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THE SONG OF SONGS IN THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURY C.E. EXEGESIS

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DATE: MARCH 1, 2001/ 6 ADAR 5761

SUMMARY: This thesis explores Third and Fourth Century midrashim on the Song of Songs in their historical, political and theological context. Contextualizing these midrashim was best achieved by comparing them to Christian exegesis on the Song of Songs. This thesis focuses on Origen's commentary to the Song of Songs (Third Century) and the midrashim written in the same period. The thesis is organized into three sections. The first lays out a general historical overview of the time period and provides background on the Song of Songs and its canonization. The second section is made up of six chapters, each one dealing with a verse or a collection of verses from the Song of Songs. Each chapter closely analyzes the Jewish and Christian exegesis on these verses. The final section presents general themes and some concluding remarks. This thesis contributes to our understanding of Jewish-Christian relations in Third and Fourth Century Palestine, and deepens our understanding of the context in which the rabbis of the midrash were writing.

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DISPUTATION:
THE SONG OF SONGS IN THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURY C.E. EXEGESIS

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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INTRODUCTION

Scriptural exegesis offers a unique perspective into the life and minds of its authors and their community. To study the Third and Fourth century C.E. midrashim of the rabbis is to enter the tumultuous world-view of a community in economic and political upheaval struggling to make theological sense of its situation. As I approached the thesis process, I knew that I wanted to study midrashim from this transitional period in Jewish history. I wanted to see how the rabbis made the Bible relevant for their times in the face of tremendous external pressures and formidable internal challenges. What did the rabbis choose to emphasize as they sought to reinforce their identity against a burgeoning Christianity and oppressive political regimes? What were the messages that the rabbis conveyed to their community through their Biblical exegesis, and why did they interpret passages the way they did? I wanted to understand third and fourth century midrash in its context.

My thesis advisor, Dr. Norman Cohen, suggested that I could understand midrash best if I were to contrast rabbinic exegesis with concurrent Christian Biblical exegesis. He suggested a study of the Song of Songs because of the fruitful interaction between the two communities in their

exegesis, and because there is very little scholarship in this area.

I was eager to engage in a careful study of the Song of Songs. As a cantor, I have become familiar with the texts of the Song of Songs, singing many of its passages at weddings. I also presented a cantorial practicum on this book. However, my interpretation and use of the song were on a literal level: the Song of Songs was love poetry, and I used it for its artful descriptions of human love. While I had been introduced to the Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs as a love poem between God and Israel at Passover, I did not know the many elaborate ways this allegory on the text was developed in the midrashim and in Christian exegesis.

The Song of Songs is a particularly interesting study because both Jewish and Christian communities have insisted on reading it allegorically, and there is therefore tremendous room for creative interpretation of the sensual symbols found in the text. The Christian community found the Song of Songs particularly apt for describing the relationship of the Church with Christ, in a manner that offered both legitimacy in tradition (for it was based out

of Hebrew Scriptures), and strong imagery of the Church usurping the place of God's former love -- Biblical Israel. The rabbis were compelled to respond to the ways in which the Christian community re-framed their primary allegory. Understanding and untangling the dialogue that ensues in their exegesis was the primary work of this thesis.

I began with a thorough and methodical study of the Song of Songs in context. First, I familiarized myself with the general environment of the period in which the midrashim and Christian exegesis were written: the history and cultural conditions of Jewish-Christian Palestine in the Second through Fourth centuries. I digested a wealth of scholarship available on the Song of Songs, traditional and modern, Jewish and Christian, critical and literary. With an understanding of the secondary scholarship on the Song of Songs and the historical context of the Jewish and Christian interpretations, I began to research the primary sources.

I selected ten verses from the first two chapters of the Song of Songs (Origen's commentary is only available through the first two chapters; the rest has been lost) that were susceptible to multiple levels of analysis. I

then proceeded in two different ways to analyze the Jewish and the Christian materials. For Jewish texts, I used Hyman's *Torah HaKetuvah HaMesorah*,¹ an index organized by Biblical verse that lists all rabbinical materials that relate to the text. I sought out all of the Jewish midrashic sources on these ten verses written between the Second and Sixth centuries C.E.² I read the texts in the original Hebrew, utilized translations when available, and organized the midrashim by verse and according to theme. Frequently, I found the same midrash in several compilations, sometimes with the exact same wording, but on other occasions with significant variations. I have noted these differences where they augment the understanding of a verse.

For the Christian texts, I began with secondary literature on Christian exegesis on the Song of Songs. It was quickly apparent that Origen was the paradigm upon which all subsequent Christian exegesis of the Song depended. As Ruth Lawson wrote in her introduction to Origen's

¹ Aaron Hyman, *Torah, HaKetuvah, V'Hamesurah*, Tel Aviv: Dvir. 1979.

² While I am primarily studying the period of the second through fourth centuries, some midrashic works compiled in the fifth or sixth century contain material written much earlier.

commentary: "Though almost all [of the subsequent Christian commentators] borrowed from him, none equaled him in richness of thought and depth of mystical conception."³ I read Jerome's commentaries on the Song of Songs⁴ and selections from Aponius's Commentary written in 405-415 C.E.,⁵ which confirmed Lawson's sentiments. I therefore focused on Origen's Commentary as the prototypical Christian exegesis on the Song of Songs by which I would carry out my comparison. I studied Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs as well as his two homilies on the text.

After a first read and brief analysis of all the primary sources, I narrowed my study from ten verses to the six verse fragments or collection of verses presented in this thesis. I followed the exegetical categorization of the rabbis and Origen on the verses in my division of the chapters. In almost all cases, the rabbis and Origen were in agreement: Verse 1:2, for example, is treated as two

³ Origen: The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies. Ancient Christian Writers. Vol. 26. R.P. Lawson, trans., (Westminster, Md, 1957), p.6.

separate pieces, while verses 2:11-13 are viewed as one piece by both communities. In cases where they differed, I grouped verses together according to theme. At times, a chapter focuses on one main theme, and sometimes several emerge.

Chapter One begins with a general overview of the Song of Songs, its canonicity, and a history of its exegesis both in the Jewish and Christian community. I also describe the modern scholarship that deals with any part of this topic. Chapters Two through Seven offer detailed analyses of the chosen verses. I begin these chapters with a *pshat* or "literal" reading of the verses, and then move to an allegorical reading by comparing the midrashim of the rabbis with Origen's exegesis according to theme. Throughout the chapters, I offer my own analysis in light of the historical and political context of the two communities, and attempt to present the world-view of these communities through their understanding of this sacred

⁴ Jerome's commentaries are found in his *Epistle #22*, and in his *Against Jovinian* found in The Principle Works of St. Jerome: Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, W.H. Freemantle, trans., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979). Jerome almost exclusively uses the book to extol the virtues of virginity and chastity.

⁵ Johannes Witte, Der Kommentar des Aponius zum Hohenliede (Erlangen: Von Junge & Sohn, 1903).

text. In my conclusion, I connect the themes that are most prevalent in the commentaries and present areas for further study.

SECTION ONE:

THE SONG OF SONGS AND ITS INTERPRETATION HISTORY

I. The Nature of the Song of Songs.

The Song of Songs is found in the Writings, the third division of the Hebrew Bible. The nature and content of this work is unlike any other book in the Bible: it is lyrical love poetry full of sensuous symbols and erotic sentiments. It is also the only book in the Bible to rely exclusively on human dialogue as the means for expressing the content of the book, although the speakers are not identified, and it is not always clear who is speaking to whom or even how many characters are present. Its language is also unique: no other book has the number of *hapax legomena*⁶ (49 in 117 verses) as the Song. Most unusual, however, is the adamantly secular nature of the poem. There are no readily apparent moral lessons, no theological or religious characteristics to the text. God is not mentioned once.

A. Canonization of the Song of Songs.

Given the extraordinary character of the book, there was considerable debate regarding the canonicity of the book. This debate is recorded in the Mishnah,⁷ in which the school of Shammai opposed its canonicity and the school of Hillel

⁶ A *hapax legomena* is a word that occurs once and only once in a document or corpus, in this case, in the Hebrew Bible.

supported it. As usual, the less stringent school of Hillel eventually prevailed; the Song of Songs entered the canon and was eventually accepted by all. A comment by Rabbi Akiva, found in this same passage of the mishnah, alludes to some lingering debate over the book and its usage. Some *tannaim*, sages who were contemporaries with Akiva, suggested that the Song of Songs might "render ones' hands unclean," its suggestive language leading to impure thoughts. Akiva vehemently rejects this suggestion, offering the strongest recorded defense of the book:

"God forbid!—no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for the entire world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."⁸

Why does Akiva attach such sacred meaning to this seemingly secular book? Akiva's defense of the book presumes an allegorical reading of the text. Ephraim Urbach explains a conventional view of Akiva's allegorical interpretation of the book:

"It seems that this declaration is linked to the mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs, which perceived this text as a description of the human soul's intense love and longing for God's presence, yearning to

⁷ Mishnah Yadaim 3:5.

⁸ Ibid.

penetrate the mystical secrets and attain knowledge of the *merkabah*."⁹

So revered was this religious and mystical reading of the Song of Songs that Akiva condemned to eternal damnation anyone who dared treat it as a secular love song: "Whoever trills verses of Canticles at a banquet and makes a kind of melody thereof has no share in the world to come."¹⁰ The allegorical reading of the Song of Songs had a special theological meaning for Akiva who strongly emphasized the role of love in his religious philosophy. Even as he was martyred, he rejoiced at the chance to live up to loving God with "all thy heart, soul and thy might." The Song of Songs is a sublime love song between God and Israel, and Akiva sees it as an attempt to elevate the role of love in religious experience.

B. Allegorical Reading of the Song of Songs—Jewish

While Akiva emphasized the mystical nature of the love between God and Israel, this allegorical reading of the book was not his innovation. The normative Jewish exegesis

⁹ Ephraim Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," in Scripta Hierosolymitana 22 (1971). 516.

¹⁰ B.T. Sanhedrin 101a and Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:10.

of the Song of Songs, in which the Bridegroom represents Yahweh, and the Bride represents Israel, was solidified between the destruction of the Temple (70 C.E.) and the Bar Kochba revolt (132 C.E.). The book details the historical love relationship between God and the nation from the Exodus from Egypt and onward.

The many tribulations of the Hadrianic persecutions and the martyrdom that came out of that period led to a more polemical reading of many texts. Following these persecutions there was a great deal of interest by the Christian community in polemics with the Jewish community. Jews were engaged in various public debates with the Christian community and disputatious literature flourished, constantly putting Judaism on the defensive.¹¹ Certain key points of contention regarding the nature and status of Law, Revelation and Messianism, for example, are all reflected in the exegesis on the Song. Furthermore, the persecutions gave rise to interpretations of the Song of Songs in which martyrology is praised and the unique role of Israel among the nations was emphasized.

By the Fourth Century, as Christianity becomes dominant in the Roman Empire, the polemical tone of the exegesis on the Song becomes more strident. Christianity was no longer just another group of Jewish sectarians -- it was the oppressive ruler, the "wicked kingdom."¹² By the time of the midrashic compilations such as Song of Songs Rabbah and Pesikta deRav Kahana, the interpretations are almost exclusively polemical or apologetic in nature. The intended audience for these polemics is not necessarily the Christian community, although there clearly was some dialogue between the two communities. They were targeted at Jews themselves. The inner-directed exegesis of the rabbis serves as a warning and reminder to their community of the unique relationship that Israel has with God, and what they must do to maintain this relationship.

C. Allegorical Reading of the Song of Songs-Christian.

The Church inherited an allegorical approach to the Song of Songs from the Jewish community, but they replaced the Bride and Bridegroom of God and Israel with Christ and the Church. Origen was not the first Church father to

¹¹ Seltzer, Claudia, Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30-150 C.E. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

interpret the Song of Songs allegorically (Hippolytus had done so four decades earlier), but his work was undoubtedly the most influential. Many other Church fathers wrote commentaries on the Song, including Jerome, Augustine, Theodoret and Gregory of Nyssa, but all of their work is derivative of Origen's original, groundbreaking interpretation.

II. Origen the Christian Commentator.

Origen was born in approximately 185 C.E. His commentaries offer a unique point of comparison with the rabbinic midrashim because he had substantial contact with the Jewish community and its texts. The exact dating of Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs is uncertain, but it was already composed by the year 244 C.E. He produced ten volumes, all of which were lost. However, four books were translated into Latin by Rufinus, and two homilies on the Song of Songs were translated by Jerome. As every translation is an interpretation in itself, we can never be completely certain of the nuances of every passage, but the general approach and methodology remain intact. His commentary was considered his master work. Jerome attested

¹² See commentary below on Chapter 2:11-13.

to their great impact in his prologue to the translation of Origen's homilies:

While Origen surpassed all writers in his other books, in his Song of Songs, he surpassed himself . . . this exposition of his is so splendid and so clear, that it seems to me that the words, *The King brought me into His chamber*,¹³ have found their fulfillment in him.¹⁴

Origen organized his commentary by verse, sometimes quoting only a portion of a verse, and sometimes grouping several verses together. He would first offer a brief "literal" interpretation of the passage, including an explanation of who is speaking and the dramatic choreography of the scene. He then launched into a more lengthy allegorical reading. He identified the Bridegroom as Christ, and the Bride as both the Church and the individual Christian soul. He generally proffers an interpretation on the ecclesial level first, and then another interpretation directed at the individual soul. He does not regard these two levels as contradictory, or even as necessarily distinct; for Origen they are bound together as one and the same thing. The same is true for redemption. Redemption is not simply an individual or even a collective matter, but both at once.

¹³ Song of Songs 1:4.

Redemption cannot come only to the individual without the Church, nor can it come to the Church without coming to individuals. Origen moves easily from the individual to the collective in his exegesis.

The fundamental principle underlying Origen's Scriptural exegesis is that the entire Old Testament is a prophecy of Christ, who is the key to understanding this text. The Jews, blind to the teachings of Christ, are therefore blind to the true meaning of the Scriptures. Revelation, in the form of Scripture, is secondary for Origen and other Christians. True revelation is not the book itself, but Christ; Christ is the Word of God, the Logos, speaking to man in revealed form. This cardinal belief recurs countless times in Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs. Yet even as Origen criticizes the Jewish community for misinterpreting Scripture, he frequently employs the hermeneutic devices used by the rabbis for his own scriptural exegesis, such as deriving an interpretation from a word-play on a Hebrew word.

¹⁴ Written in Jerome's prologue to Origen's Homilies on the Song of Songs. Found in Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 265.

Just as Origen was influenced by the exegesis of the rabbis, the rabbis were influenced by the polemical writing of Origen and the Christian community. Their political situation certainly influenced the apologetic tone of their exegesis, but undoubtedly, Origen's exegesis sharpened the polemical nature of their commentary. Origen lived within the Jewish community of Caesaria for two decades, and there are several scholars who believe that Origen was in contact with Hillel, Hoshaya Rabbah, Resh Lakish and other prominent Jewish leaders.¹⁵ The cultural milieu was such that dialogue and debate must have occurred between the two communities, and the exegesis on the Song of Songs was clearly influenced by these verbal and written polemics.

III. The Role of Scripture in Jewish-Christian Polemics.

Scripture becomes the major arena for developing the differences between Christians and Jews because the focal point in Jewish-Christian polemics hinged on who "owns" the Scripture. The debate within the two communities was not

¹⁵ H. Graetz, in "Hillel, der Patriarchensohn," *MGWJ* 25 (1881), argues that Origen was in contact with Hillel. W. Bacher, in "The Church Father Origen and Rabbi Hoshaya," *JQR* 3 (1891), argues that Origen was in contact with Hoshaya Rabbah. C. Hanson in *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London, 1954) suggests that Origen was in contact with Resh Lakish.

simply over the meanings of verses, but rather represented a larger fight for control. Ultimately, the dispute over Scripture was part of a greater struggle over who inherits God's promise as the "true Israel." The Jews were not willing to concede the Scriptures to the Christians, for they needed the Bible for their own authority and proselytizing purposes. Jews appealed to the same groups to whom Christians were preaching. If a group of sectarians claimed to be the "true Israel," and thereby usurped Judaism's textual basis, Judaism would lose its strongest lever. Christians were eager to claim the antiquity of the scriptural heritage to counter the charge that they were an upstart religion lacking in foundation. Scripture became the basis for a tremendous polemical dialogue.¹⁶

The Song of Songs is particularly fertile ground for Jewish-Christian polemics because of its unusual character. The text cries out for a creative and multi-layered exegesis because its characters and their dialogue must be read allegorically. Every animate object, every tree, lily, dove and blossom, takes on a highly symbolic meaning.

¹⁶ For more on this topic, see Seltzer, Jewish Responses to Early Christians.

The primary theological question of both Jewish and Christian exegesis on the Song of Songs is no less than who is the beloved Bride of God, or who is the "true Israel." With the status of chosenness at stake, the two communities stage a heated battle over the Song of Songs text. While Origen and Rabbi Yochanan lived miles apart, one can almost hear them debating back and forth over each theological controversy.

IV. Previous Works on the This Topic.

The interrelationship between the two communities' exegesis on the text will be the major focus of this paper. To date, there have been four studies that examine the interrelationship between Origen and the rabbis, and three of them touch on the Song of Songs in particular. The first published work was by Y.F. Baer in 1956, the second by Ephraim Urbach in 1961, the third (which does not deal specifically with the Song of Songs) by N.R.M. Lange in 1975, and the most recent by Reuven Kimelman in 1980.

Baer's work, *Israel, The Christian Church, and the Roman Empire; from the time of Septimus Severus to the Edict of Toleration of A.D. 313*, provides a historical look at the

first three-hundred years of the relationship between the Church and Israel. The article contains three main sections, the second of which discusses Origen, whom Baer calls "the greatest of the Christian theologians of the period under discussion here."¹⁷ Within this section, Baer deals at some length with Origen's commentary and homilies on the Song of Songs which he explains were built on rabbinical midrashim. He gives a brief analysis of several verses and notes the various ways that Origen drew his material from the teachings of the rabbis, most frequently, without quoting them. Origen's extensive "borrowing" from the rabbis allows for a unique perspective into the political and religious attitude of the Jewish community in Origen's time. Baer seeks to derive the historical lessons of the period from the examination of Origen's works.

Urbach also maintains the thesis that Origen's commentaries are uni-directional responses to Rabbinic exegesis. In his article, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," he points out, rather

¹⁷ Baer, Y, "Israel, the Christian Church, and the Roman Empire from the Time of Septimius Severus to the Edict of Toleration of 313," In Scripta Hierosolymitana 7, 1961, p. 98.

unflatteringly, how Origen's commentaries draw from the rabbis:

At times Origen had need only to transcribe the homilies of the Sages and change a few of their concepts in order to find in them what he wanted, but such is his pleasure upon discovering an exposition of this nature that he does not lightly let it go.. It is the Rabbis who furnish the ideas and the sparkling homiletical interpretations, but his tiresome treatment of them and his tendency to drown them in a sea of words cause their charm and flavor to grow insipid at times. Yet, notwithstanding, his words are imbued with the enthusiasms of one who has found a sphere in which to display his talents.¹⁸

Urbach argues that Origen was influenced by the rabbis, but fails to recognize the extent to which the rabbis were influenced in return by the writings of Origen.

Lange's book, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish Christian Relations in Third Century Palestine*,¹⁹ does not deal specifically with Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs, but more generally with Origen's relationship with the Jews. He believes that Origen holds a key position in this period's history of Jewish-Christian relations because of his contact with the Jewish community of Caesaria, and

¹⁸ Urbach, p.258.

he sets out to describe the results of this contact in Scriptural analysis and public debates. He provides an important analysis of the shared context of these two communities.

Kimelman,²⁰ in contrast to Lange, offers the most focused analysis of this topic of all the studies to date. He specifically targets the Song of Songs exegesis of Origen as compared with the midrashic exegesis of Rabbi Yochanan, for they were contemporaries. Though they did not live in the same city, in the mid-240's C.E., Origen returned to Caesarea and Rabbi Yochanan made frequent trips there to visit his teacher Hoshaya Rabbah. In a brief analysis of five verses, Kimelman sets out to prove that both R. Yochanan and Origen were aware of each other's exegetical tendencies and that they reflected the Jewish-Christian disputes of the period. Kimelman's work is limited significantly because he compares Origen only to R. Yochanan, and he focuses on only one theme within each

¹⁹ Lange, N. R. M., *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

²⁰ Kimelman, Reuven, "Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation," Harvard Theological Review, Vol. 73, (Jl-D. 80), 567-595.

verse. Nonetheless, his approach and methodology greatly influenced the way that I approached my research.

SECTION TWO - THE VERSES:

VERSE 1:2a LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH

I. The Nature of Revelation

Most scholars consider this verse the original beginning of the Song of Songs, with verse 1:1 the work of an editor's hand.²¹ With this dramatic opening, the Song of Songs introduces both the characters and the tone of this sensual, erotic love poetry. We meet our first character, a "bride" who pines away for her lover and longs for his kisses. The word *nashak*, or "kiss," has a range of meanings in Hebrew just as it does in English. In Psalms 85:10, it refers to meeting or joining: "justice and well-being kiss," and in Ezekiel 3:13, kissing refers to the way the wings of the cherubim touch each other. But here the bride asks specifically for the "kisses of his mouth," making explicit the romantic nature of these kisses.

The fact that these are lovers' kisses is critical for the subsequent allegorical interpretation that follows in both Rabbinic and Christian commentaries. The kiss is an intimacy that is shared between two figures who have exclusive feelings for one another, an intimacy that, in purity, is reserved only for the chosen love. It refers to

²¹ This title is considered the work of an editor for it uses the relative particle *asher*, which is never found in

a kind of direct contact that can only be known and enjoyed by the two lovers in embrace. The nature of the kiss would be compromised by any interference between the bride and her lover.

A. Mediated or Unmediated Revelation

The rabbis, who allegorized the Bride as Israel and her lover as God, interpreted the "kisses" to be the Revelation of God to His chosen lover, Israel. Origen, who followed Paul, countered that the "kisses" that Israel received were compromised because they were transmitted through angels and prophets. Paul noted that the revelation of Law was in fact inferior to the Gospel of Christ precisely because of this mediation by the angels:

[The Law] was promulgated through angels, by the agency of an intermediary. Now there can be an intermediary only between two parties, yet God is one. Is the Law contrary then, to God's promises? . . . [T]he promise can be given only by faith in Jesus Christ to those who have this faith."²²

In this statement, Paul not only degrades the nature of Law for being mediated by angels, but he also challenges

the Song itself. George Buttrick, ed., vol. 5 of *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 91.

²² Galatians 3:19-22.

whether it could even be contrary to God by nature of its indirect transmission.

1. Direct Revelation Through Christ

Origen, in his Commentary on the Song of Songs, adopts Paul's perspective and applies it directly to this verse.

Origen: I pour out my petition to Thee, the Father of my Spouse, beseeching Thee to have compassion at last upon my love, and to send him that He may no longer speak to me only by his servants the angels and the prophets, but may come directly and kiss me with the kisses of His mouth—that is to say, may pour the words of His mouth into mine, that I may hear Him speak Himself, and see Him teaching. The kisses are Christ's which He bestowed on His Church when at His coming, being present in the flesh, He in His own person spoke to her the words of faith and love and peace, according to the promise of Isaiah who, when sent beforehand to the Bride, had said: *Not a messenger nor an angel, but the Lord Himself shall save us.*²³

Origen argues that the "kisses" are the teachings of Christ that are "poured forth" directly to the mouth of His Bride, the Church. The Bride, who has become impatient with the messages of the servants, the angels and prophets, wants a direct experience with her Lover, Christ. Origen makes reference to an intermediary more direct in his First Homily:

²³ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 60.

Let Him Kiss me with the Kisses of his Mouth. Their meaning is: 'How long is my Bridegroom going to send me kisses by Moses and kisses by the prophets? It is His own mouth that I desire now to touch; let Him come, let Him come down Himself!'²⁴

In this case, Origen specifies Moses as the intermediary. These comments pose a direct challenge to the Jewish community regarding the nature of their Law, and the role of Moses and the angels in its transmission. The Torah text seems to state explicitly that the Torah is given through Moses, who serves as mediator between God and Israel: "It was I standing between the Lord and you at that time."²⁵ Additionally, many rabbinic texts reinforce the role of Moses as mediator between God and Israel. According to Paul and Origen, mediated revelation is no better than being kissed by the servant of your master. It is clearly not a genuinely divine experience. Two questions are raised by these arguments: first, how did the Jewish community respond to these polemics? And second, in what ways were these Christian works responses to what already existed in rabbinic texts?

²⁴Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 269.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 5:5.

We cannot know the answers to these questions conclusively. The four studies mentioned in the introduction help us come closer to some understanding of the interrelation between the two communities. These studies have theorized that Origen borrowed techniques and even direct exegesis from the rabbis. Only Reuven Kimmelman discusses the text as a dialogue between the two communities. Kimmelman compared the writings specifically of Rabbi Yochanan with those of Origen, and concluded in his study that there was considerable dispute between these two figures.

2. The Jewish Defense of Direct Revelation

There are two commentaries attributed to Rabbi Yochanan on this verse, and on the surface, they seem to be in direct contradiction to one another. The first claims that the law was carried to the Israelites by the angels:

An angel carried the utterances from before the Holy blessed be He, each one in turn and brought it to each of the Israelites and said to him, "Do you take upon yourself this commandment? So-and-so many rules are attached to it, so and so many penalties are attached to it, so many precepts and so many lenient and strict applications are attached to it; such and such a reward is attached to it' The Israelite would answer him, 'Yes.' . . . thereupon he kissed him on the mouth.²⁶

The second fights strongly against the notion of mediation, re-interpreting Moses' role in the transmission of Law to that of envoy, not mediator:

Rabbi Yochanan interpreted the verse as applying to Israel when they went up to Mount Sinai. It was as if a king wanted to marry a wife of good and noble family so he sent an envoy to speak with her. She said: 'I am not worthy to be his handmaid, but all the same I desire to hear from his own mouth.' When the envoy returned to the king, he was full of smiles, but he would give no clear report to the king. The king who was very discerning, said: 'This man is full of smiles, which would show that she consented and he does not give any clear report, which would seem to show that she said that she wants to hear from my own mouth.' So Israel is the woman of good family, Moses is the envoy and the king is the Holy One, blessed be He.²⁷

While the envoy does transmit "smiles" that the discerning king interprets as the answer he desired, he himself does not speak! Moses, as envoy, does not mediate the verbal exchange, he merely conveys the interest on behalf of both parties. The verbal exchange is the true revelation, the Logos. This verbal exchange, the text leads us to believe, is exchanged directly between the King and the woman, between God and Israel.

²⁶ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:2.

²⁷ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:3.

Ephraim Urbach asserts that Origen's exegesis is a copy of this dictum of Rabbi Yochanan, but is also a reaction to his first homily on angels.²⁸ R. Yochanan's midrash of the angels necessitated an anthropomorphic interpretation of the verse as the angel kisses the lips of each Israelite who accepts the commandment. Origen demotes the significance of the commandment and its acceptance because of its mediation by angels. He asserts the superiority of the Church which was vouchsafed by Christ's direct kiss.

R. Yochanan was undoubtedly aware of the Christian polemic regarding Jewish mediation. The mediation of Revelation clearly diminished the significance of the relationship between God and Israel. Why then would R. Yochanan interpret this verse in this manner? We can only understand this midrash in the context of the midrash which follows his interpretation:

The rabbis, however, say: The *Commandment* itself went in turn to each of the Israelites and said to him, "Do you undertake to keep me? So many rules are attached to me, so many penalties...such and such a reward is attached to me." He would reply, 'Yes, yes,' and straightway the commandment kissed him on the mouth (for

²⁸ Urbach, p. 255.

Adkulain son of Hadimah),²⁹ and taught him Torah.³⁰ (emphasis added)

This midrash mirrors R. Yochanan's previous one almost exactly, except it is the Commandment, or the Word, that comes directly to each Israelite. If it is the Word that comes to each Israelite, then there is no mediation, for the Word is equivalent to God Himself. Origen frequently refers to Jesus as the Word or Logos in its exegesis. In this sense, the rabbis seem to resolve the polemic easily by refuting R. Yochanan's angel interpretation in favor of the direct interaction between Israel and the Commandment.

3. Revelation as Legal Covenant

It is also possible that mediation is not the main thrust of these two commentaries at all. The two midrashim take care to mention that the angel or the Commandment went to each Israelite and asked for acceptance. Both interpretations stress the willing participation that each and every Israelite makes in accepting the Torah. The Torah is a Covenant not only with a people, but between God and every Israelite, a Holy Covenant not dissimilar to that of Kiddushin, the sanctification of one person to another

²⁹ There is no adequate explanation for these words.

in marriage. There are hints of a formal legal procedure in the action carried out by the angel and the Commandment, in which each consenting partner accepts the terms of the Covenant, sealing the Kiddushin with a kiss. This analogy is in harmony with the broader analogy of marriage between Israel and God found in the Song of Songs allegory. These midrashim do not primarily focus on mediation of Revelation, but rather on the idea that Revelation at Sinai was a mutually consensual and binding legal proceeding between God and each and every Israelite soul.

Origen picks up on this theme of individual consent:

When we seek the meaning of this sort and cannot find it, then let us make this prayer our own and beg from God the visitation of His Word, saying: "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His Word." For the Father knows each single soul's capacity and understands the right time for a soul to receive the kisses of the Word in lights and insights of this sort.³¹

Origen also emphasizes the relationship that God has developed with each individual. Origen frequently shifts from an interpretation of the Bride as Church to an interpretation of the Bride as each individual, so this is not an unusual additional reading of this verse. However,

³⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:2.

it is difficult to assess the influence of R. Yochanan's interpretation on Origen here.

4. The Role of Angels and Moses in Revelation

Whether or not individual covenant was the main thrust of the two homilies found above in Song of Songs Rabba, it becomes clearer that R. Yochanan was less concerned with the role of angels in mediation, for there was already a rabbinic tendency to exclude any mediating angels from Sinai.³² He, himself, excludes the angels' mediation in another midrash on the Torah verse, *I am the Lord Thy God*:³³

Consider the analogy of a king who was standing at the door of his palace giving orders. The general thought: He is about to deal through me . . . So when God was standing issuing commands on Mt. Sinai, Michael thought: He is about to deal through me. Gabriel thought: He is about to deal through me. But as soon as they saw Him say: *I am the Lord thy God*, they said: He is dealing [directly] with His children and giving the Torah to His people.³⁴

In this case, the midrash states explicitly that God gave Revelation directly to the people Israel. However, R.

³¹ Origen, *Commentary and Homilies*, p.62.

³² Kimelman, p. 575. Kimelman refers the reader to J. Goldin, "Not by an Angel and Not by a Messenger," in *Religions in Antiquity* (Ed. J Neusner, Leiden, 1968), 419.

³³ Exodus 20:2.

³⁴ Pesikta Rabbati 21.5.

Yochanan cannot erase the biblical texts or subsequent literature which show Moses as mediator of the covenant. This explains his second homily, in which he responds more directly to the polemic posed by Origen regarding mediation. R. Yochanan attempts to minimize the role of Moses in Revelation, asserting that he is not a mediator, but rather an envoy, one he analogizes to a marriage broker.

Students and contemporaries of R. Yochanan show great discomfort as well with the idea that Moses is mediator in their exegesis on this verse. Rabbi Levi, a colleague of R. Yochanan, was clearly aware of the polemics surrounding this issue,³⁵ and in his exegesis he resists the notion that the Law was mediated by Moses. Yet he also must struggle against the many references to Moses' direct involvement in the transmission of the Law. R. Levi attempts a compromise position, arguing that while Moses communicated most of the commandments, God did kiss the Israelites directly with His mouth for two of the most important commandments. He justifies his interpretation with a traditional exegetical method, a numbers game:

³⁵ See Exodus Rabba 32:3 for further evidence of R Levi's understanding of this polemic.

It is written, *Moses commanded us a law.*³⁶ The whole Torah contains six hundred and thirteen commandments. The numerical value of the word 'torah' is six hundred and eleven, and so many commandments Moses spoke to us, but 'I am' and 'Thou shalt not have' Moses did not speak to us, but we heard them from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He . . . In this way, *He kissed me with the kisses of his mouth.*³⁷

God's kisses transmitted only two of the commandments directly. However, these two commandments are precisely those that counter any Christian claims for a son of God. The midrash continues with a discussion between the 'rabbis' and Joshua b. Levi and his students. The rabbis argue that the Israelites heard *all* of the commandments from the mouth of God, and they justify it with the verse, "And they said to Moses: 'Speak thou with us and we will hear.'" ³⁸ They maintain that the Torah does not adhere to strict chronological order, and suggest that the Israelites spoke these words after hearing the first two commandments uttered directly by the mouth of God. In this way, the Israelites heard all the Law they needed to profess their utter faith, and they accepted it. Moses then transmitted the remainder of the 611 commandments.

³⁶ Deuteronomy 33:4.

³⁷ Song of Songs Rabba 1:2:2.

But not even R. Levi was satisfied with this compromise position, and in another homily he argues that the entire Law was transmitted directly from the mouth of God. Rabbi Levi, joined by R. Isaac, suggests this interpretation in the form of a parable in which the Father offers his food directly from his own mouth:

R. Isaac and R. Levi; one said that it can be compared to a rich man's son, who, on returning from school, found a dish of food in front of his father. When the father offered him a piece, the son said: 'I would rather have some of that which thou thyself art now eating.' The father complied, on account of his great love for him, giving him from his own mouth.³⁹

R. Levi and R. Isaac note that God gave directly from His mouth out of his great love for Israel. In another passage, R. Pinhas b. Hama also asserts that God gave all of the commandments directly from His mouth, but he attributes this gesture not to God's love, but rather to His distrust of Israel:

"Does then one comply with the request of a fool? The Holy One, blessed by He, clearly foresaw, however, that after forty days, Israel would make the Golden Calf. Said He: 'Unless I now comply with their request, they will later say: "All we asked of Moses was that God should show us His likeness and that He should speak with us." In order, therefore, not to give them the excuse of

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Exodus Rabbah 41:3.

saying, 'Because we did not hear the Commandments from God's own mouth, or see His likeness, did we make this god,' God thought to Himself: 'I will reveal Myself to them and also speak with them mouth to mouth'...' 'Out of His mouth cometh knowledge and discernment' intimates that the Torah was given to them from God's own mouth."⁴⁰

Whatever the reason for God's direct Revelation, be it out of love or coercion, the number and vehemence of the interpretations on this verse related to mediation indicate the vital importance of this issue to the rabbis. Origen's suggestion, based on previous Christian polemics, that the mediated law of Israel was replaced by the direct revelation of the Word in Christ, challenged the very foundation of the God-Israel relationship. Christians want to show that they are the rightful inheritors of Scripture, as the recipients of its latest revelation. The question of mediated or non-mediated revelation is only one part of a larger and more fundamental theological debate over who truly understands the word of God and who will inherit God's promise as the true Israel.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

B. "Kisses" as interpretations of Scripture

While the polemical exegesis on the first half of this verse focuses primarily on mediation, Origen offers another interpretation for "kisses" that does not deal with the issue of direct revelation in terms of the Torah text itself, but rather attacks the many levels ("kisses") of interpretation necessary to understand the Law:

For as long as she was incapable of receiving the solid and unadulterated doctrine of the Word of God Himself, of necessity she received 'kisses,' that is interpretations, from the mouth of teachers. But when she has begun to discern for herself what was obscure, to unravel what was tangled, to unfold what was involved, to interpret parables and riddles and the sayings of the wise along the lines of her own expert thinking, then let her believe that she has now received the kisses of the Spouse Himself, that is the Word of God.⁴¹

In response, the rabbis refuse to allow the Law to be derided as mere preparation for the Gospel. Two very similar interpretations are found in Song of Songs Rabbah and Exodus Rabbah which respond directly to the challenge posed by Origen. Rabbi Hanina writes that each subsequent generation received more of God's commandments: "He gave Adam six commandments, and added one to Noah, Abraham had

⁴¹ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 61.

eight, and Jacob nine, but to Israel He gave them all."⁴² He then goes on to further emphasize that the heathens did not receive *all* the commandments: "*he hath not dealt so with any nation,*"⁴³ only with Jacob, whom He chose from all the heathen people, giving to the latter only part [of the Commandments]." Not only were the heathens not given all of the commandments, but most importantly, they were not given a clear explanation of them:

So God gave to the heathen commandments as it were, in their raw state, for them to toil over, not making any distinction among them between uncleanness and purity; but as soon as Israel came, He explained each precept separately to them, both its punishment and reward, as it says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth."⁴⁴

This exegesis could be a direct response to Origen's comment that interpretation was needed to understand the Law. The rabbis respond that the Christians simply never received the full Law in its finished state. Therefore, the heathens would understandably need help to "discern what was obscure and unravel what was tangled." For Israel, it was taught and interpreted from the mouth of God directly. The full Law in its finished state, for the rabbis, included the Oral Torah, the domain of Israel

⁴² Exodus Rabbah 30:9.

⁴³ Psalms 147:20.

alone. This becomes the primary polemical feature of the exegesis on the second half of this verse: "For your love/breasts are better than wine."

⁴⁴ Exodus Rabbah 30:9.

VERSE 1:2b FOR YOUR LOVE (ED ONES) IS BETTER THAN WINE

I. What comprises complete Revelation?

A. What is the companion to the Law?

Verse 1:2 compares the loved one favorably to wine. This is unquestionably high praise, for wine has the power to warm the soul, to intoxicate, and even to sanctify. However, there is considerable discussion in rabbinic literature over exactly what is better than wine. The tension lies in how to read *dodecha*. Depending on the vocalization, the Hebrew word can either be read as either gender, as the masculine "loved ones" or as the feminine "breasts." The Septuagint translates it as "breasts" and subsequent Church fathers, including Origen, base their exegesis on this translation. There is no uniform agreement in rabbinic exegesis. Interpretations are found using either or both meanings, and several arguments over the word are recorded in the Midrash.

1. Oral Torah is companion to Law.

In one text, the question of how to read the word *dodecha* is posed to R. Ishmael, who responds that the word should be read in the feminine as *dadecha*, "breasts."⁴⁵ Joshua, who asked the question, counters that it should be

⁴⁵ Tosefta Parah 10:3.

vocalized as the masculine, *dodecha*, "loved ones," based on the parallel vocalization of *shemanecha*, "oils," found in the very next verse of the Song of Songs. R. Yochanan reads the verse with the double entendre of the word, as both breasts and loved ones.

Simeon b. Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: The teachings of the Scribes⁴⁶ [the "loved ones"] are as beloved as the teachings of the Torah. What is the proof, 'And the roof of the mouth is like the best wine.' The scholars said in the name of R. Yochanan: The teachings of the Scribes are more beloved than those of the Torah.⁴⁷ (*italics mine*)

Here, R. Yochanan translates the word *dodecha* as "loved ones," which refers to the Scribes. Yet, he derives his interpretation from a metaphoric understanding of Torah as plural "breasts," meaning both the Written and the Oral Torah. L. Ginzburg, in his *Commentary on the Palestinian Talmud*, notes that the comparison of breast to Torah is commonplace. R. Yochanan compares the Torah to breasts, and just as a baby nurses from its mother's two breasts, so does Israel gain nourishment from the two torahs, oral and written. The comparison implies that the two are

⁴⁶ The *sofram*, "Scribes" was another designation for the *rabbanim*, "rabbis," who are considered the "loved ones" for transmitting the Oral Torah.

⁴⁷ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:2, similarly found in B.T. Avodah Zarah 35a and P.T. Sanhedrin 11:4.

equivalent. But R. Yochanan goes further. Not only are they equivalent, but the teachings of the "loved ones" or the Scribes, the Oral Torah, are more beloved than those of Torah.

2. Gospel as successor to the Law.

How does R. Yochanan come to this seemingly heretical idea?

Perhaps as a response to the words of Origen:

The Bridegroom's breasts are good, therefore, because treasures of wisdom and knowledge are concealed in them. The Bride, moreover, compares these breasts to wine and that in such a way as to point the breasts' superiority. By wine is meant the ordinances and teachings which the Bride had been wont to receive through the Law and Prophets before the Bridegroom came. But when she now reflects upon the teaching that flows forth from the Bridegroom's breasts, she is amazed and marvels: She sees that it is far superior to that with which she had been gladdened as with spiritual wine served to her by the holy fathers and prophets, before the Bridegroom came...she says, "Thy breasts are better than wine"--better, that is to say, than the teaching with which she was gladdened by them that were of old.⁴⁸

Both Origen and R. Yochanan agree that the wine is the "ordinances and teachings which the Bride had been wont to receive through the Law and Prophets," and they both agree that the breasts offer something superior. But they differ

⁴⁸ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 65.

in terms of what the milk of the breasts offer. For Origen, it is the Gospel, and for R. Yochanan it is the Oral Torah. Wine can warm the heart, but it cannot nurture or sustain the soul. Who derives the true sustenance of the milk from God? Both Origen and Rabbi Yochanan use this verse to prove that they are in possession of the proper companion to the Law, but for one it is the Gospel and for the other, the Oral Torah. The issue at stake, once again, is no less than who is the true Israel.

B. Christian Understanding of Law as preparation for Gospel.

Paul articulated this polemic earlier with his letter to the Romans and the Letter to the Galatians in which he sets out to correct what he considered the Jews' proud reliance on Law. He stated that one should appreciate the Law as part of the development of God's divine plan. The Mosaic Law was good and holy because it revealed God's will to the Jews,⁴⁹ but the Law does not offer the spiritual guidance necessary to obey them: "So then, no human being can be

⁴⁹ Romans 7:12.

found upright at the tribunal of God by keeping the Law; all that the Law does is to tell us what is sinful."⁵⁰

Paul goes further, stating that the Law invites one to break it, and thereby tempts sinfulness: "Once when there was no Law, I used to be alive; but when the commandment came, sin came to life and I died. The commandment was meant to bring life, but I found it brought death..."⁵¹ Paul speaks here of a spiritual death brought on by the blindness of strict adherence to the Law. Origen adopts the Pauline view that the Law is inferior to Gospel, but he does not say that the Law is worthless, or even dangerous, as Paul has done. Rather, he asserts its importance and worth for Christians, thereby claiming ownership over the Law. Nevertheless, the wine of Law, even good wine, cannot be compared to the sustaining milk of the Gospel:

The Bride says here, "Thy breasts are better than wine," as referring to good wine, not bad wine. For the Bridegroom's teachings are preferred in comparison not with bad ones, but with good. She had tasted good wine before, in the Law and the Prophets, in that by musing upon them the Bride had prepared herself, as it were, to receive gladness of heart, and had made herself ready and able to receive also that more excellent and all-surpassing doctrine that was to come to her hereafter through the

⁵⁰ Romans 3:20.

⁵¹ Romans 7:9-10.

breasts of the Bridegroom Himself. That, therefore is why she says, "Thy breasts are better than wine."⁵²

The Law, in and of itself, has tremendous worth, especially when seen as guidance before the Word of Christ has arrived. However, the wine of the Prophets turns sour when it sits too long, and Origen faults the Jews for failing to see that the wine was merely preparation for the milk of Christ. This polemic was made explicit by Paul, who faults the Jews for their failure to understand that the Law has been fully realized in Christ:

I readily testify to [the Jews'] fervor for God, but it is misguided. Not recognizing God's saving justice they have tried to establish their own, instead of submitting to the saving justice of God. But the Law has found its fulfillment in Christ, so that all who have faith will be justified.⁵³

C. Oral Law vs. Gospel to prove the "true Israel."

On the basis that Christ has fulfilled the Law of Israel, Paul asserts that Christians are the "new Israel."⁵⁴ Paul's

⁵² Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 68-69.

⁵³ Romans 10:2-4.

⁵⁴ Throughout the New Testament are references to Christianity as the "new Israel" or sometimes the "true Israel." The Gospel of Matthew, for example, operates with the understanding that Christianity represents the "new Israel" while the Gospel of Luke emphasizes Christianity as the "true Israel." These titles define the nature of Christianity's relationship to Judaism. However, they are

idea of the "new Israel" was sufficiently prevalent to elicit a strong refutation by the Jewish community. It was not enough for the Jews to simply defend the sanctity of the Law, however, for the Christians were laying claim to the Law as their foundation as well. Origen, in his comment above in praise of Law, adopts and accepts the teachings of the Prophets, and was unwilling to allow the Law to remain the sole possession of the Jews. The rabbis could only properly refute the "new Israel" theme by means of a unique possession of their own: the Oral Torah.

The rabbis could not prevent the Christians from claiming the Scriptures as their own, but they could criticize them for misunderstanding and corrupting its meaning. They identified the Oral Torah as a powerful alternative to the Christian Gospel as the fulfillment of the Law, and they brandished it polemically:

Moses asked that the Mishnah also be in written form like the Torah. But the Holy One . . . foresaw that the Nations would get to translate the Torah, and reading it, say, in Greek, would declare: We are Israel; we are the children of the Lord. The scales would appear to be balanced between both claims, but then the Holy One...will say to the Nations: What are you claiming, that you are My children? I have no way of

fairly interchangeable for our purposes; either term signifies the succession of Christianity over Judaism.

knowing other than that My child is he who possesses My secret lore (*mysterion*). The Nations will ask: And what is Thy secret? God will reply: It is the Mishnah [the Oral Law].⁵⁵

Without the Oral Torah, the relationship between God and Israel is jeopardized. This midrash even goes so far as to say that without the Mishnah, meaning the Oral Torah, God might be confused as to who the "true Israel" was. If God could be confused over the true Israel, how much more so mere mortals! In order to recognize the true Israel, one must look to who possesses God's secret lore, the Oral Torah. The sanctity of the Torah was challenged when the translations of the Septuagint and Vulgate corrupted the written text. Therefore, only Israel was entrusted to receive God's *mysterion*, the Oral Torah. In its oral form, the other communities did not have access to the "text," so they could not take ownership over it and then "corrupt" it as they had the written text.

This explains why it was important for R. Yochanan to say that the words of the Scribes are *more* beloved than Torah. The Oral Torah was the sole property of the Jews. In addition, the Oral Torah helps Jews to reclaim the Written

⁵⁵ Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 5:14.

Torah as well. The rabbis assert that the true meaning of the Written Torah is also not fully comprehensible to other nations because the key to understanding its full mystery lies in the Oral Torah:

The words of the beloved ones are better than the wine of the Torah. Why? Because one cannot give a proper decision from the words of the Torah, since the Torah is closed and consists entirely of headings; as may be inferred from the text, *And teach thou it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths* (Deut. 31:19) which means, it is 'headings' (*ohbnx*) in their mouths.' From the words of the Sages, however, one can derive the proper law because they explain the Torah.⁵⁶

The rabbis make use of a traditional hermeneutic device in which they derive the idea of *simanim* "headings," from the word *sima*, "to put," referring to the Torah. In this way, the Midrash explains clearly how it can favorably compare the "beloved ones" with the wine of Torah. Without the scribes, the Torah is closed off from the reader. This polemic may have been directed both inward, to the Jewish sectarians and zealots who did not accept the divine nature of Oral Torah, and outward, taunting the communities who lacked access to the words of the Scribes. An additional passage explains that the Oral Torah is more strict in terms of its interpretation of practice, and in that way,

it is more beloved. It is an approach which views God's love for Israel in terms of discipline. Through the Oral Torah, Israel comes closer to the full intention of God and God's love:

If a man says: There is no command to put on phylacteries, thus transgressing a precept of the Torah, he is subject to no penalty. But if he says there are five compartments (in the phylacteries), thus transgressing the injunction of the Scribes, he is subject to a penalty . . . You see, therefore, that if he had not said the Shema at all he would only have transgressed a positive commandment, but now that he did say it, he rendered his life forfeit. This shows that the words of the Scribes are more beloved than those of the Torah . . . and they are even more stringent than the words of the Torah and the prophets.⁵⁷

Without the Oral Torah, one cannot expect to understand the intention of the Law. The Scribes teach the Law to Israel, and Israel alone. This is taught in a parable:

They (the Scribes) are like two agents whom a king sent to a province. With regard to one, he wrote: If he shows you my signature and seal, trust him, otherwise do not trust him. With regard to the other, he wrote: Even if he does not show you my signature and seal, trust him. So, of the words of prophecy, it is written, *If there arise in the midst of thee a prophet... and he give thee a sign,*⁵⁸ but of the words of the Scribes it is written, *according to the law which they shall teach*

⁵⁶ Numbers Rabbah 14:4.

⁵⁷ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:2.

⁵⁸ Deuteronomy 17:2.

thee.⁵⁹ It does not say, 'which the Torah shall teach thee,' but 'which they shall teach thee.' Nor does it say, 'according to the judgement which it shall tell thee', but 'which they shall tell thee.' *Thou shalt not turn aside from the sentence which they shall declare unto thee to the right hand nor to the left: if they tell you that the right hand is right and the left hand left, listen to them, and even if they shall tell you that the right hand is left and the left hand right.*⁶⁰

The parable explains that it is not the Torah that teaches Israel, but the Torah in the hands of the Scribes that teaches. So beloved and trusted are the words of the Scribes that you are to follow them, even if they seem to go against your initial understanding of the teachings of Torah—even if they run counter to your own common sense. If one were to try to navigate the Torah without the help of the Scribes, not only would one be unable to appreciate the true meaning of the text, one risked the dangers that come with misunderstanding the texts:

Just as with water, if one does not know how to swim in it, he will be drowned, so with the words of the Torah: if one does not know how to thread his way through them and to instruct in accordance with them, he will ultimately come to grief.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:2.

⁶¹ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:3.

The rabbis advocate complete reliance on the Oral Torah for the understanding of the Law despite the inconsistent and even contradictory nature of Oral Law. The rabbis' case for the preeminence of oral law is stretched somewhat thin with regard to this verse. We see the rabbis' tendency to force exegesis, especially on passages which are used by Christians to bolster their claim as the true or new Israel.⁶²

But the rabbis were not alone in straining the proper limits of interpretation. Origen pushes against the very boundaries of the laws of nature. For one, he has the bride sucking the milk of the Bridegroom's breasts. Even read allegorically, this reading is less than satisfactory. In addition, Origen writes that as children we drink the

⁶² In *Pesikta DeRab Kahana*, *Piska* 1:3, the rabbis comment on the verse: *Even upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him in the day of his espousals* (Song 3:11). The rabbis cannot abide that Christians saw this as textual proof that there is a "mother" figure for God, specifically, this was a prototype for Mary. R. Yochanan asks how it is that God could have a mother? R. Eleazar answers with a parable in which a king so loves his daughter that he first calls her "daughter," but unsatisfied with this endearment, God calls his child, "my sister," still not satisfied, He also calls her, "my mother." R. Yochanan explains that God loved Israel so exceedingly, that God referred to Israel as "mother." R. Yochanan makes clear that Israel is the "mother" of God.

wine offered in preparation for the milk of Christ, which can only be received in maturity:

With reference to the perfect soul and the Word of God, then we may say in this connection that as long as a person is a child and has not yet offered himself wholly to God, he drinks the wine which that field produces, which holds within itself the hidden treasure too; and he is gladdened by the wine he drinks. But when he has offered and vowed himself to God and has been made a Nazirite and has found the hidden treasure and come to the very breasts and fountains of the Word of God, then he will no longer drink wine or spirit, but with reference to these treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in the Word of God, he will say to Him: "Thy breasts are better than wine."⁶³

This subverts the natural order in life, in which a baby suckles from his mother's breast before and maturing to drink the intoxicating wine without harm. Origen's exegesis indicates that he felt compelled to respond to the polemical reading of this verse offered by the rabbis. There is evidence that the exegesis on this verse was shaped by both sides in response to their dialogue with one another.

⁶³ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 69-70.

' VERSE 1:3 THE FRAGRANCE OF YOUR OINTMENTS IS SWEET. THY
NAME IS AS OIL POURED OUT. THEREFORE THE MAIDENS LOVE THEE

I. Who Spreads God's Fragrance in the World?

In this verse, the Bride continues her sensuous praise of her Bridegroom, moving from the sense of taste to the sense of smell. Perfumed oils were a necessity in the warm climate of the Near East,⁶⁴ but only the wealthy could afford the finest oils made from rare spices. Here, as she praises her Bridegroom's smell, the Bride refers not only to the sweet scent of her lover, but also to his impressive status. This is further evidenced in the next phrase, "thy name is as oil poured out." As oil is poured out and released from its containing vessel, the fragrance is diffused widely. Here, the oil is compared to His name which is spread far and wide. A name represents the essence of a person or thing in Semetic language,⁶⁵ and the spreading of the fragrance represents God's very essence being spread throughout the world.

The "maidens who love thee" refer to young girls, and represents sexual ripeness without a presumption of virginity. Rabbinic exegesis plays with the word "maidens" to signify all the righteous proselytes, martyrs, and

⁶⁴ Pope, Marvin, The Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 300.

faithful ones who follow the fragrance of God. Similarly, the Church interprets the maidens as the young souls reborn in baptism. Origen specifically refers to them as the young churches and the souls of the martyrs who display the vigor and purity of youth. These are the righteous ones who follow the fragrance of God in the world.

A. Jesus and the Christians spread God's fragrance.

The polemic in this verse concentrates on the question of who embodies the fragrant oil of God's name throughout the world? It is a contest between Abraham and the Christians (who represent the body of Christ) as the central disseminator of God's great name. In the Christian tradition, the notion of Christians spreading the name of Christ is found in II Corinthians 2:15-16, which states: "For we are the aroma of Christ everywhere." In his First Homily, Origen relates this passage to Jesus in his interpretation of this verse.

The literal interpretation . . . holds good also for that which is before us now . . . at Our Lord and Savior's coming, it should come to pass that His name should be so spread abroad throughout the globe and over the whole world, as to make it an odour of sweetness in every place; as the Apostle also says: *We are the good odour of Christ*

⁶⁵ Ibid.

*in every place; to the one indeed the odour of death unto death, but to the others the odour of life unto life.*⁶⁶

This verse extols the ability of the Christians, each church and each individual, to carry the "odor" of Christ throughout the world. With Christ as their example, they are empowered to spread the sweet fragrance of His Name. This fragrance has the power to bring death to those who are spiritually dead, but also to bring life to those who choose life in the Church. A similar passage is found in Origen's First Homily, but in this case he specifically names Jesus, instead of the embodiment of Jesus in the Christians, as the fragrance that is poured forth:

"Thy name is as perfume poured forth." As perfume when it is applied scatters its fragrance far and wide, so is the name of Jesus poured forth. In every land His name is named, throughout all the world my Lord is preached; for His 'name is as perfume poured forth.' We hear the name of Moses now, though formerly it was not heard beyond the confines of Judea; for none of the Greeks makes mention of it, neither do we find anything written about him or about the others anywhere in pagan literature. But straight away, when Jesus shone upon the world, He led forth the Law and the Prophets along with Himself and the words, 'Thy name is as perfume poured forth,' were indeed fulfilled.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 75.

⁶⁷ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 273.

In his homily, Origen claims that Jesus not only spread the Gospel far and wide, but that he was also responsible for spreading the Mosaic Law to a wider audience. Until Jesus came, he argues, no one had heard of Moses or the Law. Here, Origen shows again that he supports the importance of the Law, and but that he views its worth primarily as a foundation for the later Gospel. Origen makes this explicit in another interpretation on this verse in which the Law is viewed as the Bride's preparation for the greater fulfillment of the teachings of Christ:

The Bride had the use and the knowledge of spices—that is, of the words of the Law and the Prophets, by which, though only to a moderate extent, she was instructed and practised in the service of God before the Bridegroom came, she being then as yet a little child and under tutors, governors, and pedagogues; for, says the Scripture, *the Law was our pedagogue to Christ.*⁶⁸

In this case, the Law was the spice that scented the oil, but it was Jesus himself who spread the fragrant oil to the world. Thus, the words of the Prophets were the preparation for the fuller revelation of Christ.

⁶⁸Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 70.

B. Abraham as the paradigmatic righteous one.

The rabbis countered by expanding the role of Abraham in Jewish texts. As A. Altmann has observed, "Abraham assumes the role which Christian theology assigned to Jesus."⁶⁹ Rabbi Yochanan made a direct comparison of Abraham to Jesus by interpreting this verse with regard to Abraham:

R. Yochanan applied the verse to our father Abraham. When God said to him, *Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred* (Gen. 12:1), what did he resemble? A phial of scent put away in a corner, so that it gives off no smell, till someone comes and moves it from its place, when its odor begins to escape. So the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham: Abraham, many good deeds hast thou performed; many precepts hast thou kept. Become a wanderer on the earth and thy name will become great in My world.⁷⁰

Abraham is entrusted with spreading the fragrance of God to others, for he is viewed as the greatest man among giants. The rabbis wrote of him that he was "worthy of being created before Adam," but God worried that Adam might sin and there would be no one to "come and set things right." So God created Abraham in the middle of the generations so that he could undo the sins of Adam, as well as those of the generations that would follow.⁷¹ While Abraham was seen

⁶⁹ Altmann, A. "Homo Imago Dei" in *Jewish and Christian Theology*, JR 47 (1967), 251.

⁷⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3:3.

⁷¹ Genesis Rabbah 14:6.

as supporting the generations that came before and after him, the rabbis make clear that the final covenant was made with Abraham:

Abraham had misgivings, saying before God; Sovereign of the Universe, you made a covenant with Noah that you would not destroy his seed from off the earth, and I arose and accumulated more commandments and good deeds than him so that my covenant superseded his covenant. Shall perhaps another arise and surpass me in good deeds and commandments so that his covenant supersede mind? God thereupon said to him: *Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield.* (Gen. 15:1) From Noah I did not raise shields of the righteous, but from you I will raise shields of the righteous. Nay more: If your children fall into transgression and evil deed, I will see what righteous man there is among them who can say to the Attribute of Justice: Enough! And I will take him as an atonement for them.⁷²

It is through Abraham that God made his final covenant, and this counters any later claims, by Christians or other groups, of being a successor to Israel. Abraham plays a crucial role in the covenantal relationship between God and Biblical Israel.

Abraham was also greatly praised for his work in "making Jews." He was credited with being the archetypal missionary. The text in Song of Songs Rabbah on this verse

talks of how Abraham and Sarai gathered all the "souls they had made in Haran."

*Therefore do the worlds [maidens] love thee. Here are many "worlds," [rewards] for thee . . . Abraham used to convert the men and Sarai the women. Then why is it stated, 'which they make in Haran'? It teaches that Abraham our father used to bring them into his house and give them food and drink and be friendly to them and attract them and convert them and bring them under the wings of the Shechinah. You learn from this that if a man brings one creature under the wings of the Shechinah, it is accounted to him as if he had created him and formed him and molded him.*⁷³

Here, not only is Abraham praised for his missionary work, but he actually parallels God's creative power in "making souls." This midrash comes as close as any to ascribing divine powers to Abraham. Perhaps most striking in the comparison between Abraham and Jesus is the contention that Abraham was worthy enough to atone for the sins of all Israel:

Rabbi Nahman explained the verse to mean: In spite of all the vanities and lying acts which the children of Abraham our father commit in this world, he is sufficiently worthy of making atonement for them all. Hence it was written, *He was the greatest man among the Anakim* (Joshua 14:15).⁷⁴

⁷² Song of Songs Rabbah 1:4:3, similarly found in Genesis Rabbah 44:5.

⁷³ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3:3.

As Abraham assumes this central position in the life of Israel, the rabbis make clear that there is no theological role that Jesus plays that does not already have its precedent in Abraham. In fact, Abraham is held up as the paradigmatic "believer," and the rabbis hold up Abraham as the paradigm for faith and as the arbiter of the final covenant with God.

Paul also saw Abraham as the prototypical man of faith and sought to co-opt him as the model of Christian faith and piety. He made an example of him as justified in faith before he was circumcised: "Abraham was to be the ancestor of all believers who are uncircumcised so that they may be reckoned as upright."⁷⁵ He was also given God's promise to inherit the world before he came to know the Law.⁷⁶ For Paul, this proved that neither circumcision nor the Law was necessary for God's covenant, but faith alone:

For the promise to Abraham and his descendants that he should inherit the world

⁷⁴ Leviticus Rabbah 29:8.

⁷⁵ Romans 4:11.

⁷⁶ This Pauline assertion stems from the *brit betarim*, the "Covenant of the Pieces," God made with Abraham in Genesis 15:9. Chronologically in the Bible, this covenant was made before Abraham was circumcised. It was also a covenant based on faith rather than laws: "And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6)." Abraham's righteousness was due to his belief, rather than observance of laws.

was not through the law, but through the uprightness of faith. For if it is those who live by the Law who will gain the inheritance, faith is worthless...for the Law produces nothing by God's retribution and it is only where there is no Law that it is possible to live without breaking the law. That is why the promise is to faith, so that it comes as a free gift and is secure for all the descendants, not only those who rely on the law, but all those others who rely on the faith of Abraham, the ancestor of us all.⁷⁷

In calling Abraham the "ancestor of us all," Paul skillfully claims him as one of his own and holds him up as a model for Christian faith. Not only is Abraham the ancestor of all, but Paul identifies Christ as his direct progeny:

Now the promises were addressed to Abraham and to his progeny. The words were not and to his progenies in the plural, but in the singular...which means Christ. What I am saying is this; once a will had been long ago ratified by God, the Law, coming four hundred and thirty years later, could not abolish it and so nullify its promise. You see, if the inheritance comes by the Law, it no longer comes through a promise; but it was by a promise that God made his gift to Abraham.⁷⁸

Paul takes the promise made to Abraham and places Christ directly in line to inherit this promise. The Christian community, therefore, embraces the centrality of Abraham in

⁷⁷ Romans 4:13-17.

rabbinic exegesis on this verse, for it does not threaten the role of Jesus in spreading the fragrance of God. Rather, the Biblical Abraham, as portrayed in Genesis 15:6-9, is the precursor to the Christians who later take his example of faith and spread God's name in all the earth.

II. The Nature of the Ointment

Paul draws heavily from Biblical figures and language, for Christianity's legitimacy hinges in part on the fulfillment of prophecy and promises to biblical Israel. The continued existence of Judaism and the Jews and their failure to be convinced by Christianity requires some explanation. Similarly, Origen takes the Jewish community to task for their failure to understand the true meaning of the Law, and its true fulfillment in the Gospels. He compares the Song of Songs to an "ointment" that has the power to give both life and death:

There are some medicaments at the smell of which some animals die instantly; whereas others by the same odour are refreshed and given life. And it seems to be a matter of life unto life for some, and of death unto death for other...For such men therefore, the effect of this odour of the Song of Songs is from death unto death—from the death of unbelief, that is to say, unto the death of judgement and condemnation. But to those

⁷⁸ Galatians 3:16-18.

who follow the leading of their subtle spiritual sense and perceive that there is greater truth in the things that are not seen, than there is in those that are seen and that the things invisible and spiritual are closer to God than are the bodily and visible, this kind of interpretation will doubtless commend itself as that which they should follow and embrace; for they recognize that this is the way of understanding truth that leads to God.⁷⁹

The implication here is that those who continue to refuse to see the "truth" in the Song of Songs -- the allegorical representation of the union of Church and Christ -- risk the danger of this medicament for death. Those who cannot grasp the truth are like those who die the daily death of disbelief of the true Gospel, and will suffer the ultimate fate of death in eternal condemnation. Those who follow the Gospel will travel from this life to life eternal when the Resurrection occurs.

For Origen, this ointment symbolized both the incarnation of Christ, as well as the life-giving and even death-giving properties of the acceptance of the ointment. Origen describes with language from the Scriptures the symbolic "ingredients" in the ointment, and makes explicit how this ointment can bring life unto life:

⁷⁹Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 81.

Let us see, then, how that ointment was made up...The Bride had of course heard these things mentioned in the Law; but now she grasps their meaning and their truth. For she sees that those four ingredients of that ointment symbolized the Incarnation of the Word of God, who assumed a body compacted out of the four elements; in which body myrrh signifies the death He underwent, alike as Priests for the people and as Bridegroom for the Bride. But the fact that what was written was not simply 'myrrh,' but 'flower of myrrh,' and 'chosen myrrh' too, foreshadowed not His death alone, but also that He was to be the *Firstborn from the dead*, and that those who had been planted together in the likeness of His death should be not only called, but chosen too . . .⁸⁰

The ingredients in the ointment, which made up the body of Christ, not only told the story of His death, but also foreshadowed the redemption of any of those who followed his death, all those who were martyrs of Christ. In this sense, this ointment is like a medicament which has the power to revive the dead.

While the Christian community was concerned with explaining the Jews' failure to recognize the life-giving properties of Christ, Israel was concerned with reconciling their "favored" relationship with God with their continued exile and oppression. Several midrashim compare the oil itself to Israel's experience:

⁸⁰Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 72.

Thy name is as oil poured forth: Just as oil in its original form is bitter but afterwards becomes sweet, so though thy beginning was small, yet thy end should greatly increase. Just as oil is improved only by pounding, so Israel are brought to repentance only by chastisements. Just as oil will not mix with other liquids, so Israel do not mix with the other nations of the world...⁸¹

By comparing Israel to the many properties of oil, this verse sums up the historical situation of Israel. It helps to explain the suffering and the oppression that Israel experiences, even as God's "beloved" one. The "pounding" Israel experiences will bring her back in repentance, and ultimately make Israel sweeter than its original form. The love offered by the Bridegroom in this case appears much more as parental discipline than that of a lover, but discipline is a loving act nonetheless. In the end, Israel is assured of moving from the bitter to the sweet and the covenant is renewed.

A similar passage comparing Israel to oil is found in Deuteronomy Rabbah. This passage includes the comparisons found above, but instead of allegorizing Israel's historical past with oil, this one uses oil to signify a vision for the future:

⁸¹ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3:2.

Just as oil gives life to the world, so, too, do the words of the Torah give life to the world. Just as oil gives light to the world, so, too, do the words of the Torah give light to the world.⁸²

III. The "Maidens" are the righteous.

The second half of verse 1:3 refers to the "maidens" who love God. The Jewish and Christian interpretations generally agree that these "maidens" are the righteous followers of the truth. Of course, this differs in each tradition. The rabbinic midrashim found later all draw from Rabbi Nachman's interpretation of this verse found in B.T. Avodah Zarah. Here, the exegesis relies on the multiple meanings of *alumot*:

R. Nahman, the son of R. Hisda, gave the following exposition: What is the meaning of the verse, 'Thine ointments have a goodly fragrance [thy name is as ointment poured forth]?' To what may a scholar be compared? To a flask of *foliatum*: When opened, its odour is diffused, but if covered up, its odour does not diffuse; moreover, things that are hidden become revealed to him, as it is said, 'Therefore do the maidens love thee': which may be read to mean 'the hidden [love thee].' What is more, even the Angel of Death loves him, for the words may be read to mean, 'The one [appointed] over Death [loves thee];' still more, he inherits both worlds — this world and the world to come — for the words may be read to mean, worlds [love thee].'⁸³

⁸² Deuteronomy Rabbah 7:3.

⁸³ B.T. Avodah Zarah 35b.

Here a scholar, a *talmid chacham*, is praised for "opening up" or sharing his knowledge with others and, therefore, helping to spread God's fragrance. For his righteousness, the "hidden" things are revealed to the scholar. The "hidden" things, *alummot*, plays on the maidens *almmot*, that love him. Reb Nahman then reads maidens as *al mavet* (on death), and praises the scholar by saying that the Angel of Death loves him. He further deduces that the righteous one will merit this world and the world to come based on the reading of *alumot* as *olamot* (worlds). Reb Nahman teaches that scholars are the ones who spread the Name of God through their teachings, and for this righteousness, they earn no less than an eternal place in the world to come.

A later midrash shares many similarities with the one found in *Avodah Zarah*:

If a man has read the Scriptures, but not studied the Oral Law, he still stands outside; if he has studied the Oral Law, and has not yet read the Scriptures, he still stands outside; if he has read the Scriptures, and studied the Oral Law, but has not yet ministered unto the Sages, he is like unto one from whom the inner secrets of the Torah are hidden...But if a man has read the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, and studied the Oral Law and the Midrash, juristic and homiletic, and has ministered unto Sages, then even if he dies or is

killed therefore, he abides in bliss for ever. To indicate this, it is said, 'Unto death (*al mavet*) do they love thee.'⁸⁴

This midrash, too, praises the scholar, but here, it spells out what knowledge the scholar must master, and explicitly indicates Oral law and the teachings of the Sages. As explained earlier in reference to Verse 1:2b,⁸⁵ knowledge of Scripture was insufficient without the full exposition of the Oral law and teachings of the Sages. Here, the text also refers to the secrets of the Torah which are "hidden," except to the one who has mastery over the entire body of Written Torah, Oral Torah, Midrash, both halakhic and aggadic and ministry with the Sages. The qualifications for who is a scholar have become much more specific and demanding. However, the one who is counted in this number will gain eternal life.

The text takes a marked shift in extolling martyrdom, particularly among the elite scholarly class. Here, too, the midrash plays on the word "maidens" and translates it as *al mavet*, meaning "until death," do they love thee. The martyrs are among the righteous "maidens" that love God,

⁸⁴ Leviticus Rabbah 3:7.

⁸⁵ See the midrashim: Numbers Rabbah 14:4, and Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:2.

and work to spread His good name. For this, they are justly rewarded.

The theme of martyrdom is picked up again and given a specific historical context in the Song of Songs Rabbah:

Another explanation of 'Maidens' is that it refers to the generation of destruction.⁸⁶ As it says, *For thy sake are we killed all the day, we are accounted as sheep for slaughter* (Ps. 44:23)⁸⁷

The generation of Destruction could well refer to many generations on Israelite history, but M. Simon, in his notes in the Soncino translation of the Song of Songs, remarks that this refers specifically to the generation which suffered the Hadrianic persecutions. The devastating repercussions of the Bar Kochba revolt included expulsion from Jerusalem, and extreme suppression of religious practice. Circumcision and the teaching of Torah were religious acts punishable by death. In the face of severe persecution, many scholars continued to teach, and many were martyred. While the Hadrianic persecution lasted only two to three years, the wounds it inflicted endured for generations. The rabbinic texts arising from this period

⁸⁶ Freedman, Dr. H., and Maurice Simon, trans., *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press, 1977), 40.

⁸⁷ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3:3.

endeavor to make meaning of their difficult lives as well as the deaths they witnessed. In the face of senseless cruelty, these "maiden" martyrs who are killed on behalf of their beliefs are still described as loving God, even to the end.

The righteous "maidens" also include the proselytes, those who chose to join the Israelites in their many years of oppression. In Midrash Tanhuma Buber, it states, "Therefore do the worlds love you." These are the peoples of the world who converted to Judaism."⁸⁸ Again, the text plays on the word *almot*, and reads it as "worlds" *olamot*. But unlike the *Avodah Zarah* text which refers to "this world and the world to come," this text relates this to the many worlds, or nations, that love God. A similar passage is found in Leviticus Rabbah:

Even the nations of the world, were they to recognize the wisdom, the understanding the knowledge and discernment, and attain the essence of thy Torah, would love Thee with a complete love, whether it be good or it be evil. Therefore, it is said, 'Worlds love thee.'"⁸⁹

The rabbinic exegesis on this text lays out in many forms the many "maidens" who love God: scholars, martyrs,

⁸⁸ Tanhuma Buber, Parashat Yitro 5:2.

proselytes and faithful ones. With Abraham as the prototypical example, these righteous ones carry the fragrance of God's good name throughout the world.

Origen, too, names the maidens as the most faithful. These are the souls that have been drawn to Christ in love and go running after Him:

For the sake of these young souls, therefore, in their growing and abundant life, He who was in the form of God Himself, that His name might be as ointment emptied out, that He might no longer dwell only in light unapproachable and abide in the form of God; but that the Word might be made flesh, and so these maiden souls at the beginning of their progress might not only love Him, but might draw Him to themselves...when they have grasped at last the reason for His coming, the motives of the Redemption and Passion, and the love whereby He, the Immortal, went even to the death of the cross for the salvation of all men. Then these maiden souls, attracted by all this as by the odours of a divine and ineffable perfume and being filled with vigour and complete alacrity, run after Him and hasten to the odour of His sweetness, not at a slow pace, not with lagging steps, but swiftly and with all the speed they can.⁹⁰

These maidens smell the divine perfume of Christ which stirs them at their deepest level and sends them running "with all the speed they can" to him. These youthful

⁹⁰ Leviticus Rabbah 3:7.

maidens are each soul, and they are also every Church. They are the one and the many who follow the teachings of Christ.

[T]he maidens, namely, draw Christ to themselves--this surely must be taken as referring to the churches, which are one Church when perfected, but many maidens while they are still under instruction and advancing on their way.⁹¹

Origen moves easily from the corporate Church to the individual soul and back again throughout his commentary. But here, the individual maidens are the imperfect churches that will only become perfect in union as the Church in Christ.

Part of the perfection of the Church comes when the Jews as well as the Gentiles embrace Christ. Paul asserts that Israel has no excuse for not believing in Christ, and that a "remnant, set aside by grace,"⁹² has already come to follow the teachings of Christ. Origen specifically states that Jesus could make of himself many forms in order to draw "maidens" from all peoples, Jew and gentile:

[S]he herself runs even as did he who, though not himself under the Law, became under the Law, that he might gain those who

⁹⁰ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 75-76.

⁹¹ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 76.

⁹² Romans 11:6.

were under the Law; who also, though he was in the Law of Christ, became without the Law to them that were without the Law, that He might save them that were without the Law.⁹³

Origen argues that the Gospel is for both Jew and Gentile alike. Both have the opportunity to inhale the fragrance of the ointment of Christ and take life unto life.

⁹³Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 77.

VERSE 1:5-6 I AM BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL, O YE DAUGHTERS OF
JERUSALEM, AS THE TENTS OF KEDAR, AS THE CURTAINS OF
SOLOMON. LOOK NOT AT ME, FOR THAT I AM DARKENED; FOR THE
SUN HATH LOOKED DOWN ON ME.

I. How is one Black and also Beautiful?

The first half of this verse can be read in two ways, either as "black and beautiful," or as "black *but* beautiful." The nature of the "blackness" of the Bride raises several questions. Is this a physical blackness, or an inner blackness? There is some evidence that blackness is viewed as the antithesis of beauty, since health and beauty are generally described as "white and ruddy" later in this book.⁹⁴ This is true more generally in the Bible, and an explicit comparison between white as beauty and health and blackness as sickness and ugliness can be found in Lamentations 4:7:

Her princes were purer than snow/ Whiter than milk/
In body ruddier than coral/ Their limbs fairer than sapphire . . . Their visage
is now blacker than soot/ Not recognized in the street/
Skin tight over their bones/ Grown dry as wood.

The text contrasts the unhealthy and unattractive "blackness" to the state of the vibrant and beautiful "whiteness." It thus seems that the verse might properly be read as "black *but* beautiful." Some commentators have tried to mitigate the "blackness" of the Bride by explaining that it is really in fact only a "darkness," or

⁹⁴ Song of Songs 5:10.

even a ruddiness, that comes from exposure to the sun, and not an innate blackness from within. Jewish and Christian exegesis on this verse struggle with the status of being the "black" bride, and each takes a different approach in defense of this objectification.

The Bride claims her "blackness" before the Daughters of Jerusalem. These women could be viewed as the Bride's wedding entourage, or more dramatically as the king's harem. Either way, this group of women gives the bride an audience for the deep expressions of her heart. The daughters are not a supportive coterie for the Bride, for they appear to offer judgement. The Bride begs of them not to look down on her for her blackness, for it is the sun that has darkened her skin. Her blackness is something she must explain, even to these ladies-in-waiting.

What does it mean to be black and beautiful, or black but beautiful? Jewish and Christian exegesis uses this verse to counteract the polemics leveled against each community, and to explain how it is that the Bride has been blackened, and yet, how she remains beautiful as the beloved one of her Bridegroom. The exegesis on this verse between the communities seems to interact more than most others,

perhaps because the counter-interpretations were well known to each other.

The community of Israel defensively must explain how Israel is the beloved one of God, and yet, how she has been prone to multiple persecutions, the destruction of her Temple, and finally exile. The political and religious situation of the Israelites becomes polemical fodder for others who claim that Israel has fallen from her position, and is blackened in sin. Cicero mocked the Jewish claim of Chosen status in an argument that remained a theme of pagan and Christian polemics against the Jews:

How beloved of the immortal gods that nation was, is proved by the fact that it is defeated, that its revenues have been farmed out and that it is reduced to a state of subjugation.⁹⁵

On the other hand, the Christian community has to contend with the general refusal of Israel to follow what they view as the rightful successor to the Hebrew Bible, the Gospel. The Jewish attack on Christianity centers in part on the authenticity and legitimacy of Jesus. Jews take critical notice of Jesus's questionable background. Celsus's Jew

⁹⁵ *Pro Flaccum* 28. As found in Marmorstein, A. "Judaism and Christianity in the middle of the Third Century," *HUCA* 10 (1935), 234-40.

accuses Jesus of lacking pedigree, not only because he is of humble origins, but also with the insinuation that he may be the offspring of an adulterous union between his mother and a Roman soldier.⁹⁶

A. The Church is Black by Origin, but Beautiful in Faith.

Origen's response to this polemic is found in this verse. He first describes the Bride as the Church, gathered from among the Gentiles. The daughters of Jerusalem are "the souls who are described as being most dear because of the election of the fathers, but enemies because of the Gospel."⁹⁷ The daughters have to rely on the election of their father, but they are disfavored for rejecting the Gospel. The daughters' reliance on lineage explains their defensive scorn for the Bride of the Church:

Those are, therefore the daughters of this earthly Jerusalem who, seeing the Church of the Gentiles, despise and vilify her for her ignoble birth; for she is baseborn in their eyes, because she cannot count as hers the noble blood of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, for all that she forgets her own people and her father's house and comes to Christ... 'I am indeed black, O daughters of Jerusalem, in that I cannot claim descent from famous men, neither have I received the enlightenment of Moses' Law. But I have my own beauty all the same. For in me, too, there is that primal

⁹⁶ Contra Celsum 1:28, 32, 69.

⁹⁷ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 92.

thing, the Image of God wherein I was created; and coming now to the Word of God, I have received my beauty.'⁹⁸

Origen takes self-righteous satisfaction in the Bride's humble status and in her inner beauty. The irony of this passage is that in explaining Biblical Israel's rejection of the 'black bride,' Origen relinquishes an opportunity to stress the authenticity of the Church through ancestry from Biblical Israel. He counters the Pauline assertion that Abraham is the "ancestor of us all," and even rejects a claim to the Mosaic Law. This passage contradicts views found on other verses in his commentary in which Origen attempts to claim Moses and the Law as the preparatory ancestor to Christ. He exaggerates his point about the bride's humble origins in order to illustrate how the bride is "black" before the daughters of Jerusalem, but he portrays this "blackness" as a mark of the Bride's beauty.

B. Israel is Black in Sin, but Beautiful in Repentance.

The Rabbinic exegesis on this verse is a direct response to Origen's commentary. The commentary begins with a short reference to the superior lineage of Israel:

⁹⁸Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 92.

*I am black but comely. I am black through my own deeds, but comely through the words of my ancestors.*⁹⁹

In addition, the text continues with a long chronology of the sinful episodes in Israel's past, each time being black in the sin, but becoming beautiful through some form of repentance:

It is written, *I am black but comely*. If 'black,' then how 'comely'? Can one be both black and comely? No, but this is what the Community of Israel said...I was black in Egypt but comely when I said at Sinai: "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do and obey" (Ex. 24:7). 'I was black' at the Red Sea as it says, *But were rebellious at the sea, even at the Red Sea* (Ps. CVI 7) ; but 'I am comely' because I said, 'This is my God and I will glorify Him' (Ex. 15:2). 'I am black' on account of having made the Golden Calf, but comely because I made the Tabernacle...I am black because of the ox, but I am comely on account of another kind of ox...I am black on account of the Tabernacle, because it says, *They have defiled My sanctuary* (Ezek. 23:38) yet, 'I am comely' on account of the Tabernacle, because it says, *And every wise-hearted man among them that wrought the work made the Tabernacle.*¹⁰⁰

Not only does this midrash show that Israel has repented and can find favor with God, but this litany of episodes throughout history is a testament to the relationship that Israel has had with God for generations. It is itself a

⁹⁹ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:5:1, and also found in Exodus Rabbah 49:2 and 23:10.

testament to Israel's lineage. The rabbis do not dismiss that their exile is a sign of their 'blackness' and their falling from favor, but they see their sinfulness as temporary. This midrash shows Israel's long salvation history with God. While they have been blackened many times before, they are made beautiful through the *mitzvot*, and ultimately, they are redeemed through their repentance. It is important that the last item in this history is the building of the Tabernacle, for the building of the Tabernacle is viewed as affecting atonement. It is an antidote to the sin of the Golden Calf because the Biblical references to the building of the Tabernacle surround the account of the Golden Calf in Exodus.

Origen also believes that the Bride's beauty comes from penitence:

It can be said also of each individual soul that turns to repentance after many sins, that she is black by reason of the sins, but beautiful through her repentance and the fruits of her repentance.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Similar midrash found in Exodus Rabbah 49:2.

¹⁰¹ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 106.

II. *Black by Birth or by Circumstance?*

Origen sees the Bride's blackness symbolically as due to her sin. He sees that the daughters of Jerusalem view her blackness as the result of her lowly origins. He interprets the bride's blackness quite literally, and cites Scriptural examples that foreshadow the "black and beautiful" character of the Church. His first example is the story of Moses' Ethiopian wife:

Have you come to forget what is written in your Law, as to what Mary [Miriam] suffered who spoke against Moses because he had taken a black Ethiopian to wife? How is it that you do not recognize the true fulfillment of that type in me? I am that Ethiopian. I am black indeed by reason of my lowly origin; but I am beautiful through penitence and faith. For I have taken to myself the Son of God, I have received the World make flesh.¹⁰²

Origen continues by following the narrative of the Biblical story,¹⁰³ in which "Mary" (Miriam) and Aaron criticize Moses for his marriage. He finds that the story lacks coherence without a mystical explanation. Why is it that Aaron and Mary ask God, "Hath the Lord spoken to Moses only: Hath He

¹⁰² Origen, *Commentary and Homilies*, p. 93.

¹⁰³ The full story can be found in Numbers 12.

not also spoken to us?" instead of approaching Moses directly about his marriage to this Ethiopian woman:

"They ought to have said, 'Moses, you should not have taken an Ethiopian wife, and one of the seed of Ham; you should have married one of your own race and of the house of Levi.' They say not a word about this; . . . It seems to me that, in so saying, they understood the thing Moses had done more in terms of the mystery; they saw Moses, that is, the spiritual Law¹⁰⁴—entering now into wedlock and union with the Church that is gathered together from among the Gentiles. This is the reason, apparently, why Mary, who typified the forsaken Synagogue, and Aaron, who stood for the priesthood according to the flesh, seeing their kingdom taken away from them and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof, say: "Hath the Lord spoken to Moses only?"¹⁰⁵

This spiritual interpretation presents Moses, representing the Law, in union with the Ethiopian woman, representing the Church gathered from among all the gentiles. Mary [Miriam], representing the "forsaken Synagogue," and Aaron, the "priesthood," are now out of favor with God, for the Lord no longer speaks to them, but through Moses alone. With her marriage to Moses and all of the Mosaic tradition, the Church immediately marries into lineage. The Church

¹⁰⁴ The Spiritual law is clearly viewed by Origen as being Christ.— "this "black and beautiful" woman is one and the same as the Ethiopian who is taken in marriage by Moses, that is, by the spiritual Law, who is undoubtedly the Word of God and Christ." Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 98.

¹⁰⁵ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 97.

gains legitimacy through an esteemed betrothal. But this marriage did not benefit the Church alone; Origen believes that the best thing that the Mosaic tradition can do is to "marry" into the belief system of the Church:

"Moses himself, in spite of all the great and splendid achievements of faith and patience that are recorded of him, was never so highly praised by God as on this occasion when he took the Ethiopian wife. It was said of him in reference to this: 'Moses was a man exceeding meek above all men that are upon earth.'"¹⁰⁶

Thus, Origen claims that despite all his great achievements, it was Moses' marriage to the black "Church" that merited his great endorsement by God.

We learn more about the nature of this "black and beautiful" Church in Origen's second Scriptural example of the black bride. In this instance, he connects this black bride with the Queen of Sheba:

This queen (Sheba) came, then, and, in fulfillment of her type, the Church comes also from the Gentiles to hear the wisdom of the true Solomon, and of the true Peace-Lover, Our Lord Jesus Christ¹⁰⁷ . . . She came to Jerusalem, then, to the Vision of Peace, with a great following and in great array;

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Origen borrows this phrasing from R. Yochanan, who plays on the Hebrew similarities of *Shlomo*, "Solomon," and *melech shalom*, "king of peace," in a midrash in Song of Songs Rabbah 1:1:11.

for she came not with a single nation, as did the Synagogue before her that had the Hebrews only, but with the races of the whole world.¹⁰⁸

What the Church cannot have in terms of lineage, she will make up for in terms of breadth and diversity of followers. Unlike the Hebrews, who only come from one nation, this church is black, it is white, it is yellow, it is all the "races of the whole world." This fits the missionary message of the Church, embracing all nations and peoples. Marvin Pope offers that Origen's attitude towards the many nations was undoubtedly influenced by the conditions in the early Church in Alexandria where Greeks, Romans, Jewish-Christians, Indians, Arabs and Ethiopians lived in fraternal harmony.¹⁰⁹ Origen was accustomed to living among many nations and races, and saw the ultimate mission of the Church as embracing all the people of the world.

The Church also distinguishes itself from Jews, and even Jewish-Christians, who see religion as something into which one is born. The Church was not to be merely the provincial religion of a single nation, but a world-wide religion. The Church emphasized faith and piety over

¹⁰⁸ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 98-99.

¹⁰⁹ Pope, Song, p. 310.

ancestry and race. In this exegesis, we see the beginnings of a religion which is truly missionary, one that seeks converts of all nations.

In the next interpretation based on Scriptures, Origen argues that the Church has replaced the Fallen Israel as God's Beloved. This replacement came as a direct result of the sinful nature of Israel. This sin is Israel's blackness:

Psalm 67, in which the writer says: *Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God.*¹¹⁰ For, if you consider how salvation comes to the Gentiles through Israel's offence, and that it was Israel's failure that opened the way for the Gentiles to come in, you will observe how the hand of Ethiopia—that is, the people of the Gentiles—outstrips and precedes in its approach to God those to whom first His oracles were given.¹¹¹

Here, Origen reads "Ethiopian" as all the nations of the Gentiles. The Gentile Church has been given the opportunity to take the place of the fallen Synagogue. In the context of this marriage allegory, sinfulness against your beloved is tantamount to adultery, and adultery results in divorce. The implication is that Israel's sin

¹¹⁰ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 102.

¹¹¹ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 102-03.

was so great that the covenant with her beloved had been breached.

A. Israel is only temporarily Blackened.

In a direct response, a midrash attributed to R. Isaac ridicules the idea that God would reject Israel for her temporary sinfulness in order to replace Israel with one who is permanently "black" with sin:

It happened once that a lady had an Ethiopian maidservant who went down with her companion to draw water from the spring, and she said to her companion: 'Tomorrow master is going to divorce his wife and marry me.' 'Why?' said the other. 'Because,' she replied, 'he saw her hands all stained.' 'Foolish woman,' said the other. 'Listen to what you are saying. Here is his wife whom he loves exceedingly, and you say he is going to divorce her because once he saw her hands stained. How then will he endure you who are stained all over and black from the day of your birth!' . . . [T]he sun of idolatry may have tanned us, but you are swarthy from your mother's womb.¹¹²

The Israelites acknowledge their 'blackness' in sin, but see it as a temporary condition, a condition that can be restored through repentance. In addition, as grave as their sin might be, R. Isaac asserts that surely God would never think of replacing them on account of their "stain"

¹¹² Song of Songs Rabbah 1:6:2.

for one who is "black" to the core. Israel's sin is instead "black as the curtains of Solomon," which can be made clean again: "Just as when a garment becomes soiled, it can be made white again, so can Israel return unto God after they have sinned, by doing penitence."¹¹³ They contrast this state to the one of the Christians, which is a blackness from the womb.

B. Christians are only temporarily Blackened.

Up to this point, Origen has embraced the Church's status as the "black and beautiful" bride, and found the "black" precursors to the Church in Scripture. However, his position changes later in the commentary, perhaps in response to the interpretation of R. Isaac, and he argues that the Church's "blackness" is not a condition of birth, but rather one of circumstance:

[T]his dark and beautiful one appears now to give good reason for her blackness or darkness, and a proper explanation to those who reproach her for it. She tells them that it is not a natural condition in which she was created, but something that she has suffered through force of circumstance. 'It came to pass,' she says, 'because the sun looked down on me'; and thus she shows that she is not speaking of bodily blackness, because the sun is wont to tan or blacken

¹¹³ Exodus Rabbah 23:10.

when it looks at and not when it looks down
on anyone.¹¹⁴

Now, the blackness of the church is explained as a temporary condition -- one brought about by its relationship to the sun. Origen argues that the Church is not "black" from the womb, as R. Isaac might claim, but blackened from the sun. Origen explains further that the nature of the sun's effect depends upon the nature of the object below it:

[T]he sun is seen as having twofold power: by one it gives light, and by the other it scorches; but according to the nature of the objects and substances lying immediately under it, it either illuminates a thing with light, or darkens and hardens it with heat.¹¹⁵

Depending on the "substance lying immediately under it," the sun has the power either to enlighten or to scorch. Origen is more explicit further in the commentary about the nature of the substance: "It enlightens the righteous; but sinners it enlightens not, but burns, for they themselves *hate the light because they do evil.*"¹¹⁶ Once, when the sun looked favorably on the Jews, it blackened the Gentiles, but now the Church of the Gentiles is enlightened in

¹¹⁴ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 107.

¹¹⁵ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 111.

¹¹⁶ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 112.

righteousness and sinful Israel is blackened. This is yet another way of saying that the sun brings "life to life" and "death unto death." Origen continues that Israel becomes not only 'blackened' but also 'blinded' by the sun's power:

I am the people of the Gentiles, who beheld not the Sun of Justice before, nor stood before the Lord...But thou likewise, who art called Israel, and hast experienced this thyself already, wilt again and again admit that this is so and say: 'For as when I of old did not believe, thou wast chosen and didst obtain mercy, and the Sun of Justice regarded thee, but looked askance at me and spurned me, as disobedient and unbelieving; so likewise now, when thou hast become unbelieving and disobedient, do I hope to be looked upon by the Sun of Justice and to obtain mercy . . . now not only has the sun looked askance at thee, but also a certain partial blindness has befallen thee.'¹¹⁷

The blackness the Gentiles previously experienced was tanning from the sun when they were unbelievers. But now the sun looks askance at Israel, and they are the ones who are black in sin and disobedience and lack of faith. Israel, who once was held in good light by the Sun of Justice, is scorched by the Sun. The sun that once illumined her, now hardens her heart and blinds her eyes.

¹¹⁷Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 108.

The image of the blind Synagogue in Christian writings goes back as far as the works of Justin Martyr,¹¹⁸ Cyprian¹¹⁹ and Paul.¹²⁰ It is an important theme in Christian polemics, indicating that if Israel were clear-sighted, it would see the truth in Christianity. Israel was blinded by the sun that now looks "askance" at her. The image of "blindness" is a strong presence in later Christian iconography. Typically, a blindfolded woman termed "Synagoga" is juxtaposed next to a seeing woman "Ecclesia" which is the Church. At times, a hand from Christ or God appears ready to lift her blindfold. This symbolizes the expectation that eventually the Jews will convert. However, in some images, her blindness is immutable, indicating her hopeless position.¹²¹ She is eternally condemned for her blindness to the truth that the Gentiles now see.

¹¹⁸ "The marriages of Jacob were types...Leah represented your people [the Jews] and the Synagogue...Rachel...our Church...As the eyes of Leah were weak, so too, the eyes of your souls." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 134)

¹¹⁹ "Jacob received two wives; the elder, Leah, with weak eyes, a type of the Synagogue; the younger, the beautiful Rachel, a type of the Church." (*Treatises XII*, 1, *Testimony* 20)

¹²⁰ "But their minds were closed; indeed, until this day when they read the Old Covenant, it [the veil which blinds them] is not lifted, for only in Christ is it done away with." (II Corinthians 3:14).

¹²¹ The iconography of the blindfolded "Synagoga" is more fully explained in an article by Michael Cook, "Images of Jesus in the Arts: Stumbling Blocks or Steppingstones?"

Origen writes that a new sun has risen, and while the old sun may have blackened the Gentiles, the new sun shines favorably upon them:

[T]his same person who is now called black . . . will be made white and fair; and, when all her blackness has been cast away, she will shine with the enveloping radiance of the true Light.¹²²

In this case, Origen reads "black" only in terms of the "sinfulness" or ugliness that the Church will cast off in the time to come. He does not read "blackness" as positive, as he did when he compared the black bride to Moses' wife or the Queen of Sheba. Instead, this blackness is the swarthy one acquires from being in the sun too long. Now that the Church is illumined under the true light of God, it has become white and fair again.

Origen uses this verse in the Song of Songs to counteract the polemic against the lineage of Jesus and the Church, and then continues by explaining Israel's blindness as reason for her refusal to follow the Gospel. Finally, he

Proceedings of the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning, Vol. 10, (St. Paul: University of St. Thomas Press, 1996).

¹²²Origen, *Commentary and Homilies*, p. 107.

looks forward with messianic hope to a time when all will become white again in the radiance of the "true Light."

II. The Status of Jerusalem

The last polemical "argument" Origen carried out with the rabbis over this verse refers to the status of Jerusalem.

He bases his exegesis on a foundation set out by Paul:

Tell me then, you are so eager to be subject to the Law, have you listened to what the Law says? Scripture says that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave girl and one by the freewoman. The son of the slave girl came to be born in the way of human nature; but the son of the freewoman came to be born through a promise. There is an allegory here: these women stand for the two covenants. The one given on Mount Sinai—that is Hagar, whose children are born into slavery; now Sinai is a mountain in Arabia and represents Jerusalem in its present state, for she in slavery together with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and that is the one that is our mother.¹²³

Paul is speaking directly to the Jews, the ones "eager to be subject to the Law." He argues that Israel, a nation born in slavery, is the child of Hagar, the "slave girl." Paul does not deny that Israel received a covenant from God, for he refers to the "two covenants"; however, Israel received the covenant as the lesser favored child. The

¹²³ Galatians 4:21-26.

second covenant is reserved for the child of Abraham and the freewoman, the matriarch Sarah, whom Paul does not name. In his parable, Paul points out Israel's political reality and states that she is in exile with the "earthly" Jerusalem, while the "heavenly" Jerusalem, which is the mother of the Church, is free. Not only is ownership over Jerusalem at stake, but also the question of who is the rightful ancestor to the covenant promised to our ancestor Abraham.

Origen quotes from this Paul's passage in his exegesis of the "daughters of Jerusalem":

He continues: "Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But that Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all."¹²⁴ Paul thus calls the heavenly Jerusalem both his own mother and that of all believers . . . Paul therefore, plainly declares that everyone who through faith from Christ follows after liberty, is a son of the freewoman; and he says that this freewoman is the free Jerusalem, which is above; she is who is the mother of us all."¹²⁵

The "daughters," Origen points out, are in exile. He implies that this shows some form of divine disfavor bestowed on the son of the "slave girl," whereas the Church

¹²⁴ Galatians 4:25-26.

¹²⁵ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 114.

is the favored son of the freewoman and is free as the "heavenly Jerusalem." Just as the 'heavenly Jerusalem' has usurped the "earthly" Jerusalem, the second covenant has usurped the first:

The Bride had progressed to the point where there was something greater than the kingdom of Jerusalem. For the Apostle says there is a heavenly Jerusalem, and speaks of believers coming thither.¹²⁶

Rabbi Yochanan responds to this in terse but incisive language:

Jerusalem will one day become the metropolis of all countries, and draw people to her in streams to do her honor.¹²⁷

R. Yochanan was apparently aware of Origen's polemical reading of this text as well as the Pauline source for this reading. R. Yochanan pointedly uses the Greek word "metropolis" in his interpretation, for its etymological meaning as "mother-city."¹²⁸ As a mother-city, Jerusalem undoubtedly has many "daughter-cities" who will eventually gather to do her honor. By using "metropolis," R. Yochanan directs this word against the Pauline exegesis and states

¹²⁶ Origen, *Commentary and Homilies*, p. 53.

¹²⁷ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:5:3, with similar passage found in Exodus Rabbah 23:10.

¹²⁸ For more on this topic, see R. J. Werblowsky, "Metropolis of all Countries," *Yerushalayim LeDoroteha*, (Jerusalem, 1968), 172.

that the true "mother-city" is the earthly Jerusalem, not the heavenly one. He looks forward with messianic hope to the time when this "earthly" Jerusalem is reunited with her exiled daughters.

VERSE 2:1-2:3 I AM THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD AND THE LILY
OF THE VALLEYS: LIKE THE LILY AMONG THE THORNS, SO IS MY
LOVE AMONG THE DAUGHTERS; AS AN APPLE TREE AMONG THE TREES
OF THE FOREST, SO IS MY BELOVED AMONG THE SONS; IN HIS
SHADE I LOVE TO SIT AND HIS FRUIT IS SWEET TO MY PALATE.

I. The Polemics of Comparison.

These three verses offer a straightforward comparison between the lily among thorns and the apple tree among all trees, allowing for interpretation from both communities that contrasts the relative merits of the Church and Israel. Verses 2:2 and 2:3 appear similar at the outset, for they both contain favorable comparisons of their beloved, but the nuances of the comparisons are quite different. The Lily is among thorns. She is not compared with like flowers, but is rather described as a flower that thrives despite the many obstacles that surround her. The apple tree, by contrast, is compared with species of its kind, other trees, and in this comparison, he emerges as most beloved. While the comparisons have different foci, the main message of the exegesis on all of these verses is to establish the supremacy of the respective faiths. Both the rabbinic texts and Origen's commentary and homilies use these verses to express the leitmotif of the singular relationship each religion has with God.

A. Israel is the Lily among the Thorns.

The rabbinic texts understand Israel as the Lily among the thorns, and embrace this as part of the mission of Israel:

R. Berekhiah expounded; The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: 'Go and tell Israel: "When you were in Egypt you were like a lily among the thorns. Now that you are entering the land of Canaan, be also like a lily among the thorns, and make up your minds that you will not act either in accordance with the deeds of the former or in accordance with the deeds of the latter."' ¹²⁹

Here, Israel asserts her unique position among all the nations. God has set out a special role for Israel, to be the one flower among the thorny plants. This has not always been as easy task and this position has often included persecution and pain; however, it has great meaning, for it is the destiny that God has set out for Israel. The reference to Egypt shows that Israel has already experienced this role in history, and the reference to Canaan is a charge to continue the task of being an exemplary nation in the future.

Being the flower of God among the thorns is the special role of Israel, and because of this role, the rabbis assert that the world has been saved for Israel's sake. This sentiment is expressed in the following parable:

R. Azariah said in the name of R. Judah who learned it from R. Simon: A king once had an orchard in which they went and planted a

¹²⁹ Leviticus Rabbah 23:7.

row of fig-trees and a row of vines and a row of apples and a row of pomegranates, and then he handed it over to a keeper and went away. After a time the king came and inspected the orchard to see how it was getting on, and he found it full of thorns and briars. So he brought wood-cutters to cut it down. Seeing in it a beautiful rose, he took and smelt it and was appeased, and said: 'For the sake of this rose the orchard shall be spared.' So the world was created only for the sake of Israel.¹³⁰

In other generations, too, God wanted to destroy the world. The generation of Enosh was destroyed by the flood, and the generation of the dispersion punished by water as well. But each time, God saw the 'beautiful rose, namely Israel,' and God was appeased: "At the time when Israel said, *We will do and obey*, said the Holy one, Blessed be He: For the sake of this rose, let the garden be spared; for the sake of the Torah and those who study it, let the world be spared."¹³¹ This homily states that the "garden" is saved for the sake of Israel, but the parable above goes farther and states that the whole world was created *only for the sake of Israel*. Why would Israel deserve this status? The exegesis on this verse, and many others, assert the answer again and again: it is because of Israel's remarkable faith -- Israel said, "*we will do and then we will listen*."

¹³⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:2:3, similarly found in Leviticus Rabbah 23:3.

Israel promised to take God's covenant upon themselves without yet knowing what that entailed.

The theme of *na'aseh v'nishmah*, "we will do and then we will listen," comes up again in several other midrashim on this particular verse,¹³² as well as countless other times in Song of Songs Rabbah. It is a foundation for the Chosen status of Israel. Israel is worthy of being the Bride of God because she accepted the Torah sight unseen. Like a pre-arranged marriage, she had faith in the relationship and agreed to the covenant even before she had seen her Beloved, or understood the conditions of her covenant. In addition, while *na'aseh v'nishmah* is a promise that Israel made on faith, Israel emphasizes that this covenant is one of actions: "we will do." It is based primarily not on a belief system, but on a system of *mitzvot*.

B. Jesus is the Lily among the Thorns.

The midrashim affirm that it is this covenant of *mitzvot* that makes Israel unique in the eyes of God. However, for

¹³¹ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:2:3.

¹³² See Leviticus Rabbah 23:3 for similar exegesis on this verse. Additional midrashim emphasizing *na'aseh v'nishmah* are found in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:3:1 and 2:3:2, Pesikta deRav Kahana, Piska 12:10, and Exodus Rabbah 1:36.

Origen, the Law was inadequate for maintaining a covenant. He counters that it is faith in the Incarnation of God in Christ that makes Christianity unique:

[T]he Bridegroom was the Flower; but because the Law brought no man to perfection, the Word of God could not there advance beyond the flower, nor achieve the perfection of fruit. In that valley of the Gentiles, however, He became the Lily.¹³³

Origen compares the Lily to Christ who "flowered" into a visible form for the sake of saving the people. Origen claims that the Law of Israel never brought forth fruit; it could only flower, but never achieve its fulfillment. It took Christ to become the Lily.

In contrast to the particularistic mission of the Jews, Origen extols Jesus as a Lily that drew others to his example. His mission was broader:

[W]hen he became the Lily in the valleys, forthwith His neighbor, too, is made a lily in imitation of Himself; so that it has been worth His while to have become the Lily, in order that His neighbor likewise—that is, every single soul that draws near Him and follows His pattern and example—may be a lily too.¹³⁴

¹³³ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 176-77.

¹³⁴ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 177.

Jesus became the form of a Lily, he became incarnate, in order to appeal to all people. It is faith in Christ and His example that allows for Christians to become lilies as well.

C. Who or What are the "thorns"?

In both traditions, the Lily symbolizes true righteousness; for' Israel, this was through observance of the commandments, and for the Church, this was through faith. Who or what, then, are the "thorns"? For Origen, they were the many unbelievers, especially the Jews, who surrounded the Lily:

So we will take his saying; as the lily among thorns, so is my neighbour among the daughters,' as denoting the Church of the Gentiles, either because she has come forth among the infidels and unbelievers, as from among thorns, or else because she may be said to be placed in the midst of clamour round her. And this last will seem the more exact interpretation because He says: "So is my neighbour among the daughters." He would not have used the term 'daughters' for those souls that had never come to faith at all. For heretics all begin by believing and afterwards depart from the road of faith and the truth of the Church's teaching . . .¹³⁵

Origen was not directing this reproach to heathens, or "unbelievers" in the sense of those who had no religion.

Rather, he directed it at the Jews and Jewish Christians in his midst. In calling them "daughters," he alludes to the "daughters of Jerusalem" in verse 1:5. The Jews who remain unmoved by Christ's message are more dangerous "thorns" than the heathens in Origen's mind, for their lack of belief undermines the message that Christians are the "true Israel." Origen expresses that these thorns are the Jews, and those Jewish-Christians among his ranks who have not been able to leave their Judaism behind for the new "truth."

For the rabbis, the thorns are the surrounding regimes and governments that have oppressed them, and specifically Rome. Two midrashim are very similar in this regard. In Song of Songs Rabbah 2:2-5, R. Huna compares the thorns to the oppression of secular powers. And in the Leviticus Rabbah 23:5 passage found below, R. Hanina son of R. Abba interpreted the verse as applying to foreign governments:

How is it with the lily? When she is placed among thorns a north wind goes forth and bends her towards the south and a thorn pricks her, and a south wind goes forth and bends her towards the north and a thorn pricks her; yet, for all that, her core is directed upwards. It is the same with Israel.

¹³⁵ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 178.

The thorns are the oppressive governments that have pricked the Lily Israel and have kept it from flowering properly. Yet, despite these torments, Israel's core is still "directed upwards" in faith. As we have seen earlier, the historical and political situation of Israel is frequently a topic of apologia for the rabbis. They are obliged to explain the oppressive political situation of the Jews in the face of their status as God's favored nation. This is stated most clearly in another passage found in both Leviticus Rabbah 23:6 and Song of Songs Rabbah 2:2-6:

This lily when the sun beats upon it withers, but when the dew falls it revives. So Israel, so long as the shadow of Esau is in the ascendant, seem to be withered in this world, but when the shadow of Esau shall pass away, Israel shall blossom forth, as it says, "*I will be as the dew unto Israel; he shall blossom as the lily.*"¹³⁶

In the above text, Esau cast a shadow that withered Israel. Israel was unable to receive the necessary light to blossom fully under the shadow of her oppressive regimes. Esau represents Christianity and Rome frequently in rabbinic literature. Here, the rabbis understand their situation to be temporary. And, as the Biblical story of the twin brothers explains, Jacob is ultimately the favored son who receives the fullest blessings.

Additionally, just as the sun has the power to enlighten or scorch (as seen in verse 1:5-6), the shadow cast has the ability to wither or to protect. In this homily, Esau's shadow withers the lily, but later in this verse we learn that the shadow of God protects Israel from Esau and all others who may harm her.

II. The Shadow of the Apple Tree.

The exegesis on the next verse, 'As an apple tree among the trees of the forest,' focuses on the nature of shadow, in both rabbinic and Christian texts. The shadow image in the preceding homily was seen as an oppressive darkness that inhibited growth. However, shade can also be something we seek. Being "under the shadow" of something can either be a positive or negative experience, depending on who it is under the shade, and what it is that offers the shade. In the exegesis on this verse, the multiple nuances of shadows are played out.

¹³⁶ Hosea 14:6.

A. Israel seeks the Shadow of the Tree of Life.

In this first example, shade is seen as something that a Middle Eastern, desert-dwelling person seeks. However, some do not see where the true shade resides:

R. Huna and R. Aha citing R. Jose ben Zimra, said: The apple tree—as all shun it because it give no shade,¹³⁷ so the nations of the world shunned the Holy One on the day of the giving of the Torah. Should you imagine that Israel also shunned the Holy One as giving no shade, the verse goes on to say, *Under his shadow I delighted to sit.*¹³⁸

It is not clear whether the apple tree gives off shade and only Israel can see this, or if the apple tree does not give off shade, but because Israel is faithful, God provides shade regardless. A later midrash helps answer this question as it explains that God appeared to the heathens with the Torah, but they did not accept it, for in their eyes it had no value. But Israel said: "We know the power of the Torah, therefore we will not budge from God and His Torah, as it says: *Under his shadow I delighted to*

¹³⁷ Professor Yehuda Feliks of Bar-Ilan University in a letter wrote: "Certain varieties of the apple tree shed their leaves in the summer, and thus give very little shade." Found in notes of Pesikta d'rav Kahana translation by William Braude and Israel Kapstein.

¹³⁸ Pesikta deRav Kahana 12:10.

sit and its fruit was sweet to my taste (Song of Songs 2:3)."¹³⁹

The other nations were offered the opportunity to receive the Law, but in their eyes, the "tree of life" offered no shade, and they refused it. Israel, however, chose to sit under the apple tree, even when it appeared to offer no shade, to find that their faith merited God's protective shadow. Israel choosing the apple tree on faith relates to the often cited statement of *na'aseh v'nishma*, "we will do and we will hear." The unwavering faith attested to by "we will do and we will hear" sets Israel's relationship with God apart from any others. The analogy of *na'aseh v'nishmah* is made again in several places in reference to the apple tree:

Just as the apple tree brings out its blossom before its leaves, so Israel at Sinai put doing before hearing as it says, *We will do and we will hear.*¹⁴⁰

Like an apple-tree in the wood, Israel distinguishes itself for service to God by setting forth their flowering actions before their full comprehension. This succinct interpretation sets forth perhaps the single most important

¹³⁹ Exodus Rabbah 17:2.

distinction between Judaism and Christianity -- the imperative to do mitzvot even before there is faith. Some would say that it is *through* the doing of the mitzvot that faith comes. Judaism emphasized faith through action as expressed by *na'aseh v'nishmah*. For Israel, the *p'ri*, the "fruit" of the Tree, was the Torah which set out these mitzvot. As Christians set out to establish a "faith" based religion, they asserted that the "fruit" was Logos, or the Incarnation of God in Christ.

B. Christians sit in the Shadow of Christ.

Origen was apparently familiar with Jewish exegesis on this verse, and he responds directly to the rabbis, utilizing the rabbis' language of "shadows":

Let us look into what the Apostle means when he speaks of the *Law having a shadow of the good things to come*...all the rites of the ancients were an example and shadow of heavenly things.¹⁴¹ If that is so, certainly it follows that all who were under the Law and had the shadow rather than the substance of the true Law (*italics mine*), sat under the shadow of the Law. We, however, are strangers to their shadow, for we are not under the law, but under grace.¹⁴² Yet, though we are not under that shadow which was cast by the letter of the law, we are

¹⁴⁰Song of Songs Rabbah 2:3:2. Similarity found in 2:3:1 of the same work, and in B.T. Shabbat 88a.

¹⁴¹Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 183.

¹⁴²Ibid.

notwithstanding under a better shadow. For we live under the shadow of Christ among the Gentiles. And there is a certain progress in coming from the shadow of the Law to the shadow of Christ; since Christ is the Life and the Truth and the Way.¹⁴³

Origen writes that Israel stands under the shadow of the Law which now stunts Israel's growth, and blinds Israel to the true law. Origen sees the mitzvot, which he deems "the rites of the ancients," as mere shadows of the substance of the "true law" which is faith in Christ. The Law served its purpose in being an example of what was to come, but for Origen, the "good things to come" have arrived in the form of grace. Christians stand under a better shadow than that of Law; they stand in the shadow of Logos.

Origen is more generous in his estimation of Judaism than many of his colleagues, and he admits that the shadow of the Law may have once afforded protection; but for Origen, it has outlived its potency:

Every soul in this life is shadowed by the covering of this gross body. So all who are in this life must of necessity be in the shadow in some sense. Some, however, are sitting in the region of the shadow of death, that is, those who do not believe in Christ...although there was a time when anyone sitting under the shadow of the Law was protected from the rigors of heat and

¹⁴³ Ibid.

summer. That time, however, has passed. We must come now to the shadow of the apple tree...The shadow of the Law indeed afforded but slight protection from this heat; but the shadow of Christ, under which we now live among the Gentiles, that is to say, the faith of His Incarnation, affords complete protection from it and extinguishes it.¹⁴⁴

Origen explicitly says that those who do not believe in Christ sit in the region of the shadow of death. While at one time the Law could offer some protection in this desolate valley, this time has passed. Origen and the Christian community grow impatient with the Jewish community that refuses to acknowledge Christ as the fulfillment of the Law. Not only does he believe that the tree under which the Jews sit, namely Torah, is deficient in terms of protection, he also maintains that this tree casts a darkness on its followers:

Justly does his Bride desire to sit beneath the shadow of the apple tree, in order, surely, that she may be made partaker of the life that is in His shadow. But the shadow of the other trees of the wood is such that he who sits thereunder may find himself sitting in the region of the shadow of death.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 184.

¹⁴⁵ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 182.

Again, Origen uses shadow imagery to emphasize the darkness that the Jews are under in failing to see that the "fruit" of the tree is the divine Logos.

C. What is the "fruit" of the Tree?

The rabbis do not accept this interpretation without answer. In a response tailored to counter Origen, R. Isaac refers to the true "fruit" of the tree:

*And his fruit was sweet to my taste. Reb Isaac said: This refers to the twelve months which Israel spent in front of Mount Sinai regaling themselves with the words of the Torah. What was the reason? Because its fruit was sweet to my taste. To my taste it was sweet, but to the taste of the other nations it was bitter like wormwood.*¹⁴⁶

R. Isaac recognizes that Origen and the Christian and pagan communities do not accept the Law, but he explains this as a problem with the "taster," not with the fruit itself. The Torah is sweet in the mouth of Israel, but "to the taste" of the other nations, it seems bitter, for they cannot taste its sweetness.

¹⁴⁶ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:3:3.

A similar sentiment is expressed in another interpretation by R. Simon. Here, the exegesis expresses the rabbi's knowledge of the Christian argument that the "fruit" for Christians is Logos:

R. Simon said: The utterance (*dibbur*) came forth in two contrasted forms—as an elixir of life to Israel and a deadly poison to the other nations. An elixir of life to Israel—As thou has heard, and live (Deut. 4:33); thou didst hear and thou didst live. A deadly poison to the other nations—they heard and died. Therefore the text says, *Under the apple-tree I awakened thee.*" ¹⁴⁷

This exegesis is similar to the one made by Origen (verse 1:3) regarding the ointment which gives "life to life," and for others "death to death." R. Simon asserts that the "fruit" of the apple tree was an elixir of life to Israel, but a deadly poison to the other nations. He intentionally uses the word *dibbur* which he directs at the polemic argued by Origen. In using *dibbur*, which translates as Logos, this exegesis insists that Logos is not the exclusive domain of the Christians. *Dibbur*, or Logos, was the origin of the two contrasting elixirs: one took the form of Torah and became the Tree of Life for Israel; the second, however, was mistakenly seen as "Logos" by the other nations, and it has poisoned them.

¹⁴⁷ Song of Songs 8:5.

Verse 2:10-13 ARISE MY LOVE, MY FAIR ONE, AND COME AWAY.
FOR, LO, THE WINTER IS PAST, THE RAIN IS OVER AND GONE; THE
FLOWERS APPEAR ON THE EARTH; THE TIME OF THE SINGING BIRD
IS COME AND THE VOICE OF THE TURTLEDOVE IS HEARD IN OUR
LAND; THE FIG TREE PUTS FORTH HER GREEN FIGS AND THE VINES
IN BLOSSOM GIVE THEIR SCENT.

I. Salvation and Messianism.

With *kumi*, "arise," the Bridegroom invites his maiden to shake off the slumber of winter and to awaken to rebirth in Spring. These verses carry a strong messianic tone, and the allegorical exegesis on this verse from both the Christian and Jewish communities elaborates on this theme. "Winter" is the historical "dark period" that has been overcome. In the Spring, the time of redemption (*zamir*) has come. *Zamir* can be vocalized as either "pruning" or "singing." The Septuagint, Aquila and the Vulgate all read it as "pruning," while the Rabbis play on its multiple meanings.

The rabbinic texts treat these verses 2:10-13 as a whole in its exegesis. Taken together, they look back to the "winter" of the many dark times in the history of Israel, and point to a messianic, redemptive time. The interpretations on these verses are short and succinct. There are few extended parables or long explanations for each verse. Instead, the text equates each of the verses with a specific representation. The exegesis found in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, *Pesikta deRav Kahana*, and *Exodus Rabbah* are very similar in form, yet different passages reflect a different period of Jewish oppression and their subsequent

redemption. They present salvation episodes, some more complete than others, which detail the oppressive "winter" and the redemptive time for zamir in every season.

A. Israel's Salvation History.

The exegesis found in Pesikta deRav Kahana on these verses portray the earliest salvation episode in the life of Israel:¹⁴⁸

*For lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.*¹⁴⁹ The words, *For lo, the winter is past* refer to the entire four hundred years decreed for our ancestors' stay in Egypt. And the words *the rain is over and gone* refer to their two hundred and ten years [of servitude]. In another comment, the words, *For lo the winter is past* are taken to refer to the two hundred and ten years [of our ancestors' stay in Egypt]; and the words *the rain is over and gone* to the time of their most bitter servitude in those years...*The flowers appear on earth; the time of singing is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land.*¹⁵⁰ The flowers appear on the earth-[the fame of] Moses and Aaron flourishes. By the words *the time of singing has come* is meant [the season when plants are pruned or cut back-hence, metaphorically speaking], the time has come for the foreskin to be cut; the time has come for the Egyptians to be cut down; the time has come for their idols to

¹⁴⁸ Every section presented from Pesikta deRav Kahana is found in Song of Songs Rabbah, with only minor variations. A small portion is recorded also in Tanhuma Buber, Parashat Bo 3:7.

¹⁴⁹ Song of Songs 2:11.

¹⁵⁰ Song of Songs 2:12.

be cut out of the world...The time has come for singing the song at the Red Sea...And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.¹⁵¹ R. Yochanan said: This verse means that the voice of Moses, the one who led us with great care through the turnings of our journey, was heard in the land; "And Moses said, Thus saith the Lord: "About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt."¹⁵²...The fig tree drops (as into a grave) her unripe and sickly figs, whilst the young grapes just formed from the blossoms on the vines give forth their fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.¹⁵³ In the words the fig tree [that is the house of Israel] drops her unripe and sickly figs, which refers to what happened in the three days of darkness¹⁵⁴ when the lives of Israel's wicked ones [who spurned redemption] were brought to an end by God, [and without the Egyptians knowing it, the bodies of the wicked of Israel were dropped into graves]. The rest of the verse...refers to those among the children of Israel [whose deeds, though far from acceptable] had, nevertheless, the fragrance of repentance so that those Israelites were received by God and remained alive [during the three days of darkness].¹⁵⁵

This passage relates the "winter" of Israel's enslavement in Egypt and her springtime redemption. Moses and Aaron are the "flowers" that appear on the earth; they are the blossoms sent forth by God to indicate to Israel that their winter is now over and that their redemption is immanent.

¹⁵¹ Song of Songs 2:12.

¹⁵² Exodus 11:4.

¹⁵³ Song of Songs 2:13.

¹⁵⁴ Exodus 10:22. This refers to the plague of darkness which God cast over Egypt.

And redemption arrives as the time for *zamir* has come—a time for pruning and singing. The time of "pruning" is an explicit reference to a renewed mandate for circumcision by Moses,¹⁵⁶ in which the relationship between God and Israel is re-sanctified through the covenant.

Moses is not only the "flower" but also the "turtledove." R. Yochanan draws his interpretation from a word-play and explains that Moses is the *tor* because he led Israel through the many *tyyr* "turns" of their journey out of Egypt. The interpretation also may come from the Aramaic meaning of the word as "go-between," since Moses was the go-between Israel and God in their redemptive journey.

The second entry in *Pesikta deRav Kahana* uses a similar format and recounts the next dark period of Israelite history, the wandering in the desert: "*The winter is past: this refers to the forty years which Israel spent in the wilderness.*"¹⁵⁷ The "flowers" are the "princes," the

¹⁵⁵ *Pesikta deRav Kahana Piska* 5:9.

¹⁵⁶ A midrash in *Exodus Rabbah* 1:8 relates that after Joseph died, the children of Israel forsake the practice of circumcision in an effort to assimilate with the Egyptians. But before they left Egypt, Moses circumcised them.

¹⁵⁷ *Pesikta deRav Kahana Piska* 5:9.

leaders of every tribe who brought offerings to Adonai.¹⁵⁸ Another passage in Pesikta deRav Kahana implies that these princes were the "spies" who went forth into Israel first.¹⁵⁹ In the Numbers passage¹⁶⁰ that relates the selection of the spies, they are called the *roshei*, the "heads" of the tribes. This language reflects that of the "princes" of each tribe. The spies were the first "buds" that hinted that Israel would find an end to her wanderings and enter in the land of Canaan.

The time of *zamir* is read not only as a time when the foreskin was to be "pruned," but also that the time had come, "for the Canaanites to be cut down, the time has come for the Land of Israel to be cut up."¹⁶¹ The time of *zamir* foretells of the time when Israel will enter the land, and Adonai instructs Moses on how to divide the land among the tribes. The turtledove (*tor*) in this passage is not Moses, but Joshua, for he was one of the "spies" who was told *latur otah eretz*, "to spy out" the land. Not only that, but he was one of only two spies who returned from Canaan and gave a favorable report of the Land. He was the

¹⁵⁸ Numbers 7:2.

¹⁵⁹ Pesikta deRav Kahana Piska 1:7.

¹⁶⁰ Numbers Chapter 13.

¹⁶¹ Pesikta deRav Kahana Piska 5:9.

instrumental tayyar, the "explorer" who actually brought Israel forth from the wilderness to the Promised land.

This passage also takes a single salvation episode in Israel's history, from the beginning to the end, and interprets key symbols in the context of this historic moment. A third passage does the same, but refers, in this case, to Israel's exile: "*The winter is past—the seventy years' rule of the kingdom of Babylon is past . . . the period of seventy years Israel spent in exile is past.*"¹⁶² The "flowers" that appear on earth in this period include: "the fame of such as Daniel and his companions, of such as Mordechai and his company, of such as Ezra and his company."

Each of these "flowers" defied their exile and helped to redeem Israel when under foreign rule. Daniel and his companions showed great faith and courage under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel proposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's food, nor with the wine which he drank . . . The chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, 'I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink: for why should he see you looking more woebegone

¹⁶² Pesikta deRav Kahana, Piska 5:9.

than other youths of your age? For then you should endanger my head to the king. Daniel said...Put thy servants to the proof I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us vegetables to eat, and water to drink...And at the end of ten days they appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the youths who did eat the portion of the king's fare.¹⁶³

Daniel remained true to his religion and his courage served as a living symbol of God's providence during the reign of Babylon. Mordechai also saved Israel from a foreign ruler while Israel was in exile. Through the help of his niece Esther, he saved the Jews from Haman and the gallows. Ezra was the scribe and priest appointed by King Artachshasta to bring the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.¹⁶⁴ Each of these men symbolizes a budding of resistance or victory for Israel while she was exiled from her land.

The "turtledove" in this passage according to R. Yochanan is a benevolent King: 'the voice of Cyrus, the voice of the one who turned us with great skill towards the Land of Israel.'¹⁶⁵ Cyrus was the one King who invited Israel to return to Jerusalem, and most importantly, to rebuild the Temple. His reign was too short to enable the Israelites to rebuild, but he nevertheless represents the one leader

¹⁶³ Daniel 1:8-16.

¹⁶⁴ Ezra 7:11-26.

among many foreign rulers who helped "turn" Israel back to Jerusalem.

The final interpretation offered in Pesikta deRav Kahana refers to the "winter" of the rabbis' immediate historical context and offers a messianic hope for the future. In the period of the Fourth century C.E., with the ascension of Constantine, Christianity has become dominant in the Roman Empire. The anti-Christian sentiment in this commentary becomes much sharper and pointed. Here, R. Azariah refers to the winter, *stav*, as: "the wicked Kingdom who entices *mesita*¹⁶⁶ the world and misleads it with lies . . . 'If thy brother [Esau, from whom came Edom and Rome] the son of thy mother . . . entice thee . . . saying : 'Let us go and serve other gods' "¹⁶⁷ The "wicked kingdom" is a clear reference to Rome and the Christian kingdom. In later editions, including the Song of Songs Rabbah, the text is amended to read as *malchut kutim*, or the "Kingdom of the Cutheans," a more explicit reference to the Christian community.

¹⁶⁵ Pesikta deRav Kahana, Piska 5:9.

¹⁶⁶ The Hebrew makes a play on the words *stav* and *mesita*.

¹⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 13:7. The passage continues to say that those who entice you, you should surely kill (13:10).

The "flowers" are the craftsmen in the verse: "And the Lord showed me four craftsmen."¹⁶⁸ These craftsmen came to "cast out the horns over the nations which lift up their horn over the land of Judah."¹⁶⁹ These horns scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem, so these craftsmen, in casting out the horns, are making the first steps to reuniting Israel and bringing her people back from exile. The time of *zamir* is a time of pruning: "time for the wicked kingdom to be rooted out of the world; the time has come for the kingdom of heaven to be revealed." And the turtledove, according to Rabbi Yochanan, is the "king Messiah, the voice of the one who will lead us with great care through the final turnings *tayyar*, of our journey." With this final symbol, Rabbi Yochanan sums up the final redemptive prophecy of this verse.

Each Midrash separately is a unit unto itself which represents a specific dark period in Jewish history. Taken as a whole, the different pieces lead us through the story of the many "winters" of Jewish experience: the redemptive budding of "flowers" in each era, the savior "turtledove", and finally the time of *zamir*, of "pruning" back the evil

¹⁶⁸ Zechariah 2:3.

¹⁶⁹ Zechariah 2:4.

ones, of renewing the covenant of circumcision and singing God's praises.

B. Christian Redemption through Resurrection.

Origen's commentary on this verse seems a direct response the midrashim of the rabbis. In his short paragraph, he alludes to all four interpretations of the midrashim :

But now suppose once more that Christ is speaking these words to the Church, and is representing the whole duration of this present age within the circle of the year. He would then be describing as 'winter' the period in which the hail and storms and the other catastrophes of the ten plagues chastised the Egyptians; so that in which Israel was engaged in diverse wars, or even the time of her resistance to the Saviour Himself when, caught in the storm of unbelief, she was overwhelmed in the shipwreck of faith. So, now that *by their offence salvation is come to the Gentiles.*¹⁷⁰ He calls the Church of the Gentiles to Himself and says to her: 'Arise and come to me, for the winter which overwhelmed the unbelievers and held you down in ignorance, has passed. And the rain too has gone—that is to say, no longer will I bid the prophet-clouds to pour the rain of the Word upon the earth; but the voice of the turtle-dove, the very Wisdom of God shall speak on earth and say: "I myself that spoke, I am here."¹⁷¹ The flowers, therefore, of believing peoples and of budding churches have appeared on the earth. And the time of

¹⁷⁰ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 249.

¹⁷¹ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 251.

pruning, through the faith of my Passion and Resurrection, also has come.'¹⁷²

Origen includes allusions to the redemption from Egypt, the conquest of the Promised Land, the Jews' living under foreign rule and her resistance to the controlling Christian kingdom. He includes these "winters" as part of the struggle of the Church, to emphasize Judaism and Christianity's shared origin, but he stops at the present historical situation to point out where they differ. Here, Christ calls out "arise" to his Bride, the Church of the Gentiles, only. The budding flowers are the believing followers of Christ and the churches who will bring about the redemption. And the savior "turtledove" is the Wisdom of God that spoke on earth, or the Logos. Those who resist the true Word are caught in a "shipwreck of faith," and will be forever swirling in the winter rains of unbelief. Here, Origen makes a clear call to those Jews and Jewish Christians in his midst to be a Bride of Christ and to be a budding flower of the redemption.

Origen writes of the Christ and Church and the time being ripe for redemption. He also interprets this verse on the

¹⁷²Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 243.

individual level, referring to the time when the individual soul is ripe for redemption:

To show that the time is opportune for these things to happen, He has, moreover, logically inserted: 'For lo, the winter is past, the rain is gone,' The soul is not made one with the Word of God and joined to Him, until such time as all the winter of her personal disorders and the storm of her vices has passed; so that she no longer vacillates and is carried about with every wind of doctrine¹⁷³ . . . the time of pruning also comes to her. And, if there be anything superfluous and of small use in her affection and perceptions, it may be cut back and recalled to the buds of spiritual understanding.¹⁷⁴

For Origen, communal redemption will come about with individual redemption. They are interrelated and codependent. Therefore, the Church is reliant on the individual souls to "prune" back their offenses and nurture their spiritual buds of understanding, in order for the Church to also experience redemption. Origen, in a most explicitly messianic example, uses this verse to talk of the upcoming resurrection and subsequent redemption of the Church. Even though he believes that the Messiah has already arrived, the Messianic age will not be here until the resurrection. But this verse foretells the time when

¹⁷³ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 240.

¹⁷⁴ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 241.

this will happen, and then the Church will be called to 'arise':

[W]e can say that it is a sort of prophecy given to the Church, to call her to the promised blessings of the future. She is told to 'arise' as though the consummation of the age were already reached and the time of resurrection come.¹⁷⁵ And because this word of command forthwith seals the work of resurrection, she is invited into the kingdom, as being now, by virtue of the resurrection, brighter and more splendid and is bidden: 'Come, my neighbour, my fair one, my dove, for the winter is past'—winter here denoting surely the storms and tempests of this present life and the blasts of temptation with which human life is racked.¹⁷⁶

C. Messianic Longings.

Origen wrote this commentary just as Christianity was on the rise, preceding the Christian conversion of the State by Constantine by several decades. Christian leaders in his time were given important positions in the Roman government and were filled with enormous confidence regarding the status of Christians and Christianity. They felt that the second coming was close at hand. At the same time, the rabbis began to express doubts about the Messiah coming, and yet still felt that salvation was close at

¹⁷⁵ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 258.

¹⁷⁶ Origen, Commentary and Homilies, p. 245.

hand. R. Yochanan makes these messianic longings evident in his interpretation of these verses:

R. Yochanan said: In the first year of the septannate in which the scion of David will come, the statement of the Scripture will be fulfilled, *And I will cause it to rain upon one city* (Amos 4:7). In the second year famine will assail it. In the third year there will be a great famine from which men, women and children will perish, and pious men and men of good deeds will become few, and the Torah will begin to be forgotten in Israel. In the fourth year there will be scarcity of a kind and plenty of a kind. In the fifth year there will be great plenty and the people will eat, drink and be merry and the Torah will be renewed and restored to Israel. In the sixth year there will be thunderings, in the seventh year wars. At the expiration of the seventh year the scion of David will come.¹⁷⁷

The Midrash continues with Abaye asking, how many times the septannate has come and gone and the Messiah has still not come! The midrash explains the state of degradation that the world will be in before the Messiah's coming. It is a "time when Truth is abandoned." R. Levi said the scion of David will come only in a generation which is full of impudence and deserves to be exterminated. R. Yannai said, "If you see one generation after another cursing and blaspheming, look out for the coming of the Messiah."

¹⁷⁷ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:13:4.

The rabbis describe the time of the Messiah as an age of utter degradation in every way. Perhaps, this was the way they viewed their present social and historical context. More likely, these descriptions were an effort to squelch messianic fervor. While the Israelites may want the Messiah to come, they certainly do not want to live in the age in which he would be called. The rabbis are fighting not only their own messianic longings, but those expressed by the Christian community. In an effort to repel the claims of the Christian community in the Messiah's second coming, the rabbis temper their own messianic desire. They still clung to a hope for salvation, however, that would come at the ruin of Rome.

SECTION THREE:

CONCLUSION

Jewish and Christian exegesis on the Song of Songs offers a lively picture of the theological, religious and political world-view of Jewish and Christian life in the Third and Fourth centuries C.E. In only six verse selections, I discovered a wide breadth of themes and polemics; issues such as who owns Scripture, the nature of Revelation, and the role of faith versus *mitzvot* are all debated in these few verses. A few major themes recur through several of the verses and become a leitmotif for the two communities in their interpretation of the Song. Sometimes the exegesis flows very logically from the text, and sometimes the rabbis and Origen stretch the imagination and force an interpretation they feel obliged to reach. In both cases, the unusual nature of the Song of Songs allows for a fascinating dialogue between the communities and the text, and between the two communities.

The theme that emerges from the midrashim on the Song of Songs texts is a Jewish community intent on explaining its covenantal status with God (its bethrothal) in the face of seemingly overwhelming evidence that Israel is no longer in God's favor. The rabbis must rationalize their exiled state, their loss of the Temple and their political

oppression using lofty theological language, all the while emphasizing their unique place in God's heart.

This theme is addressed most explicitly in verse 1:5, in which the rabbis have the opportunity to explain how Israel can remain the Bride of God while she has been "blackened" in sin. They explain that Israel's blackness is temporary and that it is cleansed through repentance and observance of the *mitzvot*. They emphasize the long history Israel has with God, the merit of all her ancestors, and the salvation history of the Jewish people. While Israel has sinned before, they have repented and God has forgiven them and saved them. The rabbis comfort Israel by stating that even in this period of exile and destruction, God will return as a result of Israel's repentance, for the covenant has not been eternally broken. This verse easily provides an explanation for the political situation of Israel, provides reassurance that God's relationship with Israel is not severed, if only for the merit of the ancestors, and then nurtures a hope for Israel's redemption.

The foundation for this eternal, covenantal relationship between God and Israel is Revelation, and Israel's complete and unquestioning acceptance of God's Revelation. In verse

1:2, the rabbis defend the act of Revelation as an event between God and Israel, an unmediated "kiss" that may have only been brokered by the prophet Moses. They take ownership of Law by emphasizing the aspect of Revelation that only the Jews possess--the Oral Law. The rabbis use the Oral Law to counter the polemical arguments posed by the Christian community that the Law is outdated or difficult to understand. The role that Oral Law takes in defending Revelation to the Christian community causes the rabbis to actually prefer the Oral Law over the Written Law in this generation. Here, we see evidence of the dialogic process at work, for had the Christians not tried to usurp Hebrew Scriptures, the status of Oral Law would have remained subservient to Written Law.

Israel's relationship with God is not only founded on Revelation, in both Written and Oral Law, but also on Israel's faith in accepting the covenant. The rabbis emphasize again the unique role of Israel with *na'aseh v'nishmah*, or putting action before understanding. As written in verse 2:3, the apple tree seemed to give no shade to the other nations, but Israel chose to sit under the "tree of life" and, behold, they were in the shadow of God. The midrashim assert that no other nation took this

leap of faith, and for that, Israel will always maintain a special status with God. The principle of *na'aseh v'nishmah* recurs often in these midrashim, not only as an assertion of Israel's faith, but also as a distinction between Israel and the Christianity: Israel performs *mitzvot*, while Christians emphasize belief alone.

Even with this covenantal status, Israel watched many righteous ones among them die in the face of oppressive governments. The rabbis wanted to explain this difficult theological problem and do so by featuring the "righteous" of their religion in the midrashim, beginning with a strong emphasis on Abraham as the model of faith. Why did the rabbis choose Abraham over, for example, Jacob, who had mystical visions of God, or Moses, the ultimate prophet of Israel? The rabbis likely were influenced by the Christian community's adoption of Abraham as the prototypical man of faith, and thus they ascribe many of the qualities of Jesus, such as the ability to create "souls" or the ability to atone for all Israel, to the patriarch Abraham, as the Jewish foil to Christ. With Abraham as a model, the rabbis portray the other "righteous" ones of the generation and make particular mention of the martyrs of the generation. In this way they extol the many Jews who had been martyred

under Roman persecution and give their deaths a theological meaning.

Finally, the rabbis respond to their current, oppressed situation by contextualizing this position in the whole history of Israel, which is rife with oppression and then, finally, redemption. The exegesis on verses 2:10-13 offers several "redemption" episodes in Israel's history. The last episode refers to the immediate period of the rabbis and is explicitly messianic. The midrash explains that Israel's relationship with God rises and falls, according to Israel's sin, but that each time, God has redeemed Israel. Rabbi Yochanan notes that the pattern of rising and falling follows a seven-year cycle, after which the Messiah will come. The rabbis are quick to note that the final Redemption has not yet come, and they discourage messianic speculation. While this midrash does not go into any detail regarding the reasons for the dark "winters," it implies that these stormy periods are inherent in loving relationships, and that every Spring brings with it a re-flowering of love. These verses explain Israel's difficult situation in terms of the natural cycle of committed relationships and that God and Israel are covenantally bound to one another through these cycles, good and bad.

Even as Israel is experiencing a dark period in history, ultimately she will be redeemed in the Springtime of messianic revelation.

The tone set by the rabbis in these midrashim is apologetic in nature. Israel is under attack, both physically and mentally, both externally and internally. The rabbis defend the covenantal status of Israel with God and give meaning to their suffering. In addition, they measure out a good deal of pointed criticism at their oppressors and at those within their community who are not faithful in these difficult times. The midrashim on the Song of Songs shows a Jewish community struggling to assert its unique relationship with God in the face of political and historical evidence that contradicts their "chosen" status. Israel is God's Bride, and the rabbis reassure their community that no amount of sin or blackness can change the eternal covenant struck by God with Israel.

While the rabbis felt they had to defend the position of Israel, Origen had to contend with establishing and legitimizing Christianity. In Origen's time, the Christian community was gaining strength, both politically and numerically, but it was still a new religion with a short

history. Origen was in the difficult position of trying to distinguish Christianity from Judaism while trying to co-opt Israel's long history; Christianity also wants to distinguish itself from the pagans, so they use Jewish texts and history to provide a legitimate basis for their religion. Origen's theme is his assertion that Christianity and the Gospel is the fulfillment of the Israel's Revelation and that Christians are the "true Israel." In addition, Origen must respond to Israel's refusal to accept this belief which he considers the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptural tradition. Origen reacts by denigrating Israel's vision and understanding.

Origen's exegesis on verse 1:5 most clearly explains why Israel does not accept the Church and her teachings. He explains that the "daughters of Jerusalem" criticize the "black" bride for her lowly origins, her lack of pedigree. Origen responds with scriptural evidence that "black" is indeed beautiful, with examples of Moses' black wife, the Queen of Sheba and Psalm 67. Each of these examples show the ways in which inherent blackness is praised. Later, however, Origen claims that the Bride is not actually 'black,' but darkened by the sun, a temporary status of circumstance rather than birth. The sun that once

enlightened Israel now blinds her, and the sun now shines favorably upon the Church. Origen explains Israel's refusal to accept the Gospel as due to her inability to "see" its truth.

In verse 1:2, Origen lays out his claim that the Gospel is the true Law of God, given directly through his "kisses," in the incarnate Christ, rather than the mediated Revelation of Israel. He cannot distance himself wholly from the Law, for he requires the foundation of the Law for legitimacy. He even goes so far as to praise the Law, but does so for the way it prepared the "true Israel" for the Gospel of Christ.

Origen further promotes Christianity's role as the "true Israel" in verse 1:3, where he states that Jesus and Christians spread the fragrance of God everywhere. He recognizes that Israel tried to do the same, but claims that until Jesus became incarnate in the world, no one had even heard of Moses outside of Israel. Origen also compares the Song of Songs to an ointment which has the power to give life or death. He charges that Israel, who refuses to recognize the Gospel as the fulfillment of Law, bring death to themselves, while those who see its life,

receive life eternal. Those who seek out the Gospel and spread its fragrance are the righteous maidens who run after God. Origen seeks out both Jew and Christians to be the "maidens" of Christ.

In verses 2:2-3, Origen makes clear what distinguishes Christianity from Judaism: faith. He asserts again that the law "brought no man to perfection," and insists on faith in the incarnation of Christ as the means to salvation. The many unbelievers are the thorns which surround the flower of the Church. Among the unbelievers, he explicitly counts the Jews, those who once had faith, but now follow the path of heretics. Origen also responds to the "shadow" imagery of the rabbis and asserts that the Law and all the ancient rituals of the Jews are a "shadow of heavenly things." He further explains that the Church now sits under a "better shadow," that of Christ. The text does not obviously lend itself to interpretation involving shadows. The dialogue between Origen and the rabbis is readily apparent with respect to this verse.

Finally, Origen asserts Christianity's role in redemption and does so with an interpretation of verses 2:10-13 that is strikingly similar to that of the rabbis. He, too,

describes the "winters" of disbelief and darkness for Christianity, beginning with allusions to the "winters" mentioned by the rabbis in the midrashim. By mentioning Egypt and the wars of Israel, for example, Origen appropriates Israel's history as part of the Church's history. He then moves forward and points to the messianic era of the Second Coming of Christ. Origen views the "winters" as the collective dark episodes in Israel's and Christianity's history, and he also views them as the dark periods of faith for individuals. The time of Redemption and Resurrection will come when the individual soul and the Church together are reborn in Spring.

Origen's tone throughout his Commentary on the Song of Songs is polemical. He seeks to distinguish the Church from Judaism for its faith and for its understanding of the true fulfillment of Revelation. Yet, in almost every exegesis, he also appropriates Israelite history and texts because of the antiquity and legitimacy they lend to Christianity. Origen constantly refers back to the concepts set out by the rabbis in the midrashim in his own interpretation.

When the exegesis of the rabbis and Origen are juxtaposed, there is a striking similarity in their themes and interpretations. Given the breadth of theological issues facing the two communities, it cannot be a coincidence that they share similar images and themes in relation to every verse studied. While some verses have an obvious connection to the exegesis offered by both communities, more often than not, the allegorical interpretation is quite removed from the simple understanding of the text. The only explanation for both the presence of so many of the same themes is that the two communities were in dialogue, either verbal or written. While this thesis does not offer a comprehensive analysis of every verse in Origen's commentary, or certainly every midrash on the Song of Songs, it provides a strong representative sample from which these conclusions may be drawn.

This thesis opened up several areas for further study. This study of Song of Songs exegesis could well be extended to different time periods. The nature of interpretation of the Song of Songs becomes explicitly mystical in subsequent generations, and takes on a different set of foci as the needs and desires of the Jewish and Christian communities change over time. I suspect that later midrashim and

Christian commentaries on this text are less polemical in tone and more focused on cultivating the spiritual life of their respective adherents.

By working on this thesis, I have learned how textual interpretation strongly reflects the context of the writers of each generation, their issues and challenges and their world-view. Each generation of rabbis, and similarly, each generation of Church fathers, came to the text of the Song of Songs with its own agenda. They sought to make the text relevant to their lives, by giving theological meaning to their suffering, and by providing a justification for their very existence. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Jewish and Christian exegites of the Third and Fourth Century C.E. were in dialogue in their interpretations of this text; Jewish-Christian disputation was one of the greatest challenges that each community faced in that time. Studying the Midrashim of the Song of Songs in the context of Christian exegesis and in the context of its historical time reminds me of the importance for every generation to read texts in context. This thesis teaches me that it is not only historically valid to interpret texts with the intent to give meaning to our personal and communal challenges and desires, it is our religious imperative.

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