "The ointments" (1,3) represent the coming down of the divine effluence from the heavenly spheres (probably the Sephirot). "The (nice) chambers" (1,4) represent the hidden mysteries. "We will rejoice" in their understanding, and He (God) will dissipate the pain (of our ignorance).

The "wine" (whose numerical value is seventy) is a symbolic term for Sciences, for without them no knowledge of the mysteries is possible.

The soul says: "I am black...as a curtain" (1,5) because of its association with the four elements (the spiritual soul being a prisoner of the dark and soiled body).

"The daughters of Jerusalem" (1,5) represent the hosts of spiritual beings (angels); a certain allusion to it is found in the word שְׁלֵמָה itself; (this allusion is possibly based on the text of Genesis 14, 18, in which Jerusalem is apparently called שְׁלֵמָה , meaning peace or perfect, two terms which apply constantly to angels in Jewish tradition.

"The tents of Kedar" (1,5) are dark and soiled because evil has penetrated them; but the pure soul (the ideal soul or the heavenly counterpart of the created souls) is nevertheless dwelling in heaven: this explains why the verse uses a double comparison to describe the soul.

The "curtains" represent the spiritual heavens; they (and all the spiritual entities they contain) remain hidden in the recesses of the Intelligence (the third Sephiran).

The "shepherds' tents" (1,8) are a symbol of the eternal mystery (for religious philosophy): why should the righteous man suffer and evil affect him?

The word פֶּה "Pharaoh" (1,9) is close to the word עָפָר "dust" (for they are almost composed of the same letters). The "steed" is an allusion to the beloved one. "Thy cheeks are comely with circlets (צִמְדִּים in Hebrew) (1,10); צִמְדִּים has the same allegorical meaning as in the verse "For they shall be a chaplet of grace unto your head" (Prov. 1,9) (צִמְדִּים and צִמְדִּים are explicitly meant in the latter verse, and so is the word צִמְדִּים interpreted in the former; since it is a plural, it obviously means the Written Law and the Oral Law). The "spikenard" is a symbolic expression referring to the good deeds.

The "bundle" (1,13) is connected in meaning with the verse: "Yet the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God" (1 Sam. 25,29).

The "rose" and the "lily" (2,1) are metaphores which show the

littleness (nothingness) of their value (the human souls?) in comparison to that of the Intelligences (the souls of the spheres or Sephirot).

The "apple-tree" (2,3) is the symbol of the ascension of the Active Intellect which fills every thing.

"The trees of frankincense" (4,14), the words ^לעץ and ^בבית, have the same roots as ^בנ and ^בבית, meaning "child" and "descendant"; the "children" represent the forces (the Sephirot or the powers in the universe), and the word "dainties" ^למנוחה, is related to the word ^למנוחה "the aged men" as in the verse: "Is science with aged men?" (Job 12,12).

By this is meant the Science which begins with the Supreme Height (the first Sephira or the Glory in the system of Azriel of Gerona, almost the contemporary of Ibn Latif).

"His left" and "his right" are designations for the two substances, the superior one, which is simple, and the inferior one which is soiled and the result of a composition and separation (from the hyle, the pure and unique matter).

The "beloved" and the "gazelle" (2,9) are symbols of the Supreme Intelligence.

The "windows" and the "lattice," (2,9) represent the corporeal elements of composed things.

The "winter" (2,11) alludes to the time of youth. The "flowers" (2,12) point to the idea that they are ready (to come, the days of the Messiah?), and then "the voice of the turtle is heard" but they are still hidden in the Foundations of the Temple (?).

The "fig-tree" is beautifully blooming! So, eat from its fruits! "The foxes that spoil the vineyards" and devastate them, and "the watchmen found me" (3,3); the meaning of these expressions is clear and evident to the intelligent one! (?)

"The litter of Solomon" (3,7) is surrounded by sixty mighty men: they represent the degrees (of the ascension of the soul?). "They handle the sword" because of "the dread of the night"; the meaning of this verse is related to the idea implied in the verse of Deuteronomy 32,10: "He found him in a desert and in the waste, a howling wilderness" (this is probably a reference to the presence of evil in the world).

"A palanquin" is (the symbol of) the foundation of the Supreme Intelligence

The "crown" (3,11) alludes to the Supreme Providence; "his espousals" alludes to the ultimate goal (the union with God).

"A garden shut up" (4,13) is an allusion to the Garden of God from which a river is flowing (it is a classical representation of the process of emanation)."

This responsum becomes more and more obscure for the one who has not been completely initiated, and even the commentary of Ezra or the text of the Zohar do not aid us in finding a sure answer. Many of these speculations were based on the three favorite methods of the early Cabbalists: the Gematria, the Temurah, and the Notarikon, as we have seen above. The letter ends on the following interpretation: "Take haste, my beloved" (8,14) for the time of the redemption has been

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses.

2. The second part of the document is a list of names and addresses.

3. The third part of the document is a list of names and addresses.

4. The fourth part of the document is a list of names and addresses.

decreed, praise and honor belong to Thee! And concerning you, my questioner, would that there were many like you in Israelie! Know that if you pay attention to all these allusions, you will understand the deep meaning of the mysteries of this beautiful book."

CONCLUSION

The diversity of the interpretations which we have examined in this study may lead us to regard allegory as a means to read into a text whatever we wish to read into it. But a deeper analysis of this literary method will show us that this is not exactly the case.

Isaac Arama has correctly described what most of the commentators have done, when he says: "In regard to the interpretation of Song of Songs, we find that Talmudic scholars made use of their traditional knowledge, the Cabbalists made use of their secret wisdom, the Metaphysicians of their metaphysical conception, and the Philosophers, of their philosophical ideas." This is certainly true, but there is one impulse which dominates all other intellectual preoccupations, and this is love, love for God, love for man, and love for the universe. Their problem was that they could not separate the love of God from the love of man. For there are not two ways to love, one way to love man and one way to love God. Both are one in the heart of man.

"I will seek him whom my soul loveth." Who is he, man or God? A religious mind can embrace both with the same love. Is it not written: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy might." The same love is commanded vis a vis our fellow man - "Thou shalt love your neighbor as yourself."

Some of the commentators, the Cabbalists, for example, have used many expressions to describe this love. They have called it the "longing of the soul," the "striving to cleave to the source of Life," and they have found an echo of it in the verses of Song of Songs:

"I will seek him whom my soul loveth," or "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please."

Whatever love touches becomes the "beloved" of him who is under the sway of love. Man is the vehicle by which God pours his love in the midst of men.

The Bible has only one word to express the act of loving אהב, and the allegory of the love relationship between God and Israel can thus only be expressed in human language: "As a bridegroom loves his bride, so is God loving Israel." There is only one way to describe the object of love, that is the "beloved."

This is how we can describe the attitude of heart and mind of the Allegorists who understood God in the expression "the beloved."

The philosophers tried to intellectualize this intuitive response of man, and introduced concepts which modified, but certainly did not annul the power of love. The elaborate vocabulary and the large scope of their philosophical systems did not irredicate the native character of love. Only he who feels as a shepherd for his shepherdess can indeed experience love.

The first concern of him whose heart is filled with love is for the wellbeing of his "beloved." "I suffer when she suffers, and I rejoice when she rejoices." Such is the character of true love, and such is the character of the love relationship between God and Israel. God suffers when Israel suffers, and God rejoices when Israel is glad. God cares for his "beloved," he is concerned for their happiness and for their salvation.

Thus the history of Israel becomes linked to the history of God in the world. Every event which happens to Israel is thus a manifestation of God's providence and will to redeem his people. The history of Israel becomes a Heilsgeschichte, a history of the redemptive events bringing salvation to the world.

By the acceptance of the Covenant of Sinai, the whole Community of Israel has been invested with the mission of redemption of humanity. The Allegorists, as well as the Mystics, have felt the implications of these principles; they have tried to understand Jewish history in their light. The Song of Songs, the most excellent and praised among the Songs, could only speak about the essential character of the destiny of Israel. The Chosen people are in their eyes the Messiah of God, they will bring salvation to the world; but in order to fulfill this mission, they have first to redeem themselves. The self-redemption of Israel rests in the hands of Israel. The fulfillment of the Torah of God will thus bring salvation to the world.

The Song of Songs will certainly continue to inspire and suggest many ideas and theories, but its allegorical interpretation will always remain as one of the most beautiful figurative expressions of the divine love for Israel and the world.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I

1. Sanhedrin 101 a.
2. Salfeld, Siegmund, Das Hohelied Salomo's, Berlin, 1879, p. 19.
3. Ginsburg, Christian D., The Song of Songs, London, 1857, p. 47.
4. Salfeld, p. 85.
5. Ginsburg, p. 49.
6. Salfeld, p. 118.

Chapter II

1. Webster's Third New International Dictionary under "allegory", p. 55.
2. Hastings' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. I, p. 32.
3. Wolfson, Harry A., Philo, Third Printing, Vol. I, Cambridge, Harvard University, 1962, p. 115.
4. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, p. 26.
5. Ibid., p. 27.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 99
8. Ibid., p. 158.

Chapter III

1. Tosephta, Sanhedrin 12
2. Beshallah 2.2. and Yitro, Bachodesh 3.

See also Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 68,13 and Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1,15.

3. Salfeld, p. 15.

4. Zohar, Acharei 83.
5. Avodah Zara, 29 b.
6. Bachodesh 1, 16.
7. Sanhedrin 7 a-b.
8. Shabbat 88 b.
9. Sifre, Berachah 343, Mechiltah, Beshallan, Shiratan 3,
mechiltah de R. Shimon b. Yonai, Beshallan 15,2.
10. Heligott, Benjamin W., The Doctrine of Election in Tannaitic Literature, New York, King's Crown Press, 1954, p.8.
11. ibid., p. 32.
12. Mechiltah , Beshallan, Shiratan, 3.
13. Shabbat, 63a.
14. Tosephta, Sanhedrin, 12
15. Baek Leo, Haggadah and Christian Doctrine, in H.U.C.A. 23,
part 1, p. 549.
16. Sifra on Lev. 9, 24.

Chapter IV

1. Targum Jonathan is a misreading for Targum Jerushalmi, according to most modern scholars.
2. quoted in Salfield, p. 8, note 2.
3. Liebreich, Leon J. , The benedictory Formula in the Targum to the Song of Songs, in H.U.C.A., vol. 18, p. 177.
4. Liebreich shows that this text corresponds exactly to the traditional formula of the blessing said before the reading of the Haftaran.

5. Mas. Sopherim, 14, 3 and Elbogen Ismar, Der Judische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung, Vierte Auflage, Hildesheim, G. Olms Verlag., 1962, p. 185.
6. The Resurrection was believed to take place solely in the Holy Land, and especially in Jerusalem. Cf. Pesikta Rabbati 1, after Psalms 110, 9 and Genesis Rabbah 74.

Chapter VI

1. Bacher W. , in Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. 6, p. 521.
2. Bacher W. , in Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. 3, p. 163.
3. ibid.
4. Ibn Ezra's commentary on Song of Songs 8, 11.

Chapter VII

1. Encyclopedia Judaica, Berlin, Verlag Eshkol, 1930, vol. 6, p. 790.
2. Graetz, Heinrich, History of the Jews, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 19 , p. 549-557.
3. Jellinek, A., Moses ben Nachman's Commentar zum Hohenlied, Der Orient, Jahrg. 12, Leipzig, 1861, p. 466.
Tishbi Isaiah, in Sinai, vol. 8, Jerusalem, 1945, p. 159.
Tishbi Isaiah, in Zion, vol. 9, Jerusalem, 1944, p. 178.
4. Image first given by Plotinus and Porphyry.
5. Jellinek A., Beitrage zur Geschichte der Kabbala, Leipzig, 1852, p. 39-45 and p. 61-66.
6. Ibn Gabirol, who is known also as Avicbron, is often considered as the first Jewish Neo-Platonist philosopher.

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