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THE BOOK OF CANTICLES  
IN  
RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

by

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DEDICATED

to the sacred memory of

MY FATHER

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# THE MIDRASH CANTICLES RABBAH

There are just a few things that can be determined for the history of Canticles Rabbah. That Canticles was interpreted haggadically in very early times is beyond dispute. The Talmud contains certain rules that must be followed in the interpretation of Canticles. In Sheb. 35b the rule is laid down as to how Solomon should be interpreted. In Erub. 21b we learn of the way in which Cant. 7:14 should be used. These are but instances of the many places in the Talmud where an exegesis for almost every verse in Canticles is found. Scholars like Weiss<sup>1</sup> and Jellinek<sup>2</sup> hold that our present Canticles Rabbah is a collection of several older midrashim to Canticles. These older Midrashim differ in this way: One of them interpreted Canticles with reference solely to the Exodus. Another used Canticles in the light of the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. Another emphasized the Tabernacle and the Holy Temple. All of these were put together by a later editor into what we know today as Canticles Rabbah. From my study of Canticles Rabbah, I find that what Weiss and Jellinek believed is correct. The entire Midrash seems to be a careless throwing together of various interpretations like those noted above.

Canticles Rabbah is also called *נ'גן ר'ק* because of the opening words in its first chapter, where Prov. 22:24 is quoted. Although Canticles Rabbah has its variations of older stories and a few original interpretations, in the main however it has borrowed generously from Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah, from the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds and other older sources. This is the belief of Zunz.<sup>3</sup> He considers it older than the Pesikta Rabbati.

1. "Dor", III, p. 263-264.

2. In a letter to Theodore found in "Monatsschrift" 1879, pp. 337 et seq.

3. "Gottesdienstliche Vorträge der Juden", 2nd ed., pp. 274-276.

It was Jellinek who maintained that Canticles Rabbah is older than the Pesikta Rab Kahana. This theory of his was responsible for an article by J. Theodore,<sup>1</sup> where he especially deals with "Shir ha-Shirim rabba und seine Quellen". Theodore proves here that Jellinek is wrong. He shows that Canticles Rabbah has borrowed from the Pesikta Rab Kahana. Theodore tells us in his article that in very early days Canticles was interpreted. We find such interpretations in the Seder Olam, the Sifre, Sifra, and in the Mechilta. Likewise is it found in the Jerusalem Talmud. Other sources are the Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah. He agrees with Jellinek that the editor of our present Canticles Rabbah gathered together older midrashim to Canticles. But he elaborates a bit further on this point to say that it was the obvious intention of that editor to create a running commentary to Canticles, utilizing everything that had been given on the subject up to his time. He likewise concurs with Zunz that besides the many sources used there are a few individual interpretations and variations of older ideas.

Theodore did not feel that the Babylonian Talmud was a source for our Canticles Rabbah. In the very few examples of such influences he found that the Babylonian Talmud was utilizing the very same older sources utilized by the editor of Canticles Rabbah. The same criticism he leveled at the possibility that the editor actually borrowed from the Seder Olam, Sifre, Sifra, and Mechilta. The following are what Theodore considered to be the indisputable sources of our present Canticles Rabbah: (1) the Jerusalem Talmud; (2) Pesikta Rab Kahana, Genesis Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah; (3) Other ancient sources which at the present time we do not have in definite form. Theodore in the latter

1. "Zur Composition der Agadischen Homilien", in Monatsschrift, 1879.

part of his article presents proofs for all of these. Most scholars since have accepted his arguments and his theories.

Besides the Midrash Rabbah to Canticles there are at the present time two other midrashim to Shir ha-Shirim. There is the "Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim"<sup>1</sup> and the "Midrash Shir ha-Shirim"<sup>2</sup>. Buber<sup>3</sup> insists that his Midrash Zuta to Canticles is the earliest commentary to the book. He goes on to explain that in the beginning, Midrash Rabbah to Canticles was bound together with the Pesikta Rabbati. There was a Midrash Chazis and a Pesikta on Canticles. In the Yalkutim, Canticles Rabbah is often<sup>4</sup> considered as the Pesikta Rabbati. This was due to their being bound together. However, he held that it was the Midrash Zuta to Canticles, which he edited, that was the earlier of any of these.

Grünhut contends that the Midrash to Shir ha-Shirim which he edited, and which was unknown up to his time, is older than either Canticles Rabbah or Zuta. Whether either of these two scholars is correct or wrong cannot as yet be determined, if ever. Their contentions, however, have this significance for us--that Canticles was the object of much rabbinical interpretation at a very early time. All evidence seems to point to this. If this were not so, it would have been impossible to keep the Shir ha-Shirim in the canon, no matter how strong Rabbi Akiba and his party were at the time when they fought for its canonicity.

As to the date when our present Canticles Rabbah was edited in its present form, we must take what Dr. Lauterbach has to say about it<sup>5</sup> in his article, "Shir Ha-Shirim (Canticles) Rabbah". The Midrash is older than Pesikta Rabbati, since the latter borrowed passages directly from it.

1. Published by Solomon Schechter, Cambridge 1896, by Buber in his Midrash Zuta.
2. Published by Grünhut in 1897.
3. Midrash Zuta, Introduction, p. 9.
4. Ibid., p. 11.
5. Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. XI.



As the Pesikta Rabbai was composed about 845 C. E., Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah must have been composed about the end of the eighth century." If this is true, then the theory of Buber that the Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim was older than our Canticles Rabbah cannot hold, for Schechter contended that the Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim was composed not later than the middle of the tenth century.

From this survey of the history of Canticles Rabbah it is quite obvious that scholars are still in the dark as to its exact date and origin. It contains signs of too many influences, that even the most expert critics should pin it down to this or that one. Some influences are predominant, as Weiss and Jellinek, Zunz and Theodore have pointed out. But further than this nobody, at least up to the present time, has ever gone.

## INTRODUCTION

"The whole world's goodness is not equal to the glory of the day when Canticles was given. All the Scripture is holy, but Canticles is holiest." (Shir ha-Shirim r. 1:11) With these words, Rabbi Akiba sincerely and enthusiastically contended for the canonicity and greatness of Canticles. Indeed, so lofty was the conception of this book in the minds of its most ardent supporters that when Rabbi Meir interpreted one of its verses in an ill light for Israel, he was reprimanded by Rabbi Yehudah who exclaimed, "Enough, Meir! One never interprets Canticles towards Israel's disgrace but only unto its glory. For Canticles was given only for Israel's glory." (ibid. 2:13; 1:55)

It would be wrong to state that the Midrash to Canticles consistently upholds the aforementioned sentiment of Rabbi Yehudah. But in the main, as we shall see, there is a certain naïve conceit and grandioseness in the way the rabbis in their comment to Canticles conceive of Israel's chosen position in the world. With their skillful juggling of texts, their charming analogies, their brilliant stories, Canticles becomes indeed the Song of Songs. It becomes a song that sings of the majesty of God, the glory of Israel, the dramatic exodus, the supreme greatness of the Torah, the nobility of Israel's founders and leaders and righteous ones. It sings of Israel's conception of the gentiles, of the Messianic days, of ethics and morals and wisdom. It is replete with delightful tales that are intensely human. Though it is true that the rabbis in their discussions of Canticles forsake the intrinsic beauty of the poetic text itself--despite the comment in ibid. 1:54, where we are told that by "studs of silver" in Cant. 1:11 the Song of Songs is meant, since each word of it was signed and supported by the rabbis as being perfect and beautiful--nevertheless in place of it they substitute their own glowing religious philosophy. Above all things else is their love for the

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God of Israel. And then comes their ardor for Israel itself. What follows is but the consequence of such lofty loyalties. Life to them is the beckoning opportunity to live as children of the ever living God. This thesis, which is based on a careful research of the Midrash Rabbah to the book of Canticles, will attempt to set forth the dominant interpretations of the rabbis found therein.

## CHAPTER I

GOD AND ISRAEL

The rabbis interpreted the lover in Canticles as God, and the beloved as Israel. The whole essence of the rabbinic interpretation of Canticles might be said to be found in this concept. It is only for the sake of clarity that we divide the subject of our chapter into God and Israel, for to the rabbis God and Israel were one. In Shir ha-Shirim r. 5:3 we are told that God's relation to Israel is like that of twin sisters, who when one of them has a headache, so has the other. God is no larger and no smaller than Israel.

In ibid. 1:45 we are told that the seal of God is **אבן**. "Resh Lakish said, 'And why **אבן**? The **א** is first of the alphabet; the **ב** is in the middle and the **ן** is the last: To tell that I (God) am the first and the last and besides Me there is no god.'" And this One, Eternal God has taken unto Himself as His choicest and most precious of all nations none other than Israel. Commenting on Cant. 1:2 where we find "for thy love is more precious than wine," the rabbis say in Shir ha-Shirim r. 1:19, "By 'thy love' Israel is meant. And since the numerical equivalent of **ין** (wine) equals 70, this refers to the other nations of which there are 70. To teach that Israel is loved more by the Eternal One than the other nations."

This Eternal One is omnipresent. In ibid. 3:16 we learn that "A heathen asked Rabbi Josha bar Karcha, 'Why did God speak to Moses from a thornbush and not from another tree?' The rabbi answered, 'If it had been from another tree like the johnny-bread or sycamore, you would have asked the same question, but in order not to send you away empty here is my answer: It should show you that no spot on earth, even the thornbush, is void of the Shechina. Therefore did God speak to him out of the thornbush.'" The whole universe bears eloquent testimony to the perfect order He has

established. None of God's creations mars the others. As *ibid.* 3:20 points out, "the stars are of fire and the firmament of water, but neither affects the other." Even though there are many elements that in themselves are opposed to one another, yet by God's bidding they perform their individual work without injuring one another. "Like a king's two legions who hated each other but in the presence of an enemy unite to fight him, so did fire and hail unite to discomfit Pharaoh for God; a miracle within a miracle." (*ibid.*)

Unto this Everlasting God Israel is most beloved. He calls Israel by endearing names. "Rabbi Eleazar said, 'Like a king who had an only daughter whom he dearly loved; he called her, "My daughter", and ceased not till he called her, "My sister", yea even, "My mother". So God loved Israel and called it, "My daughter" (Ps. 45:11) and then "My sister" (Cant. 4:10) and "My mother" (Isa. 51:4) where if you take the  $\aleph$  from  $\aleph k f$  you have  $\aleph k f$ .'" (Shir r. 3:21)

It was no easy thing to become the beloved of God, for at Mt. Sinai when God and Israel were united the Israelites at first were overwhelmed. Commenting on Cant. 6:16, "His mouth is most sweet", the rabbis in Shir r. 6:4 say that the terror of the Israelites at Sinai was "like a king who spoke with his son and struck terror in the child's heart. The king noticed this and said, 'Fear not. Are you not my only one, my beloved child? And am I not your father?' So at Sinai when the Israelites heard, 'I am the Lord thy God', their very souls left them. Angels then embraced and kissed them, restoring their souls, saying, 'Do not fear; you are the children of the Most High.' God said, 'Are ye not my beloved children and am I not your God? Ye are My people whom I love and cherish.' And thus He spake till their strength returned and they began to exclaim, 'His mouth is most sweet.' Or another interpretation is that the Torah said to God at that time, 'Does a king marry his daughter and then kill her husband? The whole world is rejoicing because of me, and shall your children die?' Thereupon their

souls were restored, as it says in Ps. 19:8, "The law of the Lord is perfect restoring the soul."

Just to show the contrast of rabbinical opinion we will record here another interpretation of the union of God and Israel at Sinai. In Shir r. 8:2 we are told that "God at Sinai held the mountain over the Israelites and said, 'If ye take the Torah, well and good. If not, I shall crush ye beneath the mountain.'" Yet in the very next midrash, ibid. 8:3, we are told that at Sinai, because of God's especial love for Israel, He commanded the angel of death that over the Israelites he would have no power. God Himself would take them from this world when each died.

One has but to attend a synagogue service to perceive the loving intimacy of God and Israel, the way in which not only Israel honors God but God Israel. In ibid. 2:21 it says, "As the gazelle skips over mountains and vales and trees, so God visits one house of worship to a house of study; one after another. He does this to bless Israel. And all this is due to the merit of Abraham. For in Gen. 18:1 it says that God appeared to him sitting by the terebinths of Mamre. Abraham wanted to get up but God said, 'Remain seated.' You shall serve as a model to your progeny, for you sit and I stand. When thy descendants will enter a synagogue and houses of study and read the

**שְׁמָע**, whilst they sit My Shechina shall stand by them.' Thus says Ps. 82:1, 'God standeth in the congregations of the Lord.'" This is somewhat similar to Shir r. 7:13 where we are told that God visits the synagogues and houses of study to see if Israel prays and studies properly. In line with this ibid. 8:15 tells us that "when Jews go to synagogue and read the Shema sincerely--together--with uniform piety and as brethren, God says, 'I and My heavenly host "hearken for thy voice"' (Cant. 8:13) but when the Shema is not read thus but with insincerity and without uniformity and piety and a lack of brotherly love, then the Holy Spirit says, 'Flee, my beloved, and be thou like a gazelle.'" (Cant. 8:14).



There is nothing in the world which is free from God's rule. In *ibid.* 1:45 Rabbi Papis says that "He alone judges all who come into the world and none can withstand His decrees." There are many decrees of God that man cannot understand but to which he must submit in utter faith that God does for the best. For example, there is the apparent prosperity of the wicked and the punishment of the righteous. Concerning this R. Eliezer says in *ibid.* 2:35, "This is like a house-owner who had two oxen--one strong, the other weak. Upon which one did he lay the heavier yoke? Upon the one who is strong. Even so God doesn't try the wicked because they couldn't stand up under the trial. Of the wicked, Isa. 57:20 says, 'But the wicked are like the troubled sea; for it cannot rest and its waters cast up mire and dirt.' Whom does God try? The righteous. As Ps. 11:5 says, 'The Lord trieth the righteous.' As Gen. 22:1 says, 'And it came to pass after these things that God did prove Abraham.' And as Gen. 39:7 says, 'And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph.' R. Jose bar Chanin said, 'The flax-man doesn't beat much on brittle flax. Why? Because it breaks. When the flax is good then he beats it because thus it becomes even better. Even so the wicked are not tried because they succumb, but the righteous are tried, as it says in Ps. 11:5, 'God trieth the righteous.' R. Yochanan said, 'When the potter wants to test his vessels he doesn't test the weak ones because no sooner does he strike them than they break. He tests sturdy vessels because no matter how many times they are struck they do not break. This is why the wicked are not tried but the righteous are.'"

But God does not desire even the death of the wicked. Commenting on Cant. 5:16, "His mouth is most sweet", the rabbis in *Shir r.* 6:1 say, "Is anything more sweet than the words in Amos 5:4, 'Seek Me and live'? Or Ezek. 33:11, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from his way and live'? And Ezek. 18:23, 'Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' saith the Lord God, 'and not rather that



he should turn from his ways and live?' And Ezek. 18:27, 'Again when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed and doeth that which is lawful and right he shall save his soul alive.' Resh Lakish said concerning Ezek. 33:12, 'And as for the wicked, he shall not stumble thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness', that this refers to a man who though in his early days was a sinner is in his latter days altogether righteous. R. Yochanan said, 'And not only is he considered a righteous man but God considers his former sins as good deeds.'" In Shir r. 5:3 we find that "Rabbi Yissa said, 'God says to Israel, "My children, make a little door of repentance even as small as the eye of a needle, and I will make it wide enough for wagons and harness to pass through." Concerning Ps. 46:11, "Let be and know that I am God", R. Tanchuma said it means, "God says, leave your evil deeds and recognize that I am God."

Another decree that baffles man is that of death that comes early to a righteous man. Yet the rabbis held that God knows that which is best for us. In Shir r. 6:6 the early death of the righteous is discussed. The attitude of the rabbis is made clear there in an apt story. Rabbi Akiba and his pupils used to sit and study daily under a fig tree. Each day the owner of the tree used to come and pick figs. They decided to move, for they felt that he resented their presence. The next day when he came and found them gone he sought them out and said, "Masters, why will ye deny me my one pleasure?" "God forbid," they answered. "Wherefore did ye seek another place?" he asked. "We thought you resented our presence," they answered. "God forbid," he said. "I will tell you why I came so early to pick the figs. If I waited till later in the day when the sun shone I would find them with worms." Some days later the students decided to pick some figs later on in the day and found worms in them. They discovered that the owner of the fig-tree was right, for he knew the proper time to pick the figs. Even so God knows at what time to remove the righteous from this

world and He does it.

God never wants to obliterate Israel. He always calls them to account. However, when He punishes or adjures Israel the Gentiles rejoice but their joy is short-lived. Rabbi Samuel in Shir r. 6:2 said, "Three times God reckoned with Israel and the nations rejoiced, but in the end they were shamed: First, when Isaiah said, 1:18, 'Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord.' The nations rejoiced and said, 'How can they argue with their Creator? Who can do this? Now He will blot them out.' God, beholding their joy, turned matters by saying, Isa. 1:18, 'Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool.' The nations said, 'Is this a command to repent or is He showing the right way of life? Surely He is jesting with His people.' Second, in Micah 6:2, 'Hear, O ye mountains, the Lord's controversy--for the Lord hath a controversy with His people and He will plead with Israel.' (Once again the nations rejoiced and exclaimed as noted above.) God seeing their joy changed matters by continuing on to say in Micah 6:3 and 5, 'O, my people, what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against Me. O my people remember now what Balak king of Moab devised--that ye may know the righteous acts of the Lord.' The nations were astounded and said, 'He but jests with His people.' Third, the nations rejoiced when Hosea, 12:3, said, 'The Lord hath also a controversy with Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways.' Then God said (Hosea. 12:4), 'In the womb he took his brother by the heel and by his strength he strove with God.'"

The supreme love of God is Israel. Let us take up at this point the subject of Israel as the rabbis conceived it.

The very existence of the world is due to Israel. This is brought out in Shir r. 2:6, "A king had a garden in which were planted a row of fig trees, a row of vines, a row of pomegranates, and a row of apple trees. He put it in charge of a caretaker and left. After some time the

king returned to see what had happened and found only thorns and thistles. He had these cleared away and at the very bottom, underneath, found a lily. 'For the sake of the lily,' he said, 'the garden shall be kept.' So also was the world created solely for Israel. For twenty-fix generations God observed and found only water. The generations of Enoch, the flood, the Dispersion, were blotted out by water. He was about to destroy the world, as it says, Ps. 29:10, 'God sits at the flood', but He found a lily--Israel--and scented its fragrance. That is when Israel accepted the Ten Commandments And God was overjoyed when Israel said, 'We will do and obey.' 'For this lily,' said God, 'the garden is spared,' that is, for the Torah and its followers the world is spared."

Before the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai the world had been given seven commandments, but since Israel is the beloved of God it was given all of the commandments. "This is comparable to a king who had a barrel of wine. When a visitor came he would offer the visitor a glass-full. And so he would do whenever a visitor came in. But when his son came he gave him the whole barrel." (Shir r. 1:16)

Israel is certain to ultimately triumph over all her enemies and adversaries because of her great love for God. Despite all suffering, Israel never forsakes her love for God. This idea is beautifully illustrated in Shir r. 2:8, "As the rose surrounded by thorns is lashed and torn by them when the north-wind blows but nevertheless still gazes up to heaven, thus Israel though tried and persecuted directs its heart always to its Father in heaven, as it says in Ps. 25:16, 'Mine eyes are constantly toward the Lord.'"

God will hearken to Israel's prayers even as He does to individuals. We find this sentiment expressed in a touching story in Shir r. 1:31, "A couple who had been married twelve years came to Simon ben Yochai for a divorce since the woman was barren. He said to them, 'Even

*Referring to Israel, you should employ a uniform pronoun*

as a feast celebrated your marriage so must you have a feast because of your divorce.' They went home and made a feast. As they were about to lie down, for he had drunk heavily, he said, 'My daughter, if you see anything here in my house that you desire you may take it with you to your father's house.' What did she do? After he fell asleep she beckoned to her servants to place him on a divan and had him carried to her father's house. Upon awakening he asked, 'Where am I?' 'In my father's house,' she answered. 'What am I doing here?' he asked. She answered, 'Did you not tell me before that I might take to my father's house anything I desired, and I desire nothing else in this world but you.' They both went back to Simon ben Yochai and he prayed for them and she conceived. This teaches that just as God visits the barren, so do the righteous help the barren. Now, if a person says to another that she desires nothing more save him and as a consequence is visited by God, how much the more Israel will be visited, who waits all day for God's salvation and desires Him beyond anything else. Therefore it says, Cant. 1:4, 'We will be glad and rejoice in thee.'

Israel's suffering is necessary, for it leads to repentance, says Shir r. 1:21. "As the oil cannot be improved except by pounding the olives, so can Israel only by suffering come to repentance." Although Israel sins the whole year, says ibid. 1:38, and is soiled by these sins, nevertheless it is cleansed from them on Yom Kippur. The sins of Israel, however, are the concern of God and not of anyone else. None may dare to speak ill of Israel on pain of death; not even Moses or Isaiah or Elijah. Shir r. 1:39 tells us that the reason why God decreed that Moses would never enter the Promised Land is because he dared to call God's beloved Israel rebels. Num. 20:21, "Hear now, ye rebels." Isaiah, too, sinned in this regard when he said, Isa. 6:5, "In the midst of a people of unclean lips I sit." God said, "Isaiah, for you to say that you are a man of unclean lips is right. But that you dwell 'in the midst of a people of unclean lips' astonishes Me."



Come and see what is written there (Isa. 6:6): "Then flew unto me one of the Seraphim, with a glowing stone in his hand." Rabbi Samuel divided the word **אבן** "stone" into **פ** **ש** "crush" and **א** **ב** "mouth". "Crush the mouth of him who speaks evil of my children." It is written <sup>that said</sup> of Elijah (I Kings 19:14), "I have been very jealous for the Lord of Hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars--and slain thy prophets with the sword." God said to him, "Why should it concern you? Are not these things mine that they destroy?" Elijah answered (ibid.), "And I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it." Come and see what it says (ibid. v. 6), "And he looked and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on the hot stones." Said R. Samuel, "Why **פ'אבן** ? Because it means

**פ** **ש** "crush" and **א** **ב** "mouth". "Crush the mouth of him (Elijah) who speaks evil of my children." A bit later in this midrash (Shir r. 1:39) we are told that once "R. Abbahu and Resh Lakish were travelling to Caesarea. Abbahu said to Lakish, 'Why should we enter this blasphemous place?' Lakish dismounted, took a handful of sand and thrust it in Abbahu's mouth. 'What is the reason for this?' said Abbahu. Lakish answered, 'Because God does not permit evil to be spoken against Israel.'"

Israel merits the love of God because each moment of its existence is colored by an observance of the laws of God. Commenting on Cant. 1: 15, "Behold thou art fair my love, behold thou art fair. Thine eyes are as doves," the Midrash (Shir r. 1:62) tells us why Israel is fair. "Behold thou art fair in observance of the Mitzvoth--in giving charity, in observance of positive and negative commandments, in the mitzvoth of the tabernacle, in dividing the Terumah and Tithe; in the mitzvoth of the field: Leket, Shik'chah and Peah; the tithe for the poor and the Hefker; in observance of **מִשְׁכָּל** (mixtures); in **שִׁטּוֹת** (sheets) and **תְּרֵמָה** ; in planting; in rejection of fruit of trees of first three years; in the fourth year's fruit of a young tree; in circumcision; in letting the hair grow; in prayer; in the Shema;



with the mezuzoth; with phylacteries; the Succoth; with the Lulab and Esrog; in Repentance; in good deeds. Behold thou art fair in this world and also in the next."

God and Israel are inseparably bound. Cant. 2:16 says, "My beloved is mine and I am His," etc. Shir r. 2:34 elaborates this, describing how Israel interprets its marriage to God. "He is my God, as Exod. 20:2 says, and I am His people, Isa. 51:4. He is my Father, as Isa. 63:16 and Jer. 31:9 say, and I am His son, Exod. 4:22 and Deut. 14:1. He is my Shepherd, Ps. 80:2, and I am His flock, Ezek. 34:31. He is my Guardian, Ps. 121:4 and I am His vineyard, Isa. 5:7. He is my Avenger, Exod. 12:12,29 since He slew the first-born of Egypt and I am the one who arouses Him, for I sacrificed to the gods of Egypt, Exod. 8:22; 12:3. He said to me (Cant. 7:3), 'No mingled wine is wanting.' And I answer, you are <sup>my</sup> good friend. Thy goodness never ceases, Ps. 23:1. R. Judah in the name of R. Ilai said, "He sings of me and I of Him. He praises me and I Him. He calls me, "My sister, my beloved, my dove, my pious," and I say to Him, "This is my beloved, my shepherd." He says to me, "Thou art beautiful, my love" and I respond, "Thou art beautiful my beloved, yea lovable." He says to me (Deut. 33:29), "Happy art thou, O Israel, who is like unto thee?" And I say (Exod. 15:11), "Who is like Thee, O God, amongst the gods?" He says (II Sam. 7:23), "Who is like my people Israel, a people that through God will be helped." And I celebrate daily His Oneness with the words (Deut. 6:4), "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." If I want anything, then I seek it from Him (Exod. 2:23,24). And when He wants anything, then He expects it only from me and through me (Exod. 13:3). When I want anything, then only from Him do I expect it (Exod. 14:10), and when He wants anything, He expects it from me (Exod. 25:2). When I am in need I call only for His help (Jud. 4:3). When God wants anything, He seeks it from me, as it says in Exod. 25:8, "Make Me a sanctuary."

Even when the Israelites pray, no matter where they may be, all of their prayer is directed to one spot, to the Holy Hill in Jerusalem. The Midrash (Shir r. 4:11) tells us that Jews outside of Palestine turn, when praying, to Palestine, as it says in I Kings 8:48, those in Palestine turn to Jerusalem. Those in Jerusalem towards the Temple, *ibid.* v. 42. Those in the Temple gaze upwards, *ibid.*, v. 38. Consequently, those Jews who live in the North turn South when they pray; and those in the South turn North. Those in the East turn West; and those in the West turn East. Thus the prayers of all Jews are directed to the same spot. This took place during the existence of the Temple. How do we know that this should continue after its destruction? In the reading of the Shema it says, "Boneh Yerusholayim", and likewise in the Tefillah and also in the Blessing after Meals it says God will rebuild Jerusalem and cause His Shechinah to dwell there. In I Kings 9:3 God says, "Mine eye and heart will for all time be there." Hosea 5:15 says, "I go and return again to my place."

With the destruction of the Temple and the growth of the Diaspora there were many things Israel could not observe, but it substituted other things, for Israel loves to obey the behests of God. Cant. 5:2 says, "I sleep but my heart waketh", etc. And the rabbis in the Midrash (Shir r. 5:2) say, "Israel said to God, 'Oh God! 'I sleep' concerning the commandments, 'but my heart waketh' for good deeds. 'I sleep', I speak not of charity, 'but my heart waketh' to do it. 'I sleep', concerning the sacrifices, 'but my heart waketh' in saying the Shema and Tefillah. 'I sleep' concerning the Temple, 'but my heart waketh' to the synagogue and the house of study. 'I sleep', I do not consider the end (of my trials), 'but my heart waketh', yearning for redemption. 'I sleep' concerning the redemption, but the heart of God is alert to redeem me.' R. Chiya said, 'God is called heart of Israel in Ps. 73:26.'"

The Israelites are constantly being tempted to forsake their

their God, but they resist the arguments of the idolators which are foolishness. Shir r. 8:14 tells us that the attempt to convert the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar is comparable to this story. "A king, angry with his son, handed him over to his servant. The servant beat him with a stick saying, 'Don't obey your father.' 'You fool,' the son said, 'My father gave me to you because I didn't obey him, and you say, "Don't obey your father."' Thus it was when the Temple was destroyed and the Jews were carried off to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Cease from obeying the Torah of your God. Worship these idols I erected,' as Dan. 3:15 says. The Israelites answered, 'You fool, the reason why we were expelled is because we practiced idolatry (Ezek. 23:14) and now you tell us to worship the idols you made. Woe to you.'"

The indomitable resistance of Israel to the persecution inflicted upon them by other nations is comparable, say the rabbis, to the strength of wild animals. However, towards God Israel is as amicable as a dove. Commenting on Cant. 2:14, "O my dove thou art in the clefts of the rock", the Midrash (Shir r. 2:30) says, "Who is the dove? Said R. Yochanan, God calls Israel thus (Hos. 7:11), 'And Ephraim is become like a silly dove.' Unto Me, says God, Israel seems like a dove, whereas to other peoples they appear like wild animals. In Gen. 49:9, 'Judah is a lion', ibid. v. 21, 'Naphtali a hind let loose. Benjamin a marauding wolf.' This is so because the nations battle with Israel crying out, 'Of what avail to you is the Sabbath and circumcision?' And God strengthens Israel and makes them like wild animals before the peoples in order to subdue them before Israel and God. But unto God Israel is like a dove and obedient, as it says in Exod. 4:31, 'And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had remembered the children of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped.'"

We have already stated that Israel is God's most beloved of all His creations. The rabbis say that not only is Israel most beloved but all

who see the Israelites can recognize them as such. This is brought out in Shir r. 6:17. "As one cannot get by the tax-collector with nuts since they are heard and recognized, so an Israelite cannot come to a place and say, 'I am not a Jew.' Why? Because he is recognized as such. So says Isa. 61:9, 'Whosoever sees the Israelites will recognize them that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed.'"

This same Midrash contributes the idea of the oneness of Israel. Anything that happens to one Jew affects the whole house of Israel. "As when one takes a nut from a heap all the rest roll down, so all Israel suffers when one of it suffers, as it is said in Num. 16:22, 'And they fell upon their faces and said, 'O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin and wilt Thou be wroth with all the congregation?'"

Although this concludes the chapter on God and Israel, we shall find in the following chapters that the rabbis in all of their other interpretations are dominated by their exalted view of the marriage of Israel to God. All that happens to Israel is because of God's love for Israel. Even the trials and sufferings are only sent in order to increase the mighty love between God and Israel. When one begins to understand how lofty was this concept of love for God in the hearts of the rabbis, one can understand the glory of Israel's martyrdom for His sake.



## CHAPTER II

THE EXODUS

The miracle of the Exodus from Egypt could not help but capture the imaginations of the rabbis. They were thrilled by its tremendous proportions. They were inflamed by the account of Israel's victory over the Egyptians at the Red Sea. All sorts of opinions were advanced for the reason of the Exodus occurring when it did. Some ventured to explain how it was that the expert horsemen of Egypt could not restrain their mounts from dashing into the sea. Others asked and answered the question: Why did God bring them to the Red Sea? Various opinions were offered as to why Israel merited the redemption from Egypt. On that point we have two conflicting views. The first is expressed as following in Shir r. 2:6, "As difficult as plucking a rose from amongst thorns, so difficult was it for God to bring about Israel's exodus from Egypt, as it says in Deut. 4:34, 'Or hath God assayed to go and take Him a nation from the midst of another nation?'" R. Joshua in the name of R. Chanan calls attention to the fact that Scripture says **אֵל מִקְרָא** and explains that even as the Egyptians, Israel was uncircumcised, grew plants for idolatry and wore mixed cloth. For these things God did not bring about the final redemption for Israel. R. Samuel said that if God had not bound Himself by an oath (to Abraham) then Israel would never have been freed. As proof of this he cites Exod. 6:6, "Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the Lord God and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians", etc. In this sentence **כִּי** is used and whenever this word **כִּי** is employed it is to signify that an oath has been made. Thus it is in I Sam. 3:14, "And therefore I have sworn to the House of Eli."

The second view as to why Israel merited the exodus from Egypt is much more in keeping with the general tone of the Midrash to Canticles. We find it in Shir r. 4:24 where it states the following: "R. Huna said in the name of Bar Kappara: Because of four virtues were the Israelites



redeemed from Egypt. First, they did not change their names. Second, they did not change their language. Third, they did not slander. Fourth, they committed no sexual sins. They did not change their names for even as when they entered Egypt they were Reuben, Simon, etc., so when they left their names were the same. Reuben wasn't called Rufus; Simon not Julian; Joseph not Justus; and Benjamin not Alexander.

"They did not change their language, for Gen. 14:13 says, 'And there came one that had escaped and told Abraham the Hebrew,' and even so Exod. 5:3 says, 'The God of the Hebrews hath met with us.' Gen. 45:12 says, 'that it is my mouth that speaks unto you.' This means in the holy tongue.

"They did not slander. This is proved from Exod. 11:2 where it says, 'Tell the people that they ask every man of his neighbor.' Although this took place for twelve months, no one slandered the other.

"They committed no sexual sins. This is proved from Num. 25:6, 'And behold one of the children of Israel came, etc.' to make known the glory of Israel that only one case does Scripture expose to be a sexual sin."

The Redemption from Egypt, according to the rabbis, illustrates God's mercy and exceeding lovingkindness. He brought about the Exodus almost two hundred years before He had originally planned to do it. This we learn from Shir r. 2:19, where it says, commenting on Cant. 2:8, "Hark! my beloved! behold he cometh, leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills." According to R. Judah, the first part of the verse refers to Moses. When he told the Israelites, "In this month will ye be freed", they said to him, "Moses, ought we to be freed? Did not God tell Abraham (Gen. 15:13), 'And they shall afflict them four hundred years'? We have served only two hundred and ten years." Moses replied, "If God sees fit to redeem you, then He doesn't follow your reckoning. But 'leaping upon the mountains.' Here is not meant mountains and hills but the Lord skips over human speculations and calculations in ends and epochs. I tell you that in this month ye shall be

released." As in Exod. 12:2, "This month shall be unto you the first month."

Next to the miracle of the Exodus is that which occurred at the Red Sea. What the rabbis thought of this is illustrated in Shir r. 2:30 where we find the following: "R. Ishmael taught: When the Israelites left Egypt, to what might they be compared? To a dove who escaped from a hawk and entered a cave in which she found a serpent's nest. She couldn't proceed because serpents were still there. She couldn't retreat because the hawks were outside. What did she do? She began to chatter and beat with her wings till the owner of the dove-cote heard and came and rescued her. So it was when Israel approached the Red Sea. They couldn't proceed because the Sea hadn't split yet. They couldn't retreat since Pharaoh was there. What did they do? They (Exod. 14:10,30) feared greatly and cried out to God and they were saved."

In this same Midrash the episode at the Red Sea is compared to a king who had an only daughter whom he longed to hear speak to him. He accomplished this by arranging to have some of his men dress like bandits and fall upon him and his daughter, while they were out riding. When this happened the king's daughter cried out, "Father, Father, save me." Thereupon he said to her, "Had I not arranged this thing you would never have cried out to me, 'Father, save me.'" Thus it was with the Israelites. We learn from Exod. 2:23,24 that God had hearkened to the groans and prayers of Israel and brought them out of Egypt. But He longed to hear their voices cry out to Him once more, but they did not. So what did He do? He hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 14:8,10) so that he pursued them and when he drew nigh the Israelites cried out unto God, "If I hand't done this," said God, "then I wouldn't have heard your voice." Once again we see from the above how much God loves Israel. He resorts to the most staggering miracles only for the reason that He longs to hear Israel's voice.

Both poetry and humor mingle in the rabbinical explanation

in Shir r. 1:50 as to why the expert Egyptian horsemen could not restrain their mounts. There we are informed that the horses of the Egyptians were all males and to them the Israelites were made to appear like mares, whereupon the male horses dashed right into the sea and were drowned together with their riders. R. Simon objected to this and said, "God forbid, that Israel be likened to mares. It was the white caps of the waves that appeared like mares to the male horses of the Egyptians and caused them to rush in. The Egyptian said to his horse, 'Yesterday I had to pull you down to the Nile and you wouldn't come after me. Today you drown me in the sea.'"

Indeed, many were the wonders performed by the Eternal One for His beloved Israel when He took them out of Egypt. But their redemption was for a purpose. They were to receive the Torah.

## CHAPTER III

TORAH

By Torah, the rabbis meant the entire accumulative knowledge of Judaism. It is only a few times in our Midrash that the word Torah is conceived of in the restricted sense of being the five books of Moses, or the Ten Commandments. Usually it is used in the aforementioned broad sense of being everything that is Judaism.

Two thousand years before the world was created, the Torah was created by God (Shir r. 5:7). No Jew can truly live the proper life without Torah. Not only does the Torah help in this life but also in the world to come. Ibid. 1:9 tells us "If thou wilt dig for Torah as for secret treasures God's reward will come. If a man drops a sela in his house he lights all sorts of lights in order to find it. This sela helps only for the life in this world. The words of the Torah, then, which are so easily accessible and provide for the world to come as well as for this world, how much the more should man dig after them." In Torah as wisdom is everything contained. The words of the Torah are like weapons to the soldier. They guard him for all his needs. Torah is like the two-edged sword that attacks both sides--this world and the world to come (ibid. 1:16).

The all-embracing character of Torah, as the rabbis conceived it, is brilliantly expressed in ibid. 1:19 which we will now quote: "The words of the Torah are compared to water, wine, oil, honey and milk. From whence do we know it is like water? From Isa. 55:1, 'Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye for water.' Even as water is found all over the earth, so does Torah cover the water. As water means life for the earth, so does the Torah. As water makes a mighty sound, so does the Torah. As water refreshes the soul, so does the Torah. As water purifies man, so does the Torah. As water cleanses the body, so does the Torah. As water covers the water's uncleanness, so does the Torah cover the nakedness of Israel.



As water descends in droplets at first and then forms streams, so is it with learning Torah, for a man first learn two Halachoth and then another two and so on until he is greatly learned. As water does not taste well unless one is thirsty, so it is with the Torah, for unless one does not weary himself in studying it he does not get the taste of it. As water flows to a lower level, so does Torah bring the conceited one down to a modest level. As water cannot remain in a silver or gold vessel but in a clay one, so the Torah abides not in a man who is proud but in him who is lowly as a clay vessel. As for water, a great man is not ashamed to ask a lesser one to give him a drink, so with the Torah a great student is not ashamed to ask anyone for the slightest information. As in water a man will drown unless he swims so with the Torah a man will be swallowed up unless he can learn and teach it.

"How is Torah like wine? As wine is praised while it is in the jug, so while Torah is in a man he is praised. As wine is recognized in a person, so is Torah and all point at him calling him a learned student. When water does not rejoice the heart and wine does, we liken Torah to wine since it rejoices the heart. Even as wine may be bad for the head and body, so also at times is the Torah.

"How is Torah like oil? As oil brightens the appearance of the head and body so do the words of the Torah. As oil is bitter at first and sweet when finally made, so is the study of Torah.

"How is Torah like honey and milk? As they are sweet, so are the words of the Torah. As there are wax cells (unenjoyable parts) in the honey, so you might think this is the case with Torah. As milk is clean, so is the Torah. As milk is tasteless, so also is it possible for the Torah to be. As milk and honey mixed may be imbibed without injury, so may the words of the Torah be digested."

The Torah is something that is inexhaustible. One can never learn all of it. R. Eliezer said, "If all the seas were ink and all reeds



were pens and the heaven and earth were parchment and all the people were scribes, they still wouldn't be able to write all the Torah I have learned. And what wisdom I skimmed of the Torah was no more than as much as one takes up when dipping the point of the painting staff into the paint bottle" (Shir r. 1:20).

The Torah is something that is priceless. No worldly goods can compare with its value. We learn in ibid. 8:7, "Rabbi Yochanan walking with one of his disciples from Tiberias to Sepphoris passed a field and a vine and olive orchard which he said he had sold some time ago in order to study Torah. His disciple couldn't refrain from weeping. 'Why do you cry?' asked Yochanan of him. He answered, 'I cry because you have nothing for your old age.' Said Yochanan, 'Do you hold so lightly, my boy, that which I have done? I have exchanged something created in six days, as it says in Exod. 20:11, "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth", for the Torah created in forty days, as it says in Exod. 34:28, "And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten words", and as it is likewise stated in Deut. 9:9.' When R. Yochanan died his contemporaries said of him (Cant. 8:7), 'If a man would give all the substance of his house for love (as Yochanan loved the Torah), he would be utterly contemned.'"

Shir r. 1:50 tells us that if the Israelites at Mt. Sinai had not accepted the Torah, which they did when they said, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do and obey" (Exod. 24:3), then the world would have returned to chaos. And it was at Sinai, previous to the giving of the Torah, that the Israelites were asked to give a surety for observance of the Torah. (Shir r. 1:24) Only when they offered their children as surety did God accept it saying, "These are good sureties and on their account I will give you the Torah." The rabbis continue at this point saying, "If the children fail to know the Torah, God will surely punish. Therefore a man should teach his

children Torah."

The Torah requires more strength to master it than the most difficult physical labor. Men of Torah are as strong as the sapphires of which Cant. 5:14 speaks, "Overlaid with sapphires". Commenting on this point, the rabbis in Shir r. 5:13 tell the story of a man so strong that he could carry forty baskets filled to the top with flour. "Why don't you, with your strength, study Torah?" he was urged. He started to study and his strength failed, so that from being able to carry forty baskets he fell to thirty and to ten, and finally couldn't even carry one. Not only this but when he finished the books he couldn't even carry his thin little child. Upon him it was fulfilled what Cant. 5:14 says, "Overlaid with sapphires". The Torah indeed demands great fortitude and strength, if it is to be mastered.

The rabbis were once debating as to which was more important, the Torah or the Deed. R. Tarphon said the Deed was more important. R. Akiba said the Torah was more important. They finally came to the conclusion that Torah was more importance since it leads to Deed. (Shir r. 2:32)

The Torah leads to a life of righteous deeds. If a man forsakes the Torah he falls into a life of sin. The rabbis in ibid. 3:14 tell us that before a man sins, when he fulfills the behests of the Torah, others stand in fear of him. When he sins, he fears others. Rabbi said, "Before Adam sinned he listened to God's voice while standing and did not fear it. After he sinned he feared it and concealed himself, as it says in Gen. 3:10." R. Ibo said that at that moment Adam's stature was cut down one hundred ells. Before he sinned, said R. Levi, Adam listened very calmly to God's voice, but after he sinned he listened with disquietude. Before the Israelites sinned they gazed undaunted upon the hosts above and beneath. After they sinned they couldn't even look on the face of Moses, as it says in Exod. 34:30. Before David sinned with Bath Sheba he used to say (Ps. 27:1), "The Lord is my light and my shield, whom shall I fear?" Afterwards he said

(II Sam. 17:2), "I (Achitophal) came to him (David) and he was weary and slept." Before Solomon sinned he summoned male and female singers, as it says in Koh. 2:8. After he sinned he had to guard himself with sixty warriors for fear of evil spirits, as Cant. 3:7 says, "Behold it is the litter of Solomon: three score mighty men are about it of the mighty men of Israel."

Mighty are the words of the Torah to fight against sin in the world (Shir r. 3:M). And yet in themselves the words are as tender as a lily. But even so they are the most powerful things, for they restrain men from committing evil (ibid. 7:7).

According to R. Eleazar ben Simon in ibid. 4:22 commenting on Cant. 4:11, "Thy lips, O my bride, drop honey; honey and milk are under thy tongue, and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon", he said that whoever discourses on the Torah, unless his words come to the listener like fine flour and as pleasant as honey, had better not speak. Resh Lakish in ~~Shiq.~~ 1:52 offers a criticism and advice upon the type of men who attempt to discourse on the Torah. He says, "Some know how to string but <sup>not</sup> how to bore pearls, that is, some know how to bring on parallels without having the ability to enter into the depth of a subject. Some know how to bore pearls but not how to string them, therefore I strung and bored."

The students of the Torah are like the tents of Kedar mentioned in Cant. 1:5, which externally look poor but inside there are precious stones. So the students of the Torah, though in this world they seem poor externally, yet within them there is the vast richness of Torah, ~~Shiq.~~ r. 1:38. R. Judah in ibid. 5:9 says that Cant. 5:11 "black as a raven" refers to the students of the Torah who though in this world are ugly looking and black will in the world to come flash like lightning, as Neh. 2:5 says.

The knowledge of Torah which insures a man the righteous life is indeed the greatest and most precious of all possessions. Our Midrash is replete with the names of those illustrious men and women whose lives were

typical of the lover of Torah. We turn next to a study of these founders and heroes of Israel.

The first of these is the story of the founding of the Jewish nation. This story is told in the Bible, and is the basis of the Jewish faith. It is the story of the people of Israel, who were chosen by God to be His people, and who were to be a blessing to the world. The story is told in the Bible, and is the basis of the Jewish faith. It is the story of the people of Israel, who were chosen by God to be His people, and who were to be a blessing to the world.

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## CHAPTER IV

ISRAEL'S FOUNDERS AND LEADERS

The Shir ha-Shirim being interpreted as a dialogue between the lover--God--and the beloved--Israel, lent itself also to a type of interpretation that emphasized the lives of those Jews who particularly loved God and were loved by Him. The following names are those which appear most often in our Midrash and which we shall present in the light of the rabbinical opinion of them.

R. Yochanan interpreted Cant. 1:3, "Thine ointments have a goodly fragrance. Thy name is as ointment poured forth. Therefore do the maidens love thee" with reference to Abraham. He said that when God told Abraham to leave his father's house, to what ought it be compared? To a flask of precious perfume hidden in a nook. A man came who discovered it and made its fragrance known all over. Similarly God told Abraham, since you have so many good deeds to your credit move about the world and I shall make thee great (Shir r. 1:22).

R. Azariah said that a reference to Abraham is given in Cant. 1:13, "My beloved is unto me as a bag of myrrh". Just as myrrh is the best of the perfumes so Abraham was the best and the first of all the righteous. Just as myrrh doesn't give off its incense except through fire so Abraham's deeds were unknown until he was cast into the fiery furnace. Just as with myrrh whoever plucks it gets his hand sticky (bitter) so did Abraham afflict and plague himself with suffering (Shir r. 1:58; 3:5).

Abraham, according to Scripture, is supposed to have made souls in Haren. Of course this is an impossibility, say the rabbis in ibid. 1:22, but the Bible in this case refers to the converts Abraham made there. It was as if he had given them their souls.

Commenting on Cant. 8:9, "If she be a wall we will build upon her a turret of silver", etc., the rabbis in Shir r. 8:9 say that this refers

to the fact that whenever Abraham spoke the Lord held his words up like a firm wall.

Isaac is meant by Cant. 1:14, "My beloved is unto me like a cluster of henna", for Isaac was tied to the altar like a cluster (Shir r. 1:59). Or since he was brought like a handful of frankincense to the altar Cant. 3:6 refers to Isaac when it says "frankincense" (Shir r. 3:5).

Commenting on the last part of verse 11 of Cant. 4, "And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon", the rabbis in Shir r. 4:23 explain as follows: In Gen. 27:27 Jacob approached Isaac his father who smelt his garments and blessed him and said, "Behold the odor of my son's garments is like that of the fields which God hath blessed." R. Yochanan said that nothing smells worse than goat's hair and yet it is said Isaac smelt his garment and thought the odor was good? He received this answer: that when Jacob came in, with him came the odor of the Garden of Eden. When Esau came in the odor of Gehenim was with him, as Prov. 11:18 says, "With wickedness is evil". This agrees with what Isaac said to Esau Gen. 27:33 *ki'ar* "Who are you?" that is, *ki'ar* 'N "Who was burned, baked in this oven, in Hell?" The Holy Spirit answered, "The hunter."

The blessings which Jacob received from his father are the very source of the world, says Shir r. 1:59. Even the stratagem that Jacob played upon his father to procure his blessing was beloved by God (ibid. 2:13).

Ibid. 3:5 tells us that from Jacob came the Priesthood, Levites and royalty. Isaac procured his possession from his father Abraham, but Jacob's possessions came from him with whom he wrestled (Gen. 32:25-34). In this same midrash R. Yudan says that the business success of the Israelites is due to the wrestle of Jacob. The accomplishments of Israel in battle and also in Torah are due to Jacob's wrestling with the angel.

Shir. 3:6 declares that the guardian angel of Esau could not defeat Jacob because Jacob possessed five merits, that is, his own, his

father's, mother's, grandfather's, and grandmother's. Another opinion as to why Jacob conquered is that the angel saw the Shechina above Jacob and so he gave up.

Through the virtue of Jacob the Israelites crossed the Jordan (ibid. 4:6).

Commenting on Cant. 4:12, "A garden shut up is my sister, my bride; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed", the rabbis say this refers to the sex purity of Sarah. It was because of Sarah's sex purity that Israel was redeemed from Egypt (Shir r. 4:24).

Commenting on Cant. 2:2, "As a lily among thorns so is my love among the daughters", the rabbis in Shir r. 2:5 say this refers to Rebekah who though coming from an evil group was virtuous. She is likened to "a lily among thorns".

In ibid. 1:1 there is a laudation of Joseph. The rabbis comment there on Prov. 22:29, "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men." The rabbis say that Joseph is referred to as the man who is diligent in his occupation and as a result will stand before kings. When all Egypt was out celebrating the festival of the Nile, Joseph was working on the accounts of his master. Further, said R. Pinchas, the reward of such diligence is freedom to the slave; as it happened with Joseph. He stood before King Pharaoh and no longer stood before "the mean man", Potiphar.

Others say in Shir r. 1:2 that this refers to Moses who was diligent in his work on the tabernacle. He stood before Pharaoh and needed no longer to stand before "the mean man", Jethro. R. Nechanya said, not Pharaoh, but he stood before God and it was Pharaoh who was "the mean man".

Moses is referred to in Cant. 1:8, "If thou knowest not, O thou fairest among women", for he was the fairest and highest of the prophets. R. Jose said that the reason why prophets are compared to women is because

just as a wife has no fear to tell her husband of the needs of her house, so the prophets fear not to tell God of Israel's needs (Shir r. 1:44).

Moses showed his devotion to the more spiritual duties at the time when the Israelites left Egypt. While the rest of Israel were engaged in collecting the spoil from Egypt, Moses was fulfilling the behest of Joseph to take up his bones (ibid.).

Commenting on Cant. 1:4, "Draw me, we will run after thee", the rabbis say that this has reference to Moses. When Moses was about to lead Israel out of Egypt the people asked him where he would take them. He gave them the arduous itinerary ending up with Sinai. Whereupon they said, "So long as you will go with us we will follow after thee" (Shir r. 1:27).

We learn from ibid. 1:51 that Moses and Aaron each rejoiced in one another. Neither thought himself the other's superior, although God had said that Moses should be the superior.

Commenting on Cant. 4:5, "Thy two breasts are like two fawns that are twins of a gazelle which feed among the lilies", the rabbis in Shir r. 4:12 say that "Thy two breasts" refers to Moses and Aaron. As breasts are the adornment and beauty of woman, so were Moses and Aaron to Israel. As breasts are full of milk so Moses and Aaron filled Israel with Torah. As the breasts feed the children what the mother eats, so Moses taught Aaron all that he learned, as it says in Exod. 4:28. As breasts are of the same size, so Moses and Aaron were equal, as it says in Exod. 6:26. "Thank God," said Chanina bar Papa, "that these brothers were created solely for Israel's glory."

In Shir r. 4:14 the rabbis laud Joshua for having circumcised the men and declare that in remembrance of this God changes His rigorous decrees to acts of mercy.

The rabbis in ibid. 4:8 say that Cant. 4:4 refers to the Priests who sang God's praises each day. On the first week-day they sang



Ps. 24; on the second Ps. 48; the third Ps. 82; the fourth Ps. 94; the fifth Ps. 81; the sixth Ps. 93; and on Sabbath Ps. 92.

Concerning David, the rabbis say that because his voice was most beautiful God attributed the entire book of Psalms to him although in reality it was written by ten men; like a king before whom men sang his praises and the king said, "I shall hear only one of you, since his voice is most beautiful" (Shir r. 4:3).

In ibid. 1:5-8 we have some very interesting interpretations of the rabbis concerning Solomon. We present here the essence of the above-mentioned Midrashim. Commenting on Prov. 22:29, we are told that it refers to Solomon son of David who was diligent in building the Temple. He built it in seven years whereas his own palace took thirteen years to construct. The former he worked on diligently, but as to the latter he was lazy (Shir. R. 1:5).

One of the rabbis gives us a sermon on the great similarity between the great son, Solomon, and the great father, David. He begins with Ps. 45:17, "Instead of the fathers shall be the sons." A righteous man gives birth to a righteous son. There is the well known **שֶׁנ**, "A scion which confirms the reputation of the fig tree, i.e., a good son of a good father." The wicked begets a wicked one, as it says in Num. 32:14, "And behold ye are risen up in your fathers' stead a brood of sinful men." This is expressed in a **שֶׁנ**. Wickedness comes from before the wicked. And to use a well-known metaphor, "What does the beetle beget? Insects worse than itself."

There are times when a righteous one begets a wicked one, as it says in Job 31:40, "Let thistles grow instead of wheat." This too is expressed in a **שֶׁנ**, "A vine may grow sprouts not like itself."

Again there are times when a wicked one begets a righteous one, as it says in Isa. 55:13, "Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress." And this is likewise expressed in a **שֶׁנ**. "From a thornbush comes forth the rose."

Now Solomon the king was the son of a king; a wise man the son of a wise man; righteous the son of a righteous one; of noble descent and the son of one of noble descent. Whatever is found written concerning David is found concerning Solomon. David ruled forty years, and so did Solomon. David was King of Israel and Judah, and so was Solomon. David built the lower floor and Solomon the upper. It is said of both David and Solomon that they ruled the earth. David wrote books and so did Solomon. David produces songs and so did Solomon. Both of them said "Vanities". Both of them produced epigrams and proverbs and gloried with the use of the word *gl.* Both of them built altars and brought sacrifices and lifted up the ark (Shir r. 1:6).

In ibid. 1:8 we are told that until Solomon came the Torah was not understood. He with his wisdom made the Torah dear to all. On the basis of this the rabbis say that one should not hold the *Sen* in contempt since only through it is the Torah understood. He who makes the Torah known to many has the Holy Spirit rest in him as it did in Solomon who wrote Proverbs, Koheleth and Canticles (ibid. 1:8).

The interpretation of Canticles by the rabbis often makes much of the Sanhedrin. Commenting on Cant. 1:10, "Thy neck with beads", the rabbis say that this refers to the seventy of the Sanhedrin who were strung behind Moses and Aaron like a string of pearls (Shir r. 1:52). And Cant. 1:15, "Thine eyes are as doves", is also interpreted as meaning the Sanhedrin, who were to the congregation of Israel what eyes are to the body. Just as the 248 parts of the human body all move and go after the eyes, so Israel cannot do anything except after the dictates of the Sanhedrin (Shir r. 1:63). Likewise Cant. 7:3, "Thy navel is like a round goblet" is thus interpreted in Shir r. 7:6: that the "navel" means the Sanhedrin. Just as the child in the womb is nourished solely through the navel so the Israelites are dependent for their lives on the Sanhedrin.

Cant. 3:8, "Every man hath his sword upon his thigh", is thus interpreted in Shir r. 3:13 by R. Meier: that the Sanhedrin perfected the Halacha so that it became sharp as a sword in order that no question confronting it would be answered equivocally.

Cant. 4:1, "Thy hair is as a flock of goats that trail down from Mt. Gilead", is interpreted thus by the rabbis in Shir r. 4:3: Just as the locks of hair of a bride are a source of good to her, so the great Sanhedrin that sat behind the Holy Temple were a profit to it.

No greater compliment is paid to these great ones of Israel than what is said by the rabbis in Shir r. 1:34, where we are told that the ancestors were sincere in everything they did.

## CHAPTER V

THE GENTILES

We turn now to the subject of the Gentiles, of the other nations, as the rabbis reveal their ideas of this subject in our Midrash. We shall find that they spare no words in condemning other peoples. They predict the most terrible punishment for them in the world to come. Their idolatry is abhorred and despised. Their apparent well-being is solely a temporary state before utter destruction. The primary distinction between Israel and other nations is that Israel has accepted the Torah and found it sweet, whereas the Gentiles have rejected it, for to them it is as bitter as wormwood (Shir r. 2:11). This idea of the rejection of the Torah by the Gentiles is likewise found in ibid. 2:10 where in commenting on Cant. 2:3, "As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons", we learn the following: Just as everyone flees from the apple tree during a torrid spell since it affords no shade, so the other peoples sought to avoid coming under the shadow of God at Mt. Sinai. But Israel said (Cant. 2:3), "Under its shadow I delighted to sit and its fruit was sweet to my taste." That is, only I, Israel, found joy in Him, but the other peoples did not.

The other nations always taunted Israel by saying, "What is your God more than our God?" (Shir r. 5:5) They pointed at Israel's suffering and persecutions and laughed at them for their belief. A most clever story illustrates the answer that the rabbis gave to such mockery. A certain woman had a maidservant who was a negress. This negress one day went down to a well to fetch water with a companion. She said to her friend, "Tomorrow my master divorces his wife and will take me to wife." Her friend asked, "Why is he divorcing her?" The negress answered, "Because he discovered that her hands were black." Her friend then said, "What a fool you are! Let your ears hear what your mouth speaks! If in the case of his wife, who



is particularly dear to him, you say he will divorce her because her hands were black for but an hour, you who are completely and naturally born black for all your life, how much the more will he reject you." So Israel says when the nations point to her and noting her misfortune exclaim, "The glory of this people has departed!" Israel answers, "If we, who have sinned just this time are considered so guilty and punished, how much the more severe is your case. Our case is comparable to that of the son of a king who went out into the wilderness where the sun bronzed his face. When he came back to the city he washed himself and was white again. Similarly are we tanned by the sun of idolatry. But ye are tanned even in your mother's womb. Even in the womb you worship idols!" How is this so? When the woman is pregnant she comes to the idol-temple and bows down, she and her unborn child (Shir r. 1:41).

The Gentiles are not even regarded by God. He pays no attention to them, and it is of the Gentiles that Isa. 40:17 speaks, "All the nations are as nothing before Him; they are accounted by Him as things of nought and vanity." It is against the Gentiles and not Israel that Isaiah 40:24 speaks, "Scarce are they planted, scarce are they sown, scarce hath their stock taken root in the earth, when He bloweth upon them, they wither, and the whirlwind taketh them away as stubble." However, for Israel there is planting and reaping. For Israel there will be great rejoicing, as it says in Jer. 32:41, Amos 9:15, Hos. 2:25, Isa. 27:6 (Shir r. 7:7). In this same Midrash the following clever parable is presented which makes clear the future glory of Israel and the destruction of the idolators. The straw, chaff and stubble were once arguing in this manner: Each said, "For my sake this field was sown." The wheat said, "Wait till you come to the threshing-floor and then you will find out which of you is right." When they came there the master put them through a sieve. He threw the chaff to the wind, the straw on the floor, and burned the stubble, but he kissed the wheat and

kept it, as Mal. 3:19 says, "For behold the day cometh. It burneth as a furnace; and all the proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall set them ablaze, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch." The nations of the world, each of them proclaims that for its sake the world was created. But Israel, like the wheat, says to them that on the Judgment Day they will come to know that it is for Israel's sake that the world was made.

Commenting on Cant. 8:8, "We have a little sister", the rabbis say in Shir r. 8:8 that this refers to Israel. In time to come the Gentiles will say to God, "Israel sins like all others. Why doesn't it too go to Gehinom?" God answers, "Because to Me she is like a little sister. As one overlooks the sins of a child because it is a child even so I overlook the sins of Israel." The sins of all the year are cleansed on the Day of Atonement, as Lev. 16:30 says, "For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you; from all your sins shall ye be clean before the Lord."

The rabbis, we realize from the above, were thoroughly convinced that the suffering inflicted upon Israel by the other nations was only a temporary thing, even as the power and prosperity of their oppressors was but a temporary state. Ultimately, Israel would be victorious. At a future date the Gentiles will be burned like thorns are burned that surround the rose (Shir r. 2:8).

## CHAPTER VI

THE MESSIANIC ERA

Basing our conclusions on the rabbinical interpretation of Canticles, it is correct to say that the rabbis firmly believed in the coming of a Messiah, in a final Redeemer. Not only did they whole-heartedly believe this but they even described what events would occur just before the coming of the Messiah. Some rabbis went so far as to tell just what Israel should do if the Redeemer was to come. For example, in Shir r. 5:3 we are told by R. Levi that if all Israel would completely repent together for one day they would be freed and the son of David, the Messiah, would immediately come, as it says in Ps. 95:7, "Today if ye would but hearken to His voice."

The reason why the Messiah is so long in coming is because God has to collect His debt of justice. He must punish Israel for its sins (Shir r. 2:18). The Israelites, said R. Chalbo, should observe the following four oaths: Not to rebel against their foreign rulers; not to insist on the Redemption; not to reveal their secrets to other peoples; not to rise up and protest against the exile. For what is the mission of the Messiah but to gather up all Israel from the Diaspora? (ibid.)

Likewise R. Berachya in this same Midrash commenting on Cant. 2:7, "That ye awaken not nor stir up love until it please," says that this refers to God's love for Israel, which Mal. 1:2 declares, "I have loved you, saith the Lord." And what is the meaning of "Until it please"? Until it please the Kingdom of Heaven, which will bring the Redemption when the debt of justice is collected. ~~There is~~

Although God said that Israel must serve the seventy nations before the Redeemer comes, the rabbis say that this is not to be taken literally. In the eyes of God when only one Jew is under the rule of a nation it is as though all Israel were subjected there (Shir. 2:13).

Most interesting are the descriptions by the rabbis of the days preceding the coming of the Messiah. The days of the Messiah, said R. Chiya, will bring a plague that will kill the sinners (Shir r. 3:29). R. Yochanan said that when the seven year period arrives at the end of which will come the Messiah, certain things will occur each year. In the first year will be established what is said in Amos 4:7, "And I caused it to rain upon one city." In the second year the arrows of hunger will be sent against it. In the third year there will be a great famine, which will kill men, women and children; and the number of pious men and men of renown will diminish; and the Torah will fall into disuse in Israel. In the fourth year there will be famine but not famine; satiety but not satiety. In the fifth year there will be great plenty. People will eat and drink and rejoice, and the Torah will return to its former importance in Israel. In the sixth year voices will be heard. In the seventh year there will be wars and when the seventh year ends, the Messiah, son of David, will come (Shir. R. 3:19)

In the opinion of Resh Lakish, at the time when the Messiah son of David comes the school-house will be used for harlotry; Galilee will be laid waste, Gabbon destroyed and the inhabitants of Galilee will wander from town to town unable to find lodging; the wisdom of the Scribes will smell illy; the fearers of sin and pious ones will pass away and truth will be blurred and the face of that generation will resemble a dog's. How do we know that truth will totter? From Isa. 59:15, "And truth is lacking and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey" (Shir. R. 3:29)

The rabbis said that in the generation when the Messiah son of David comes the wise men will die. As for the remainder their eyes will fail, for trouble--sorrow and intense poverty, and evil, as well as anxiety and oppression will come over the people; and heavy decrees will be renewed and enforced which, when even while one is in operation, another new one will be decreed (ibid.).



Rabbi Nehorai said that when the son of David comes the young men will turn grey like the elders and elders will take the place of youths, as it says in Micah 7:6, "The daughter rises up against her mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house." And the son will not be ashamed before his father (Shir r. 3:29).

Rabbi Nechemja said that before the coming of the Messiah, distress will increase and there will be famine. The vine will produce grapes but the wine will stink. The government will be blasphemous but none will correct it (ibid.).

Abba bar Kahana said that the son of David comes only when the human race are like dogs (ibid.).

Rabbi Levi said that the Messiah will come when people are impudent, arrogant and deserve destruction (ibid.).

Rabbi Yanai said that if you see generation after generation being blasphemous and evil, then look for the footsteps of the Messiah, as it says in Ps. 89:52, "Wherewith thine enemies have taunted, O Lord, wherewith they have taunted the footsteps of thine anointed" (Shir r. 3:29).

The rabbis say that when the Messiah will come, whoever trusts and follows him and is patient will live happily. But whoever does not and becomes a renegade and goes over to the other nations will be killed by them (Shir r. 2:22).

The coming of the Messiah is inevitable. The time has been set for his arrival but if Israel so lives as to merit God's love then He will hasten the coming of the Messiah. This thought is presented in the concluding Midrash of our book. Commenting on Isa. 60:22, "I, the Eternal, bring it speedily in its time", Rabbi Acha said that God will bring the Messiah at the appointed time even though the Jews do not deserve redemption. But if they live so as to deserve redemption, then God hastens the coming of it. So may it be God's will that the Redemption come speedily and in our day. Amen! (Shir r. 8:16).

## CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The book of Canticles in rabbinic interpretation, as found in the Midrash Rabbah to the book, has revealed in the six chapters discussed here some of the dominant religious and theological convictions of the rabbis. Their God concept, if at times a bit too anthropomorphic, is nevertheless as **purely** ethical-monotheistic as ever voiced by the greatest literary prophets.

What they thought of themselves, of Israel, may appear much too conceited, but one must love them for the exalted moral and learned ideal they ever upheld for Israel. Their lofty notion of themselves was a necessity, if their suffering and burdens were to be, in some way at least, lightened.

We have learned their sublime concept of Torah. Their's was a determined attempt to bring all life under the wings of the Torah. They actually integrated the ideal of Torah into every moment of existence. Those men and women who had achieved this supreme triumph of putting themselves completely under the influence of the Torah were constantly held up as models for others to follow. The heroes in Israel's history, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and so on, are ever present in their discourses. These rabbis may have had no "historical sense", but they most certainly had a sense of the religiously and ethically important in the history of their people.

Dedicated as they were to a life of the highest moral conduct and to a mastery of the Book of Books, they could not help but consider themselves superior to the idolatrous pagan life about them. That they foretell everlasting destruction unto the Gentiles is not surprising, in the light of their own pure ethical monotheism. Their concept of the Gentiles must needs be a scathing condemnation of them, for the worship and life of

the other nations contradicted Israel's.

The Exodus to them was a wonderful sign of God's love for Israel. They never forgot it. Throughout their discourses the names of Egypt, Moses, the Red Sea, Mt. Sinai fairly abound. It was at the Exodus that God revealed Himself as the champion of Israel's rights and liberties. However, they would not say that the slavery in Egypt was due to the victory of Egypt over their God. To them it was God that had put them into slavery. All of their punishments were God's doing. Yet, as we have noted in the previous chapters, all the sufferings that God brought upon them came only that Israel might love Him more.

With utter faith they looked longingly for the coming of the Messiah. Reason enough was there for doubt and denial of the coming of the Son of David. But God, they believed, would bring him in due time, as it pleased God. Were they not sinners? And did not God always exact punishment for sins? Therefore they earnestly believed and patiently waited.

The Midrash Rabbah to Canticles has given us a keen insight into the beliefs and thoughts of the rabbis. When we consider how brilliantly they interpreted the Canticles, perhaps what Rabbi Akiba said about it was true, "The whole world's goodness is not equal to the glory of the day when Canticles was given. All the Scripture is holy, but Canticles is holiest" (Shir r. 1:11).