A LILY AND AN APPLE: A HISTORY OF JEWISH INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG OF SONGS FROM THE RABBINIC THROUGH THE MODERN PERIOD

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DIGEST

The sizeable corpus of Jewish commentaries to the Song of Songs includes volumes from all intellectual disciplines and all periods. At many times, the Song of Songs provided Jews a textual support for their hope of redemption. In many places, commentaries on the Song of Songs were inspired by the desire to critique other nations and lands.

This thesis chronicles the history of Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs. Using two verses (Song 2:2-3) as exemplars, this work begins with an examination of early rabbinic exegesis, examining multiple volumes of midrashim and the Targum. The second chapter is devoted to the schools of *peshat* and *derash*, with particular attention paid to the exegetes Rashi, Toviah ben Eliezer, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Sforno. The third chapter explores the schools of medieval Jewish philosophical interpretation, with a detailed discussion of Maimonides, Ibn Aknin, the Ibn Tibbons, Gersonides, and Arama. The fourth chapter surveys the medieval Kabbalistic interpretations of Ezra of Gerona, Ibn Sahula, the Zohar, Luria, and Alshekh. The fifth and final chapter analyzes modern interpretation, from Moses Mendelssohn through the Artscroll Commentary series.

Over the course of the history of Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs, allegorical interpretation, in its homiletical, philosophical, and mystical manifestations, appear to have moved further away from the plain, original meaning of the biblical text. This thesis examines how and why the commentators shifted the meaning of the Song of Songs as they did.

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I would like to acknowledge the place in which this thesis was inspired. That was in Dr. Jerusalmi's course entitled Shir HaShirim in the Targumic Tradition. Dr. Jerusalmi not only sparked a love for the Song of Songs, but he was instrumental in setting me up with many of his own personal books, and taking time here and there to meet and discuss the Targum.

I cannot allow an opportunity to thank all of my professors and lecturers here at HUC-JIR allude me. I will work to emulate your wisdom and compassion throughout my career. In addition, I would like to thank the administration, administrative assistants, and the library staff—all of whom have supported me over the past five years. To my classmates, it has been my privilege to study and grow with you—a privilege that has only begun.

I dedicate this thesis to my family, who has not only nurtured and encouraged me over the past years, but has given me the intellectual, religious, and moral footing upon which I am able to pursue a career in the rabbinate. To the newest member of my family, my husband Yonatan, it is an understatement when I remind you that I could not be where I am today without you: my partner, my best friend, my teacher, my muse, my תפוח.

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INTRODUCTION

"If ever a biblical text 'cried out' to be interpreted allegorically, Song of Songs is it."[1] The Song of Songs is replete with explicit love scenes and illustrative eroticism. To the same extent that one cannot escape these glaring images and references, one cannot help but notice that the name of God is entirely absent, as is any unambiguous reference to traditional Israelite rituals, theologies, or events. For all of these reasons and both what is present and what is absent from the text, the Song of Songs has been interpreted allegorically since an early time.

In the first century C.E., Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph admonished, "He who trills his voice in chanting the Song of Songs in the banquet house and makes it a secular song, has no part in the world to come."[2] This reproach, which appears in the Babylonian Talmud, is followed by an equally, if not more, severe warning:

> Those who recite a verse of the Song of Songs as they would a secular song, or who read its verses in inappropriate circumstances, bring evil to the world, because the Torah wraps itself in sackcloth, and standing before the Holy One, blessed be He, complains: "Master of the World, Your children have made me a harp on which mockers play. . .[3]

Evidently, Rabbi Akiva and the anonymous speaker who follows him understood the Song of Songs to be only acceptable as an allegorical text; one in which the shepherd and

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[1] Menachem Kellner. "Communication or Lack Thereof Among Thirteenth-Fourteenth Century Provencal Jewish Philosophers: Moses Ibn Tibbon and Gersonides on Song of Songs." in *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Sophia Menache (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 230.

[2] *t. Sanh.* 12:10. Gordis, Robert, *The Song of Songs*, (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1954), 9. There is no discussion in ancient rabbinic literature as to whether or not Jews were employing the Song of Songs as a love poem. However, there are multiple parallels between the Song of Songs text and ancient Egyptian love poetry, which would lead one to believe that knowledge and/or familiarity with the Song as a love poem existed among the Jewish community. Keith Schoville, "The Character of the Song of Songs," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 14-20, vol. 19)

[3] *b. Sanh.* 101a. Yitzhak I. Broch, *The Song of Songs As Echoed in Its Midrash*, (New York: Feldheim, 1968), 8-9.

shepherdess symbolized much more than a simple love affair between two plain folk, but rather the representation of a holier rank.

The book consists of only 117 verses, and nonetheless, the Song of Songs has been the inspiration for more self-reflective literature than any other biblical book.[4] Moreover, it is clear that the degree of dissonance between the Song of Songs and the interpretations of it is, likewise, more dramatic than those of any other book in the Tanakh.[5]

It seems that around the first century at Yavneh, the great Israelite academy of scholars, some anxiety was expressed over what appeared to be the content of the book (as evidenced above)—with enough apprehension to warrant a somewhat lengthy discussion of its canonicity.

I. The Song of Songs in the Hebrew Canon

The earliest significant mention of the Hebrew canon is in the works of first century historian Josephus. In his work, *Against Apion*, Josephus wrote that the Hebrew canon was comprised of twenty-two books, four of which "contain hymns of God and precepts for the conduct of human life." From this statement, many scholars have deduced that the Song of Songs was included in this particular grouping.[6] The reality is that this conjecture cannot be conclusive. Therefore, the earliest decisive mention of the Song of Songs as a member of the Hebrew canon is in the Babylonian Talmud's account

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[4] Isaac Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition* (Cincinnati: Ladino Books, 1993), xliv; Daniel Frank. "Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth Century Jerusalem." in *With Reverence for the Word*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51.
[5] Wilfred Schoff, *The Song of Songs, A Symposium*, (Philadelphia: The Commercial Museum, 1924), 80.
[6] Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977), 18; Solomon Zeitlin, "An Historical Study of the Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures," in *American Academy for Jewish Research* 3 (1932): 129-30.

of twenty-four books that comprised the canon, in which the Song is mentioned by name.[7]

In the Babylonian Talmud, wherein the Song is included in the list of biblical books of the canon, there is no mention of any dissent as to its canonicity. The lengthy discussion of its canonicity is in fact mentioned in the Mishnah, in the context of a greater discussion as to the canonicity of both the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.

The *tannaim*, who made up the great academy of scholars at Yavneh, when speaking of what books were considered divine, and therefore authoritative, used the phrase "*metamei et ha-yadaim*," "it renders the hands unclean." This phrase came out of the rabbinic decree that held that any hands that came into direct contact with a biblical holy book were considered unclean. If, then, one's unclean hands touched the priestly gift-offering, or the *terumah*, the hands, by extension, rendered the gift-offering unfit for the priest's consumption.[8] According to scholars, the term "it renders the hands unclean," while it must be understood as indicating the divine, inspired nature of a biblical book, may also rightly be equated with a biblical book worthy of membership in the canon.[9] As Zeitlin writes, "[to the *tannaim*] books are either inspired and canonical, or uninspired and forbidden."[10]

The following is the tannaitic discussion regarding the canonicity of the Song of Songs:

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[7] *b. B. Bat.* 14a. According to Pope, Melito, Bishop of Sardis, traveled to Palestine in the end of the second century to see what books were canonical there. Upon his return, in his own Canon of Melito, he noted that the Song of Songs was a part of the Hebrew Canon. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 19. Hence, this may be the earliest outside evidence of its canonicity in Hebrew terms.

[8] *m. Kelim* 15:6.; *m. Yad* 3:2., 4:6.; Norman Henry Snaith, "Bible: the Canon, Text, and Editions," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed.

[9] See *m. Ed.* 5:3., *m. Yad* 3:5., *t. Yad* 2:14., and *m. Meg.* 7a. for these mentions.

[10] Sid Z. Zeitman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1976), 111.

> The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render the hands unclean. Rabbi Judah says, The Song of Songs renders the hands unclean, but with regard to Ecclesiastes, there is a dispute. Rabbi Yose says, Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclear, but rather, with regard to the Song of Songs, there is a dispute...Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai said, I have received [a tradition] (i.e. learned) from the seventy-two elders, on the day that Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was appointed to the Yeshiva, that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render the hands unclean. Rabbi Akiva said, Heaven forbid! No one of Israel ever differed, [saying] that the Song of Songs does not render the hands unclear (i.e. no one ever disputed that the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean). The entire universe is not as worthy as the day on which Israel received the Song of Songs, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies (i.e. the most holy). If they differed, they only differed about Ecclesiastes.[11]

In other words, according to the sages, the Song of Songs is adamantly separated from the dispute that apparently shrouded Ecclesiastes. Moreover, Rabbi Akiva argued that the Song of Songs held the designation of special canonical status! In the same section of the Mishnah, Rabbi Akiva claimed, "Had the Torah not been given, we could live our lives by the Song of Songs."[12]

While the canonical status of the Song was never rescinded, the literal reading of the Song remained the subject of several misgivings from the rabbinical period through the modern period. Mystical allegory followed philosophical allegory, which followed homiletical allegory. Allegorical interpretation was not only the result of a desire to de-emphasize the literal meaning, however. Allegorical interpretation was also an avenue toward discovering the deeper meaning of the biblical text.

II. Methodology

In order better to understand how the relationship between "the lovers" has been interpreted over time and, more specifically, to better comprehend how the entire text of

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[11] *m. Yad* 3:5. Sid Z. Zeitman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1976), 130-1.
[12] Ibid.

the Song of Songs has been treated, I will trace a couplet of verses through approximately 50 commentaries from the rabbinic period through the present. This couplet, Song of Songs 2:2-3, illustrates a scenario as suggestive as any in the entire book:

2 כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים כֵּן רַעְיָתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת׃

3 כְּתַפּוּחַ בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וְיָשַׁבְתִּי וּפִרְיוֹ מָתוֹק לְחִכִּי׃

I will trace the history of Jewish interpretation of these verses, with the goal of shedding light on exegesis of the book more generally. Where appropriate, I will comment on extant Christian commentaries. A significant part of this project is to explain why the various readers understood the text as they did and not only to describe their understanding.

This project is divided into five parts treating commentators according to their time and/or genre of interpretation: early rabbinic homiletical interpretation, medieval literal-homiletical interpretation, medieval philosophical interpretation, medieval Kabbalistic interpretation, and modern interpretation. Within each chapter, special attention will be paid to external circumstances and influences, internal circumstances and influences, points of departure from an earlier generation, points of junction with an earlier genre, and all measurable attempts at innovation.

III. The Lily and the Apple

The lily and the apple,[13] symbolic of the superlatives that describe the object of each lover's respective affection, call for a brief introduction. To what extent do we understand these terms?

The שׁוֹשַׁנָּה, or the lily, appears only one other time in the entire Hebrew Bible. That mention is in the book of Hosea:

אֶהְיֶה כַּטַּל לְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִפְרַח כַּשּׁוֹשַׁנָּה וְיַךְ שָׁרָשָׁיו כַּלְּבָנוֹן:[14]

In the Song of Songs itself, the lily in fact appears in multiple verses.[15] The תַּפּוּחַ, or the apple-tree, like the lily, makes other appearances in the Song of Songs, as well.[16] However, unlike the lily, it does not appear outside of the Song of Songs.

Due to the limited mention of the lily and the apple outside of the Song of Songs, it makes it quite difficult to gain information about the original meaning of these two terms. Approximately ninety-six percent of commentators and translators prefer to render the Hebrew שׁוֹשַׁנָּה and תַּפּוּחַ as lily and apple-tree respectively. Those who dissent from these popular interpretations do so on the basis of the authority of some scientific knowledge, if not observation, of the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה and תַּפּוּחַ. There are those, also, who choose to couch their mystical or homiletical interpretations in terms of what *may be* observed in the natural world.

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[13] By using the English lily and apple, I have already informed the reader of the way in which I have chosen to interpret the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה and the תַּפּוּחַ. Over the course of the thesis, it should become apparent that these English terms are the overwhelmingly preferred way in which to render the Hebrew. However, it should become equally as apparent that multiple commentators preferred rose to lily, and etrog to apple-tree.
[14] *Hos* 14:6.
[15] *Song* 2:1., 4:5., 5:13., 6:2., 7:2.
[16] *Song* 2:3., 2:5., 7:9.

In terms of modern scholarship, flora experts have taken their turn at attempting to prove or disprove the ancient existence of the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה and the תַּפּוּחַ as a lily and an apple-tree. Accordingly, to begin with, the lily appears to be just that. What type of lily, however, is the subject of continued speculation. According to Moldenke, the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה is a madonna lily, a species of lily that proves to be native to Palestine.[17] According to Tournay, the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה is potentially a water-lily, loaned from the Egyptian word *ssn*, which means lotus.[18]

Moldenke disputes the possibility that the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה is the water-lily of the lotus type (as it was not native to Palestine), but offers scientific evidence to support the possibility that the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה could in fact be a white or blue water-lily (as they both were native to Palestine).[19] Of course, one could argue, as Pope does, that the Egyptian water-lily could have been known through means of artistic depiction to the ancient Palestinian "writer" who may have seen it on Egyptian or Canaanite artifacts.[20]

Interestingly, rabbinic through modern interpretations do not appear to be concerned with identifying the specific species of the lily. This is not the case, however, for the תַּפּוּחַ. Much modern interpretation, in fact, is concerned with this. One modern interpretation speculates that the תַּפּוּחַ is an apricot-tree. This assertion is supported in modern scientific scholarship. Moldenke supposes that it is an apricot-tree, because the apricot-tree is indigenous to Palestine. Furthermore, Moldenke read the biblical text, and

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[17] Alma L. Moldenke and Harold N. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible*, (Waltham, Mass.: Chronica Botanica Company, 1952), 164.
[18] According to Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 81.
[19] Moldenke, et al, *Plants of the Bible*, 154-5.
[20] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 368.

following the textual assertion that the תפוח is sweet and fragrant, concluded that the apricot fit this bill. After all, one might argue, the etymology of the תפוח is from the root nph, to breathe, intimating a fragrant fruit. [21]

Nevertheless, the evidence has remained inconclusive for some time. Corroborating the popular choice of translating תפוח as apple-tree, one scientist uncovered a quantity of charred apples at Sinai![22]

IV. Final comments

The combination of choice flora with profound allegorical implications prompted Jewish tradition to adopt what is understood to be both an ancient and a contemporary custom to read the scroll of the Song of Songs each Friday night. This liturgical institution takes on special significance on the Sabbaths nearest the season of physical and spiritual rebirth, Passover.[23]

In the following five chapters, we will discover the myriad of ways in which the Song of Songs, apropos to its liturgical usage, has undergone rebirth in terms of the way in which it has been understood anew in the hands of each biblical commentator.

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[21] Moldenke et al, *Plants of the Bible*, 184-5.
[22] Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs*, 83.
[23] Keith Schoville, "The Character of the Song of Songs," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 14-20, vol. 19)

CHAPTER 1: RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

I. Introduction

Two modes of interpretation prevail throughout the history of exegesis of the Song of Songs. The first attempts to read the text literally; the second reads the Song as an allegory. This chapter treats early rabbinic commentary to the Song of Songs. Therein, the latter method of interpretation is preferred. The Church fathers who lived in the time period of the early rabbinic interpretation also developed their own commentaries to the Song of Songs. Like their rabbinic contemporaries, they preferred the method of allegorical interpretation. When their work is relevant to the discussion of the rabbis' contributions, it is discussed below.

In the general introduction, the subject of the canonization of the Song of Songs was treated. As mentioned there, much of our knowledge of the timeline, impetuses, and significance of the Jewish canonization of the Song of Songs is dependent on material provided in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. Most of the references made to the Song of Songs in these four texts relate directly to the canonization of the biblical book. A handful of references, however, understand the Song as an interpretation and analysis of the major events throughout the history of the relationship between God and the Israelite people. The event most prominently discussed by the Song of Songs is the account of the Israelites' encounter with God at Mount Sinai. One of the verses highlighted in this thesis, Song of Songs 2:3, is referenced in such a manner in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat,[1] for example:

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[1] *b. Sabb* 88a.

> Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina said, "What is the meaning of that which is written, *like an apple-tree among trees of the field*? Why is Israel likened to an apple-tree? To tell you: just as in the case of the apple-tree, wherein its fruit precedes its leaves, so too did Israel say *we will do* before *we will listen.*[2]

This method of supplying proof texts to support the interpretation of other biblical verses is utilized in almost all other references to the Song of Songs within the corpus of early rabbinic material, specifically Mekhilta, Sifra, and Sifre on Numbers.[3] Another example occurs in a Sifre commentary to Parashat Vezot HaBracha,[4] elucidating the first cola of Song of Songs 33:26, אֵין כָּאֵל יְשֻׁרוּן, "Jeshurun,[5] there is none like God,"[6] the author elaborates on this verse, depicting the relationship between Israel and the Holy One as a strong love affair. What better proof texts support this scene than the particularistic love affair depicted in Song of Songs 2:2-3, the ancient rabbinic mind must have wondered. In this Sifre passage, the following appears within the conversation between the Israelites (Jeshurun) and the Holy One (Ruach HaKodesh):

> Israel said, "Listen O Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord is One. The Holy One said, "Who is like you Israel?" Israel said, "As an apple-tree among trees of the field" [implied: are you]. The Holy One returned her [Israel] as a lily among thorns. Israel said, "This is mine [implied: God] and I will make Him my home." The Holy One said, "This is the nation that I have created for Myself..."[7]

However, two volumes from the early rabbinic period are distinct from the aforementioned texts in the way in which they approach the explication of the Song of Songs. These two volumes, Shir HaShirim Zuta and Song of Songs Rabbah, offer an

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[2] My own translation of מדרש רבה על כל המפרשים *Volume Four*, (Jerusalem: Vagshal Publishing Limited, 2001), 84.
[3] Isaac Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition* (Cincinnati: Ladino Books, 1993), x.
[4] Sifre to *Deut 14*
[5] Jeshurun is a poetic name of Israel, first introduced in the Bible; there it appears four times. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Jeshurun." (pg. 243, vol. 11)
[6] My own translation, influenced by the Jewish Publication Society's reading of this phrase.
[7] My own translation of מדרש רבה על כל המפרשים *Volume Four*, (Jerusalem: Vagshal Publishing Limited, 2001), 85.

exegetical midrash of the entire Song. Much is known about the authorship of the contributions to the latter volume; less is known about the authorship of the former volume, with the exception of what appears in both works. In other words, Song of Songs Rabbah attributes its midrashim to one Amora or another. Shir HaShirim Zuta, or "Minor Song of Songs," is a collection of extracts from various midrashim,[8] without attribution to its original author(s).

Schechter points out multiple features in common with Yelamdenu-Tanchuma midrashim. When determining Shir HaShirim Zuta's date of redaction, therefore, he points to the tenth century.[9] While others date the work to the eleventh century,[10] it is generally agreed upon that the date of redaction does not appear to be earlier than the tenth century.[11]

It is understood that the redactor of Shir HaShirim Zuta made use of a midrashic work(s) that are no longer extant. Shir HaShirim Zuta is important to the discussion of early rabbinic exegesis on the Song of Songs because the material within its pages, while redacted after the tenth century, originated in the early rabbinic period.[12] However, none of its commentary on Song of Songs 2:2-3, is unique to this midrashic compilation. In other words, all commentary is a repetition of that which is included in Song of Songs Rabbah. Consequently, it is with Song of Songs Rabbah that we begin our analysis.

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[8] Moshe Herr, "Midrashim, Smaller," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 187-90, vol. 14)
[9] H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 319-320.
[10] Moshe Herr does so in his article in the EJ, for example: Moshe Herr, "Midrashim, Smaller," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 187-90, vol. 14)
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

II. Song of Songs Rabbah

Song of Songs Rabbah, the rabbis' midrashic compilation to the Song of Songs, also referred to as Aggadat Hazita in the middle ages,[13] draws from tannaitic literature, the Jerusalem Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, and Pesikta de-Rav Kahana. A view now widely-accepted, Zunz posited that Song of Songs Rabbah was redacted between the 650 and 750 C.E.[14]

What remains unresolved is the procedure by which the redaction took place. One popular theory, argued first by Theodor, is that the redactor of Song of Songs Rabbah set-out to compile a retrospective linear commentary to the biblical book.[15] This theory, therefore, accounts for the range of methods of interpretation represented in this volume--from explications of individual words to substantial homilies.

Regardless of the evidence supporting a sixth century redaction, such as later euphemisms and words borrowed from Arabic,[16] it is nevertheless evident that Song of Songs Rabbah bears a tradition whose core goes back to the days of the Amoraim.[17]

Although the place of redaction for this midrashic work is not known, much evidence supports the redaction of Song of Songs Rabbah in Erez Israel, or Palestine. The most compelling evidence includes the Palestinian rabbis cited therein, the Palestinian sources used by the redactor, and the Aramaic dialect also used in the Palestinian Talmud. Also, when a passage is found both in the Palestinian Talmud and

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[13] In geonic and medieval rabbinic literature Song of Songs Rabbah is also referred to as Midrash Hazita or Aggadat Hazita, the name deriving from its opening passage: "This is what Scripture states in the words of Solomon (Prov. 22:29): 'Seest thou *(hazita)* a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings.'" Moshe Herr, "Song of Songs Rabbah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 20, vol. 19)

[14] In their widely-acclaimed introduction to rabbinic literature, Gunter Stemberger and H.L. Strack uphold this viewpoint. Stemberger et al, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 315.

[15] Samuel Lachs, "Prolegomena to Canticles Rabba," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 50 (January 1965): 242-3.

[16] Lachs, "Prolegomena to Canticles Rabba," 248.

[17] Ephraim Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 275.

the Babylonian Talmud, the reading follows the Palestinian Talmud."[18] Moreover, it should be noted that the development of classical midrash was confined almost completely to Palestine. This factor significantly contributes to the contextualization of Song of Songs Rabbah as well.

Beyond the terms of its redaction, what is truly important to the subject at hand are the conditions of its character. Neusner argues that what characterizes Song of Songs Rabbah itself is the repetitive nature of its discourse. He writes, "The treatment of the Song of Songs by our sages of blessed memory who compiled Song of Songs Rabbah shows over and over again that long lists of alternative meanings or interpretations end up saying just one thing, but in different ways."[19]

Song of Songs Rabbah appears to address three major topics: the allegory of the historical relationship between God and Israel, the import of messianic redemption, and the incidence of polemical expositions against Christianity.[20] The first of these three themes will be explored in the subsequent section devoted to the analysis of the text of Song of Songs Rabbah. The third will be taken up immediately thereafter.

III. Text Analysis of Song of Songs Rabbah 2:2

כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים כֵּן רַעְיָתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת׃ [2:2]

The rabbis were solely interested with the first half of this verse, כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים. Hereafter, this phrase will be denoted by one of its English translations: *as a lily*[21] *among*

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[18] Lachs, "Prolegomena to Canticles Rabba ,"245.
[19] Jacob Neusner, *Song of Songs Rabbah*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 2.
[20] Moshe Herr, "Song of Songs Rabbah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 20, vol. 19)
[21] The best translation of this Hebrew word is contested. The majority of scholars translate שושנה as a lily in the context of the Song of Songs. Others prefer to translate this flower as a rose. The occurrence of the translation of שושנה as rose may be influenced by Rabbi Azariah in Song of Songs Rabbah wherein he uses

thorns.[22] In Song of Songs Rabbah, the phrase *as a lily among thorns* is understood in six diverse, and yet not entirely disparate, ways.

The first interpretation, as it appears linearly in its current edition, attributed to Rabbi Isaac, a third generation Palestinian Amora, equated the matriarch Rebekah with the lily and Laban, Bethuel, and other Arameans of Paddan-Aram with the thorns. The text reads:

> This virtuous one came forth from their midst. What does she resemble? "A lily among thorns."[23]

In this case, the Song of Songs text was used to explain Genesis 25:20, where Rebekah is introduced as "Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel, the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.[24]" The midrash, it seems, was used to explain the evident embellishment of detail, as it insists:

> It is to tell us that her father was a trickster, her brother was a trickster, and all the men of her place were tricksters.[25]

This allusion played a significant role in Song of Songs Rabbah to Song of Songs 2:2.

In this first exposition, the lily was understood to be one individual in the history of Israel. In another, Rabbi Hanan of Sepphoris, a fourth generation Palestinian Amora, also interpreted the lily to symbolize an individual. In this explication, he likened the lily to an individual who knows a litany of liturgy, whereas, the remaining nine members of

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the term שושנה אחת של ורד. Besides this case, the rest of the midrashim in Song of Songs Rabbah do not seem to differentiate between the שושנה and the חֲבַצֶּלֶת of 2:1. They are understood to be synonymous. Therefore, because the חֲבַצֶּלֶת , or lily comes first, the שושנה is understood in terms of the חֲבַצֶּלֶת .This will not be the case for the Early Christian expositors, who went out of their way to differentiate between the two; the differentiation they made in fact became the basis for their interpretation.

[22]H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, (London: The Soncino Press, 1961), 94.

[23] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 95. As its translation most closely reflects the Hebrew text, the English translation hereafter will be based on the Soncino edition of Song of Songs Rabbah. However, when this translation is not the best rendering, I have slightly altered the English. These alterations are minimal and are footnoted accordingly.

[24] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 94.

[25] Ibid.

the prayer quorum, who do not know the liturgy, were likened to the thorns. As he explains:

> It often happens that ten men go into a synagogue and not one of them can say the blessings before the *shema* or pass before the Ark until one of them says the blessings before the *shema* and passes before the Ark. What does he resemble? A lily among thorns.[26]

While these two interpretations of the lily applied the verse to individuals, the preponderance of the Song of Songs Rabbah commentary understood the lily to be the Israelite people. This is evidenced by the midrashim of Rabbis Eleazar, Azariah, Huna, and Abihu. All four Amoraim likened the people to the lily. However, it was not the people of Israel generally who were identified by this proverb, but Israel at a particular point in her history.

First, Rabbi Eliezar, a third generation Palestinian Amora, interpreted the horticultural imagery as a reference to the stage of the nation's history when God freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. He compared the exodus of Israel out of Egypt to the plucking of a lily from a vine of thorns in an overgrown garden:

> Just as a lily when it is situated among thorns is difficult to pluck, so the deliverance of Israel was a difficult matter for the Holy One, blessed be He.[27]

Rabbi Azariah, a fifth generation Palestinian Amora, interpreted כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים as a description of the next great stage in Israel's history when the nation stood at the base of Mount Sinai:

> A king once had an orchard in which they went and planted a 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 single lily of

[26] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 96-7.
[27] Ibid., 95.

> the rose-type,[28] he took it and smelt it and was appeased, and said: 'For the sake of this lily[29] the orchard shall be spared.' So the world was created only for the sake of Israel. After twenty six generations the Holy One, blessed be He, inspected His garden to see how it was getting on, and he found it one mass of water. The generation of Enosh was wiped out with water; the generation of the dispersion was punished with water. So He brought wood-cutters to cut it down, as it says, *The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood* (Psalm 29:10), but He saw a beautiful lily of the rose-type, namely Israel, and He took and smelt it, at the time when Israel received the Ten Commandments, and He 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 lily let the garden be spared; for the sake of the Torah and those who study it let the world be spared.[30]

Rabbi Huna, a fourth generation Palestinian Amora, continues to follow the historical timeline of Israel, likening the lily to the nation while equating the thorns to the various kingdoms who once ruled over them:

> Just as a lily, if situated between thorns, when the north wind blows is bent towards the south and pricked by the thorns, and nevertheless its heart is still turned upwards, so with Israel, although taxes and other tributes are exacted from them, nevertheless their hearts are fixed upon their Father in heaven, as it says, *Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord* (Psalm 25:15).[31]

Third, Rabbi Aibo, another fourth generation Palestinian Amora, understood the phrase *a lily among thorns* as an eschatological simile referring to the final epoch in Israel's history:

> When the lily is between thorns it is difficult for the owner to pluck, so what does he do? He brings fire and burns all around and then plucks it. So *The Lord hath commanded concerning Jacob, that they who are round about him should be his adversaries* (Lamentations 1:17), like Halamish to Gava, Jericho to Noadan, Susisan to Tiberias, Kastera to Haifa, Lydda to Ono, and so it is written, *This is Jerusalem! I have set her in the midst of the nations* (Ezekiel 5:5). Tomorrow when the end shall come, what will the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He will bring fire and burn all around her, and so it is written, *And the peoples shall be as the burnings of lime* (Isaiah 33:12).[32]

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[28] This is how I deem most fit to translate שושנה אחת של ורד.
[29] My rendering, based on the Hebrew: שושנה
[30] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 95-6.
[31] Ibid., 97.
[32] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 98.

It appears that this interpretation offers a perspective juxtaposed to the image of God having plucked the rose out from among the thorns, as explicated by Rabbi Eliezar. The commentary has advanced to the point where God rids the garden of the thorns, as opposed to ridding the thorns of the rose, or lily. This is clearly an ultimate redemption for the lily, as Rabbi Abihu's commentary further describes.[33]

What Rabbi Abihu's commentary ultimately attempts to achieve, however, is a greater methodological and theological feat that the majority, if not all, of the commentary in Song of Songs Rabbah. This feat may be characterized in three ways. First, in the Proem to Song of Songs Rabbah, a passage appears in which the rabbis further explain one of the methods that inspired their commentary:

> Solomon proved the words of Torah; he made handles for the Torah.... As Rabbi Shila said, 'it is like a pot full of boiling water, which had no handle to carry it, and someone came and made it a handle, and it began to be carried by its handle.'

In other words, the rabbis appear to have read the Song of Songs both as a work of scripture and of interpretation.[34] As a work of interpretation, the Song of Songs effectively elucidates many passages of Torah. The specific repetition of the commentary of Song of Songs Rabbah to Song of Songs 2:2-3 in Exodus Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah furthers this point.

It should be noted that while the rabbis sought to utilize the text of the Song of Songs as a hermeneutical tool to explain the Torah, nevertheless there still exists a degree to which the Torah interprets the Song of Songs text. That is to say, at a certain level, the

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[33] Endemic to the Sages, and apparent here, was a concern with the status of the people of Israel as chosen. The Sages understood chosenness as fundamental to the Jewish people as creation was to the earth. This fundamental belief, however, was also heightened by the multiple losses and trials that the people of Israel endured, from the destruction of the Temple through the spread of Christianity. For a more extensive discussion of this, see: Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages, their concepts and beliefs*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press of Hebrew University, 1979), 541-554.

[34] Gerald L. Bruns. "The Hermeneutics of Midrash." in: *The Book and the Text: the Bible and literary theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990),195.

rabbis have established an intertextual, symbiotic relationship. As Boyarin writes, "[In Song of Songs Rabbah] we have the establishment of an intertextual connection between two signifiers which mutually read one another.[35]"

As a second element of their methodology reflected in Song of Songs Rabbah, the rabbis attempted to provide further evidence of the unique relationship between God and Israel, with the Song of Songs being the particular expression of this relationship. Neusner writes in fact, "What is episodic elsewhere is routine here [Song of Songs], what is characteristic over all comes to acute expression here."[36]

A third element of the method used in the commentary to Song of Songs Rabbah incorporates the first two elements but necessitates its own illumination. In other words, reading the biblical book like the sages, as an elucidation of the Torah, particularly as a description of the special relationship between God and Israel, this midrashic volume naturally emphasized the early rabbinic conclusion of the dispute over the canonicity of the Song of Songs.[37]

An analysis of Song of Songs Rabbah 2:3 reflects these very postulations:

IV. Text Analysis of Song of Songs Rabbah 2:3

כְּתַפּוּחַ בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דּוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וְיָשַׁבְתִּי וּפִרְיוֹ מָתוֹק לְחִכִּי׃ 2:3

The theme of Israel as a glorious entity among the surrounding nations was continued by the authors of Song of Songs Rabbah as in the second verse of the couplet.

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[35] Daniel Boyarin. "The Song of Songs: Lock or key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash." in: *The Book and the Text: the Bible and literary theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), 219.

[36] Jacob Neusner, "Theology of Song of Songs Rabbah," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, 1st ed. (pg. 887, vol. 1)

[37] Ibid.

However, in contrast to the exposition of the previous verse, the rabbis agree that this verse refers to Israel's involvement in a single event, the revelation at Sinai.

Also, while both the apple-tree and the lily were likened to the people Israel, the midrashim of Song of Songs Rabbah did not expound בְּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר, among the trees of the field, to the same extent as בֵּין הַחוֹחִים, among the thorns. Although the lily is usually interpreted in relation to the thorns surrounding it, the apple tree is presented in its own terms rather than being compared to the rest of the forest.

> The apple-tree brings out its blossoms before its leaves, so Israel in Egypt declared their faith before they heard the message, as it says, *And the people believed; and they heard that the Lord had remembered.* (Exodus 4:31)[38]

The aforementioned midrash was expounded by Rabbi Aha b. Rabbi Zeira, a fourth generation Palestinian Amora. He expounded another statement, which appears to be a different presentation of the first teaching, with the utilization of a separate proof text as its only variation:

> The apple-tree brings out its blossoms before its leaves, so Israel at Sinai put doing before hearing, as it says, *We will do and we will hear* (Exodus 24:7).[39]
>
> Rabbi Azariah made two statements about the uniqueness of the apple-tree:
>
> Just as the apple-tree does not attain to full ripeness until Sivan,[40] so Israel emitted a fragrance[41] only in Sivan.[42]
>
> Just as from the time the apple-tree produces its blossoms until its fruit is ripe fifty days elapse, so from the time that Israel went forth from Egypt until they received the Torah fifty days elapsed. When did they receive it? *In the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth.* (Exodus 19:1)[43]

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[38] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 99.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Sivan was the month in which the Israelites received the Torah at Sinai, as Neusner, among others, makes this point. Neusner, *Song of Songs Rabbah*, 156.
[41] Freedman and Simon claim that the phrase 'emitted a fragrance' refers to 'accepting the Law.' Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 99.
[42] This exact exposition appears in Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, 12:10.
[43] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 99.

The scientific phenomena that the rabbis weaved into their interpretations, particularly in this portion of their commentary to the Song of Songs, most likely reflects their own observations of the natural world rather than horticultural expertise. In addition to the rabbis' pursuit of finding examples in the Prophets and Writings to support the narrative of the Five Books of Moses, examples in the natural world, as depicted in the Song of Songs 2:2-3, bolstered their conclusions—as if to say that what is inherent in the natural world is further evidence of God's teachings in the Torah.[44]

The remainder of commentary to this verse speaks to the second and third cola, בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וְיָשַׁבְתִּי and וּפִרְיוֹ מָתוֹק לְחִכִּי, nevertheless it maintains the metaphor of Sinai and Torah.[45] The main point of the midrashim in these two cola is that if the other nations had had foreknowledge of what would transpire at the tent of meeting, they would have been concerned:

> Although the Torah was proclaimed at Sinai, Israel was not punished for breaches of it until it was explained to them in the tent of meeting. It was like a decree which was written and signed and sent to a province, but the inhabitants did not become liable for disobedience to it until it had been publicly explained in the province. So although the Torah was proclaimed at Mount Sinai, they did not become liable for breaches of it until it was explained to them in the tent of meeting.[46]

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[44] In the Soncino translation of the Babylonian Talmud, the editor offers a conflicting claim to that of Rabbi Azariah's claim that the apple tree's blossoms precede its leaves. The Tosafot find a way to square the reading of the Sages when they read תפוח not as apple tree, but as citron tree. The editor explains this reading in scientific terms: "The tosafot observes this is untrue of the apple tree, which grows like all other trees; consequently refer this to the citron tree. As the citron remains on the tree from one year to the next, at which time the tree sheds its leaves of the previous year, the fruit may be said to precede the leaves." This note does not serve to take away from the Sages' understanding of the natural world. It does, however, serve as evidence that the early rabbis were not truly experted in horticulture and the like. Isadore Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud*, (London: Soncino Press, 1948), 418-419.

[45] Jacob Neusner, "Theology of Song of Songs Rabbah," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, 1st ed. (pg. 888, vol. 1)

[46] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 101.

This excerpt, and almost sixty-five percent of the section of Song of Songs Rabbah dedicated to 2:3, has been "parachuted down"[47] from Leviticus Rabbah. While the rationale for having done so is not entirely clear, it is ostensible, according to Neusner that the redactor(s) "simply inserted whole materials that bear out the proposition that the seventy nations of the world lost out at Sinai."[48] As the text immediately preceding the discussion of the tent of meeting says:

> And his fruit was sweet to my taste: Said Rabbi Isaac, 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.[49]

The ancient rabbis were pre-occupied with using the Bible to authenticate the antiquity, and thereby the authority, of their contemporary religious beliefs. This notion is well borne out in the text of Song of Songs Rabbah as it relates to Song of Songs 2:2 and 2:3. As evidenced in the aforementioned commentary attributed to Rabbi Isaac, the early rabbis appear to have held a strong desire to root Israel's chosen status in the narrative of the Song of Songs.

It has also been argued, however, that the polemic discussion between Jews and Christians in Palestine, during the period of Aggadic creativity, was another significant inspiration for these themes found in Song of Songs Rabbah.[50]

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[47] The term Jacob Neusner uses when describing this phenomenon.
[48] Jacob Neusner, "Theology of Song of Songs Rabbah," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, 1st ed. (pg. 888, vol. 1)
[49] Freedman et al, *Midrash Rabbah*, 101.
[50] Lachs, "Prolegomena to Canticles Rabba," 244.

V. Christian Exposition in light of Song of Songs Rabbah

Many expositors have contributed to the significant corpus of Christian commentary on the Song of Songs. However, one of the early Church fathers, Origen, had a unique relationship both the rabbis and the Song of Songs.

Origen, a theologian of the early Christian Church, lived from 184-253 C.E. According to De Lange, Origen was the first Church Father to devote himself to the study of Bible in a comprehensive manner.[51] Living at a time when the Christian understanding of the Old Testament relied heavily on the exegetical tradition of Jewish scholarship, for which no interpretive equivalency existed in Christianity, Origen sought to create his own uniquely Christian biblical scholarship.[52]

Although born in Alexandria, Origen visited Palestine (specifically, Caesarea) a number of times, at which time he came into contact with Jewish scholars.[53] It seems that "his reliance on the living Jewish tradition is one of the most distinctive features of his exegesis."[54] To what extent Origen came into contact with the rabbis' specific exegetical works is the subject of some debate. For example, there were Jews within the Church who were valuable resources for Christian understanding of contemporary Judaism,[55] and therefore evidence of Jewish sources in his work does not prove contact with the rabbis. This being said, it is generally accepted that the rabbis engaged in public and private discourse with non-Jews.[56]

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[51] N.R.M. De Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 133.
[52] Ibid.
[53] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Origen." (pg. 474, vol. 15)
[54] De Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, 134.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Adam Kamesar, "Rabbinic Midrash and Church Fathers," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, 1st ed. (pgs. 20-40, vol. 1)

Kimmelman argues that Origen's position as dean of his own academy, his status as a popular preacher, his polemics against the rabbi's theological positions, as well as his similar exegetical interests, particularly a shared interpretation of the Song, invite the possibility that Origen and the authors of the midrashim to the Song of Songs were aware of one another's exegesis.[57]

In fact, Origen's work shows that he accepted the allegorical-historical interpretation of the early rabbis, regardless of whether he did so independently or not, even appearing to agree with much of the midrash's detail and expressions.[58] However, he adapted the historical interpretation to his own Christian context, viewing the Song as a history of the Church and the magnificent portion of the Gentiles.[59]

Origen went to great lengths to minimize what is mentioned above as the fundamental idea that the rabbis worked into their midrashim: namely, the significance of the revelation at Mount Sinai and of the unique willingness of Israel to accept the Torah.[60] Origen, in his attempt to reinterpret the subject of the midrash's metaphor, found another proof text to undermine the rabbis' claim that Israel was uniquely important. This proof text is in fact Song of Songs 2:2, specifically the phrase *as a lily among thorns*.

While the Amoraim, specifically Rabbi Eleazar, stressed the unilateral identity of the חֲבַצֶּלֶת, or the lily, with the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה, or the rose, as they appear in Song of Songs 2:1 and 2:2 respectively, Origen differentiated between the two specimens of flora in order to

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[57] Reuven Kimmelman. "Rabbi Yochanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation." *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 573.
[58] Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," 272.
[59] Ibid., 269.
[60] Ibid., 275.

create a contrast between the people of Israel and the Church.[61] His exposition specifically related *the lily* to the Church and the phrase *among the thorns* to the synagogue.[62] Thereby, Origin turned not only the rabbinic reading of this verse on its head, but undoubtedly, the rabbinic understanding of the importance of the entire biblical book was naturally attacked through such an exposition as well.

Accordingly, the rabbis went to great lengths to respond to such Christian denigration of Jews and Judaism by placing even greater emphasis on the election and uniqueness of Israel and decrying the Gentile nations,[63] as evidenced in the lengthy collection of commentary to this verse in Song of Songs Rabbah.

VI. The Aramaic Targum

The influence of the early rabbinic midrashim to the Song of Songs influenced one final document, the Aramaic Targum to the Song of Songs.

Modern scholars have not been able to ascertain the author of this Targum, nor its precise date of composition. Apparently, for a time, its authorship was attributed to Jose or Joseph "the blind," chief of a Suraitic rabbinical seminary in the third century.[64] However, for a number of reasons, this theory no longer holds. Current scholarship has concluded that the Targum owes the form of its current version to various authors over

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[61] Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," 268.
[62] According to Pope, this phrase was also used to describe the inner Church of the elect as it stood surrounded by the outer Church of the called, which was apparently made up of debauched individuals. Furthermore, Christian exposition utilized the metaphor to identify the Virgin Mary as a rose among slanderous tongues, the circumstances of the Crucifixion, and kinship with Jews—all thought to be thorns that impinged on the clarity of the rose. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 371.
[63] Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," 273.
[64] Hermann Gollancz, *The Targum to the Song of Songs*, (London: Luzac and Co., 1908), 1-2.

multiple centuries,[65] and, there exists much evidence for a later redaction date. It is not mutually exclusive, therefore, to mention that the Aramaic Targum to the Song of Songs has somewhat descended from the works of the Talmudic time period.[66]

As far as the evidence that corroborates a later redaction date, according to Melamed, the Targum to the Song of Songs was most likely redacted in the seventh century, and for this reason, it evidences Arabic influence.[67] Loewe provides similar reasoning but is skeptical regarding the utilization of this line of reasoning as the primary one. However, to support the probability of Arabic influence, he raises the fact that Ishmael, who generally represents the Arabic world, is mentioned on two occasions in the Targum."[68] Loewe's argument is challenged, however, in a recent volume written by Bakhos, in which she argues that any reference to Ishmael around and after the rise of Islam are not always about Arabs.[69]

As far as determining the provenance of the Aramaic Targum, there exist multiple vocabulary clues that aid this determination. The Targum includes the terms "Av Bet Din" and "Sanhedrin." Both existed in Palestine.[70] It is indeed generally accepted that the Targum emerged from Palestine.[71] Perhaps it is the fact that "the Targum contains exegesis for which midrashic parallels are extant"[72] which is most convincing in ascribing the Targum's origin to Palestine. In other words, because all of the midrashim

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[65] Ibid.
[66] P. S. Alexander. "The Targumim and the Rabbinic Rules for the Delivery of the Targum." *Congress Volume* 36 (1983): 26.
[67] Raphael Hai Melamed. "The Targum to Canticles: According to Six Yemen Mss." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 10 (April 1920): 5.
[68] Raphael Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations,* ed. A. Altmann, (Waltham: Brandeis University, 1966), 164.
[69] Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border; Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 130.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition,* x.
[72] Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," 168.

of the Song of Songs are believed to be Palestinian, the Targum is believed to be Palestinian as well.

The influence of the genre of midrash on the Targum to Song of Songs is clear. According to Alexander, this influence is confined to two identifiable features, both of which are evident in Song of Songs Rabbah and the Aramaic Targum to the Song of Songs: the significant length of the work in contrast to the original Hebrew of the biblical text and the occasional, however infrequent, allusion to other lines of Scripture introduced by citation formulae.[73] However, Schneekloth argues that Mishnaic commentary, Talmudic commentary, and that exegesis found within Song of Songs Rabbah are "quite atomistic,"[74] whereas the Targum's commentary appears to be contextual. He writes, "Verses or sections of the song are often referred to out of context in the midst of many discussions recorded in these works. It is in the Targum that we have the first real commentary on the song."[75]

As far as determining the Targum's own genre, it is definitely accepted to be a translation.[76] There is no question that the Targum's "translation" is derived with painstaking care from the Hebrew text of the biblical book. Every single word of Hebrew is in fact represented in the text of the Targum.[77] Moreover, each word is presented in an order following the biblical text-- approximately ninety-eight percent of the time.[78] Although, while scholars accept the classification of the Targum as a translation,

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[73] Alexander, "The Targumim and the Rabbinic Rules for the Delivery of the Targum," 19-20.
[74] Larry Gilbert Schneekloth, "The Targum of the Song of Songs: A Study in Rabbinic Biblical Interpretation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978), 39.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Alexander, "The Targumim and the Rabbinic Rules for the Delivery of the Targum," 14.
[77] Phillip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), xi.
[78] This number was derived based on my own thorough work evaluating the entire Targum in light of the biblical text.

scholarship in general agrees that this classification does not accurately characterize the epitome of the translation.

The Targum consists of paraphrastic statements that exist without proof texts or evidence of the logic the author followed to reach these interpretational conclusions. In other words, the Targum preserves only "the outward form"[79] of a translation. According to Alexander, the Targumist has done so in order to create the sense that the Targum is a translation.[80] In fact, when conducting a comparison of the original biblical text to the Targumic text, it is "not always immediately obvious just what it was in the original text that served as the point of departure."[81] Sperber goes so far as to classify the "Targum as a misnomer for Midrash."[82] While a statement steeped in hyperbole perhaps, it is correct as it tries to capture the essence of the message, or theme, of the Aramaic Targum to the Song of Songs.

Unlike the multiple ways in which the rabbis who contributed to Song of Songs Rabbah understood the original words of Scripture, the character of the Aramaic Targum is not multi-faceted. Instead, it is a lucid, straightforward, and unilateral reading of the original biblical text. Herman Gollancz argues that a thorough study of the Targum elucidates what the authors, or redactor, understood to be the single original purpose of the Song of Songs.[83]

While it is generally accepted that multiple authors may have contributed to the work over many generations, the final redaction of the Targum appears to be the work of

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[79] Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, 29.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 21.
[82] Class Notes, Spring 2006, HUC-JIR Cincinnati, Dr. Isaac Jerusalmi, "The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition."
[83] Gollancz, *The Targum to the Song of Songs*, 1.

a single editor who imposed a unified reading on the biblical text.[84] In contrast to the fragmented approach of Song of Songs Rabbah, this single redactor took a "holistic" approach. [85] While Song of Songs Rabbah did achieve thematic unity, the Targum to Song of Songs accomplished a greater achievement. According to Lachs, "it has an overarching structure that results from the Targumist seeing the biblical text as an orderly narrative.[86] According to Alexander, "the Targum is unique in Jewish biblical exegesis before the High Middle Ages in subjecting a book of the Bible to a holistic reading."[87]

While the contribution to the formulation of both the Targum and Song of Songs Rabbah may have transpired concurrently at certain places in the history of their development, it is generally accepted that the Targum was not only redacted later, but was more extensively formulated after the completion of Song of Songs Rabbah. For example, it seems evident that the early rabbis' precedent of understanding the relationship between the shepherd and shepherdess as symbolic of the relationship between God and the Congregation of Israel inspired the Targum's exposition.[88]

In addition, in a few elliptical cases, it seems that the Targum's exact explication of the biblical text is not intelligible without knowledge of the midrashic treatment of it.[89] In fact, the Targum was valued by medieval exegetes as a midrashic source.[90]

The influence of the midrashim on the development of the Targum being clear, there are other reasons why the Targumist may have been interested in continuing with the allegorical method of interpretation. It is understood that the Targumim were directed

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[84] Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, xi.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, 28.
[88] Christian Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970), 33.
[89] Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," 162-3.
[90] Ibid.

primarily toward the unlearned.[91] This may, or may not, account for its emphasis on aggadah.[92]

Much like Song of Songs Rabbah, the Targum interpreted the Song of Songs as an allegory of the history of Israel, namely from the era of the Israelite's Exodus from Egypt to the epoch of the Messiah.[93] However, unlike Song of Songs Rabbah, it maintains adherence to a strict verse-order. The verses discussed below enter the historical trajectory of the people Israel in relationship to God at the time of the Sinaitic experience.

More importantly, it is arguable that while Rabbi Akiba validated the reading of the Song of Songs as an allegorical relationship between God and Israel, midrashic sources such as Song of Songs Rabbah and the early material found in Shir HaShirim Zuta do not illustrate the relationship clearly enough. Therefore, what the Targum uniquely does is introduce a more elaborately detailed interpretation of the relationship between God and Israel.[94] To this end, the Targum emphasized the Oral Torah as a medium for discourse between God and Israel. Such treatment of the Song of Songs by the Aramaic Targum is further expanded below.

VII. Text Analysis of the Aramaic Targum 2:2-3

2:2 כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים כֵּן רַעְיָתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת׃

> But when I stray from the paths which are straight before Him, He removes His holy *Shechina* from me. I am then comparable to a rose blooming among thorns,

[91] Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, 27.
[92] For a lengthy and fascinating discussion on the scope and function of the Targum, please see Alexander's article as footnoted in footnote 25.
[93] Keith Schoville, "Song of Songs," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 14-20, vol. 19)

[94] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 100.

whose foliage is torn and split; so am I in exile, torn and split by terrible decrees in the various districts of the peoples.[95]

The Targum's rendering of the relationship between the lily and the thorns appears to echo the interpretation of Rabbi Huna in Song of Songs Rabbah: namely, the physical construal of the lily[96] and the power of non-Israelite, exilic, realms.

2:3 כְּתַפּוּחַ בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דּוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וְיָשַׁבְתִּי וּפִרְיוֹ מָתוֹק לְחִכִּי׃

Just as the etrog [var. matrona] is notoriously pretty among ornamental trees, and everybody acknowledges this, so was the Master of all the world beautiful and praiseworthy among the angels when He revealed Himself at Mount Sinai, as He gave the Torah to His people. At that moment, I yearned to reside in the shadow of His *Shechina*. The words of His Torah were delightful to my palate, while the reward of His precepts is kept for me for the world to come.[97]

The term ornamental, here, is euphemistic for trees that do not produce fruit or blossoms.[98] There are two curious shifts in interpretation from the Song of Songs Rabbah to the "translation" in the Targum. First, the word תַּפּוּחַ is related to an etrog-tree and not an apple-tree.[99] Second, the Aramaic Targum uniquely interprets the beloved as God and the lover as Israel, residing in the beloved's shadow through the loving embrace of His Torah. This identification of the beloved and the lover contradicts the rendering of the Targum in the previous verse as well as the interpretation of these verses in Song of Songs Rabbah.

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[95] Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition*, 47, 53.
[96] This influence may be more tenuous.
[97] Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition*, 53.
[98] Gollancz, *The Targum to the Song of Songs*, 30. Isaac Jerusalmi also confirmed this identification in a personal conversation.
[99] There is evidence to suggest that the Targumist was opposed to the influence of mystical thought at the time of the Targum's redaction. (See: Pope, *Song of Songs*, 99.) There is also evidence to suggest that the apple-tree was one subject of mystical depiction. This being said, it is my assertion that the use of the term etrog was the Targumist's attempt to stray from any mystical allusion/intimation. For more about the mystical movement that Gershom Scholem argues existed as early as the second century and was a Gnostic movement in antiquity, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

The interpretation of these verses, Song of Songs 2:2-3 as an account of Israel at Mount Sinai, remains common both to the Targum and Song of Songs Rabbah. Pope argues that what is common to both compilations is also a pointed effort to respond to the reigning Christian exegetical thought of the time.[100] Accordingly, this is very possibly why there appears to be a de-emphasis of the role of a Messiah and an emphasis of the role of God vis-à-vis the onset of the "eschatological climax"[101] which the Targum addresses over and again.

The Targum's enduring influence is reflected in assorted Jewish folk-versions of the Song of Songs, Such folk versions have been discovered in the languages of Spanish, Italian, Arabic, and Hebrew. To this day, Sephardi communities can be found chanting such a version of the Targum.[102]

VIII. Conclusion

Clearly, the aggadic or allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs flourished in the early rabbinic period. This period was not the only period to see such a preferred method of exegesis. However, it may be argued that this period was the progenitor of subsequent allegorical exposition.

According to Pope, following the redaction of the Aramaic Targum to the Song of Songs, the next significant, Jewish exegesis of the Song of Songs appears in the early tenth century.[103] This exegetical work is ascribed to Saadia ben Joseph Gaon Al-Fayyumi.

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[100] Pope, *Song of Song, 100.*
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 101; Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 34.

In the précis to his own work, Saadia agrees with the interpretive approach taken by the Targum and the Midrash: namely, that the Song of Songs is best understood to be a historical overview of the people Israel. Much like the Targum, Saadia also places an emphasis on the Oral Law in his introduction and overview.[104] Albeit, Pope notes that when Saadia lays out the actual exegesis of the Song of Songs, "his exposition actually bears little relationship to that of the Targum."[105] Many others exegetes, from each period of interpretation, also demonstrate a relationship with the exposition of the Targum as well as the midrashim. Even the *pashtanim*, whom we will take up in the next chapter, found significance in the early rabbinic corpus of interpretation.

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[104] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 101. Beyond this brief, but important series of notes, we will not take up a formal inquiry into the nature of Saadia's exegesis. Saadia's commentary to the Song of Songs can be read in the following edition: Saadia Gaon, פרוש על מגילת שיר השירים אשר הועתק מלשון ערבי ללשון הקודש, (Prague: Moses ben Joseph Bezalel, 1608). His commentary is brief, not complete, and is generally understood not to be influential.

[105] Ibid. One example of how Saadia's commentary bears little resemblance to the Targum is that in his commentary to 1:2-3:5 he describes Israel's battles with Sihon and Og, and God's displeasure at Israel's reaction to the report of the spies: two of many elaborations that the Targum does not concern itself with in the least.

CHAPTER 2: *PESHAT*, WITH DEFERENCE TO *DERASH*, AS TWO MODES OF INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG OF SONGS

I. Introduction to Peshat and Derash

In the introduction to Saadia Gaon's commentary to the Song of Songs, he portrayed the Song of Songs as a "lock to which the key has been lost."[1] It may be fair to characterize all subsequent commentary to the Song of Songs as an attempt to create the key to that lock. Four categories of exegetical approach characterize the methods by which medieval commentators sought to act as locksmiths: *peshat*, *derash*, philosophical, and mystical. This chapter addresses the *peshat* and *derash* approaches. Subsequently, entire chapters are devoted to philosophical and mystical interpretation, respectively.

As we have discussed, the early rabbinic period was saturated with the *derash*, or homiletical approach. While this approach was the preferred method of interpretation, it is evident that many early rabbis gave biblical texts an examination for its literal meaning as well.[2] This, however, became a complicated exercise when examining the Song of Songs. In fact, it often became an embarrassing exercise—for its literal meaning appeared to be erotic. As a result, the literal meaning played little or no role in the early history of Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs. It was not until the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE that a literal approach to biblical interpretation became an

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[1] Daniel Boyarin. "The Song of Songs: Lock or key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash." in *The Book and the Text: the Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), 214; Saadia ben Joseph, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, ed. S. A. Wertheimer, *Ge'on Ha-Ge'onim* (Jerusalem: 1925), 82.

[2] Isaac Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition*, (Cincinnati: Ladino Books, 1993), vii.

acceptable exegetical category.[3] The literal approach, or *peshat*, in fact grew to overshadow, though not rule out, homiletical interpretation for multiple centuries.

The *peshat* approach attempted to place the biblical text within a greater historical, linguistic, and literary context. Most secondary literature on Jewish interpretation defines *peshat* as a simple or plain meaning, in addition to a literal approach. These terms do not capture the true meaning of *peshat*—for the historical meaning of a text, for example, may be composite and intricate.[4] A more exact term may be "contextual."[5] The *derash* approach, by contrast, is an "acontextual"[6] approach, because it ignores the confinements of history, literature, and linguistics.

The three geographical centers within which the *peshat* tradition emerged were North Africa, Northern France, and Spain. All three schools of *peshat* developed the belief that "human linguistic analysis accurately yields the Torah's message."[7] However, it has become apparent through thorough analysis and comparison of the two largest schools, the French and the Spanish, that the French school undertook a hesitant literary approach, employing homiletical interpretations often simultaneously, while the Spanish school, suited with a practiced knowledge of literary theory and linguistic terminology, regarded the biblical text with a more dutiful consideration for its literary language.[8] This notion is explored later in this chapter, specifically in regards to the exegetical approaches of Rashi and Ibn Ezra to the Song of Songs.

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[3] Edward L. Greenstein. "Medieval Bible Commentaries." in *Back to the Sources: reading the classic Jewish texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 220.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," 220.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Mordechai Z. Cohen. "'The Best of Poetry:' Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Peshat* Tradition" in *The Torah U-Madda Journal*. (1993): 36.
[8] Cohen, "'The Best of Poetry:' Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Peshat* Tradition," 36-37.

Jews in Arab lands prepared the way for the *peshat* approach. Newfound familiarity with Arabic languages, and scientific methods thereof, catalyzed a desire to make use of this novel knowledge in an approach to biblical text.[9] At the same time, the *peshat* approach allowed for a common ground to develop between multiple religious groups who shared a love for the Hebrew Scriptures.[10] Greenstein argues that a significant element of the motivation to develop *peshat* exegesis was an internal factor, in addition to any external factor. This internal factor, he argues, was a desire "to combat the so-called Karaite heresy"[11] referring to the group of Jews who rejected the Oral Torah, accepting only the Written Torah as *the* authoritative expression of God's will.[12]

Karaite interpretation of the Bible emerged in the 10th century out of a particular group of Karaites in Jerusalem. This group, self-named the *Shoshanim*, or lilies, were an ascetic, messianic group who found particular significance to support their views in the Song of Songs.[13] Like the early rabbis, the Karaite biblical commentators viewed the Song of Songs in an allegorical light. However, where the rabbis elucidated multiple allegorical possibilities of a phrase or verse, the Karaites isolated one "correct" interpretation.[14] Subsequent commentators of the *peshat* tradition polemicized against these interpretations—their strong messianic overtones, and the questionable tradition that they sought to advance.

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[9] Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," 222.
[10] Ibid., 223.
[11] Ibid., 224.
[12] The Karaites were a Jewish sect formed between 750 and 1050 CE which emerged, in large part, out of a desire to reject the authority of the post-biblical tradition and its legal codes (namely, the Talmud). Karaism stressed the importance of the Mosaic law. Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews, Volume I*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 346-351.
[13] Daniel Frank. "Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth Century Jerusalem." in *With Reverence for the Word*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52.
[14] Frank, "Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth Century Jerusalem," 52.

Two Karaite Bible commentators, Salmon ben Jeroham and Japheth ben Eli, wrote what has been described as widely-read commentaries to the Song of Songs. According to Salmon and Japheth, the Song of Songs, as in the rabbinic tradition, is a lengthy metaphor of God's love for the people Israel. The Karaites certainly adopted the rabbinic approach, but they modified it to fit their own viewpoint. What they sought to advance was a belief that the messianic age was imminent in their own time. They endeavored to disseminate their conviction that the Song of Songs was a prophetic book, revealed to Solomon.[15] Frank summarizes the two most prolific Karaite commentaries to the Song of Songs:

> Broadly speaking, Salmon and Japheth offer similar readings of the Song. The allegory which they elucidate describes the relationship between God and the Jewish people—from the distinctive standpoint of Mourners for Zion. Three features characterize this interpretation: (1) an emphasis on the End which is identified with the present; (2) the isolation and explication of emblematic appellations; (3) a vigorous sectarian stance against Islam and rabbinic Judaism.[16]

Ibn Ezra, for example, was pre-occupied, at times, with infusing responses to these Karaite texts within his biblical commentary.[17]

The following analyses of interpretive methods, both of *peshat* in this chapter as well as philosophy and mysticism in the following chapters, reflect respective layers of interaction with outside peoples, historical circumstances, and systems of thinking. Perhaps the Song of Songs, under the scrutiny of these layers, became a book not to which the key was lost, but to which the lock was changed.

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[15] Frank, "Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth Century Jerusalem," 52-60.
[16] Ibid., 56.
[17] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Abraham Ibn Ezra." (pgs. 665-72, vol. 9)

II. Solomon ben Isaac

Since Solomon ben Isaac, better known as Rashi, invented the present-day distinction between *derash* and *peshat*, it seems apropos to begin a chapter devoted to medieval *peshat* interpretation with an analysis of Rashi's contribution. This analysis will begin with Rashi's exegesis because he was the first individual to produce a comprehensive commentary to the Song of Songs in this genre of *peshat* interpretation.

Rashi lived between 1040 and 1105 C.E. Born in the town of Troyes, France, little is known about the early period of his life. Rashi left France to study in the yeshivas of Mainz and Worms, returning to Troyes in his mid-twenties.[18] Around 1070 C.E., he founded his own yeshiva, with some sons-in-law as his own students. One son-in-law, Samuel ben Meir, also produced his own commentary to the Song of Songs. He will be the next subject of our analysis.

It is crucial to make note of the political milieu within which Rashi lived and wrote his many works, most notably his commentaries to almost every book of the Bible. Rashi lived through the torment leading up to and the devastating onslaught of the First Crusade.

A distinctive characteristic of Rashi's approach to biblical commentary was that his exegesis offered both literal and midrashic interpretations. A close reading of his exegesis shows that many of the midrashic interpretations that he offered are not in fact necessarily his own. Three quarters of his overall biblical commentary are inspired by, borrowed from, and/or based on rabbinic sources.[19] It appears that the same percentage

[18] Aaron Rothkoff, "Life of Rashi," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 101-102, vol. 17)
[19] Avraham Grossman, "Main Characteristics of Rashi's Commentary," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 102-103, vol. 17)

applies to his commentary to the Song of Songs. Although a minority in his commentary, Rashi's unique contribution is his philological analysis.[20]

According to Thompson, Rashi's overwhelmingly dependence on the allegorical is one expression of his understanding of the literal. As Thompson writes, "The allegory, in this case, is what the author understands to be the *peshat*.[21]" In other words, the midrashim that Rashi relies upon are employed to evoke the plain meaning of the biblical text.[22]

Rashi and Joseph Kara, one of his students who later became his contemporary in the field of biblical exegesis in Northern France, are regarded as having been the most influential among the progenitors of the genre of *peshat* commentary in the medieval period. Kara is believed to have written a commentary to the Song of Songs as well, yet it is no longer extant. While both Kara and Rashi, and their generation of *pashtanim*, weaved midrashic interpretations into their literal exposition, the next generation was less willing to give as much attention to the homiletical genre of biblical interpretation. While homiletical interpretation was an element in many French *pashtanim'* interpretation of the 12th century, the literal or contextual interpretation played the largest role in a more definitive manner.[23]

One may ask why a *pashtan* such as Rashi chose to rely extensively upon the midrash when he sought to elucidate the literal meaning of the text. The use of midrash by a *pashtan* will be explored at various points within this chapter. One early conjecture

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[20] Yaakov Thompson, "The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs." Diss. The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988, 93.
[21] Ibid., 93.
[22] A very interesting and important discussion on this topic takes place in: Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," 215-219.
[23] Thompson, "The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs," 22.

is that "out of his great appreciation and love for the Bible, he felt the need to supply various details about which the biblical text itself is relatively silent."[24] As will be evident by a close reading of his commentary to Song of Songs 2:2-3, Rashi uses midrash as a means to explain the words of the text.[25] From this, one might conclude that Rashi had two complementary aims: to address both the religious and grammatical questions posed by the text. While he gave deference to the latter, his extensive use of the midrash supports both aims.

It should be noted that when Rashi borrows a midrashic text, he does not always cite its source.[26] The Targum, for example, is never referenced, although it is heavily relied upon. The Targum appears to be the central influence on Rashi's commentary to the Song of Songs.[27] As discussed in the previous chapter, the Targum is an allegorical work, despite its method of suggesting a limited, single-faceted narrative of the biblical text. In this way, Rashi's exegesis as a whole provides a narrow, narrative-like reading.[28]

According to Rashi, the relationship between the shepherd and the shepherdess, much like the Targum, is symbolic of the relationship between God and the Congregation of Israel. Additionally, the congregation of Israel is best compared to a wife who has

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[24] Avraham Grossman. "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France: Relation between Plain and Homiletical Meaning in Rashi's Commentaries." in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002), 335-36.

[25] Benjamin Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 10. For an additional, excellent, nuanced discussion of the means by which Rashi employed midrash to the ends of plain, linguistic clarity, see: Sarah Kamin, "Rashi's exegetical categorization with respect to the distinction between 'peshat' and 'derash' according to his commentary to the Book of Genesis and selected passages from his commentaries to other books of the Bible," *Immanuel* 11 (1980): 16-32.

[26] He does, however, make reference to Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah in his commentary to verse 2:3.

[27] Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," 216; Ivan G. Marcus. "The Song of Songs in German Hasidism and the School of Rashi: a Preliminary Comparison." in *Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, ed. Barry W. Walfish (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press and University of New England Press, 1993), 182.

[28] Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," 215-219; Marcus, "The Song of Songs in German Hasidism and the School of Rashi: a Preliminary Comparison,"182.

been neglected by her husband (God) for a period of time.[29] This point is made by Rashi himself in the introduction to his commentary to the Song of Songs:

> My view is [that] Solomon produced this book by divine inspiration in the language of a woman saddened by a living widowhood, longing for her love. She recalls their love in youth and confesses her guilt. Her lover is saddened by her sorrow and remembers the loyalty of her youth, the charms of her beauty, and her good works which had bound him to her with an everlasting love. The intent was to show Israel that God did not afflict her willingly, that though He did put her away, He has not cast her off, for she is still His wife, and He her husband, and ultimately will return to her.[30]

In these words, one can hear an echo of the persecution of Jews in his own day. Rashi's entire commentary to the Song of Songs, which is not entirely evident in verses 2:2-3, depicts a conflicted and tried lover, who, nevertheless, remains faithful to that love affair. Rashi's commentary to the Song of Songs, overall, offers a message of consolation to the Jews in light of the historical circumstance of the First Crusade.[31]

Another reaction to the difficult historical circumstance of the late eleventh century C.E., in addition to offering a message of consolation, is to engage in anti-Christian rhetoric. Many scholars attribute a message of anti-Christian, or at least anti-Christological, rhetoric to Rashi's writings.[32] Anti-Christian rhetoric can be found in Rashi's exposition to verses 2:2-3. These particular biblical verses, as the history of commentary to these verses has already shown, lend themselves especially well to this type of exposition. As the Targum shares this method of anti-Christian rhetoric, this is

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[29] Christian Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970), 41.
[30] This is Pope's translation: Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977), 102-103.
[31] Marcus, "The Song of Songs in German Hasidism and the School of Rashi: a Preliminary Comparison," 184.
[32] Jonah Fraenkel, "Other Characteristics of Rashi's Bible Interpretation," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 104, vol. 17); Marcus, "The Song of Songs in German Hasidism and the School of Rashi: a Preliminary Comparison," 184.

another expression of Rashi's reliance on the Targumic text. The following is Rashi's explication of verses 2:2 and 2:3:

> *Like a rose among thorns*: which prick it, yet it constantly retains its beauty and its redness.
> *So is my beloved among the daughters*: they[33] entice her[34] to follow them, to stray as they do, after other gods, yet she persists in her faithfulness.
> *Like an apple- tree*: An apple tree, when it is among barren trees, is more precious than all of them—for its fruit is good in taste and in fragrance.
> *So is my beloved among the sons*: [i.e.] among young men.
> The allegory is: So is the Holy One, blessed be He, chosen over all the gods.[35]
> Therefore, *in His shade I delighted and sat.*
> And the Midrash Aggadah[36] explains: This apple tree—everyone flees from it because it has no shade. So all the nations fled from the Holy One, blessed be He, at the giving of the Torah, but I[37]—"In His shade I delighted and sat."[38]

Rashi's affinity for language is quite apparent in these verses. Although Rashi's comments regarding the rose retaining its redness despite being prodded by thorns might seem new, the idea of the rose retaining its overall beauty amidst poking is hardly original. Thus, it seems that what Rashi is doing in his explication of verse 2:2 is adding a nuance. The remainder of his commentary to this verse, however, is a replication of earlier material.

While it is apparent that Rashi's explication to verse 2:3 is a repetition of multiple midrashic texts, both those overtly cited as well as simple allusions to the early rabbinic exegetical tradition, there is one new exposition, specifically his reading of בֵּין הַבָּנִים כֵּן דּוֹדִי as 'among the sons.' In other words, Rashi does not read בֵּין הַבָּנִים as a symbol or metaphor, as all others until this point have done. The identity of these sons,

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[33] "They," apparently meaning "the nations," here.
[34] "Her,"apparently meaning "Israel," here.
[35] A reference to *Song Rab.* 2:3.
[36] A reference to *Song Rab.* 2:3.
[37] 'I' apparently means 'Israel' here.
[38] With some minor adjustments for accuracy, this is the translation provided in: Abraham Schwartz and Yisroel Schwartz, *The Megilloth and Rashi's commentary with Linear translation*, (New York: Hebrew Linear Classics, 1983), 72-3.

however, is not addressed by Rashi at any point in his commentary. I believe that this excerpt from Rashi's commentary to the Song of Songs is one of the clearest examples of Rashi's underlying objective to provide plain, linguistic clarity.

III. Toviah ben Eliezer

While Rashi's mode of interpretation relies on a view of the Song of Songs as a narrative while applying a *peshat* and *derash* methodology, Toviah ben Eliezer applied a *peshat* and *derash* methodology while relying on a view of the Song of Songs as progressive,[39] or best interpreted line by line. His commentary to the Song of Songs appears in a volume entitled the *Lekach Tov*, or *Pesikta Zutarta.*

It is not entirely clear who exactly Toviah ben Eliezer was or where he lived. Naturally, without sufficient information about Toviah ben Eliezer from external sources, scholars have had to rely mostly on discussions and mentions of his work *Lekach Tov.*[40] Buber argues that Toviah ben Eliezer lived in Kastoria, Bulgaria, based primarily on a number of references made may Judah Leon Mosconi, a Bulgarian medieval philosopher and scholar[41] whose main work was a supercommentary to Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentaries on the Torah.[42] According to Buber, the fact that Mosconi makes reference "to a countryman Toviah ben Eliezer,"[43] puts Toviah in Bulgaria. Additionally,

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[39] David Burstein Fine, "Toviah ben Eliezer on the Song of Songs" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1989), viii.
[40] The *Lekach Tov* remained unpublished for centuries after it was written. The first commentaries of the *Lekach Tov* , namely that of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuternomy, were published in Venice in 1746. It was not until 1909 when the Song of Songs commentary of the *Lekach Tov* was published by A. W. Greenup: Albert Greenup, פרוש לקח חוב על מגילת שיר השירים, (London, 1909).
[41]David Flusser, "Judah Leon ben Moses Mosconi," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 563, vol. 14)
[42] Ibid.
[43] Fine, "Toviah ben Eliezer on the Song of Songs," iv.

Mosconi's multiple references to the town Kastoria in his supercommentary convinced Buber that Toviah was specifically from Kastoria.

Conversely, and more convincing than Buber, historians Leopold Zunz and Louis Rapoport place Toviah in Mainz, Western Germany.[44] This assertion is based primarily on the following line of Toviah's commentary to *Parashat Emor*: "I am writing to serve as a memorial to the action done by the martyrs of the Congregation of Mainz who handed themselves, their wives, their sons, and their daughters over on the first day of Shavuot, and were slaughtered together for the sanctification of the name of the God of Israel, in the year 4856 (1096 C.E.) from the creation of the world."[45] His own words seem to be the most convincing evidence to place Toviah in Mainz throughout the greater part of his lifetime.

Within his commentary to Song of Songs 1:3 in the *Lekach Tov*, Toviah indicates that the Commentary to the Song of Songs within the *Lekach Tov* was written around, if not in, the year 1096 C.E. The commentary is saturated with fraught sentiment. Mainz, undoubtedly, suffered much of the destruction and loss that accompanied the First Crusade, more so than the Jewish community of Kastoria, for example.[46]

More significant than its place of writing is how the *Lekach Tov* responds to the depression and angst of its time. Despite the pervasive cries of trouble, the commentary is profoundly hopeful throughout. The unique contribution of this commentary is the hope that Toviah breathes into his interpretation of the Song of Songs. Toviah viewed the Song

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[44] Fine, "Toviah ben Eliezer on the Song of Songs," ii.
[45] *Lekach Tov* to *Lev* 22:33
[46] For an excellent discussion of the impact of the First Crusade on the community of Mainz, in addition to other communities, see Robert Chazan, *In the Year 1096: The First Crusade and the Jews*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996).

as "God's blueprint for the future."[47] In other words, according to Toviah, God's love for Israel in the past is an indication of what He will do for Israel, out of love, in the future. This is not only a declaration of hope; but also an assertion of faith. Moreover, it is similar to the Targum with its message of messianic hope.

Toviah's commentary to the Song of Songs may be considered both literal and aggadic. Much like Rashi, Toviah's midrashic exegesis may have been indistinguishable from his contextual explanations. For instance, Toviah explains many anthropomorphic verses and statements as parables.[48]

He also did not always give credit to the earlier volume from which he borrowed: the Targum, the Talmuds, Song of Songs Rabbah, Pesikta Rabbati, and Midrash Zuta. Often Toviah paraphrased earlier ideas,[49] as is evident in his commentary to Song of Songs 2:2:

> *As a lily among the thorns*: Just as the lily is beautiful among the thorns and everybody recognizes a moist lily, so is Israel recognized among the nations and is set apart from all their defilements and their impurities *as a lily among the thorns.* If it leans one way or the other it is torn by the thorns.[50] Likewise, if Israel leans from the path of the Lord, the nations of the world immediately come upon them, striking and punishing them.
> *As a lily among the thorns*: Just as it is difficult for this lily to be picked from among the thorns, so it is difficult for Israel to be redeemed from among the nations.[51]
> *As a lily among the thorns*: Just as this lily is for nothing other than smell, so Israel was created only to waft praise to God, as it is said: "This people I formed for Myself, they will tell My praise."[52]
> *As a lily among the thorns*: Just as the lily wilts in a heat spell, so does Israel suffer because of Esau.[53] For when Esau will be wiped out, it is said: "And no

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[47] Fine, "Toviah ben Eliezer on the Song of Songs," xviii.
[48] Here, this interpretation may be indicative of anti-Karaite polemic. Jacob Elbaum, "Midrash Lekah Tov," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (p. 190, vol. 14)
[49] Fine, "Toviah ben Eliezer on the Song of Songs," vi.
[50] A reference to *Song Rab.*, 2:2. *and Lev Rabb, Achare Mot.*
[51] A reference to *Song Rab.*, 2:2.
[52] A reference to *Isa* 43:21.
[53] In the early rabbinic mind, the war against idolatry was synonymous with the conflict between Jacob and Esau. (In fact, wickedness in general was associated with Esau.) Jacob and Esau were more specifically

> survivor will be left of the house of Esau,"[54] Israel will immediately bloom like the lily, as it is said: "I will be to Israel like dew, he shall blossom like the lily."[55] The lily when it is small is called a narcissus, but when it is grown is called a lily[56]—but because Israel is among the nations amidst all kinds of troubles that is why she is called *as a lily among the thorns.*[57]

I am most intrigued by Toviah's discussion of the young lily versus the grown lily, vis-à-vis the contiguous interpretation of why Israel is called a *lily among thorns.* Interestingly, the discussion of the young versus grown lily is a reference to an extant commentary—namely, Song of Songs Rabbah 2:1 (not 2:2). Toviah could have simply stated that the reason Israel is called *a lily among thorns* is "because Israel is among the nations amidst all kinds of troubles" and left out the reference to another verse. Instead, Toviah prefaces this comment with a discussion of the name lily. I believe that he does so because he believes that it is a natural progression. When a lily is small it is called a narcissus. When a lily is grown it is normally called a lily. But when a grown lily is among thorns it is called a lily among thorns. As a name is one's identity, the name *a lily among thorns* is part of Israel's identity. In other words, Toviah ben Eliezer very likely believed that pain and persecution were part of Israel's identity. While other commentators understand the lily as an entity in opposition to the thorns, Toviah understands the lily as essential to the thorns. This, I believe, is further evidence of the historical context in which *Midrash Lekach Tov* was written.

The following is Toviah's commentary to 2:3, disparaging yet hopeful, as well as self-aggrandizing:

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regarded as representative of Jewry and Rome. Here, Toviah adopts the rabbinic precedent for alluding to Esau in matter concerning the negative affect of outside influences. Gerson D. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Early Rabbinic Cultures*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 233-234.

[54] A reference to *Obad* 1:18.

[55] A reference to *Hos* 14:6.; entire paragraph borrowed from *Song Rabb.* 2:2.

[56] A reference to *Song Rabb.* 2:1.

[57] This is Fine's translation. Fine, "Toviah ben Eliezer on the Song of Songs," 63-5. He consulted the Hebrew work of: Albert Greenup, פרוש לקח תוב על מגילת שיר השירים, (London, 1909).

> *Like an apple-tree among trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths*: The Community of Israel says: 'Just as the apple has a good scent and is recognizable *among the trees of the forest*, where there are no fruit [trees] beside it, so the Holy One is unique to Israel and they have not chosen anyone other than Him, as in: 'If we forgot the name of our God and spread forth our hands to a foreign god.[58]' Why does it say apple above all other kinds of fruit? To tell you that just as an apple-tree is not ripe until the month of Sivan, and lo, it is what protects Israel in the exile.[59]
> *I delight to sit in its shade*: Even though the nations of the world are plotting against me to oppress me, we have not forgotten His Oneness, nor did we cheat on His covenant.
> *His fruit was sweet to my mouth* and his Torah is sweet to my mouth for the Torah is called a fruit, as it is said, 'My fruit is better than gold, fine gold. Rabbi Aha son of Zeira says: 'just as this apple, from the time that it blooms until its fruit is ripe is fifty days, so the time from Israel's going out from Egypt until they received the Torah was fifty days.[60]

Although many commentaries to Song of Songs 2:3 depict Israel in a better light than the foreign nations, *Lekach Tov* portrays the nation in unusually self-aggrandizing manner. At some points, this portrayal seems to be desperate in its attempts to portray Israel in this way. The best example is found in Toviah's comments on בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וְיָשַׁבְתִּי: "We have not forgotten His Oneness, nor did we cheat on His covenant." One might argue that it is not desperate, but rather defensive in an attempt to be anti-Christian.

Toviah must be considered a pashtan, using the methodology of *peshat* to make the homiletical convincing. For example, in his commentary to 2:2, Toviah mentions Esau in what is clearly a midrashic reference. However, he uses this midrashic reference by way of explaining how "a lily melts in a heat spell," a question that is redolent of both a *peshat* and a *derash* preoccupation.

Toviah ben Eliezer's commentary to the Song of Songs is very possibly the only commentary written so close in time and location to the persecution of the First Crusade.

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[58] A reference to *Ps* 44:21. This translation is borrowed from Fine, "Toviah ben Eliezer on the Song of Songs," 65-7.
[59] A reference to *Song Rabb.* 2:3.
[60] A reference to *Song Rabb.* 2:3.

> *Like an apple-tree among trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths*: The Community of Israel says: 'Just as the apple has a good scent and is recognizable *among the trees of the forest*, where there are no fruit [trees] beside it, so the Holy One is unique to Israel and they have not chosen anyone other than Him, as in: 'If we forgot the name of our God and spread forth our hands to a foreign god.[58]' Why does it say apple above all other kinds of fruit? To tell you that just as an apple-tree is not ripe until the month of Sivan, and lo, it is what protects Israel in the exile.[59]
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[59] A reference to *Song Rabb.* 2:3.
[60] A reference to *Song Rabb.* 2:3.

The next two commentaries to the Song of Songs that we know of come both from the early twelfth century, out of France and Spain respectively.

IV. Rashbam

The first of these two early twelfth century commentaries to the Song of Songs was written by Samuel ben Meir, better known as Rashbam. Rashbam was born in Ramerupt,[61] in approximately 1080 C.E. Married to Rashi's daughter Yocheved,[62] Rashbam was the son of Meir, an early *tosafist*[63] and pupil of Rashi. Under his father and grandfather's tutelage, Rashbam excelled as a student of Bible and Talmud, producing commentaries to both. While Rashbam may have written commentaries to most, if not all books of the Bible, only his commentary to the Pentateuch and a few other books within the canon survive.[64] One of these books is his commentary to the Song of Songs.[65]

As a student and relation of Rashi, one might think that Rashbam was so influenced by Rashi that their commentaries would be overwhelmingly similar. This is, in fact, the conclusion that both Ginsburg and Pope assert in their volumes on the history of interpretation to the Song of Songs. [66] They both assume that Rashbam's commentary is a direct response to the shattered psyche of the Jewish community at the time it was written. This appears to be an incorrect assumption. While his commentary to the Song of

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[61] A city in Northern France.
[62] Avraham Grossman, "Rashbam," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 771-73, vol. 17)
[63] An inquiry into the French Literal School absolutely calls for a survey of the commentaries of the *tosafists*. This thesis will not name any additional *tosafists*, however, for an analysis of the commentaries to 2:2-3 in *Tosafot HaShalem* show, for the most part, a repetition of Rashi, Rashbam, the Targum, and the Sages. That which is new to 2:3, however, is the clarification, footnoted in chapter one, rendering the תפוח to mean citron and not apple. See: Yaakov Gelis, ספר תוספות השלם על חמש מגילות, (Jerusalem: Mifal Tosafot Hashalem, 1981).
[64] Outside of the Torah, Rashbam's commentaries to Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Songs have survived—not in whole, but in part.
[65] Rashbam also created *piyyutim* and wrote a grammatical tome entitled *Sefer Daikut*. Avraham Grossman, "Rashbam," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 771-73, vol. 17)
[66] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 40-3.

Songs does share many features in common with Rashi, Rashbam's greatest contributions are distinct. Rashbam's commentary may also contain hints of an upbeat, hopeful message to Jews despairing of the recent past, yet this does not appear to the focus of his commentary to the Song."

The first and foremost uniqueness of Rashbam's commentary is its reading of a rhetorical, prose-style conversation into the biblical text. In other words, he understood this book to be completely conversational. Rashbam explains this reading of the biblical text in the introduction to his commentary:

> "The author wrote his book...after gathering wisdom from all the ancients. His wisdom in worldly matters was great and exalted [and is expressed as if written by] a beautiful young woman who laments that her loved one has gone away from her."[67]

It appears that Rashbam understands the dialogue between the lovers as something that the female lover is recalling from her memory.[68] In other words, the dialogue in his commentary is the reminiscences of a former conversation between the man and the woman. It is part perception and part reality. Incidentally, such an approach allows for a more sensual interpretation of the biblical text to be discussed. This is a new reading of the Song of Songs within the trajectory of the history of Jewish interpretation.

Jellinek, in his introduction to Rashbam's commentary, which Jellinek himself was the first to publish,[69] offers an explanation of the mode by which Rashbam interprets the biblical text as a dialogue of erotic love. He writes, "The author [Rashbam] deals with questions of love and erotic imagery with sympathy and reveals the human tenderness in

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[67] This translation is from Thompson, "The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs," 224. Thompson consulted a manuscript from the Hamburg Library, MS 32 to establish the text of Rashbam's commentary.
[68] Thompson, "The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs," 131.
[69] Adolph Jellinek, *Commentar Zu Kohelet Und Dem Hohen Leide Von R. Samuel ben Meir*, (Leipzig: Verlag Van Leopold Schnauss, 1855).

the text."[70] Rashbam's approach, in so far as it was tender, was also a *peshat* approach. Rashbam's interpretation of the text as a love poem is the result of a quest to understand the plain meaning of the text. Specifically, in his commentary to Song of Songs 2:3, the *peshat* methodology that emerges in Rashbam's novel interpretation is apparent.

This *peshat* interpretation of Rashbam is significantly less allegorical than Rashi; its allegorical comments are generally followed by explanations of lexical problems.[71] Almost all explanations are of a single nature, unlike his grandfather Rashi who provided multiple ways in which to interpret one verse, phrase, or word.

While Rashbam's commentary to the Song of Songs stands on its own on its own, there is some overlap with the work of Rashi. There are some places where Rashbam does repeat the interpretation of Rashi, without attributing him the credit. In other places, it seems that Rashbam's commentary complements Rashi's. For example, in those cases where Rashi did not follow the *peshat*, often Rashbam did.[72]

The following is Rashbam's commentary to verses 2:2-3:

> *Like a lily among thorns*: He answers her and says: "Like a lovely lily among thorns is my beloved, comely and beautiful among the maidens, fairer than any of them."
> *Like an apple among trees of the forest*: She answers him, saying: "Like a good and fragrant apple tree among trees that are barren, so is my beloved- more handsome than any of the other young men. For that reason, I long to sit in his shade, that his fruit might be sweet in my mouth." That is the way that the rhetoric is appropriate: He calls her "a rose," a feminine word, and she calls him "an apple," a masculine word.[73]

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[70] Thompson, "The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs," 112.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Avraham Grossman, "Rashbam," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 771-73, vol. 17)
[73] This linguistic comment is common to Rashbam's exegesis, and reflects his affinity for grammar. Rashbam showed much interest in linguistic matters. Of this, it was said, "Rashbam had *the* most sophisticated approach to grammar of all the members of his school." Rashbam's grammatical acuity was attested to in his book *Sefer Daikut*, dealing with grammatical issues in the Bible. Edward Breuer. "Medieval Jewish Interpretation." in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004), 1889.

> *[Like a lily among] thorns*:[74] The word [thorns] connotes thistles. The allegorical meaning of the verse refers to the Holy One and the Assembly of Israel who were endeared to each other through the giving of the Torah. It was then that God caused His Presence to dwell in the Tabernacle between the two cherubim. It was then that He loved Israel with a true love like the love between a man and a woman. Israel built the Tabernacle with choice cedars called 'shittim trees' so that God would rest His presence within it. There God and Israel were endeared to each other as if they lay embracing upon the bed of youthful love.[75]

Rashbam's exposition is lucid and concise. The allusions to Shir HaShirim Rabbah, the Targum, and Rashi's commentary are evident here and throughout his commentary. What is somewhat curious is the appearance of a second explanation of verse 2:2. It is especially curious in light of the low incidence of multiple explanations by Rashbam throughout his commentary. Some scholars believe that a gloss like this may be best attributed to anti-Christian, or anti-sectarian, rhetoric.[76] This conjectural explanation may very well be a response to controversies with sectarian, rather than Christian, neighbors. That is, a reproach to those who stray from Torah. While certainly overt in his commentary to Torah, a polemic in this context can only be surmised.[77]

Rashbam may have inserted this second explanation of *a lily among thorns* in order to subdue any outrage within the medieval French exegetical schools toward his reading of the biblical text as love poetry. The placement of this allegorical gloss makes much sense in this light.

Rashbam was not the only individual in the history of medieval Jewish interpretation to infuse his *peshat* interpretation to the Song of Songs with allegorical

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[74] This is the actual order of Rashbam's commentary, even though he has already responded to verse 2:2 and 2:3 in order.
[75] This translation is borrowed, and only slightly modified, from: Thompson, "The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs," 238-9.
[76] Avraham Grossman, "Rashbam," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 771-73, vol. 17)
[77] Shaye J. D. Cohen. "Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A comparison with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor." in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, (Boston: Brill, 2004), 36.

homage to opposing and dissenting popular views. It is thought that Abraham Ibn Ezra, a contemporary to Rashbam in time, but not in place, did the very same.[78] This alleged parallel between Rashbam and Abraham Ibn Ezra will be discussed in the next subsection.

V. Abraham Ibn Ezra

Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary to the Song of Songs contains multiple parallels to Rashbam. Ibn Ezra, also, appreciates the literary design of the biblical text in a manner very similar to his French contemporary. To this end, Ibn Ezra reads the text also as a spoken, love narrative, recalled by the female lover. However, Ibn Ezra, unlike Rashbam, comes out of the Spanish *peshat* tradition, which utilized the vehicle of *peshat* interpretation in a slightly different manner. As Cohen explains: "The French *peshat* method interprets Scripture as if it were ordinary, though well structured, human speech; but the Spanish *peshat* tradition interprets it as if it were the 'best of poetry.'"[79] This stricter adherence to the literary flow of the biblical text is quite detectible in Ibn Ezra's commentary to the Song of Songs.

Ibn Ezra was born in Tuleda, Spain in 1089 C.E. Apparently, he lived for three-quarters of his life in Spain and one-quarter of his life in Rome, traveling every so often for extended periods of time. During his years in Rome, 1140-1164 C.E.,[80] Ibn Ezra wrote his literary works.[81] Ibn Ezra's writings include astrological treatises, poetic compositions, and commentaries to the Torah and multiple books of the Writings and

[78] Thompson, "The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs," 96.
[79] Cohen, "Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A comparison with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor," 37.
[80] Uriel Simon. "Abraham Ibn Ezra." in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002), 378.
[81] Uriel Simon, "Abraham Ibn Ezra" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 665-67, vol. 17)

Prophets. Ibn Ezra wrote his commentary on the Song of Songs, in three parts. Purportedly, one of the three divisions of his commentary was written in northern France, where he spent a significant amount of time in the late 1140s.[82] The other two are thought to have been written in Rome.[83]

Ibn Ezra's commentary to the Song of Songs contains three varying schools of exegesis: grammatical interpretation, literal interpretation, and allegorical interpretation. Ibn Ezra's reasoning for three separate interpretive volumes appears to be for clarity's sake, as he himself writes in the introduction to his commentaries: "That it be perfectly clear in all its ways, I have explained it three times: in the first interpretation I will reveal every obscure word. In the second interpretation its treatment shall be according to its plain meaning. In the third interpretation it will be explained midrashically."[84]

The subject of his exegetical intentions is of some controversy, however. As discussed in the previous subsection, Rashbam was alleged to have infused his *peshat* interpretation to the Song of Songs with allegorical interpretation in order to appease those French medieval exegetes who held popular views in opposition to the *peshat* school. Ibn Ezra has been accused of similarly attempting to appease those anti-literalists. In other words, perhaps Ibn Ezra's primary goals were those of a grammatical and literal nature alone. The following is one such accusation, made by Gratz:

> Ibn Ezra was fully conscious that the Canticles in their simple literal meaning contain a love-story, but he had not the independence and not sufficient boldness to follow-up this knowledge, and, consequently, in the exposition of this book as of other books of Holy Scripture, especially the Pentateuch, he has employed all

[82] Ibid; Richard Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1982), 35.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 93.

> sorts of devices as blind, so as not to be charged with heresy as being a rationalist.[85]

Although the location where Ibn Ezra wrote his allegorical interpretation is unknown, it is generally accepted that one-third of his commentary was written in France. Thus, it is possible that its inclusion was aimed at appeasement. However, Ibn Ezra's own words, which appear in a different section of his lengthy introduction to his commentary, seem to add serious doubt to this assertion: "Heaven forbid that the Song of Songs be considered erotic poetry! Rather, it is an allegory. Were it not for its great loftiness, it would not have been written in the allegorical manner of sacred scripture. It is undisputed that it 'defiles the hands.'"[86]

This would be a bold assertion for appeasement's sake alone, of course. It is more likely that Ibn Ezra saw the allegorical interpretation as a necessary and natural extension of the literal interpretation, much like Rashi.[87] Moreover, Ibn Ezra, despite his insistence upon the text being understood as allegory, does not allow this interpretation the greatest of his attention. In fact, Ibn Ezra's commentary is "one of the very few" [88] to encourage a reading of the relationship of the Song of Songs as a pure love affair between shepherd and shepherdess. Like Rashbam, Ibn Ezra reads the biblical text as a conversation between the two lovers.[89]

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[85] H.J. Mathews, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on Canticles*, (London: Trubner and Co., 1874), x.
[86] Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 93. It is also important to acknowledge that Ibn Ezra's statement here speaks to a need, reminiscent of the Yavneh debate, for religious rabbinic authorities to allay concerns of the holiness of the Song of Songs, despite its permanent place in the canon.
[87] I believe that Ginsburg may very well, if not tangentially, support me on this point, per his language on p. 45: "The commentary consists of three different glosses: in the first, the words are explained; in the second, the suppositious history of the attachment of the shepherd and shepherdess is developed; and in the third gloss, the allegory is evolved from that history." Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 45.
[88] A term borrowed from Jerusalmi, *Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition,* xii.
[89] According to Yaakov Thompson.

Ibn Ezra's allegorical interpretation understands these lovers, nonetheless, as representative of the relationship between God and the Congregation of Israel, not applicable to any other types of religious relationship, such as philosophy. Although Ibn Ezra was not a "systematic philosopher,"[90] philosophical problems were often addressed and redressed throughout the compendium of his biblical works. However, in his commentary to the Song of Songs, philosophy does not play a role at all. Ibn Ezra has choice words for those who read the allegory as other than the relationship between God and Israel:

> Philosophers are determined to explain this book as concerning the mysterious nature of the universe, and the manner of the union of the highest soul with the body, which is on the lowest level. Others explained it according to its composition. "But the wind shall carry them all away for they are emptiness." (Isaiah 57:13) The truth is none other than what our sages of blessed memory have transmitted, that this book concerns the Congregation of Israel, and that is how I will explain it in the third interpretation.[91]

Ibn Ezra's intended audience is unclear. On this point, Keller writes, "I do not know to whom he is referring, but from his comment we may infer that at least one philosophically oriented commentary on Song of Songs was composed before the first half of the twelfth century, when Ibn Ezra flourished."[92]

In his unique, three-part commentary to the Song, Ibn Ezra's grammatical interpretation "was the first systematic attempt by a rabbinic commentator to account for linguistic, etymological, syntactical and grammatical difficulties in the text."[93] While other commentators before him engaged in grammatical inquiry and exegesis, Ibn Ezra's comprehensive look is unique and novel. Although his commentary on Song of Songs 2:2

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[90] Raphael Jospe. "Ibn Ezra as Philosopher" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 669-71, vol. 17)
[91] Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 95.
[92] Menachem Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 97.
[93] Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 20-21.

is missing or non-existent, Ibn Ezra explains the term *tapuach* in 2:3, "*Like an apple-tree*: this is a tree."[94] While implied in almost every other commentary to date, Ibn Ezra is the first to state this point overtly, presumably a point he sought to clarify.

In his *peshat* interpretation on Song of Songs 2:2-3, Ibn Ezra comments:

> *As a lily*: He said "You can not be compared to the lily of the valley, which is close by for the picking; rather you are like a lily among thorns."
> She said, "*like an apple tree*." These verses are connected with the words *I delight*, because *I long to sit in his shade*.[95]

In his *derash* interpretation of these verses, Ibn Ezra explains:

> The Shekhina said, "I will protect you so that no evil will touch you *like a lily among thorns*."
> The Congregation of Israel replied, "If you will protect me I will always *sit in your shade*." The meaning of *his fruit* is "because I will hearken to all of Your commandments.[96]

Juxtaposing the second and third interpretations, the allegorical interpretation appears to only reiterate the literal interpretation, with the characters of that interpretation being switched. This stands as further evidence of Ibn Ezra's emphasis on literal interpretation.

Perhaps it is most precise to categorize the third interpretation as an historical-allegorical[97] interpretation. This type of interpretation is what the Targum and earlier midrashic materials incorporate into their exegesis as well. Unlike those exegetical

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[94] Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 109.
[95] Ibid., 137. Block relied on the text of the commentary that appears in the *Biblia Hebraica* printed by Daniel Bomberg in Venice in 1524. This text appears in Block's thesis, Appendix I. I also consulted H. J. Mathew's celebrated early translation of Ibn's Ezra's commentary to the Song of Songs, which was edited from three manuscripts: a Berlin manuscript, a Paris manuscript, and an Oxford manuscript which he claims has been added to and therefore not reliable, yet interesting. For all pertinent manuscript information available to Mathews in 1874, see: H.J. Mathews, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on Canticles*, ix. For his slightly different, but very similar, translation, see H. J. Mathews, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on Canticles*, 11-12 and 19.
[96] A reference to the Targum 2:3 and Song of Songs Rabbah 2:3. This is also Block's translation. Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 167.
[97] This term is used by Richard Block, but the idea is introduced by Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 45.

volumes, however, Ibn Ezra interprets the Song of Songs to be an historical overview of the Israelites beginning with Abraham,[98] *not* Moses. Like the Targum, Ibn Ezra projects the history of Israel into a Messianic, redemptive future.

Due to his extensive travels and the rumored conversion of his son,[99] Ibn Ezra's understanding, or prophesy, of redemption for the Israelites may in fact be solace for his own life's circumstances.[100] Much like Rashi and Rashbam, but to a significantly lesser degree, Ibn Ezra's allegorical interpretation may have stemmed from a desire to assuage the sufferings of his Spanish, French, or Italian brethren. [101] However, it was Ibn Ezra's ability to offer exegesis that covered a breadth of disciplines that remains one of his most significant contributions to the history of exegesis.

VI. Ovadiah ben Yaakov Sforno

This inquiry into the peshat and derash interpretations to the Song of Songs concludes an analysis of the work of Ovadiah ben Yaakov Sforno.

Sforno, a biblical commentator and physician, was born in Cesena, Italy in the latter part of the fifteenth century. After a brief stay in Rome, Sforno settled in Bologna, establishing a house of study, addressing halakhic queries, and writing commentaries on the Torah, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Psalms, and a handful of the Minor Prophets.[102]

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[98] Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 25.
[99] Uriel Simon, "Abraham Ibn Ezra" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 665-67, vol. 17)
[100] Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 33.
[101] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 44; Block, "Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 33. It should be noted here, however, that unlike Rashi, Ibn Ezra upheld a strong commitment to a sense of "public responsibility." As he wandered a great deal throughout his life, he worked to bridge the gap between himself and his readership; Simon, "Abraham Ibn Ezra," 387.
[102] Ibid.

In general, Sforno's biblical exegesis incorporated both literal and philosophical interpretation.[103] However, his commentary to the Song of Songs assumed a different shape. Interestingly, with the exception of the introduction and parts of chapters one and five, Sforno interpreted the Song of Songs text in a completely allegorical manner, giving very little deference to *peshat*.[104]

In the introduction to his commentary, Sforno elucidates his preferred allegorical perspective:

> This entire book is like an expression of the sentiments of God's congregation towards Him, blessed be He, especially when they were under the tribulation caused by the enslavement to the kingdoms, and His response by which He informs about the reason for the stricter application of His attribute of justice to them rather than to others, along with his steadfast love on their behalf, especially regarding the enslavement to the kingdoms.[105]

This allegorical interpretation is clearly evident in his commentary to the Song of Songs 2:2. In this verse, Sforno views the nations surrounding the Jews as important:

> *Like a lily among the thorns* that does not grow except among them, *so is my beloved among the daughters*. Israel is between the nations that oppress her, in order that she would give up a certain advantage, namely that she will not turn to Me anymore as [Scripture] says, "O Lord, in their distress they sought you."[106]

Sforno's entire commentary to the Song of Songs places great emphasis on the importance of *halakhot*, *mitzvot*, and the important system of reward and punishment vis-à-vis the Law.[107] However, this is not surprising due to his position as a Halakhist.

A prominent feature of Sforno's style, evident in both his Song of Songs commentary and others, is his way of reading a string of verses as a unified thought.[108]

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[103] Joshua L. Segal, "Sforno's Commentary on the Song of Songs" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1983), 34.
[104] Ibid., 3.
[105] Ibid., 26. Segal consulted: Ovadiah ben Yaakov Sforno, ביאור על שיר השירים, (Venice, 1567).
[106] *Isa* 26:6; Segal, "Sforno's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 47.
[107] Ibid., 12-13.
[108] Ibid., 8-9.

What Sforno does not include in his commentary also defines his style. The greatest example of this omission is his lack of reference to any previous scholar or commentary, despite his well-known access to other commentators, whether communicated to him orally or otherwise.[109] In fact, Sforno's commentary to Song of Songs 2:3 quite closely resembles Shir HaShirim Rabbah:

> *As an apple-tree among trees of the forest*: The congregation of Israel answers: O Lord, behold it is appropriate to hurry for the honor of Your Name for indeed it is like the apple that is most cherished of all the trees of the forest, and no one there recognizes its superiority over all the rest. Likewise, none of the nations recognize Your superiority over the angels, for they are princes of the nations. As [Scripture] says: "They spoke of the God of Jerusalem as though He were like the gods of the other peoples of the earth."[110] Therefore, I alone *sat in His shade in delight* in the giving of the Torah as [Scripture] says: "They followed in Your steps."[111] *And his fruit is sweet to my mouth* as [Scripture] says: "We will willingly do it."[112]

Sforno's homiletically-oriented commentary is an excellent example of how the Song of Songs appears to have gently twisted the psyches of those biblical commentators who normally took one or two interpretive approaches in every other situation. It is the lock to which the key is subjected, and not the other way around, after all. It speaks volumes about the nature of the Song of Songs when, for example, a philosopher abandons those faculties in the midst of his exegesis.

VII. Conclusion

While the *pashtanim* no doubt attempted something new in their literal explication of the biblical text, their method used to accomplish this task was not wholly new. In their investigation of the grammatical and linguistic features of the text, the

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[109] Segal, "Sforno's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 10.
[110] *2 Chr* 32:19.
[111] *Deut* 33:3.
[112] *Deut* 52:4.; Segal, "Sforno's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 47-8.

pashtanim did not abandon the centrality of the early rabbis' midrashim. They only advanced interpretation to the Song of Songs by taking the midrashim which the early rabbis wrote to explain the allegorical nature of the text and using them in their literal interpretation of the text.

In contrast, the philosophical schools of exegesis, which will be taken up in the next chapter, relied upon the midrashim only to a very limited degree. Nonetheless, they, like the *pashtanim*, advanced interpretation of the Song of Songs.

CHAPTER 3: MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION

I. Introduction to Jewish Philosophy and Medieval Philosophical Interpretation

Did a distinct Jewish philosophy exist in the ancient world? The early rabbis, as evident in Talmudic and Mishnaic literature, "were not entirely without their concern for philosophical truth and theological doctrine."[1] However, this concern was employed as a sermonic or dialectic means to illustrate a moral or legal lesson. Moreover, both rabbis and general community members in this period did not question the fundamental Jewish beliefs about God or revelation.[2]

For these reasons, in addition to the geography of the early rabbinic period, Jewish philosophy as a discipline did not emerge until the medieval period, with the exception of Philo of Alexandria.[3] More specifically, Jewish scholars encountered Greek and Arab philosophy, their respective writings and schools of thought, in the tenth century.

By its very nature, interaction with Greek philosophy raised tensions for Jewish scholars. Early efforts were devoted to exploring the relationship between Judaism and philosophy, or revelation and reason.[4] The general aim of Jewish philosophy, in its exploration of various metaphysical topics throughout the medieval period, was how to

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[1] Chaim Pearl, *The Medieval Jewish Mind*, (London, England: Vallentine, Mitchell, and Co., 1971), 7.
[2] Ibid.
[3] My concern here is with Jewish philosophy as a significant phenomenon, not solely the occupation of one individual.
[4] Warren Zev Harvey. "Medieval Period of Jewish Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 106-108, vol. 16)

cope with the perceived conflict between "the contending truth claims of the Jewish faith and scientific reasoning."[5]

Many factors contributed to the development of Jewish philosophy in the tenth century: the translation of Greek philosophy into Arabic, recent attacks on the Bible by Jewish critics, such as the ninth century Karaite scholar Hiwi al-Balkhi, and a similar tension faced in Islam between religion and reason.[6] In fact, Islam's claim to universal truth catalyzed Jewish efforts to find the same within their own religious tradition.[7]

Philosophy in medieval Judaism can be divided into two major periods. In the first period, Jewish philosophy was influenced by Islam in the East between the tenth and twelfth centuries. The second period, following a decline the Islamic East, is characterized by Jewish philosophical investigation in the Christian West between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries.[8] This second period, which developed primarily in Spain, Northern France, and Italy, was particularly fruitful. Jewish scholars translated Arabic philosophies into Hebrew, and more importantly, they began to produce literature exclusively devoted to purely philosophical topics.

In the first period, Neoplatonism ruled as the preferred school of philosophy. Neoplatonism, among other things, taught that the world emanated from God, analogous to the way in which rays emanate from the sun.[9] Furthermore, Neoplatonism also introduced the idea that God, being above creation, should be described in negative rather than positive terms.

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[5] Norbert Samuelson. "Medieval Jewish Philosophy." in *Back to the Sources: reading the classic Jewish texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 262.
[6] Judah M. Rosenthal. "Hiwi al-Balkhi" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 295, vol. 9); Mark R. Cohen, "Revival of Jewish Religious Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed.
[7] Ibid; Pearl, *The Medieval Jewish Mind*, 8.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Arthur Hyman. "Neoplatonism in Jewish Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 77, vol. 16)

In the second period, Aristotelianism replaced Neoplatonism as the prevalent, school of philosophical thought.[10] Aristotelianism was founded on three primary notions: God as the "unmoved mover," the eternity of the world, and the most pertinent aspect to our present discussion, the soul as manifest in the intellect of human beings.[11]

The mark of Greek philosophy on both Muslim and Jewish thought in the medieval period was most evident in discussions of the human soul.[12] Concern with survival of the soul, in particular, "raised doubts about the relationship between good deeds and immortality."[13] Medieval Jewish philosophers created a genre of philosophical allegory aimed at resolving their concern of the nature of the soul, in addition to multiple other concerns that could not be solved by homiletical or literal interpretation. Possibly the most significant matter of concern that provoked philosophical allegory was the incorporeal nature of God. Numerous biblical texts use anthropomorphic terms, yet God's possession of a body might imply reproductive ability or even imperfection. In order to repudiate the corporeal nature of literal explanations, philosophical allegory was an imperative.[14] As Harvey generalizes, "[It can be said of the philosopher,] whenever a decisive scientific demonstration contradicts the literal sense of the biblical text, it is obligatory to interpret it by way of allegory."[15] Thus, the biblical text received another layer of meaning.

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[10] Seymour Feldman. "Aristotelianism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed. (pg. 407)
[11] Ibid; Lenn Evan Goodman, *Rambam*, (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 252.
[12] Pearl, *The Medieval Jewish Mind*, 56.
[13] Gregg Stern, "Philosophic Allegory in Medieval Jewish Culture: The Crisis in Languedoc (1304-6)," in *Interpretation and Allegory*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2000), 193.
[14] Ibid., 203-4.
[15] Warren Zev Harvey, "On Maimonides' Allegorical Reading of Scripture," in *Interpretation and Allegory*, in *Interpretation and Allegory*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2000), 181-2.

The philosopher-exegetes of this second period of medieval Jewish philosophy significantly "uprooted" the literal meaning of the text, yet they simultaneously remained dedicated, like the *pashtanim*, both to early rabbinic and contextual interpretation.[16] Saadia Gaon's commentary to the Song of Songs, which is the most well-known philosophical commentary to come out of the first period, is brief, not entirely creative, and more of a summary than a commentary. This chapter surveys the most influential and representative philosopher-exegetes from the second period, who were creative and prolific, all of whom were profoundly influenced by Moses ben Maimon, commonly known as Maimonides.

Maimonides, an Aristotelian, was the most influential Jewish philosopher during this period, was one of the most prolific writers about the human soul and the first biblical exegete in this period to discuss the Song of Songs from a philosophical vantage. Of Maimonides, who lived from 1135 to 1204 C.E., it has been said that the other medieval Jewish philosophers writing on the Song of Songs, "all follow his lead."[17]

II. Introduction to Maimonidean Thought on the Soul, as it pertains to the Song of Songs

Maimonides was born in Cordova, Spain, but left Spain for Fostat (Old Cairo), Egypt via Fez, Morocco, due to the fighting between the Almohads and the Almoravids. In Egypt, Maimonides produced multiple medical, legal and philosophical works in his maturity.[18] Maimonides' most influential philosophical work was the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides wrote this work as a lengthy epistle to Rabbi Joseph Ibn Aknin

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[16] Harvey, "On Maimonides' Allegorical Reading of Scripture," 185.
[17] Menachem Kellner, "Communication or Lack Thereof Among Thirteenth-Fourteenth Century Provencal Jewish Philosophers: Moses Ibn Tibbon and Gersonides on Song of Songs," in *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Sophia Menache (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 231.
[18] Samuelson, "Medieval Jewish Philosophy," 273.

of Maghreb (Fez), and all others who had become perplexed by various theological matters. In this letter, he addressed such topics as the unity of God, creation, God's existence, and the doctrines of intellect.[19]

For Maimonides, the lovers' relationship in the Song of Songs is a model for an individual's intellectual love of God.[20] He alludes to this interpretation in a section of the Mishneh Torah, his earlier treatise on Jewish Law[21]:

> How does one love God properly? It is to love God with a great and exceeding love, so exceedingly strong that his soul is preoccupied with the love of God, so that he is constantly ravished by it, like people sick with love whose thoughts are never free of the love of that woman [whom they love]...All of Song of Songs is an allegory concerning this matter.[22]

Based on earlier teachings of the Muslim, Aristotelian philosopher Avicenna, Maimonides understood the intellect as a means to God and immortality. In his philosophical system, the intellect can subdivided into a series of intellects, two of the foremost being the Active or Agent Intellect and the Passive or Material/Hylic Intellect. While the Passive Intellect merely possesses the potential for knowledge, the Active Intellect is knowledge in its purest form. According to Maimonides, the Active Intellect is not just the sum of all knowledge, but it is also "the outside cause needed to bring man from a state of potential knowing to a state of actual knowing."[23]

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[19] Mark Cohen. "Revival of Jewish Religious Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed. (pgs. 155-6)
[20] David Shatz, "The Biblical and Rabbinic Background to Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.
[21] Scholars have shown that one can understand the *Guide's* philosophy from the reading of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, which held a great place of centrality to Maimonides' thought. Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 14.
[22] Maimonides' Mishneh Torah: "Laws of Repentance," 10:6. For other mentions of the Song of Songs, see: "Laws of the Foundations of Torah," 2:12, 6:9; "Laws of Torah Study," 5:4; and "Laws of Repentance," 10:3.
[23] Sarah Pessin. "The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online ed.

The Active Intellect is also the point of contact with the Divine. In other words, as one is closer to achieving the Active Intellect, one is closer to God. This theological statement motivates Maimonides' reading of the relationship between the shepherd and shepherdess in the Song of Songs.

Although Maimonides did not write a commentary to the Song of Songs, his influence on subsequent Jewish philosopher-exegetes is evident in their speculation about his thoughts on the Song and their commentaries written in his theological tradition. Others will take a slightly different exegetical route, only after respectfully naming Maimonides and explaining why parts of his thought will not be advanced. In other words, in one way or another, medieval Jewish philosopher-exegetes literally followed his lead.

III. Joseph ben Judah Ibn Aknin

If Maimonides was the first Jewish philosopher of the second period of medieval Jewish philosophy to comment on the Song of Songs, Joseph ben Judah Ibn Aknin was the first Jewish philosopher of that period to produce a complete, linear philosophical commentary to this book. Scholarly debate has ensued over a century and a half as to whether Joseph ben Judah Ibn Aknin, who lived approximately from 1150-1220 C.E., is the same Joseph Ibn Aknin to whom Maimonides addresses his *Guide*.[24] It is generally accepted today that the person of whom Maimonides spoke was Joseph ben Judah ibn

[24] Abraham Halkin. "Judah Ibn Aknin" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed.; Abraham Halkin, "Ibn Aknin's Commentary on Song of Songs," in *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, ed. Saul Lieberman (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 401.

Shimon, whom he wrongly called Ibn Aknin.[25] There is much evidence to make the once-claimed theory that Ibn Aknin was the subject of Maimonides' writing heavily suspect, foremost being the fact that Ibn Aknin and Maimonides knew each other quite well. In the *Guide*, Maimonides says that he knows of "Ibn Aknin" through letters and other correspondence alone.[26] Hence, there were two separate individuals.

Ibn Aknin was born in Barcelona, Spain, but lived most of his life in Fez, Morocco due to the Almohad persecutions, which Maimonides was presumed to flee from as well. Ibn Aknin was both a poet and a philosopher, completing a handful of works of translation, philosophy, rabbinic-legal matters, and science throughout his life. Beyond the details of his social milieu and life works, little else is known of his life.

Ibn Aknin's *magnum opus*, *The Divulgence of Mysteries and the Appearance of Lights*, was his Arabic commentary on the Song of Songs. Ibn Aknin, much like Abraham Ibn Ezra, wrote a three-tiered commentary. In the introduction, Ibn Aknin outlined his exegetical approach:

> The explanation shall be according to three facets: the one presented first will take a literal approach to expounding its meaning....I have also compiled the second interpretation which follows the system of our sages of blessed memory in their sayings....I decided to compose this book due to the third interpretation. It is my own method of explaining that the beloved and the friend connote the Active Intellect, while the bride, darling, and sister connote human reason.[27]

In other words, Ibn Aknin explored the grammatical-literal, homiletical, and philosophical approaches respectively. However, unlike Ibn Ezra, he expounded on all three aspects at once.

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[25] Andrew Koren, "Ibn Aknin and Ishodadh as Philologists" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1993), 15. For a lengthier discussion of this, please consult this thesis, pgs. 9-16.
[26] Halkin, "Ibn Aknin's Commentary on Song of Songs," 406.
[27] Koren, "Ibn Aknin and Ishodadh as Philologists," 52-53. Koren consulted: Josephi ben Judah ben Jacob Ibn Aknin, *Divulgato Mysterorium Luminique Apparenta*, A.S. Halkin, (Jerusalem: Miktzei Nerdamim, 1964).

In contrast to his successors, explored below, Ibn Aknin showed little deference, and minimal reference, to Maimonides.[28] However, Ibn Aknin's commentary is clearly in the tradition of Maimonidean thought, thought, as a work of contemporary Aristotelianism drawing upon the relationship between the Active Intellect and the rational soul. In his interpretation, the two lovers mutually longed to unite, despite the obstacles in their way.[29]

Ibn Aknin's commentary, while philosophical in intent and nature, is more precisely characterized as a series of independent yet related philosophical comments, rather than one methodical and tight system of thought.[30] He gives a significant amount of space to grammatical and homiletical exegesis. Halkin ascribes this to the nature typical of Jewish intellectual living under Islamic rule with no conflict between religious and secular pursuits: "He [Ibn Aknin] was convinced that the ultimate goals of his Jewish and secular learning were identical."[31]

Ibn Aknin not only did no harm to his philosophical commentary by addressing grammatical and homiletical issues, but potentially served to heighten his philosophical points, as evidenced by this comment in his introduction: "The first two interpretations present an introduction of sorts to the third level which is the intended purpose of this collection."[32] According to Halkin, the reason this self-proclaimed work is steeped in the homiletical may be related to Ibn Aknin's interest in the early exegesis of the midrash and Targum due to their message of hope and strength.[33] Ibn Aknin, according to extant

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[28] Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 208.
[29] Halkin, "Ibn Aknin's Commentary on Song of Songs," 408-9.
[30] Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 208.
[31] Abraham Halkin. "Judah Ibn Aknin" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 659-70, vol. 1)
[32] Koren, "Ibn Aknin and Ishodadh as Philologists," 54.
[33] Halkin, "Ibn Aknin's Commentary on Song of Songs," 408.

sources, was prey to the persecution of Jews of his time. It is not known if he was forced to disavow Judaism publicly, or alternatively, was required to conceal his Judaism. Regardless, the epilogue to Ibn Aknin's commentary to the Song of Songs sheds light on the very real proof of Halkin's conjecture:

> I hope that my Lord will grant me a handsome reward and will aid me in my desire to cleanse myself from the defilement of conversion by helping me in my plan to break away from 'the land of the decree which has not been cleansed.' The Rabbis have taught: When a person attempts to cleanse himself he is aided. Since I aim to cleanse myself, and have performed a major *mitzvah* in writing a commentary on this book which is called the holiest of holies, may God give me my reward and help me to attain the other major *mitzvah*.[34]

Not only homiletical tradition steeped in messages of hope and redemption but also deference to the rabbis may have eased Ibn Aknin's mind. In fact, this statement was made to reassert his commitment to Judaism.

As it turns out, Ibn Aknin's commentary to Song of Songs 2:2 is particularly fastidious, taking up a novel discussion of the species of plant ascribed to the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה, not offering much by way of philosophical excursus:

> *As a lily among thorns, so is my beloved among the daughters.*
> He compares his sweetheart among the women to roses amidst thorns, since she is exquisitely beautiful, and she is to the women what roses are to thorns.
> The proof that *shoshana* means rose is the mention of *among thorns*. The *sosan*[35] does not grow among thorns, whereas roses do grow among thorns. Similarly, we also find the verse *shoshanim sefatoteinu*[36] where it is inconceivable that he meant lilies since it would be inappropriate to describe lips as being "white as lilies." And if you should argue that by *shoshana* he meant that the wafting of her smell is similar to that of the lily, well a rose is preferable because it combines color, scent, and refinement.[37]

Ibn Aknin's intended audience is unknown, and his explanation may be an independent rumination. This discussion is faintly redolent of Rabbi Azariah's usage, without

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[34] Halkin, "Ibn Aknin's Commentary on Song of Songs," 401.
[35] Arabic for lily of the valley.
[36] *Song* 5:13.
[37] Koren, "Ibn Aknin and Ishodadh as Philologists," 79-80.

discussion, of the term *shoshana echat shel vered*, lily of the rose-type, in Song of Songs Rabbah.

Ibn Aknin's commentary to Song of Songs 2:3, also reminiscent of the discussion in Song of Songs Rabbah, is not philosophical in the least:

> *As an apple-tree among trees of the field, so is my beloved among the sons. I delighted and sat in his shade; his fruit is sweet to my palate*:
> She compares her sweetheart to an apple tree which combines savory taste and aromatic fragrance. Even though it is overwhelmed by the trees of the field, in terms of the amount of shade that it provides, it surpasses them with its delicious tasting fruit and its aromatic fragrance.[38]

In his entire commentary to the Song of Songs, Ibn Aknin uses the terminology of the Intellect twice. Both occurrences, "This is the beginning of the Active Intellect's description praising the Human Intellect." (6:4) and "It is possible that the Active Intellect is speaking to the Human Intellect." (8:6), preface a philological or homiletical interpretation. The philology and midrash, while not philosophical in terms, nevertheless fit into the philosophical rubric that Ibn Aknin sets out in his introduction. As Ibn Aknin portrays the two lovers as mutually longing to unite, despite the obstacles in their way, it is convincing that by way of this metaphor, the Active and Material Intellects so too wish to ardently unite.

Ibn Aknin's lasting influence was minimal at best. If anything, Ibn Aknin's commentary attests to the influence of Maimonidean-Aristotelian thought on Jewish biblical exegesis of this time period. All subsequent Jewish philosophical exegetes will exhibit a more profound, nuanced, and sophisticated advancement of Maimonidean thought.

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[38] Koren, "Ibn Aknin and Ishodadh as Philologists," 80.

IV. Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon

This inquiry into medieval Jewish philosophers and their biblical commentaries continues with a father and son, Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon, credited with translating Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* from Judeo-Arabic into a Hebrew volume entitled, *Moreh Nevuchim*, apparently also wrote a letter asking Maimonides to produce a commentary on the three biblical books traditionally ascribed to Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.[39] According to Samuel ibn Tibbon himself, the letter reached Maimonides only after his death, leaving him the task of producing these commentaries. However, Samuel ibn Tibbon was only able to complete commentaries on the first two books in his lifetime, leaving the Song of Songs to be expounded by his son, Moses ben Samuel ibn Tibbon.

Although Samuel Ibn Tibbon did not produce a commentary on the Song of Songs, his other commentaries describes all three Solomonic works as shedding light on the tension inherent in the union of the human soul and the Active Intellect.[40] According to Robinson, Samuel Ibn Tibbon's commentary to Ecclesiastes reflect a considerable preoccupation with the soul, "Solomon defended the Aristotelian conception of immortality against the skeptics who claim that conjunction with the Active Intellect is nothing but an old wives tale."[41] In fact, Moses Ibn Tibbon will defend the Aristotelian influence of Solomon's work.

Moses ben Samuel Ibn Tibbon was born in the early thirteenth century in Marseilles, France and flourished as a writer between 1240 and 1283 C.E., not only a

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[39] This story is related by Samuel ibn Tibbon himself in his intro to his commentary of Ecclesiastes. Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 221.
[40] Ibid., 229.
[41] James T. Robinson, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes" (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 2002), 36.

biblical exegete but also as a physician and translator.[42] In fact, Moses Ibn Tibbon produced one of the first translations of an Aristotelian science volume, Averroes' *Epitome of On the Soul.*[43]

More significantly, Moses Ibn Tibbon translated more than three volumes of philosophy and science written by Averroes. Averroes, 1126-1198 C.E.,[44] was one of the most notable Islamic philosophers, renowned for his commentaries to Aristotelian treatises. Almost immediately following Moses Ibn Tibbon's translations of Averroes' commentaries to Aristotle, they became considered "among the most sophisticated philosophic works in circulation."[45]

Like Maimonides, Averroes was born in Cordova. Due to their relative closeness in age, some have assumed that the Maimonides knew of Averroes' work intimately.[46] However, recent scholarship has shown that Maimonides did not know of Averroes' work until after he completed the *Guide*.[47] Nevertheless, what is an important thread is that both were profoundly influenced by Aristotle.

In a letter addressed to Moses Ibn Tibbon's father Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides recommends Averroes' commentaries as an aid to understanding Aristotle. This letter was only one of two places in which Maimonides ever mentions Averroes by

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[42] Isaac Bryde, Richard Gottheil, and Max Schloessinger. "Moses Ibn Tibbon" in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (pg. 548)
[43] Steven Harvey. "Arab into Hebrew: The Hebrew Translation Movement and the Influence of Averroes upon Medieval Jewish Thought." in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 260.
[44] Suessmann Muntner, Shlomo Pines, Bernard Suler. "Averroes: Influence on Jewish Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 724, vol. 2)
[45] Gregg Stern. "Philosophy in Southern France: Controversy over Philosophic Study and the Influence of Averroes upon Jewish Thought." in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 287
[46] Suessmann Muntner, Shlomo Pines, Bernard Suler. "Averroes: Influence on Jewish Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 724, vol. 2)
[47] Ibid.

name.[48] From this letter, and an analysis of Samuel Ibn Tibbon's exegetical writings, it is understood that Averroes influenced Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Consequently, Moses Ibn Tibbon was greatly influenced by Averroes.

In his philosophical system, Moses Ibn Tibbon viewed the human soul and Active Intellect in tension. In his view, the "powers of the soul" prevent the Active Intellect from realization. Including both original philosophical interpretation and allegorical interpretation borrowed from earlier scholars, his commentary to Song of Songs 2:2 appropriately allegorizes these "powers" as the thorns:

> *As a lily among the thorns, so is my beloved among the daughters*:
> It is possible that both of them resemble the cognitive parts or the theoretical parts of the lily, and the rest of the powers of the soul [resemble] the thorns. And if she did not remember that a man could touch them lest they poke holes in his hand, similarly the rest of the powers of the soul prevent the Active Intellect from completing the Material Intellect and from taking it from thought into action.[49] And, it should be said about the superiority of the lily over the thorns: that they are not deserving even to be burned. For man can not touch them or enjoy them: so is my beloved superior over the remainder of the daughters.
> There are those who comment that the lily is one beautiful flower that has six petals/leaves and it is called *lezari*,[50] and therefore it is called a lily for it is possibly a clue for six old leaves.[51] That is to say that the intellect of man stands there among the thorns. That is to say that between the powers of the Material Intellect that prevent the unity, as they said, the son of David will not come until the souls of the body expire. Midrash Chazith: Just like this lily was decreed for *shabbatot* and holy days, so too was Israel decreed for the redemption of tomorrow.[52]

This quotation outlines the obstacles between the Active Intellect and the Material. The entire exposition is philosophical, even employing the midrash selection

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[48] As for the second mention of Averroes: In 1190, in the midst of working on the *Guide*, Maimonides wrote to the Joseph b. Judah ibn Shimon that he had received Averroes' commentaries with the exception of the one. He also wrote that while he did not have time to look over them thoroughly, he was impressed by what he had seen. Suessmann Muntner, Shlomo Pines, Bernard Suler. "Averroes: Influence on Jewish Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 724, vol. 2)

[49] I.E. execute it.

[50] Hebrew is unknown. Possibly a variation of Lida.

[51] Both Abraham Ibn Ezra and Ezra of Gerona posit this in their commentaries.

[52] My own translation of Mosheh Ibn Tibon, פרוש על שיר השירים, (Lyck: Mekitse Nerdamim, 1874), 10.

for philosophical ends. This selection from the midrash, commenting on Song of Songs 2:1, supports the medieval Jewish philosophical belief of redemption. During this period, philosophers believed that messianic redemption, following Maimonides, would take place from the individual attainment of pure knowledge.[53] Therefore, this discussion is a natural exhaustion of the ultimate potential danger of the meddling of the unwanted "powers of the soul." However, Ibn Tibbon's commentary on Song of Songs 2:3 is not entirely philosophical in nature:

> *As an apple-tree among the trees of the field, so is my beloved among the sons*: Compare it, [the Active Intellect], to an apple, that the apple is beautiful to sight and good for eating. There is not inside of it or outside of it anything hard or bitter or sour or inedible, and it is pleasant and its aroma is good, and its texture is smooth, and it is clean, it stands and maintains its moisture most of the time, you will not find any of these good praises in any other one food, it explains that she did not compare her lover among the men to an apple among other fruit-bearing trees, but rather among other trees of the forest, because the real beautiful apples grow in the forest. She made this comparison because he compared her to the lily among thorns.[54]

While his commentary to Song of Songs 2:3 is primarily philosophical, the final line suggests that a *peshat* interpretation is being adduced as well. While this *peshat* reading is novel, with no other scholar of the Middle Ages connecting 2:2-3 as an allegorical pair, the lasting impact of Moses Ibn Tibbon's exegesis went far beyond the specifics of his thought.

Although Maimonides and Ibn Aknin attempted to reserve these philosophical "truths" from the Song of Songs for the elite, by speaking little of the book and not mentioning the name or attributes of the intellects respectively, Samuel and Moses Ibn

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[53] Haim Kreisel. "Maimonides' Political Philosophy." in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 214-5; Hava Tirosh-Samuelson. "Philosophy and Kabbalah: 1200-1600." in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 235-6.

[54] I.E. not lily among other flowers. This is my own translation of Mosheh Ibn Tibon, פרוש על שיר השירים, (Lyck: Mekitse Nerdamim, 1874), 10.

Tibbon made these truths explicit to the masses, thereby changing the course of philosophical inquiry. Kellner speaks to the influence of the Tibbon family:

> This tension between the desire to reveal the true teachings of the Torah and the perceived necessity of keeping them secret from the masses is typical of all thirteenth-century Jewish philosophers in the Tibbonian School. That they resolved this tension in favor of revelation is evidenced by the fact that they ultimately wrote the books by which we know them.[55]

Following in the wake of the thirteenth century Tibbonian school was the philosophical commentary on the Song written by Levi ben Gershom, the greatest medieval Jewish philosopher after Maimonides.

V. Levi ben Gershom

Levi ben Gershom, who lived from 1288-1344 C.E., was born in Bagnols, France and spent most of life in Orange and Avignon. This Jewish philosopher, known among Jews by the acronym Ralbag and elsewhere by his Hellenized name Gersonides, was an acclaimed mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and biblical exegete.[56]

Gersonides' works may be split into two categories, corresponding to two periods of his life. In his earlier years, he wrote his philosophical opus, *Wars of the Lord*, scientific works, a string of supercommentaries to Averroes' commentaries of Aristotle, and, a commentary to the book of Job. Kellner argues that his commentary to the book of Job was the turning point toward his later production of narrowly Jewish works, including other biblical commentaries and Talmudic works.[57]

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[55] Menachem Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), xxviii.
[56] Norbert M. Samuelson. "Levi Ben Gershom" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed. (pg. 273)
[57] Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, xv.

Gersonides produced his commentary to the Song of Songs in 1325 C.E., only six months after he completed his commentary to Job.[58] Consistent with philosophy of his time, Gersonides worked within Aristotelianism, adopting many Maimonidean and Averroist teachings. While some scholars view his work as an extension of Maimonides and greatly influenced by Averroes, Gersonides was extremely creative, advancing much new thought.[59]

The greatest example of his creativity centers on the theme of the immortality of the soul. While Averroes also suggested that the human intellect becomes immortal at the achievement of the eternal Active Intellect, this same scholar believed that this union causes human intellects to lose their individuality, becoming multiple manifestations of one intellect. However, Gersonides rejected this opinion, believing that immortality of the soul was an individual phenomenon. He insisted that the human intellect is individual to each person, maintaining an individual status eternally.[60]

Although this philosophy was integral to Gersonides' exegesis of the Song of Songs, the immortality of the soul is not discussed in his commentary on 2:2-3. Like Ibn Tibbon before him, Gersonides speaks in these verses of the impediments to the union between the Material and Active Intellects. In Gersonides' philosophical discussion, there are two dialogues recorded in the biblical book, between the Material and Active Intellect and the Material Intellect with the faculties of the soul. Interestingly, Gersonides presents

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[58] Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, xv.
[59] Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides and His Cultured Despisers: Arama and Abravanel," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6 (Fall 1976): 269.
[60] Seymour Feldman. "Jewish Averroism and Gersonides" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed (pgs. 408-9); Charles Touati. "Levi ben Gershom" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 698-702, vol. 12)

these dialogues as a relationship in the abstract, rather than as a running commentary like Rashbam and Ibn Ezra.[61]

In the introduction to his commentary, Gersonides describes the two relationships in the Song, its general epistemology, and these five main themes:[62]

1. The overcoming of impediments to cognition (and thus felicity) related to immoral behavior
2. The overcoming of impediments caused by failure to distinguish between truth and falsity (1:9-2:7)
3. The need to engage in speculation according to the proper order
4. The division of the sciences and how nature reflects that division
5. Characteristics of these types of sciences

Gersonides also explains his purpose for composing this exegetical commentary:

> We have seen that all the commentaries which our predecessors have made upon it and which have reached us adopt the midrashic approach, including interpretations which are the opposite of what was intended by the author of the Song of Songs...We have set as our intention to write what we understand of this scroll without mixing with it other things which vary from the author's intention.[63]

While the midrashic approach, in his opinion, *has* produced very good ideas, he suggested "the proper interpretation of the text is a prerequisite for understanding the midrashim."[64] As if to say that the midrashim should be understood as philosophy.

Gersonides believed that his philosophical allegory of the Song of Songs was the *peshat*, the literal or contextual meaning.[65] There are almost no traces of any midrashic or literal comments in his exegesis. All commentary, as evidenced below, reflects his

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[61] Shatz, "The Biblical and Rabbinic Background to Medieval Jewish Philosophy," 20-1.
[62] Kellner is responsible for this summary, which is a more sophisticated summary by way of rewording what Gersonides himself writes in paragraph form, prior to each and every division. Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, xx.
[63] Ibid., 3. After consulting seven manuscripts from the Jewish National and Unversity Library (JNUL) in Jerusalem, dating prior to 1400 CE, Kellner chose to based his translation on Ms. Vatincan Urbino 17/1 (JNUL 656).
[64] Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, xix.
[65] Ibid., xxi.

philosophical inquiry. The excerpts below represent a mere two-thirds of his commentary:

> *As a lily among the thorns, so is my beloved among the daughters*:
> You ought to know that the faculties of the soul, when they obey the intellect, all turn toward it and intend its perfection. And when they do not intend this object they distance the intellect from its perfection and turn toward the physical desires, *for the inclination of one's heart is evil from his youth.*[66] This, as we said at first, one who wishes to progress toward the intelligibles must subordinate all the faculties of his soul to the service of his intellect. This will happen when he discards and abandons his material desires and takes from them only what he needs for the maintenance of his body. Since this is a matter which must be striven for first, the intellect pointed out the existence of these impediments and called them thorns because they are thorns and brambles which inflict pain and destruction upon themselves and others. He compared his beloved from among these animate faculties to a *lily among thorns*.
>
> *As an apple-tree among trees of the field, so is my beloved among the sons; I delighted and sat in his shade, and its fruit was sweet to my palate:*
> She replied to the intellect that it, among the other guiding faculties of the soul, is like the apple-tree—which produces a fruit very beautiful with respect to its appearance, scent, taste, and feel—among the other trees of the forest, trees which do not produce fruit. In truth, fruit is ascribed to the intellect along among the other guiding faculties of the soul because it alone can achieve the condition of eternity in an individual. This is the entire fruit of these sublunary existents and the final perfection with respect to which the first matter exists in potential. Of the other perfections which may be acquired by first matter, some are acquired through others and they all exist for this perfection.[67]

As most scholars believe that Gersonides, like Maimonides, addressed his commentary to the intellectual elite, it is curious why his commentary uses such rudimentary language. A thorough analysis of his entire commentary provides very little philosophical sophistication. Moreover, it places a heavily weighted emphasis on the "proper" method for the study of science and philosophy.[68] These two observations, introductory philosophy and argumentation for the "proper" approach to the study of philosophy, make for an important recent assertion.

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[66] *Gen* 8:21.
[67] Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, 39.
[68] Ibid., xxix-xxxi.

According to Kellner, Gersonides wrote his commentary to the Song of Songs with a greater aim. In his opinion, this commentary was written as a comprehensive manual for would-be philosophers, with the hope that this work would negate all philosophical writings that might lead one astray. In other words, Gersonides' commentary is a polemic addressed to "philosophical amateurs unaware of their amateur status. It is designed to convince them that philosophic perfection can only be achieved through hand, well-organized work and study and that sought after goal is worthy of the effort."[69] Thus it seems that the influence of place, time, and events does not elude even the philosophers.

Since Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon created a class of public discourse and study on matters of philosophical inquiry, Gersonides, though he may not have wished to speak forthrightly on matters reserved for the elite, was forced to clarify those public discussions, lest knowledge spin further out of control. While Gersonides believed the union of the Active and Material Intellects was reserved for the elite, he saw that such an achievement, even in this context, was near impossible.

While his commentary appears to polemicize against the dispersion of Ibn Tibbons' philosophy,[70] Gersonides' awareness of Moses Ibn Tibbon's commentary on the Song is yet debated.[71] The lack of quotation or reference by Gersonides caused Kellner to conclude negatively.[72]

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[69] Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, xxx.
[70] Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 283.
[71] He certainly knew of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, as he read his Hebrew translation of the original Judeo-Arabic of the *Guide*. Stern, "Philosophic Allegory in Medieval Jewish Culture: The Crisis in Languedoc (1304-6)," 191.
[72] For more on this discussion, read Menachem Kellner. "Communication or Lack Thereof Among Thirteenth-Fourteenth Century Provencal Jewish Philosophers: Moses Ibn Tibbon and Gersonides on Song of Songs." in *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Sophia Menache (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). While one may wonder whether Gersonides was familiar with commentaries

VI. Isaac ben Moses Arama

Isaac ben Moses Arama, who lived from 1420-1494 C.E., was born in Northern Spain and spent much of his youth as a *yeshiva* student in Zamora, Spain. He later served as rabbi of Tarragona, Fraga, and Calatayud, composing many of commentaries and Sabbath sermons from Calatayud.[73]

The sermons in Arama's foremost work, *Akeydat Yitzchak*, bespeak his fine abilities as both a master homileticist and philosopher. Scholars and historians suggest multiple motivations for Arama's sermons. Most significantly, there was a timely need in the mid-fifteenth century to offset the rhetoric of Christian messianizing sermons, to which his congregants and fellow Jews were subject.[74] The extent of anti-conversionist themes appearing in Arama's work will be discussed later, as this theme appears in his commentary to the Song of Songs.

Many of the conversionist Christian sermons that were foisted upon the Jews of Spain in the mid fifteenth Century were "well-ordered and rational expositions in support

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from two other important individuals, Joseph Ibn Caspi (1279-135) or Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome (1272-1350), the greater question involves whether Ibn Tibbon was aware of these scholars, especially since they lived during the same period. Caspi also expanded Maimonides' assertion that the Song of Songs depicted the relationship between the Active and Material Intellects. However, Caspi does not write a linear interpretation to the Song of Songs, rather he wrote simply a longer essay than Maimonides, loosely offering his understanding of the overarching themes of the Song of Songs. It still remains that Ibn Tibbon was the first to produce a comprehensive commentary. For a reproduction and translation of Caspi's essay, see Ginsburg, 47-8. Immanuel of Rome's commentary remains in manuscript form and thus, was unavailable to this author to justly examine. However, a few verses from his linear commentary were reproduced in the Ginsburg volume, and one is of particular interest: "The celebrated sage Rabbi Moses Ibn Tibbon came and explain the book according to wisdom, and his exposition is, indeed, full of wisdom and excellency. As he, however, passed by several particulars, not noticing their design, our wise contemporaries, reading the writing of that learned author, and wishing to enter more fully into all its parts, insisted with a command of love, that I should write a complete commentary on the book, keeping the same path the learned author has pointed out..." Ginsberg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 51. Fascinating for the scholar who tackles Immanuel's post-Ibn Tibbon commentary.

[73] Sara O. Heller-Wilensky. "Isaac Arama" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 339-40, vol. 2); Pearl, *The Medieval Jewish Mind*, 4-5.

[74] Ibid., 2.

of Christian doctrines."[75] Christian conversionist sermons brought a need for a philosophically-sound and impressive Judaism. At this time, much like in the previous decades, philosophy of the Arab and Greek tradition remained reserved for the elite intellectual-religious circles.[76]

According to Pearl, Arama showed little innovation in his philosophical expositions,[77] perhaps because he emphasized revelation over reason.[78] In other words, Arama used philosophy as his means to understand faith, with deference shown to religious tradition when philosophy and faith stand in tension.

Arama possessed a wealth of knowledge concerning philosophical traditions: Arab, Greek, and specifically Jewish. In his philosophical system, Arama could be labeled anti-Aristotelian, a system founded by Hasdai Crescas, a slightly earlier Spanish philosopher who wrote a work entitled Or Adonai, which attacked Aristotelianism and the Jewish intellectuals whom Aristotelian thought lead away from Judaism as he understood it.[79]

Although mainly allegorical, Arama's scriptural exegesis does not completely disregard the literal meaning of the text. In this interpretation of the Song of Songs, Arama offers two levels of meaning: a commentary on the relationship between two lovers, and a homiletical-philosophical interpretation, at times "interspersed with kabbalistic digressions:"[80]

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[75] Pearl, *The Medieval Jewish Mind*, 1.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., vii.
[78] Ibid., 9-11.
[79] Shatz, 26; Tzvi Langermann. "Maimonides and the Sciences." in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*,ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163.; Warren Zev Harvey. "Hasdai Crescas" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 284-8, vol. 5)
[80] Isaac Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition*, (Cincinnati: Ladino Books, 1993), xvii.

As a lily among thorns:
He agreed to her opinion and added a parable of his own and he said "when she is in exile among the women, then she is like the lily, the kind that is born among the thorns, not like the other one that raises her own thorns." For even though she is entangled by the thorns, and it is her own nature that there are thorns that she grows,[81] her good aroma is well-known. It is like the saying of the wise one that happy is the person who is similar to this lily because he will do his work beautifully.[82] The painful thorns the lily is standing by do not affect her. The lily still looks good and smells good. The thorns do you good. Even the troubles are reasons to seek perfection; the thorns touching the rose or lily is the same as someone's poverty.

As an apple-tree among trees of the field:
And it will not look at all like an orchard, as RaZaL said, "any kind of beauty outside of Israel is like someone who has no God." So is my beloved among the nations, and with all of this—[the issues marked by] this shadow— he is experiencing sorrow about being in the Diaspora. And while in the Diaspora, if this rotten and sour fruit was sweet to my palate, we should understand it to mean that here is where its shadow is to prepare for the oppressors. The fruit is the perfection that comes from it, and all this is happening during times of exile. Its perfection is natural and weak. Death adds on and influences the *Elyon* that is sought after.[83]

Unlike many of the exiled Spanish Kabbalistic commentators, to whom much of the next chapter is devoted, Arama lived and wrote at a time when his commentary was not influenced by the expulsion but the milieu that preceded and precipitated the event. His commentary speaks to fellows Jews, assuring them that these conversionist attempts were simply a consequence of living in the Diaspora, not any reason to question their beliefs. In this way, Arama's commentary served as sermonic advice, encouraging his audience to continue in the faith.

Though many of his other works speak of his belief in the Maimonidean notion of the will to unite the Material and Active Intellect, Arama's commentary to the Song of Songs does not discuss this theme explicitly or extensively. Arama's commentary can be

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[81] I.E. are her own.
[82] I.E. she is not affected by those around her.
[83] I produced this translation. I consulted: Isaac Meir Arama, עקדת יצחק על חמשה חומשה תורה ועל חמש מגילות, a Facsimile of the Pressburg 1849 edition, (Jerusalem: Offset Yisrael-America, 1960).

deemed as a turning point, in which much of the philosophic content is more eclectic. Commentaries to the Song of Songs, following Gersonides, are not comprised of philosophical inquiry only.

VII. Conclusion

The interest of the Jewish medieval philosopher-exegetes, for the most part, was primarily philosophical and secondarily exegetical. It is not that they wrote biblical commentaries for the sake of elucidation of the text alone, but for the clarification of their theological and philosophical concerns.[84] Often they were concerned with the nature of philosophy in the Jewish sphere. Primarily, their concerns were intellectual. Specifically, they were concerned with the anthropomorphic image of God in the earlier allegory, and, the sexual nature of the text.[85]

What the early rabbis, the *pashtanim*, and the philosophers have all avoided by way of their respective schools of exegetical methodology—namely, the apparent erotic intimacy of the Song of Songs—the Kabbalists will address. However, like the *pashtanim* and the philosophers, the Kabbalists do not address this subject directly, but rather use their symbols to create an allegorical fence. Kabbalistic allegory will be examined in the next chapter.

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[84] Sara Klein-Braslavy. "The Philosophical Exegesis." in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002), 303-4.
[85] Kellner, *Gersonides on Song of Songs*, 231.

CHAPTER 4: KABBALISTIC INTERPRETATION

I. Introduction to Kabbalah

The term mysticism conjures up notions of magic, superstition, cosmology, angelology, and the occult. Over time, mysticism has developed within almost every historical religion. However, mysticism may best be understood as a historic phenomenon rather than a set of codified ideas or laws true for all time.[1] In each religion seeking to address the occult, mysticism has stimulated its own unique, yet not wholly new, system of religious expression. Judaism's distinct system of mystical expression has been termed Kabbalah.

While often applied to Jewish mystical expression, including literature and theory, from as far back as the rabbinic period, Kabbalah is technically defined as a historical movement of the Middle Ages, originating in the second half of the twelfth century in Provence, France.[2]

Emerging from this area were both the progenitor of Kabbalistic thought, Isaac the Blind,[3] as well as the first Kabbalistic work, *Sefer ha-Bahir*,[4] whose origin is unknown despite its appearance in Provence between 1150-1200 C.E."[5]

Sefer ha-Bahir is the earliest text which addresses the two facets of God, a central Kabbalistic belief. Although an earlier volume, *Sefer Yetzirah*, dated prior to the tenth

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[1] The term "historic phenomenon" is adopted from Lawrence Fine. "Kabbalistic Texts." in *Back to the Sources: reading the classic Jewish texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984). I believe that it is the best way to describe what I aim to express here.
[2] Lawrence Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 308. and Arthur Green. "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism." in *Modern Critical Interpretations of the Song of Songs*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 141.
[3] Lawrence Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 307.
[4] Daniel Abrams, "Sefer ha-Bahir," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 62-3, vol. 3)
[5] Ibid.

century,[6] directly influenced *Sefer ha-Bahir*, this work primarily addresses cosmogony and speaks of only one facet of God, known as the *sefirot*.[7]

As Kabbalism emerged out of mystical tendencies in other religions, yet within a framework of Judaism, its beliefs need to be reconciled and often reinterpreted. In fact, non-Jewish systems of belief, such as Gnosticism, are as much of Kabbalah as Jewish philosophy and Halakhah. However, the more magical ideas central to Gnosticism were abandoned in favor of Jewish philosophies. Nonetheless, Kabbalistic though both emerges and diverges from Jewish philosophy.[8]

The influence of other belief systems upon Kabbalism is certainly evident in its concept of God. Both medieval Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah focus on God's negative attributes, what God is not. In fact, Kabbalah described God as the *ein-sof*, "without end, infinite," implying that God cannot be "positively name or imagined."[9]

However, the agreement between Kabbalah and medieval Jewish philosophy ends here. Although Kabbalah taught that the *ein-sof* could not be understood by humans, manifestations emitting from the Divine could be known. These manifestations, termed *sefirot*, are ten in number as introduced by the *Sefer Yetzirah* and named in *Sefer ha-Bahir*.[10]

According to Kabbalah, these *sefirot* did not signify external characteristics of God but rather stood as symbols for the essence of God. On this distinction, Fine explains, "They [the *sefirot*] should not be thought of as things we say about God, but

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[6] Gershom Scholem, "Sefer Yetzirah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 328-31, vol. 21) This article addresses the dispute as to when in fact it was written, within the period between the second and tenth century.
[7] According to: Daniel Abrams, "Sefer ha-Bahir," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 62-3, vol. 3)
[8] Gershom Scholem, "Jewish Mysticism," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 586-93, vol. 11)
[9] Lawrence Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 318.
[10] Daniel Abrams, "Sefer ha-Bahir," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 62-3, vol. 3)

rather they are symbols pointing to the spiritual realities comprising the life of the deity."[11]

According to scholars, the notion of *sefirot* not only entails language by which humans can understand God, but actually uses the language of the *sefirot* themselves to enable human beings to interact with God.[12] Furthermore, Kabbalistic thought encouraged the search for commonality or identity with God. In fact, not only could one identify or interact with God, but some Kabbalistic circles believed that human actions could affect God.[13]

After this inquiry into the basic tendencies of Kabbalah, the question remains as to the source from which this Kabbalistic mindset emerged. Some scholars have suggested that a novel, creative energy was allowed by the closing of the Talmuds and other volumes that largely set Halakhah.[14] The time, arguably, was ripe for a life of strict Torah observance to become a more profoundly internal experience.

While Kabbalah originated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in France and Spain respectively, a second wave of Kabbalistic creativity occurred in Sefat. The impetus for this Kabbalistic movement was also a desire to become more spiritual and mystical beings. However, a greater aim may have been to reinvent the self image of the devout Jew into an individual with a more vital role in the world.[15] This desire, of course, was largely catalyzed by the events surrounding the expulsion of Jews from Spain.

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[11] Lawrence Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 319.
[12] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 146.
[13] Lawrence Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 308. It should be further noted that human actions, according to Kabbalists, can not have an impact on the "ein-sof," but rather on the *sefirot*. This nuance should be noted.
[14] Gershom Scholem, "Jewish Mysticism," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 586-93, vol. 11)
[15] Ibid.

II. Introduction to Kabbalistic interpretation of the Song of Songs

When they ventured to interpret biblical texts, medieval Kabbalists did not seek to interpret the text from a mystical perspective alone, but like their predecessors, they fielded grammatical issues, launched literal inquiries, and considered homiletical import. However, the Kabbalists present a new layer of interpretation, in addition to these traditional methods.

One of the most significant layers that the Kabbalistic commentators contributed to the field of exegesis was their interpretation of allegory. On an exoteric level, the Kabbalists accepted the Targumic belief that the Song of Songs sung of a love affair between God and the community of Israel.[16] However, on an esoteric level, the Kabbalists believe the Song sung of a love affair between God and the Shekhina, or the feminine indwelling of God, one of the ten *sefirot*.[17] As Green states, "medieval Jewish esotericism sees the divine wedding taking place within God, rather than between God and Israel."[18]

While Kabbalah emerged out of Provence, it spread from Southern France to Northern Spain in the first half of the thirteenth century. In particular, the Catalonian town of Gerona became a center of mystical writing. It is there that the first decidedly Kabbalistic commentary to the Song of Songs was produced.

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[16] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 145-6; Eliot Wolfson. "Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs." in *With Reverence for the Word*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96. The term exoteric is used by Wolfson, in addition to many others.

[17] There is a second interpretation of the allegorical relationship between the lovers, which is less discussed, yet is often a relationship that was understood to exist simultaneously with the first relationship. This second relationship is between the individual soul and the Shekhina. Wolfson, "Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs," 96-7. Later Kabbalists will express this second, in-tandem, interpretation.

[18] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 145-6.

III. Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona

The first Kabbalist to dedicate an entire volume to the explication of the Song of Songs was Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona.[19] This volume, until as recently as 1964 C.E.,[20] had been erroneously attributed to Nachmanides, quite possibly because they lived at the same time. Ezra of Gerona has also been confused, and sometimes conflated, with Azriel of Gerona, yet these individuals should be identified as two Kabbalistic thinkers living in the same place during the same time.

Born in 1160 C.E., Ezra was a student of Isaac the Blind and wrote a commentary to the Sefer Yetzirah, although it is no longer extant.[21] Among Ezra's additional works are less known commentaries on Talmudic Aggadah[22] and his highly influential commentary to the Song of Songs. Most indicative of its influence is the selected excerpts found in the Zohar.

Composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century,[23] Ezra's commentary includes two sections prior to the exegesis. First, a mini-lexicon of *hapax-legomena* was created, of course, interpreting the words in a mystical rather than *peshat* fashion. Second, Ezra details his contempt for earlier commentators, who interpreted the Song in a

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[19] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 147.

[20] Isaac Jerusalmi notes that Ezra of Gerona's commentary was mistaken for Nahmanides as late at 1964, when Mosad Rav Cook issued it with erroneous authorship. Isaac Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition*, (Cincinnati: Ladino Books, 1993), xiii. At this time, a separate work by Nahmanides is not extant.

[21] Efraim Gottlieb, "Ezra of Gerona," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (p. 663, vol. 6)

[22] Ibid; Seth Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona's Commentary to the Song of Songs*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1999), 7.

[23] This is based on the claim of Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona's Commentary to the Song of Songs* , 8. I.E. that it was produced forty to fifty years prior to the Zohar, which is usually dated, but approximately so, to the year 1268. It appears to be erroneously dated to 1250 by Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 147. This is impossible if Ezra died in 1238 or 1245. Also, Ezra himself says that he wrote this commentary after approaching his fifth rung (I.E. fiftieth year –this would most likely be 1210.

literal or homiletical manner.[24] As Ezra himself wrote in the introduction to his commentary:

> So I kept my silence, placing hand to mouth, until I reached my fifth rung and saw that the days of my life were setting before me, that old age was rapidly approaching. Therefore, I pressed forward to interpret one of Scripture's twenty-four books, encompassing every delight, bespeaking matters weighty, mysteries and secrets whose memory was lost to Scripture's interpreters, neglecting its perdurance and splendor: that is the Song of Songs. In accord with my strength, I have interpreted it as I have received it from our rabbis. I have crowned it with the meanings of the commandments and composed it in accord with the mysteries of creation.[25]

Ezra's mystical commentary to Song of Songs 2:2 is unmistakable:

> *As a lily among thorns*: The lily is that plant known as the *Lida* which possesses six leaves. Thus the Shekhina has six boundaries.[26]

However, Ezra is not the first commentator to propose that the lily possesses six leaves. Abraham Ibn Ezra is the first to offer this particular conjecture. In his commentary to Song of Songs 2:1, Ibn Ezra describes the lily as "a white flower." "It is a white flower of sweet but narcotic perfume, and it receives its name because the flower has, in every case, six[27] petals, within which are six long filaments."[28]

Lilies are flowers composed of six parts. However, this type of claim, like the statement of early rabbis, is based solely on physical observation, not floral expertise. This type of "horticulture" serves mostly to support the assertion that "the Shekhina has six boundaries." Ezra of Gerona was the first commentator to make the mystical connection between the lily in Song of Songs 2:2 with the Shekhina. Such mysticism is further developed in his comments to 2:3:

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[24] Jerusalmi, *The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition*, xiii.
[25] Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona's Commentary to the Song of Songs*, 24. Brody consulted the Jewish Theological Seminary's manuscript designated Lutzski 1059.
[26] Ibid., 54.
[27] Presumably, the Hebrew word for six, שש, is extracted as a morpheme within the word for lily, שושנה.
[28] Emil G. Hirsch and Immanuel Low, "Lily," in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1st ed. (pgs. 88-9)

> The Glory is likened to an apple which possesses multiple colors: green, red, and white.
> *Among the trees of the forest*: This passage is a figure referring to the Central Column, standing in the medial position. None of the trees can produce their own fruit by their own devices since all draw their nourishment from there.
> *In his shade is my delight*: My existence is through His power and causal agency and for His very sake.
> *And his fruit is sweet to my mouth*: The fruit of the Holy One, blessed be He, are the souls, as it is written, "From me comes your fruit."[29] Also, "Light is sown for the righteous."[30] and "Sweet is the light."[31]

The average Kabbalist would read this text with a mystic's delight, noticing the replete *sefirotic* allusions. On this subject, Brody wrote, "in the course of his discourse, the [Kabbalistic] author will switch from one of these symbols to another without missing a beat, at each step, reinforcing the cluster of associations in the reader's mind."[32] The number of references to the *sefirot* here is at least seven in number. These include the following terms with their *sefirotic* allusion: Glory (*tiferet*), red (*din*), white (*chesed*), Column (*yesod*), and Holy One (*tiferet*).

Ezra's main contribution in his commentary on the Song of Songs was the inclusion of natural and erotic symbols of mysticism into the language of Jewish theology.[33] In effect, Ezra's commentary to the Song of Song validated the *sefirotic* notions introduced by the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, among other early Kabbalistic writings. Therefore, even the Zohar, the great apex of Kabbalistic literature, was dependent on Ezra's work.

Other Kabbalistic works of the thirteenth and fourteenth century in Spain were indubitably influenced by Ezra and one his greatest successors, Isaac Ibn Sahula

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[29] *Hos* 4:9.
[30] *Ps* 97:11.
[31] *Eccl* 11:7.; Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona's Commentary to the Song of Songs*, 54.
[32] Ibid., 2.
[33] Ibid.

IV. Isaac ben Solomon Ibn Sahula

Isaac ben Ibn Sahula was born in 1244 C.E. in the town of Guadalajara, in the region of Castile.[34] Sahula, a disciple of Moses of Burgos, was a Kabbalist as well as a poet. His major work was *Meshal ha-Kadmoni*, an anthology of parables, stories, and tales written in a highly poetic form, which gained much popularity in the medieval era.[35] Incidentally, this work was the first volume to quote the Zohar.

Ibn Sahula's only other known literary contribution was his commentary to the Song of Songs.[36] Pope and Ginsburg suggest that Sahula was urged by his colleagues to produce such a commentary.[37] At this time, Kabbalistic doctrine, by its nature, could only be expressed through symbolism. While imposing multiple limitations on the dissemination of their teachings, Kabbalists clung to idea of two types of knowledge inherent in biblical texts: an exoteric meaning available to most people, and esoteric meaning only accessible to a minority.

Accepting the common opinion of the time, Ibn Sahula believed that biblical texts must be read on both levels. In his commentary, each verse was expounded with esoteric analysis, concise and cryptic, as well as an exoteric analysis, elaborate and penetrable.[38] In his explication of Song of Songs 2:2, Ibn Sahula elaborates on the exoteric level:

> *As a lily among the thorns, so is my beloved among the daughters*: The interpretation is of the obvious type. It is as if after she had denigrated herself, because she is to be found in the lower world, that she is called the word *Sharon* and [she is in] the valleys as she looks at the higher shapes which stand at the top of the world. Her lover came back to praise her and said that she is superior and

[34] Abraham Meir Habermann, "Isaac Ibn Sahula," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pg. 667-8, vol. 17)
[35] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 148.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977), 109; Christian Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970), 57.
[38] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 148-9.

> higher than the other nations, and, she is like a lily who is glorified by the goodness of her scent and her beauty/glory among the thorns that are not important except for burning in the fire. He also says that He put you as superior over all the nations—which He did all for the purpose of praise and Name and glory.[39]

In his commentary on this passage, Ibn Sahula is concerned with the implication that the lily, or Shekhina by extension, is found in a low lying area. In order to counter this problematic deduction, Ibn Sahula develops a theory about the intentional modesty of the Shekhina. However, However, Ibn Sahula also desired to underscore the higher lot of the Jewish people, saying that the lily, or Israel,[40] is superior to all other nations. Based on the text of the Song, Ibn Sahula makes an ancient claim using new Kabbalistic language, redeeming both the image of the Shekhina and the image of the people of Israel.

Although not evident in his commentary on this passage, Ibn Sahula's major contribution to Kabbalistic interpretation of the Song of Songs was his novel reading of the lovers' allegory as the soul yearning for God,[41] a Neoplatonic reading focused on the individual soul and its desire to return to God.[42] While the soul is not overtly mentioned in Ibn Sahula's commentary on Song 2:2-3, there is veneration of God:

> *As an apple-tree among trees of the forest*: We have already accepted that the words apple, and apples, which is in this book, is a parable for the honored Shekhina.[43] And here I am adding an explanation of this verse in the way of the obvious and I am saying that it is known to anyone that is enlightened that apples have three virtues. The first is a good smell that all who come close to it enjoy it equally. The second is that it has a pleasant taste. The third is a good drink that we

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[39] I produced this translation. I consulted: Arthur Green, "Rabbi Isaac Ibn Sahola's commentary to the Song of Songs" *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, (1987): 424-5. Green relied on the sole extant manuscript.

[40] While it may be confusing, Kabbalistic thought saw the lily or the female lover to be simultaneously the Shekhina and the people Israel. Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 149.

[41] Ibid., 150.

[42] Ibid.

[43] This is a reference to Ezra of Gerona.

> make from it[44].... And as for the meaning of this verse: the apple-tree is praised in its virtue among the trees of the forest that stand ready to sing praise to their creator about the goodness of His Protection.[45]

Absent in Ibn Sahula's commentary on both verses, as Green points out, is the "national-collectivist allegory" which plays a prominent role in the preponderance of earlier exegesis.[46] Green writes, "The community of Israel on one hand has been hypostatized to the point of inclusion within the deity, and on the other hand it has been atomized into an aggregate of individuals, each on a different rung in the striving for God."[47]

Ibn Sahula's emphasis on the individual soul's union with God is indicative of the often-lonely search of the medieval Kabbalist.[48] Medieval Kabbalah worked mostly within the framework of private, personal attainment of a higher relationship with God. The idea of a collective relationship with God found expression later in the Zohar. The Zohar's interpretation of the Song of Songs outlived the important, but considerably less prominent exegesis of Ibn Sahula.

V. Zohar

The *Sefer ha-Zohar*, known as "The Book of Splendor" is the most widely-acclaimed Kabbalistic treatise ever to emerge. While this mystical holy book itself

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[44] In certain types of medieval mysticism, the mystic attained a desired spiritual state by imbibing certain substances. For an in-depth look at this potential connection here, see: Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

[45] My own translation based on the text of Green. A large chunk of this translation has been omitted. For all intents and purposes, the omitted section is a lengthy elaboration of the three virtues of the apple. Green, "Rabbi Isaac Ibn Sahola's commentary to the Song of Songs," 425-6.

[46] Arthur Green. "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 150.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

claims to have been written in Mishnaic times,[49] it was mostly likely written between 1268-1300 C.E.[50] Most likely written in the heart of Castilian Kabbalism, its purported author, Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon, went to lengths not to avow his own involvement as he was ardently committed to establishing its authority. To this end, the book was written in Aramaic.

In the early fourteenth century, Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, a recent émigré to Spain and supposed pupil of Nachmanides,[51] became suspicious of Moses de Leon's claim to have compiled an earlier tradition.[52] After being pressured to produce a copy of the inherited manuscripts on which his work was based, Moses de Leon apparently died on his way to garner such proof. However, when confronted by Isaac of Acre after her husband's death, his wife testified that there were no such manuscripts.[53]

While it is not clear whether Moses de Leon authored the Zohar or simply compiled earlier sources and/or contemporary Kabbalistic scholars, his main objective to establish both integrity and sustainability was successful. The Zohar, in fact, achieved near-canonical status in the centuries following its introduction, rivaling the Bible and Talmud respectively, within and beyond mystical circles.[54]

Today, the Zohar is divided into five volumes, three entitled *Sefer ha-Zorah al Ha-Torah*, "the Zohar on the Torah," the fourth, *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, and the fifth, *Zohar*

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[49] Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 311. The voices of many *tannaim* are present—most frequently, Simeon bar Yochai.
[50] Gershom Scholem, "Jewish Mysticism," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 586-692, vol. 11)
[51] Kaufmann Kohler and M. Seligsohn, "Isaac ben Samuel of Acre," in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1st ed. (pgs. 629-30)
[52] Fine, "Kabbalistic texts," 310.
[53] Gershom Scholem, "Jewish Mysticism," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 586-692, vol. 11)
[54] For an excellent discussion of the incarnations of regard toward the Zohar as sacred, see: Boaz Huss, "Sefer ha-Zohar as a canonical, sacred and holy text: changing perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries" *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1997): 257-307.

ha-Hadash. Zohar ha-Hadash is a collection of sayings and texts proven to have come from the manuscripts of various Kabbalists from Safed in a period later than Moses de Leon.[55] This volume includes commentary to the Song of Songs, yet only to the first few verses.

While the Song of Songs and its mystical import is truly the unwritten theme of the Zohar,[56] the majority of commentary to the Song of Songs occurs in the three-volume *Sefer ha-Zohar al Ha-Torah*. However, there the commentary does not appear in a consecutive design.

The *Sefer ha-Zohar al Ha-Torah* is arranged according to biblical book. Nonetheless, the Zohar is not merely an interpretation of Bible. It is the record of the adventures of nine disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai,[57] their midrashic statements and religious compendiums,[58] and pertinent discussions on many topics. The interpretation of the biblical texts, as expressed through these multiple lenses, is borrowed from a myriad of sources, including the Talmud and the works of Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Ezra of Gerona.[59] The Zohar aimed to enter the mainstream of rabbinic exegesis and pronounce its ideas as Kabbalah's own.[60] A perfect example is the Zohar's commentary to Song of Songs 2:2, found in Parashat Lech L'cha:

> Mystery of the word: Isaac issues from the side of Abraham, supernal Chesed, who acts in love toward all creatures, though he is severe Judgment. Rebecca issues from the side of severe Judgment, but she withdrew from among and joined Isaac; for although she issues from the side of severe Judgment, she is mild

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[55] Gershom Scholem, "Zohar," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 647-64, vol. 21)
[56] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 150.
[57] Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), LXV.
[58] Gershom Scholem, "Zohar," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 647-64, vol. 21)
[59] Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 312.
[60] Matt, *The Zohar*, 265.

> Judgment, a thread of grace dangling from her. Isaac, severe Judgment; she, mild, *like a rose among thorns.*[61]

In Song of Songs Rabbah, as discussed earlier, Rabbi Isaac equates Rebekah with the lily plucked from the midst of the thorns, the Paddan-Arameans. In the Zohar, Rabbi Isaac again similarly equates Rebecca with the lily, but an additional layer is added to the allegory. Matt suggests that Rebekah also symbolizes the Shekhina.[62] Just as the Shekhina "is surrounded by forces of Judgment, or Din, so Rebecca was surrounded by wicked humans. But the harsh origin of both the Shekhina and Rebecca is softened by the grace of Hesed."[63]

Once again, *sefirotic* references abound, as is expected in the volume that solidified the *sefirotic* essence of Kabbalah. An excellent example comes from the introduction to the Zohar:

> Rabbi Hizkiyah opened, "*Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens.*" Who is a rose? The Assembly of Israel. For there is a rose, and then there is a rose! Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white, so the Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion. Just as a rose has thirteen petals, so too does the Assembly of Israel have thirteen qualities of compassion surrounding her on every side. Similarly, from the moment God is mentioned, it generated thirteen words to surround Assembly of Israel and protect Her; then it is mentioned again. Why again? To produce five sturdy leaves surrounding the rose. These five are called Salvation; they are five gates. Concerning this mystery it is written: "I raise the cup of salvation." (Psalm 116:13) This is the cup of blessing, which should rest on five fingers—and no more—like the rose, sitting on five sturdy leaves, paradigm of five fingers. This rose is the cup of blessing.[64]

Although Ezra of Gerona clearly read שׁוֹשַׁנָּה as lily while the Zohar understood the term as a rose, his influence in clearly evident in the discussion of the colors of the rose and the mystical associations involved in counting the number of petals.

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[61] Ibid., 1. Matt consulted multiple original manuscripts dating from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. For an elaborate list and explanation of works consulted, see Matt, *The Zohar*, xvi.
[62] Matt, *The Zohar*, 265.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 1-2.

Subsequent commentaries are indelibly inspired by the Zohar, not by specific interpretations but rather the enthusiasm, imagination, and sefirotic ecstasy at the very essence of the Zohar.[65] Green argues that the Zohar itself "has within it something of transcendence."[66] In the least, the subsequent five generations held the Zohar in the highest esteem, while Kabbalism changed around it. One such Kabbalistic innovation occurred in Safed, approximately three centuries later.

VI. Isaac ben Solomon Luria

If the Zohar represents the pinnacle of Spanish Kabbalistic achievement, Isaac ben Solomon Luria's teachings represent the height of Safed Kabbalistic achievement. In fact, an entire system of Kabbalistic innovation is named in honor of Isaac Luria's system of thought, Lurianic Kabbalah, which was permeated with messianic tension.[67] Gershom Scholem best describes the messianic nuance that Isaac Luria added to the theoretical stratus of Kabbalah:

> The deeds of man are invested with mystical significance, not only because they are linked with the secret workings of creation, but also because they are integrated into a vast cosmological drama which is enacted in order to rectify the original blemish in the world and to restore everything to its proper place. It is not the role of the Messiah to accomplish the redemption; the task of cosmological restitution is imposed on the entire Jewish people through strict observance of the precepts and prayer.[68]

Much of the life of Isaac Luria, who lived from 1534-1572 C.E., is steeped in lore. Born in Germany or Poland, Luria studied a non-mystical approach to the Law

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[65] Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," 313.
[66] Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," 150.
[67] Gershom Scholem, "Isaac Luria," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 262-7, vol. 13)
[68] Ibid.

during his early years, before taking up mysticism and Kabbalah during a brief stay in Egypt, before finally moving to Israel in 1569 C.E.[69]

Isaac Luria expounded his novel Kabbalism at the end of his life, prior to which his sole work was a commentary on the *Sifra di-Zeniuta*, "The Book of Concealment," one section of the Zohar.[70] While Luria did not commit his multitude of ideas to writing, his rumored hundreds of disciples wrote down his teachings and published them in a vast body of literature.[71] In fact, many of "his teachings" are not his ideas, but the outgrowth of thought that emerged from his school of Kabbalah.

This school produced a commentary, in Isaac Luria's name, to the Song of Songs. The following is "his" exposition to Song of Songs 2:2:

> *As a lily among the thorns*: The holy groom revealed his opinion, that the verdict is with her with all of her questions, that even though they occasionally have intercourse in the Diaspora, this is not the end of what is desired—it is understood that she is still among the thorns. That is, it is not only when she is underneath, or in a disadvantaged position, that when she is in his place during the intercourse, then worlds surround and protect her, with the knowledge that they are her daughters.[72]

While the final two cola are esoteric and somewhat unclear, the bride and groom[73] can not have a perfect relationship because she is in exile. Consistent with Lurianic thought, this passage describes a longing for a whole world, or a messianic event, a reunion of God and Israel in wholeness.

The following is "Isaac Luria's" exposition of Song of Songs 2:3, equally as indicative of the greater Lurianic school of thought:

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Gershom Scholem, "Zohar," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 647-64, vol. 21)
[71] Ibid.
[72] My own translation. I consulted: Hayyim ben Joseph Vital, ספר לקוחי תורה נביאים וכתובים, (Tel Aviv: Hotsaat Kitve Rabenu ha-Ari zatsal, 1962).
[73] Presumably, this refers to a relationship within God and a relationship between God and the community of Israel at the same time, as we have seen can be the case in Kabbalistic interpretation, as to whom the lovers represent.

As an apple-tree among the trees of the forest: Praises of a lady to her husband: praise that includes all praises, it has three virtues, blessed be He: *chesed, din, v'rachamim*. And in any given moment, it does not take on a single virtue. They are hints of three shades of color of an apple. The expansion of his compassion even becomes sweet, even the positive laws become sweeter. *Mem, nun, tzadee, pey, chaf*:[74] is gematria for the Hebrew word forest. And he didn't have to for the worlds.....they are called his sons. So too do they become sweet. And to this, there is a need to make earlier/speed up their pairing/intercourse. Because then they give him the image as known.
In his shade I delighted and sat, and his fruit: The one that comes out of the couple/intercourse to the worlds and the souls of Israel are *sweet to my palate*. They arouse for intercourses that will be eternal and they start from the wisdom of the kissing of the mouth.[75]

From this passage, three observations are apparent. First, many elements of this commentary allude to the Zoharic and Geronic induction of the *sefirot* and the shades of the apple as examples. Second, a reference to the *mitzvot*, which is inherent to the messianic onslaught in Lurianic thought, is evident. Third, this mystical, erotic, pairing of the lovers, simultaneously touched upon and set as a messianic hope, is further evidence of the eschatological underpinnings of "Luria's" interpretation to the Song of Songs.

One impetus for the eschatological underpinnings is a reaction to the expulsion from Spain. As Gershom Scholem articulately put it, "A catastrophe of this sort, which uprooted one of the main branches of the Jewish people, could hardly take place without affecting every sphere of life and feeling. In the great material and spiritual upheaval of that crisis, Kabbalism established its claim to spiritual domination in Judaism."[76]

Isaac Luria's death at a young age must be attributed to one of multiple plagues in Safed during the late sixteenth century.[77] His students were troubled not only by the

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[74] These are the five letters of the Hebrew letters that function as letters of the *sofit* type.
[75] My own translation. I consulted: Hayyim ben Joseph Vital, ספר לקוחי תורה נביאים וכתובים, (Tel Aviv: Hotsaat Kitve Rabenu ha-Ari zatsal, 1962).
[76] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (Jerusalem: Schoken Publishing House, 1941), 240.
[77] Ibid.

recent memory of the expulsion of Jews from Spain, but also by the myriad of plagues and other disasters. One such student was Moses Alshekh.[78]

VII. Moses Alshekh

Moses Alshekh, born approximately 1507 C.E., was a member of Joseph Caro's rabbinical court, a teacher in two *yeshivot*, and a preacher in the community of Safed.[79] He approached sermon preparation by busying himself in the study of biblical exegesis and Kabbalah, respectively.[80]

Closer to the end of his lifetime, Alshekh edited his sermons into commentaries[81] for many biblical books, including a commentary on the Song of Songs entitled *Shoshanat ha-Amakim*. This work reflected the context of his historical milieu, in addition to his pious inclinations and research on biblical exegesis and Kabbalah.

In addition to his various affiliations and capacities, Alshekh became active in community-wide affairs. This position, coupled with the urgency of economical and medical affairs, led him to make visits to the Jewish communities in Syria and Turkey in 1590 C.E., the year in which one plight damaged the livelihood of so many Jewish community members that a significant number were forced to flee Safed.[82] This is reflected in the concluding lines of his commentary to Song of Songs 2:2-3:

> *As a lily among thorns*... We have borne the burden of suffering and the yoke of this exile for so long. Say 'Enough!' to our troubles and rejoice with us in the same measure that You have afflicted us.

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[78] There is some debate about whether or not Alshekh was in fact Isaac Luria's student. Legend has it that Isaac Luria was particular about his students and seriously tried to discourage Alshekh both from studying with him and undertaking the study of Kabbalah at all.
[79] Toviah Preschel, "Moses Alshekh," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 10-11, vol. 2)
[80] Ibid.
[81] His commentary in fact reads like a series of sermons.
[82] Ravi Shahar, *The Commentary of Moshe Alshich on the Song of Songs*, (Jerusalem: Feldenheim Publishers, Ltd., 1993), 22.

> *As an apple-tree among trees of the field*... Please God, we have suffered enough under the shadow of your apple tree. Isn't it time we tasted the good fruits, which are our wish and desire?[83]

Despite this incredible plea to God, Alshekh nevertheless upholds the virtue and responsibility of the Jewish community. Though the peace of other nations might convince Jews that they should not uphold the commandments or remain steadfast in love to God, Alshekh implores his audience that these sufferings are merely external, while Jews continue to have constant inner warmth and the future promise of redemption. These sentiments are evidenced by an excerpt of Alshekh's commentary to Song of Songs 2:3:

> When this man sees his fellow sitting under the apple tree and suffering in the heat, he will call to him, 'why are you sitting there? All day long the sun beats down on you, and at night you are exposed to the elements. Don't you feel sad and dejected sitting in its shadow? Wouldn't you be more comfortable in the shade of this big forest tree, where you can rest in tranquility like me?'
> The man under the apple tree answers him, saying, 'I don't mind having to suffer now by sitting here under the apple tree, for the day will come when it produces luscious, tasty fruits, and my present predicament will turn out to be for my benefit. Moreover, the sun can harm only my skin; the apples will satisfy my inner body.[84]

It is utterly apparent that Alshekh's commentary to the Song of Songs, and all Lurianic commentary to the Song of Songs, moved more closely to toward the elucidation of religious-ecstatic concerns and preoccupations.

VIII. Conclusion

Jewish mystical interpretation, like that of the early rabbis, the *pashtanim* and *darshanim*, and the Jewish philosophers, was similarly committed to allegorizing the

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[83] Shahar, *The Commentary of Moshe Alshich on the Song of Songs*, 112. Shahar consulted a Venice Manuscript from 1692.
[84] Ibid., 110-111.

Song of Songs. In their case, they chose erotic imagery. They chose this because, again, it supported their allegorical reading. In the modern period, in contrast to all pre-modern modes of interpretation, interpretation will generally move away from allegory.

CHAPTER 5: MODERN INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSION

I. Modern Commentaries

This inquiry into the history of Jewish biblical interpretation to the Song of Songs now reaches the modern period. However, the plural subheading, "Modern Commentaries," was intentional, since multiple perspectives are presented in modern Jewish commentaries. Perhaps in a hundred years when the modern period is considered closed, more generalizations will be drawn from Jewish interpretation emerging from this period. However, at this time, there is only enough perspective to divide modern interpretation into three categories, each replete within their own century, set of beliefs, and unique milieu from which they emerged.

Modern Jewish commentaries to the Song of Songs can be divided into three categories: the Enlightenment period, Hasidic exegesis, and English language commentaries. The Enlightenment signals a shift from medieval to modern interpretation, Hasidic exegesis reverts to rabbinic and medieval methods, and English commentaries consider the Song of Songs in its ancient context.

A. Interpretation in the Enlightenment Period

At the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, the period of Enlightenment reached England and France, among other places. The Enlightenment and its progenitors emphasized human reason over other sources of knowledge, primarily revelation. Judaism's own Enlightenment, or Haskalah, found its roots in the general Enlightenment of the eighteenth century in Europe, however, it had

its own concerns and objectives, which rendered it quite different from the general movement.[1]

Moses Mendelssohn of Berlin, who lived from 1729-1786 C.E., is generally considered the father of the Haskalah movement. Among other things, his enlightenment involved the advancement of intellectual integration of German culture among Jews. His main avenue for this advancement was a translation and commentary on the Bible in German and Hebrew, addressing both linguistic and stylistic points.[2]

This literary work, known as *Biur*, with its German translation and Hebrew commentary, was compiled by Mendelssohn but composed by multiple contemporary authors, including Solomon Dubno.[3] The overall project, which reflects the work of our single editor, heeds both to the tradition of biblical interpretation as well as the emerging field of biblical research. Mendelssohn's deference to the interpretive tradition is limited by his adoption of certain early theological and allegorical teachings, never mentioning early Jewish commentators by name, and his biblical research primarily involved issues of grammar and style.[4]

The interplay of these two aspects of his interpretative approach is evident in the *Biur*'s commentary to Song of Songs 2:3:

> *As an apple-tree*: She answers him, "Just as the apple-tree is chosen from all of the rest of the trees of the field, so too are you chosen from all of the sons." And after she allegorizes the apple-tree, she offers another comparison: *In his shade, I delighted and I sat.* This is to say, she perched under his wings.[5]

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[1] Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 15; Yehuda Slutsky, "Haskalah" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 434-4, vol. 8)
[2] Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 13.
3 Richard Gottheil and Crawford Howell Troy , "Bible Translations," in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1st ed. (pgs. 192-3)
[4] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Moses Mendelssohn." (pgs. 33-40, vol. 14)
[5] My translation, based on the 1817-1818 Vienna edition of Mendelssohn's *Chamesch Megiloth*.

Mendelssohn's approach to biblical interpretation comes out of the Enlightenment *specific* to Central Europe. Eastern European Jewish biblical interpretation of the same period reflects some influences of the Enlightenment, but very few.[6] The most noteworthy figure and Bible exegete of this particular period and location was Meir ben Jehiel Michael Malbim.

Malbim, who lived from 1809-1879 C.E., was born in Volhynia, Poland, and lived in a number of places in Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Malbim's influence involved his interest in biblical exegesis, centering on polemics against the Reformers. His participation in many incursions against the Reformers earned him the title, "sworn enemy of progress."[7]

Malbim's commentary to the Song of Songs, entitled *Shirei HaNefesh*,[8] sought to strengthen Jewish exegesis according to its plain meaning. While his commentary reflects some influence of the Enlightenment, Malbim is more closely aligned with pre-modern Jewish interpretation, incorporating *derash*, philosophy, and Kabbalah, yet emphasizing *peshat*. As in the history of *peshat* interpretation, Malbim understood the lovers' relationship as a depiction of God's covenant relationship with the community of Israel. This is evidenced in Malbim's explication of Song of Songs 2:2:

> *As a lily*: This is the Supreme Beloved answering. Although you are similar to the daughters of Jerusalem, that is to say between the powers of the female Gentiles, just like a lily, the tree upon which she grows is full of thorns, and there is a need for her to raise her head above them, lest she be mixed with them. Because then the thorns will poke holes in her. So are the powers of materialism that the soul will rise above. They are like the thorns that poke holes in the holy lily when she mixes in their company. And they will corrupt her beauty and the glory of her

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[6] Isaac Avishur, "Haskalah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 434-4, vol. 8)
[7] This appeared in the official newspaper *Moniturul*, in the March 6, 1864 edition. This is noted in: Yehoshua Horowitz, "Malbim," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 27-9, vol. 13)
[8] *Shirei ha-Nefesh* was published first in Krotoszyn and then in Bucharest in 1860: Yehoshua Horowitz.

holiness, and she needs to rise above them and not become mixed in their company.[9]

However, Malbim's aim to create a polemic against the Reformers did not completely disregard the political circumstances of his time. Much like his pre-modern predecessors, Malbim spoke to the challenges of living in the Diaspora. This theme was also evident in Hasidic interpretation.

Thus, Jewish interpretation in the period of the Enlightenment, as illustrated by two contemporaries working in distinct cultures, Mendelssohn and Malbim, only began to separate itself from pre-modern exegesis. This division would not be complete for another century and a half.

B. Hasidic Exegesis

Although operating in the modern period, the style and content of Hasidim is reminiscent of its medieval forerunner. Thus, Hasidic exegesis may best be understood as a bridge between post-medieval and modern Judaism.[10]

Hasidism originated in southeastern Poland and Lithuania in the mid to late eighteenth century. Following the death of its charismatic founder Israel ben Eliezer Baal Shem Tov in 1760 C.E., Hasidism reached its height over the next seventy years, spreading throughout Russia, Romania, and Hungary.[11] Responding to the down-trodden spirit of Eastern European Jews who had endured a lengthy period of social decline,

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[9] My translation of Gerstenkorn, Yitzchak, אהבה בתענוגים, (Tel Aviv: Dov Gutterman Press, 1958), 20, part 2.
[10] Arthur Green. "Teachings of the Hasidic Masters." in *Back to the Sources: reading the classic Jewish texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 370.
[11] Andre Hajdu and Ja'acov Mazor, "Hasidism," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 393-434, vol. 8)

political oppression, and inner turmoil, Hasidism created an inner peace amidst external chaos.[12]

Early Hasidic leaders and their followers were could be recognized by their ecstatic movement during worship and pious observance of the *mitzvot*. In addition, early Hasidic interpretation is marked by its equal emphasis on the midrashic tradition of rabbinic Judaism and original thought from its own theology. Its adherence to tradition enabled the movement to take hold. The Hasidic leader, or commentator, evoked familiarity in his followers, while, nevertheless, sharing a novel message.[13]

"Hasidic biblical interpretation is characterized by its intricate, purposeful compilation of various homiletical commentaries and biblical verses, a more distinctly modern feature. However, the message of Hasidic interpretation is unmistakably linked more closely to its pre-modern predecessors, offering a clear message with consistent language. An example can be found in *Sefat Emet*, the biblical commentary of Hasidic leader, Judah Aryeh Lieb Alter,[14] who lived from 1847-1905 C.E.[15]

The descendant of a branch of Hasidism in Ger, Poland, the Sefat Emet became its head in 1870 C.E., playing a role in public affairs and promoting Torah study.[16] These two occupations strongly appear in the intimations and conclusions of his own commentary to the Song of Songs:

> *As a lily among thorns and as an apple-tree among trees of the field*:
> As [was evidenced] by the act in the land of Egypt, it is difficult for her owner to gather her....I have already written in a previous chapter that [these] two verses are dependent upon one another. The Community of Israel is *like the lily among thorns* and the Holy One, Blessed be He, is *like the apple-tree among the trees of*

[12] Green, "Teachings of the Hasidic Masters," 370.
[13] Ibid., 362.
[14] Alter is commonly referred to as the Sefat Emet as well.
[15] Green, "Teachings of the Hasidic Masters," 370-1, 393.
[16] Abram Judah Goldrat, "Ger Hasidism," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (pgs. 760-1, vol. 7)

> *the forest*. As it is difficult to pick the lily from among the thorns, so too it was hard for the children of Israel to recognize the Creator, Blessed be He, for He is concealed in the natural world, as it is said: *among the sons*.[17] [emphasis mine]

While every previous commentator address the related nature of Song of Songs 2:2-3, the Sefat Emet is the first scholar to address these two verses in the same exegetical breath. The verses underlined form a psycho-social appeal to the down-trodden psyche of the Hasidic Jew. A similar appeal is made later in his commentary on these verses:

> And the Sages have said: Just as the apple-tree does not have a shadow, so too the nations of the world ran away from the Holy One blessed be He, so that there is no recognizable defense of Him.[18] Indeed, this is the way it is, [regarding] the leadership of God vis a vis Torah and Mitzvot, that one does not see the benefit until the mitzvah is being fulfilled with real devotion. In true belief, you see and achieve the goodness. And thus is has been said: 'They will do them and live by them.'[19] [emphasis mine]

As Green points out, the Sefat Emet's biblical commentary expounded the conviction that "since creation took place through Torah, it is by faithfulness to the commandments of Torah that the transformation of 'being into nothingness'[20] can come about." Hasidic interpretation marks the end of a strict adherence to the well-defined and reasoned system of exegetical thought inherited from the ancient and medieval rabbis. All subsequent Jewish interpretation to the Song of Songs adheres to a new and unrecognizable interpretive method, from a pre-modern viewpoint.

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[17] My own translation. Gerstenkorn, Yitzchak, אהבה בתענוגים, (Tel Aviv: Dov Gutterman Press, 1958), 28-9, part 2.
[18] I.E. God does not protect everyone.
[19] *Lev* 18:5. My own translation. Gerstenkorn, Yitzchak, אהבה בתענוגים, (Tel Aviv: Dov Gutterman Press, 1958), 28-9, part 2.
[20] This is an earlier Hasidic idea, proposed by the Magid of Mazerich. Green, "Teachings of the Hasidic Masters," 397.

C. English Commentaries

Like their predecessors in the Enlightenment, twentieth century North American commentaries also stress the interpretation of a "text in context."[21] This emphasis on the importance of the biblical context to understand the "original meaning" is a distinctly modern approach." As Levy writes, "Those that totally ignore the study of antiquities are simply not modern."[22] However, modern commentators, specifically in twentieth century North America, also de-emphasize the millennia of biblical interpretation from antiquity to modernity.[23]

While modern commentary of this period consistently attempts to bring in the voices of early and medieval rabbinic interpretation, it does so along the side of modern Jewish and non-Jewish scholarship on various topics. In the case of Song of Songs, such scholarship gleans from many new areas, such as horticulture, an area ancient rabbis could only observe rather than conduct experimentation with scientific methods. However, it seems that modern commentaries have been written as a contribution to critical scholarship and scientific inquiry rather than continuing earlier tradition.

Only a decade and a half after printing Hertz's commentary to the Pentateuch, widely considered the foremost Torah commentary of the early twentieth century, Soncino Press began publishing Cohen's commentaries to rest of the biblical books. His commentary to the Song of Songs was published in *The Five Megilloth* in 1946, soon

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[21] This is former Jewish Theological Seminary Chancellor Ismar Schorsh's characterization of the exercise of biblical criticism. His explication and use of this term appears in his book, *From Text to Context: the turn to history in modern Judaism*, (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press and the University Press of New England, 1994).
[22] B. Barry Levy. "Artscroll: An Overview" in *Approaches to Modern Judaism*. (1983): 121.
[23] Levy, "Artscroll: An Overview," 120.

gaining wide acceptance." In the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs, Cohen writes:

> Summing-up the evidence on each side, it is not easy to discover any justification for the Rabbinic explanation that the Book represents successive events in the history of Israel, a view much favored by the Midrash and Rashi. Modern scholarship has abandoned, to a large extent, this allegorical interpretation in favor of simple literalness.[24] [emphasis mine]

In this short quotation, Cohen's aims are clearly evident, summarizing the vast history of exegesis, employing modern, literary criticism.

Cohen's commentary on Song of Songs 2:2-3 reflects the interpretation of the *pashtanim*. Following Ibn Ezra in reading these verses as a literal discourse, Cohen superimposes on the text, however, an indication of the speaker. Rather than allegorizing the lovers, modern interpretation usually ascribes these roles to Solomon, a shepherd, or simple lover. In his commentary to 2:3, Cohen writes:

> Ignoring the king's compliment, she praises her lover. Compared to other men, the royal suitor included, he is like the apple-tree, sweet and fragrant...[25] [emphasis mine]

What is truly scientific in the case of Cohen's commentary is his free and unapologetic use of non-Jewish scholarship on specifically grammatical issues. For the authors of later twentieth century English commentaries to the Song of Songs, what is truly scientific is not their understanding of linguistic nuances alone, but the scientific evidence of the modern era that elucidates the fruit, the flora, and the geographical important toward an understanding of the physical context of the original biblical text, over the linguistic context.

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[24] Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, *The Five Megilloth*, (New York: Soncino Press, 1946), xii.
[25] Cohen, *The Five Megilloth*, 6.

In twentieth century North America, most Jewish commentaries to the Song of Songs came out of religious movements and their associated publishing houses. However, Ariel and Chana Bloch, two American academics, recently published a translation and commentary to the Song outside of these traditional spheres. Holding to a strictly literal explanation of the biblical text, their translation added the layer of biological-scientific contextualization, as evidenced in their commentary to 2:3:

> *An apple*: *Tappuach* has usually been rendered "apple," but many botanists today are inclined to identify the *Tappuach* with the apricot, which is abundant in Palestine and most probably has been ever since biblical times. The common apple is not native to Palestine, having been introduced there comparatively recently. Moreover, its fruit in the wild state—before improvement by modern techniques of selection and cultivation—is small and acidic and not likely to be the subject of glowing praise. The apricot, on the other hand, is soft, golden, fleshy, and fragrant.

As many modern commentaries focus on the grammar in the text, earlier scholars also understood these issues but used them to understand the lover' relationship, specifically the implicit references to God, not merely for scholarship. However, some modern commentaries both advance scholarship and a spiritual appreciation of the text. Additional commentary on Song 2:3 from Bloch and Bloch illustrate this dual accomplishment:

> *I delighted and I sat*: Normally *hamad* "to take delight in something, to covet" is in the qal, but here in the pi'el, possibly to denote continuity or a prolonged experience: "I took delight many times, repeatedly."[26]

Another twentieth century English language commentary, written by Reform Rabbis Leonard Kravitz and Kerry Olitsky and recently published by the Union for Reform Judaism, follows its modern predecessors but takes a slightly new direction. The commentators chose to base their commentary on the Targum, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and

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[26] Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 149.

Gersonides, although these authors are already available in English editions and are hardly representative samples.[27] This may have been for the benefit of laypersons wishing to analyze the original text, rather than for scholarship.

As the only modern commentary to give deference other interpretations beside the *pashtanim*, these authors occasionally offer "spiritual-emotional" commentary, best described as a felicitous rendering of the import behind the text. This feature is evident in Kravitz and Olitsky's commentary on Song of Songs 2:3:

> It is clear from this verse and others that the Bible is not afraid of explicit sexual imagery. In Judaism, sex within the context of a loving relationship is celebrated.[28]

The final line of their commentary here is shocking. It appears that Kravitz and Olitsky are inserting this edifying comment for the sake of their agenda, rather than understanding biblical exegesis. There is no direct relationship between the text and this religious lesson. It is a particularly bold statement when one considers how many great lengths have been traveled by Jewish commentators in order to allegorize that which appears overtly erotic. In contrast to this tradition, here is a statement that is overtly, unapologetically, erotic.

Israel Bettan's commentary to the Song of Songs, the predecessor to Kravitz and Olitsky from the Union of Reform Judaism Press, was published in a volume of commentaries on the Five Megillot, much the same as Cohen, yet preferring ancient and medieval allegorical-homiletical approach to the literal meaning." Such is evident in Bettan's commentary on Song of Songs 2:2:[29]

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[27] Leonard Kravitz and Kerry Olitsky, *Shir HaShirim*, (New York: URJ Press, 2004), x.
[28] Kravitz et al, *Shir HaShirim*, 19.
[29] Israel Bettan, *The Five Scrolls*, (New York: UAHC Press, 1950). Bettan did not in fact comment on every verse. Of our pair, he commented only on 2:2.

> *As a lily among thorns*: The allegorists see much aptness in the comparison drawn here. In times of persecution, they observe, Israel stands among the nations as a lily among thorns. He is pricked by oppression and unjust discrimination, yet his heart, like the lily, points heavenward, reaching out toward the Father on high. (Midr.)[30]

While all the preceding scholars have written modern, critical, liberal commentaries to the Song of Songs, one modern commentary stands along in its religious perspective and interpretive approach. Similar to Hasidic exegesis, the Artscroll Commentary, with its sixteen reprinted editions, emerges from modernity yet reflects pre-modern interpretation.[31]

The Artscroll Commentary describes itself as "an allegorical translation based upon Rashi with a commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic sources."[32] Though all translations must be interpretive, the Artscroll attempts to create a translation-interpretation. This combination is evident in their rendering of Song of Songs 2:2-3:

> Like a rose maintaining its beauty among the thorns, so is My faithful beloved among the nations. Like the fruitful, fragrant apple-tree among the barren trees of the forest, so is my Beloved among the gods. In His shade I delighted and there I sat, and the fruit of His Torah was sweet to my palate.[33] [emphasis mine]

Throughout its commentary on the Song, the Artscroll interprets the lovers' relationship as an allegorical representation of God's relationship with Israel, as evidenced in the Sinai events.

The primary aim of this commentary is to codify the allegorical-homiletical interpretation. The only innovation in this commentary is its introduction of such an

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[30] While Bettan makes a reference to the midrash, it is not entirely true. The allegorical notion that he raises does reflect the midrash, however, the words appear to most closely reflect the commentary of Arama.
[31] See inside cover of Artscroll for all 16 editions, ranging from as early as January 1977 to as late as September 2006: Meir Zlotowitz, *Shir HaShirim*, (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2006).
[32] Ibid., inside flap.
[33] Ibid., 97, 99.

approach in the modern period. Of greatest importance to this inquiry is the objective of this commentary. According to Levy, this Artscroll Commentary series, which includes numerous other biblical commentaries along with Jewish texts, seeks to fill a perceived chasm in the extant modern English commentaries on the Bible.[34] Unlike Liberal commentaries which present multiple possibilities of interpretation, this Orthodox[35] commentary offers a single, correct reading. Of this, Levy writes,

> We may conclude that the editors are radical innovators without being aware of it. But it is also possible that through selection of certain models and controlled censorship of others they are consciously working to redirect the way in which traditional Jews understand the Bible.[36]

The Artscroll Commentary to the Song of Songs clearly supports Levy's conclusion. The Artscroll Commentary, with its twentieth century brethren, popularized the ancient and medieval texts to an unprecedented degree. However, its apparent lack of scholarship renders the selections of its authors riddled with inaccurate readings.[37] In light of the wealth of ancient and medieval sources available in modernity, these commentaries actually impede rather than advance scholarship.

II. Conclusion

Rabbis Herbert Bronstein and Albert Friedlander wrote, "The Song of Songs has been accompanied throughout our generations not only by celebration, but by cerebration as well."[38] As the previous survey and analysis have shown, this point about cerebration is astute. In the rabbinic period, commentaries on the Song of Songs were aimed to

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[34] Levy, "Artscroll: An Overview," 112.
[35] This capitalization of both the O and the L are intentional, as these commentaries mostly stem out of these particular religious movements, their agendas, etc.
[36] Levy, "Artscroll: An Overview," 120.
[37] Ibid., 123.
[38] Herbert Bronstein and Albert Friedlander, *The Five Scrolls*, (New York: CCAR Press, 1984), 158.

legitimize this provocative book as a member of the Jewish canon. The medieval French and Spanish *peshat* schools were guided in their study of the Song by scientific, linguistic analysis. Philosophers of this period were inspired by the Song of Songs toward pure knowledge. And mystical communities employed the Song in their quest for an ecstatic relationship with God.

All incarnations of biblical interpretation to the Song of Songs explored avenues which may have moved away from the original intent of the biblical book. As Schoff contends, "the degree of dissonance between the interpretations of the Song of Songs and the biblical text is more dramatic than those of any other book in the *Tanakh*.[39]

Did the commentators mean to move away from the bare intent of the Song of Songs? While there exists one Song of Songs that can be identified as the original text, each exegete created not only commentaries, but new versions of the Song. In other words, the commentaries of Rashi, Gersonides, and Ibn Sahula, gave the original text new life. Thus, their respective conclusions did not appear to be so far from the "original" text. What they understood to be the original intent of the Song of Songs was synonymous with what we deem today to be their "allegorical" reading. As we have demonstrated, pre-modern commentators viewed these meanings as one in the same.

After the previous analysis of all incarnations of Jewish interpretation to the Song of Songs, the "preferred interpretation" is clearly the allegorical. Modern critical scholarship has compared the Song of Songs to ancient Egyptian poetry, attempting to prove that the Song of Songs functioned as erotic love poetry itself.[40] In light of this

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[39] Schoff, Wilfred, *The Song of Songs, A Symposium*, (Philadelphia: The Commercial Museum, 1924), 80.
[40] Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). This book is the leading scholarly work to place the Song of Songs in the genre of ancient Egyptian love poetry.

possibility, it is no wonder why the ancient and medieval rabbis' preferred allegory as their mode of interpretation. Jewish traditional interpretation has refused to allow erotic love poetry as an option.

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