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Weaving Love into Sacred History:

Early Rabbinic Interpretation of the Song of Songs

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Abstract: Throughout the interpretive history of the Song of Songs, the theme of love has undergone successive transformations shaped by shifts in interpretive agents and methodologies. In early rabbinic interpretations, the theme of love was inscribed into the framework of sacred history. This process was rooted in two interconnected developments: first, the canonization of the Song of Songs within the Hebrew Bible, which invested it with sacred authority; and second, the rabbinic practice of conducting verse-by-verse parallel interpretations that anchored the text in the Torah. Early rabbinic interpretations transcended the Song of Songs' literal depictions of love, reconfiguring its secular themes into commemorations of sacred history and articulations of the divine-human relationship. The love portrayed in the text, functioning as a textual thread, is intertwined with sacred history as an interpretive thread: rabbinic exegesis employed the former as a vehicle for religious meaning, using it to foreground the latter as the text's true theological core. By analyzing the Mishnah and the midrashic work Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah, this article elucidates how sacred history absorbs and reframes the theme of love within its narrative.

Keywords: Song of Songs, Midrash, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah,* Intertextuality

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Introduction

The Hebrew Bible comprises a collection of texts, all of which underwent a rigorous canonization process before being enshrined as authoritative scripture. Canonization, defined as the process by which a text gains normative status through communal recognition, serves as a concentrated expression of a group's cultural identity and spiritual aspirations (Tian 2023). Among these biblical books, the Song of Songs stands out for its bold poetic language and unique thematic focus—centered on intimate love—which distinguishes it sharply from other scriptural works. Its integration into the biblical canon was notably more contentious and protracted than that of most other texts.

Key evidence of this canonization debate is preserved in the Mishnah, a core component of the Talmud and a compilation of ancient Jewish oral law structured primarily as rabbinic dialogues and question-and-answer exchanges. The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the subsequent Jewish Diaspora heightened the role of rabbis—learned spiritual leaders whose lineage traces to the first century CE (Rao 2010, p. 38)—in preserving communal identity. By teaching and interpreting the Hebrew Bible, rabbis sought to consolidate faith and sustain the hope of returning to the Promised Land. The compilation of Tannaitic literature (rabbinic exegetical works attributed to the Tannaim, active 70–300 CE) was completed in the third century, marking the conclusion of the Tannaitic period.[1] This literature encompasses discussions of legal precepts, religious customs, and personal ethics, including verse-by-verse biblical exegesis—much of which employs Midrash, the dominant interpretive strategy of early rabbis. As such, midrashic texts have become indispensable for investigating early Jewish theological thought and legal concepts.

Traditionally, rabbinic literature is divided into two categories: Halakha and Aggadah (Tian 2016, p. 108). The former refers to casuistic interpretations of Torah law, while the latter uses folk legends, anecdotes, and symbolic narratives to elucidate legal and moral teachings—both ultimately serving the dual goals of legal exegesis and ethical formation. Like other canonical texts, the Song of Songs received detailed verse-by-verse commentary from early rabbis, preserved in midrashic literature.[2] Among these, *Shir Ha-Shirim*

1 The "early" period used in this article is the Tanner period, which is the period from the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE to the compilation of the Mishnah in the 3rd century CE.

2 It is generally believed that only the books established as canon can be interpreted in the midrashic way. Before this, the works could only be read. To this end, the earliest Midrash commentary on the Song of Songs dates back to 65 CE. See Samuel

Rabbah is the oldest and longest surviving early rabbinic exegetical work on the Song of Songs (Kadari 2023, p. 55). Composed between the first and fifth centuries CE—with the Song of Songs itself dating to the late sixth or early seventh century BCE—this midrashic text belongs to the Aggadah tradition (Kadari 2023, p. 55). It holds foundational significance for understanding how rabbis conceptualized and interpreted the love depicted in the Song of Songs, while its interpretive methods exemplify the distinctive rabbinic approach to biblical interpretation.

Scholarly research on rabbinic interpretations of the Song of Songs has centered on two core strands: textual criticism and intertextual analysis. Textual studies investigate the formation, redaction history, variant readings, and internal hermeneutical strategies of these exegetical works. For instance, Tamar Kadari has conducted pioneering research on *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, exploring its discovery, critical edition, and complex redaction process (Kadari 2012), as well as illuminating its transmission and textual variations through the identification of new manuscripts and fragments from the Cairo Genizah (Kadari 2016a) and the Cambridge Genizah (Blanc 1999). Intertextual studies, by contrast, examine the dialogue between these interpretations and other Jewish exegetical traditions, such as the Aramaic Targum and medieval commentaries.

In terms of hermeneutical methods and ideological content, Kadari (2016b) offers a systematic literary analysis of rabbinic exegetical strategies, arguing that the allegorical interpretations of core imagery (e.g., milk, mother, brother) likely emerged from early Jewish-Christian polemics over chosen identity and interpretive authority regarding the Torah (Kadari 2017). Girón Blanc (1987) similarly identifies allegory as a defining feature of *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*. Comparative studies have also revised established assumptions: for example, research indicates that the Aramaic Targum of the Song of Songs did not directly depend on *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, but both drew from a shared late antique exegetical tradition (Junkermann 2011). Further comparative work extending to the medieval period highlights the divergence between midrashic allegory and the rationalist exegesis of commentators like Abraham ibn Ezra (Blanc 1987).

Building on this scholarly foundation, the present study aims to address three core questions: How did ancient rabbinic interpretations shape the form of love depicted in the Song of Songs? What interpretive processes and strategies were employed to construct this love? And what are the essential characteristics and ideological underpinnings of this rabbinically reframed love? By focusing on *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* as a primary source, this research

Tobias Lachs (1965, p. 238).

seeks to uncover the transformation of the love in the Song of Songs from its literal romantic connotations to a symbol of the divine-human covenant, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of early Jewish hermeneutics and the theme of love.

Canonization: The Foundation of the Legitimacy of Sacred Interpretation

The first topic to be discussed is the canonization process of the Song of Songs. Canonization is an indispensable link for a text to enter the biblical corpus, and its connection to interpretation lies in the fact that the process of canonization lays the foundation and delineates the boundaries for interpretation. The establishment of the Song of Songs as sacred during its canonization marks the starting point of its acceptance as a biblical text worthy of interpretation. Simultaneously, invested with the new identity of a religious text, its interpretive pathway is linked to a transcendent realm of meaning. The canonization process is one of the origins of the long-standing debate over the sacredness or secularity of the love depicted in the Song of Songs, and it also represents the first interpretation of the Song of Songs as it is known today. Without canonization incorporating it into the biblical canon, the Song of Songs would not have garnered such a broad and numerous readership as it enjoys currently.

Due to its unique content and style, the Song of Songs' canonization was fraught with controversy. Mishnah *Yadayim* 3:5 records a debate concerning its canonization, particularly addressing whether the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes defile the hands. This constitutes one of the earliest surviving documented commentaries on the Song of Songs. Some scholars regard it as the first text to position the Song of Songs as a sacred love poem.[3] For the Song of Songs, the core of this debate centered on whether the love it depicts is sufficiently sacred. Rabbi Akiva (c. 50–135 CE) lavished high praise on the Song of Songs, affirming its supreme sanctity and profound significance for Israel, thereby directing the interpretation of the love in the Song of Songs toward the sacred.

Mishnah *Yadayim* presents the debate among rabbis regarding the purity of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Two rabbis held differing opinions: Rabbi Judah (c. 135–170 CE) maintained that the Song of Songs defiles the hands, but there is controversy concerning Ecclesiastes, while Rabbi Yose (c.

3 One view holds that the period when the Song of Songs was interpreted as a divine love song began in the early second century CE. Other scholars argue that such an interpretation emerged in the first century BCE, when certain groups including the Pharisees interpreted the Song of Songs as sacred in order to crub the trend of regarding it as a "profane" wisdom. For detailed research, see Kaplan (2010, p. 45).

135–170 CE) argued that Ecclesiastes defiles the hands, with controversy surrounding the Song of Songs. More intriguing, however, is the premise set forth earlier in the passage: "All sacred writings (כְּתֵבֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ) defile (מְטַמְּאִין) the hands; both the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes defile the hands" (Mishnah, *Yad*. 3:5). The verb "defile" (טִמֵּא) raises questions: is it used in a positive or negative sense, and are the subjects (writings, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes) beneficial or harmful to humans?

Rabbi Shimon ben Azzai (c. 110–135 CE) recounted that he learned a tradition concerning the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes from the Seventy-Two Elders—on the day he was appointed academy dean, he heard the elders declare that both texts defile the hands. This claim was immediately refuted by Rabbi Akiva, whose eulogy of the Song of Songs became a classic proof of its sacredness for later generations: "Far be it from me! No one in Israel disputes that the Song of Songs does not defile the hands. For the entire world is not worthy of the day the Song of Songs was bestowed upon Israel; for all writings are sacred (שֶׁכָּל הַכְּתוּבִים קֹדֶשׁ), but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies (קֹדֶשׁ קָדָשִׁים). If there was any dispute, it was only concerning Ecclesiastes" (Mishnah, *Yad*. 3:5).

Rabbi Akiva's praise, concluding the entire debate, can be regarded as the Mishnah's response to the issue: the Song of Songs is the holy of holies. However, this conclusion does not resolve inherent contradictions. For instance, Rabbi Akiva's emphatic assertion that "all writings (works) are sacred" seemingly conflicts with the opening statement that "all sacred writings defile the hands." Questions such as whether "works" are subordinate to or equivalent to "sacred writings," and whether sacredness and "defilement" constitute an absolute binary opposition, remain elusive.[4]

These contradictions are not unfounded. The author of Ecclesiastes questions God from the perspective of human suffering, while the Song of Songs openly celebrates human love in secular settings — neither text frequently mentions the divine name YHWH, yet both stood at the threshold

4 Three common resolutions to such contradictions include: the debate is recorded merely to highlight Rabbi Akiva's high regard for the Song of songs; "works" is equivalent to "sacred writings", the passage emphasizes that all works under discussion are sacred; or certain scrolls defiling the hands signifies their canonical status, equating canonicity with defilement. A more plausible explanation is offered by John Barton: defiling the hands is a consequence of the devotional practice of holding the writings, separate from the inherent nature of the writings (sacred or impure). Thus, the sacredness of the writings is not the cause of the practitioner's action, nor can the value of the scrolls be equated with the outcome of the practice. See Barton (1997, p. 2). And another interpretation of the writings directly refers to the Ketuvim in the Hebrew Bible. See: Edmée Kingsmill (2009, p. 9).

of biblical canonization, a process that is itself riddled with mysteries. For the Song of Songs, the form of love it depicts was crucial to confirming its orthodoxy, and vice versa. The purity debate reveals that the Song of Songs and canonization engaged in a dynamic, mutually influential process. On one hand, the sacredness or impurity of the Song of Songs shaped the meaning of "defilement" and other recorded concepts. On the other hand, Rabbi Akiva's exaltation of the Song of Songs sparked enduring questions about the nature of its love. How could this love be consistent with tradition and deemed acceptable? Could it be identified as the literal secular love between men and women? How did allegorical and other interpretive methods shape the form of this love?

In addition to praising the Song of Songs as the holy of holies and emphasizing its immense value to Israel, Rabbi Akiva made another assertion in *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 12:5, a classic of oral law: those who chant the Song of Songs aloud in taverns and treat it as a secular song will forfeit their place in the world to come (*Tosefta*, *Sanhedrin* 12:5). A similar statement, unattributed to Rabbi Akiva but nearly identical in content, appears in Talmud Sanhedrin 101a:2: anyone who reads verses from the Song of Songs and interprets them as a form of secular song rather than a sacred text, or reads any biblical verses at feasts not in their proper time but merely as entertainment, introduces evil into the world (*Talmud*, *Sanhedrin* 101a:2). Furthermore, Rabbi Akiva made an even more forceful claim: if the Torah had not been given, the Song of Songs alone would suffice to guide the entire world (Kingsmill 2009, p. 10).

Whether a text defiles the hands may be related to its mode of reception. Rabbi Akiva attached great importance to the sacred value of the Song of Songs and its proper reading. By the time of canonization at the latest, the Song of Songs could be read in a relatively casual manner and circulated secularly. Ilana Pardes notes that numerous clues in the Song of Songs' history and text indicate it was once sung at festivals, with the Hebrew term "שִׁיר" (shir) encompassing both poem and song (the two were not strictly differentiated at the time). Additionally, some scholars argue that the Song of Songs is an inspired collection of poems influenced by Mesopotamian sacred marriage hymns and rituals (Pardes 2019, pp. 13–14). It is plausible that prior to the debates over its canonization, the secular meanings and values accumulated during its folk circulation had already permeated people's perception of the text. The form of love in the Song of Songs evolved with changes in the text's status. When the Song of Songs appeared in secular settings as a festival or ritual song, its love—central to its poetic value—took on a secular joyfulness; when interpreters represented by Rabbi Akiva sought to elevate it to the status of a religious classic, the love in the Song of Songs became sacred.

The core conflict regarding the love in the Song of Songs has emerged through records related to canonization: secular love versus sacred love. The love depicted in the Song of Songs directly refers to secular scenes and experiences, but Rabbi Akiva's declaration of its sacredness indicates that this superficial meaning is insufficient to define the love in the Song of Songs as secular romantic love between men and women. When he issued a prohibition against the secular use of the Song of Songs by Jews, he established its sacredness, which seemingly contradicts its secularity. Rabbi Akiva's positioning of the Song of Songs marks the starting point for interpreting the love in the Song of Songs in rabbinic literature: the Song of Songs cannot be used as entertainment in secular venues, and its love is not a portrayal of earthly romance but is reconstructed as the sacred love between God and Israel.

Intertextuality: The Context and Methods of Early Rabbinic Interpretation

As the Song of Songs was incorporated into the canon, its value orientation toward love underwent a transformation. On one hand, the outcome of this love—marriage as the consummation of a relationship—was emphasized. On the other hand, its erotic and emotional dimensions were largely discarded, replaced by solemn historical retellings and doctrinal exhortations. Central to this transformation was the rabbis' intertextual interpretive approach, which transposed Torah themes onto the Song of Songs' love narratives. This bridged the gap between a relatively new biblical text and an ancient historical tradition.

In rabbinic tradition, the PaRDeS interpretation (literally meaning "orchard," referring to a mystical realm of contemplation in rabbinic thought) extracts the four consonants of "PaRDeS" as designations for four interpretive approaches. These four methods are: Peshat (פְּשָׁט, "plain"), the literal interpretation; Remez (רֶמֶז, "hint"), the allegorical interpretation; Derash (דְּרָשׁ, the root of which means "to seek"), the homiletical interpretation; and Sod (סוֹד, "secret"), the esoteric interpretation (Fishbane 2015a, pp. xxxv-xxxviii). Among them, the noun form of "Derash" is "Midrash," and rabbinic literature can be regarded as a process of seeking meaning in sacred texts. Works of Derash-type interpretation primarily center on the Torah, emphasizing the sacred value of studying the Torah and the religious significance of remembering the experience of suffering. To facilitate in-depth exploration of the Torah, rabbis developed an intertextual interpretive method — when interpreting a specific text, they transpose portions of the Torah's texts or narratives to serve as explanatory tools. Such transposition may involve directly extracting sentences and plots from the Torah, or applying meanings derived from the Torah tradition to the target text. However, this is not a

simple textual collage but rather the spreading of wings for the ascent of understanding. Fishbane argues that the intertextual method of Derash is not merely a textual practice but also an expansion of the Bible's spiritual guiding role, as its use is driven by the text's recipients and the desire to convey strength to them (Fishbane 2015b, pp. 168–170). *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, an early rabbinic commentary on the Song of Songs, is a Derash text that employs the intertextual interpretive method. In reading the Song of Songs through *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, readers revisit tradition through the literal depiction of love and further receive transcendent guidance. This act of constructing meaning within a textual framework resembles allegorical interpretation, yet their constructive processes are fundamentally distinct. Daniel Boyarin incisively points out that the rabbis did not adopt the widely assumed allegoric method but instead intertextually connected different signifiers directly; allegory, by contrast, delves deeply into symbols to find a signified that can be linked to the signifier (Boyarin 1990, p. 223). Another distinctive feature that sets Derash apart from the allegorical method is its greater emphasis on investigating etymology and textual structure (Kadari 2023, p. 59), which is followed by repeated citation on this basis. Sophisticated repetition includes the thorough and recurring study of stories, discourses, and key vocabulary, ultimately aiming to unearth the spiritual meaning of the Torah. As Boyarin notes, in midrashic literature, the highest level of reading is intertextual reading—connecting the immediate text with the ultimate Text—rather than allegorical reading, which connects the text with abstract concepts (Boyarin 1990, p. 226).

From the perspective of a linear conception of history, it was not until the Hellenistic Jewish period when Philo lived, or the later period when Judaism came under the influence of Neoplatonism, that allegorical methods of interpretation came to supplant the early interpretative approaches exemplified by Derash. However, it cannot be denied that features of allegorical interpretation are present in the midrashic literature. Rabbi Akiva's assessment sets a precedent: the love between man and woman in the Song of Songs was sanctified in rabbinic thought. That is to say, there exists a metaphorical understanding that views secular love as a prelude to divine love, with the text's ultimate meaning residing beyond its literal surface. Thus, textual meaning is divided into superficial and deeper layers—a fundamental interpretive tendency that later developed into allegorical exegesis. The widely accepted interpretation in Jewish exegesis posits that the lovers represent God and Israel, and their love signifies the union between God and Israel. It is inferred that the Song of Songs was incorporated into the Hebrew Bible precisely because this religious system lacked sacred texts addressing eros (Pardes 2019, p. 12). As a force that draws two parties closer together, eros is not an ancient Greek philosophical concept to which later generations

applied the Christian term 'agape' by way of comparison, nor does it refer to love in a sexual sense. When examining early rabbinic literature, the introduction of the concept of eros can be used to describe an extraordinary attraction and connection, pointing to the mysterious force behind it that drives everything. For instance, in the Derash method, the tradition-oriented act of interpretation links textual content from different sources to form a shared world of meaning with the reader; this can be attributed to an adhesive force of eros.

Overlapping Narratives: The Dual Imagery of Marriage and Covenant

Within the narrative of the Song of Songs, two distinct relational frameworks emerge: the romantic bond between male and female lovers, and the marital bond between a bridegroom and a bride. The terms "bridegroom" and "bride" may function as affectionate epithets or carry symbolic weight, but they do not definitively confirm the lovers' eventual marriage—the text only mentions King Solomon's marriage, and Solomon's role as the male protagonist remains unconfirmed. Nevertheless, if we assume the narrative depicts the protagonists' marriage, this union represents the apex of their love, signifying an identity transformation and the fruition of their affection. In traditional rabbinic interpretation, the bride and bridegroom symbolize God and Israel respectively, and their marriage embodies the supreme covenant between them.

Early rabbinic exegesis circumvented love as emotion or desire, focusing instead on love as covenant and commitment. Through allegorical analogy, this love transcended literal romantic love to symbolize the relationship between God and humanity. Rabbis sanctified marriage and its underlying covenant, making this covenant the core theme of their interpretation of the love in the Song of Songs. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* frequently employs a parable: God, likened to a king, seeks to wed a woman of noble lineage and sends a messenger to propose. Upon hearing the proposal, the woman consents to be his handmaid yet yearns to hear the betrothal directly from the king. The messenger returns joyful, but his words are unintelligible to the king—who infers from his expression that the woman has consented and desires his personal proposal (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:2:3). Here, the messenger symbolizes Moses, framing the allegory as Moses leading Israel in covenant with God: as God's intermediary, Moses conveyed divine messages but struggled to translate human response into divine language. Israel, God's chosen "wife" of noble lineage, remains separated from God by an uncrossable boundary. This parable accompanies the commentary on Song 1:2 ("Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine"). Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai (c. late 2nd century CE) and Rabbi Johanan

bar Nappaha (c. 180–279 CE) both linked this verse to the Israelites' ascent of Mount Sinai (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:2:1–2)—the site where Moses established the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 24:12–31:18). This interpretation reframes human romantic love as the positive relationship between God and humanity, casting marriage as a symbolic covenant and attributing to the text a meaning not inherently present. By interpreting love through the lens of marriage, rabbis introduced covenantal obligations into the divine-human relationship, inviting audiences to participate in this narrative. The interpretive focus shifted from the unfolding of romantic love to its covenantal consequences—a quintessential example of intertextual interpretation cloaked in allegory, wherein rabbis superimposed an external narrative onto the target text rather than deriving meaning from its inherent symbols. Tradition, as a meaning system, thus constructed a shared spiritual world within the Song of Songs.

This parable alone does not fully illustrate how marriage shapes the interpretation of the Song of Songs' love. Biblical tradition abounds with divine-human marriage metaphors: Isaiah declares that God has called Israel "a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit" (Isaiah 54:6) and that "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5); Jeremiah recalls Israel's "love as a bride" in following God through the wilderness (Jeremiah 2:2); Hosea portrays Israel as an adulterous wife who "has a lover" (Hosea 3:1) by worshiping idols. These metaphors stem from God's covenant with Israel, which demands unwavering fidelity—mirroring marriage's core requirement. Israel's idolatry, framed as adultery, undermines the divine-human covenant's sanctity. A critical question arises: how do these marital emphases in other biblical books connect to the love in the Song of Songs, and how do divergent textual perspectives influence its exegesis? *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* provides an answer through its interpretive method.

When the Song of Songs expresses love through calls and kisses, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* supplements detailed covenantal interpretations: the "kiss" is framed as an affirmation of the divine-human relationship. Rabbis note that the Torah contains 613 commandments, of which Moses conveyed 611 to the people—the first two of the Ten Commandments were heard directly from God. This direct divine-human interaction, they argue, is the "kiss" invoked in *Song* 1:2 (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:2:2). Similarly, the kiss is interpreted as God sending fire to accept Israel's sacrifices in the Tabernacle (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:2:1), signifying the authenticity and intimacy of the divine-human bond and God's unique recognition of Israel. In emphasizing these themes, rabbinic commentary bypasses the Song of Songs' poetic evocation of emotional and sensory experience—instead mapping its verses onto Torah narratives and prophetic sayings to form a "shadow-like commentary." As

Daniel Boyarin observes, rabbis regarded later biblical works as unified interpretations of the Torah; the Song of Songs thus served as an exegetical key to the Hebrew Bible, yet in the process lost the key to its own interpretation[5]. When a single text bears the narrative of another, meaning loss is inevitable—yet within the Derash interpretive pathway, such a trade-off is necessary.

Notably, the Song of Songs is grouped with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as three Torah-commentary texts attributed to Solomon. In interpreting *Song* 1:1 ("The Song of Solomon, the Song of Songs"), *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* devotes significant space to emphasizing the text's sacred authorship, repeatedly stating: "The Holy Spirit rested upon him (Solomon), and he composed these three books: Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:1:5–10). The Rabbis thus framed these works as divinely inspired through Solomon, endowing the Song of Songs with sufficient sacredness to serve as a "key" for unlocking the Torah and deepening Israel's understanding of it. Boyarin argues that in functioning as a Torah commentary, the Song of Songs lost its own interpretive key—a view rooted in the premise of biblical self-exegesis through internal texts. Importantly, the hermeneutical transformation of the love in the Song of Songs predated both rabbinic Midrash and the canonization debates in the Mishnah: when the text's depictions of love sparked canonization controversy, its transformation into divine love was already underway. Entry into the biblical canon enabled the love in the Song of Songs to be integrated into biblical tradition as a homologous element.

This raises a critical question: did the Song of Songs' marital narrative exert a reverse influence on Torah interpretation, or transplant its literal meaning into Torah exegesis? Despite its enduring linguistic charm and evocative portrayal of romantic love, the Song of Songs' emotional core did not permeate rabbinic interpretation—a discrepancy tied to the intertextual method. Intertextuality involves two texts: an earlier one incorporated into the interpretive framework and a later one. Jonathan Kaplan notes that when a later text cites an earlier one, the earlier text receives commentary and undergoes a meaning shift (Kaplan 2010, p. 48). However, the Song of Songs' commentary on the Torah is not achieved through direct quotation but through its deployment as an interpretive key by the rabbis—a method that frames later texts as commentaries on earlier ones. As the rabbis held interpretive authority over the Hebrew Bible, Midrash became the dominant

5 This allusion stems from a first-century commentator (attributed to Saadya): "My brother, know this: regarding the interpretation of this Song of songs, you will find many differing opinions, for the Song is like a lock whose key has been lost." See Kingsmill (2009, p. 11).

exegetical mode, consigning the Song of Songs' love to a subordinate role. This intertextual relationship was hierarchically preordained: love's potential remained unexplored, ceded to earlier texts. Thus, the Song of Songs and other later texts functioned as unidirectional commentaries on the Torah—history and law, deemed worthy of commemoration, were subjected to deep excavation, while the Torah remained unchanged by the Song of Songs' commentary, achieving self-explanation through it. Within this framework, the love in the Song of Songs was reduced to a state of hermeneutical impoverishment: its interpretation was reduced to the divine-human relationship, yet failed to bridge the chasm between secular and divine love—as the two texts never developed organic interaction in Midrash. The transformation of love's meaning can therefore only be explained by invoking rabbinic interpretive authority and sanctioned methods, with no further answers found within the interpretation itself.

Nevertheless, when the Song of Songs became an "earlier text," its references in later works resonated with its inherent meaning. Through subtle interpretive "quotation," the Song of Songs' love was understood and applied differently across texts. For example, in Ezra and Revelation, the text's love is implicitly framed as divine, borrowed to emphasize male figures' leading role in restoration. The Song of Songs' emotional fervor is amplified to affirm the exclusivity and indestructibility of God's love for humanity, while serving as a lens to refract the essence of Israel's relationship with God (Kaplan 2010, pp. 65–66).

Spiritual Transformation: From Physical Depiction to Divine Love

The purpose of rabbinic interpretation is to serve the exegesis of the Torah, and its subject matter, though rooted in the relatively secular imagery of the Song of Songs, ultimately aligns with Aggadah. As Edmée Kingsmill observes, Rabbi Akiva emerges as the pivotal figure who elevated the Song of Songs' status—yet this elevation merely reduced the text to a tool for interpreting the Torah (Kingsmill 2009, p. 192). In fact, the Song of Songs, alongside Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, functions not only as a textual commentary on the Torah but also as a narrative of Israel's national history. As previously argued, the romantic love depicted in the Song of Songs is transformed in rabbinic exegesis into the establishment and consolidation of the divine-human covenant. This process simultaneously accomplishes the commemoration and repetition of foundational historical memories—from the Exodus to the covenant-making at Mount Sinai. Thus, under the primacy of historical memory in Israelite tradition, the love in the Song of Songs enters a distinct hermeneutical domain.

The Song of Songs employs vivid metaphorical rhetoric to describe the

human body, drawing comparisons primarily from the natural world and everyday life. These depictions brim with passion, embodying heartfelt praise between lovers, while carrying subtle erotic undertones that express their desire. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, however, interprets the human body with deliberate restraint, sidelining both its erotic and lyrical dimensions. Instead, it deconstructs the text of the Song of Songs and juxtaposes it with Israel's collective historical memory.

The Song of Songs' striking bodily descriptions center largely on the female form, with Chapter 4 offering a paradigmatic example[6]:

1 How beautiful you are, my love,
how very beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.
2 Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
that have come up from the washing,
all of which bear twins,
and not one among them is bereaved.
3 Your lips are like a crimson thread,
and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.
4 Your neck is like the tower of David,
built in courses;
on it hang a thousand bucklers,
all of them shields of warriors.
5 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle,
that feed among the lilies.
(Song 4:1–5)

In the commentary on the opening line "your eyes are doves behind your veil" in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, the eyes are likened to the Jewish Sanhedrin, signifying the eyes of the congregation (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2). This is followed by a series of parallels drawn between the dove and the people of Israel. Beginning with the discovery of a new subject (the Sanhedrin), followed

6 Chapter 7 shares many similar bodily descriptions with Chapter 4, though its sexual allusions are more explicit. However, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*'s interpretation of Chapter 4 is rich and representative, hence Chapter 4 remains the chosen example for illustration.

by a point-by-point enumeration of similarities or connections between the metaphor and the subject (the Sanhedrin, like the dove, is pure and spotless, conspicuous, humble, and vulnerable), and concluding with references to other books—this constitutes a relatively typical interpretive structure in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*. More broadly, this process involves (a) understanding the text, (b) understanding national history, and (c) shaping Israel's theology and worldview (Langer 2023, p. 78).

Indeed, when the meaning of love in the Song of Songs leaps from romantic love to divine relationship and national history, this expression of love becomes ubiquitous. The phrase "Your eyes are doves" alone reveals the rabbis' profound care in their commentary, using the dove's nature to emphasize the need for self-restraint among the Israelite people. The following interpretation, composed of five parallel clauses, further details the path of understanding the relationship between God and humanity and the interpretation of historical memory (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2).

"Just as the dove, from the time it meets its mate, does not exchange its mate for another, so too did Israel: from the time it came to know the Holy One blessed be He, it did not exchange Him for another" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2). This affirms the nature of the relationship between God and the nation of Israel, declaring Israel's unwavering loyalty to God. It also responds to the first commandment among the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:3).

"Just as the dove enters its nest and knows its nest, its dovecote, its fledglings, its chicks, and its windows, so are the three rows of Torah scholars when they sit before them, each and every one knows his place" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2). This statement is addressed to Torah scholars, effectively linking the function of the eyes with the habits of doves. On one hand, seeing-recognizing-learning the Torah forms a sequential relationship; on the other, recognizing the order of things and the scholars' awareness of their own positions create a parallel, reflecting the orderly and well-structured hierarchical system within Judaism. Specifically, the "three rows of Torah scholars" describe the scene of the Jewish Sanhedrin deliberating over new judges. The three rows of scholars sit before the Sanhedrin members, serving as candidates for new judges, from whom the Sanhedrin makes its selection (*Sanhedrin* 37a).

"Just as the dove, even though you take its fledglings from beneath it, it will never forsake its dovecote, so too did Israel: even though the Temple was destroyed, it did not have the three annual pilgrimage festivals abrogated" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2). This pertains to the historical destruction of the Temple. Despite the destruction of both the First and Second Temples and the two exiles of the Jewish people, the pilgrimage festival customs continued to

be observed and practiced. This demonstrates the remembrance and commemoration of the historical traumas of Judaism. Moreover, this interpretation underscores the profound significance of the Temple as a dwelling place and the Promised Land as homeland for the faithful Israelites—marking their identity even in exile.

"Just as the dove produces a new brood each and every month, so too did Israel renew for itself Torah, mitzvot, and good deeds each month" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2). This interpretation reinforces the status of the law. Moreover, the rabbi who uttered these words was himself producing "a new brood"—that is, regenerating the Torah through the act of interpreting the Song of Songs.

"Just as the dove travels far afield and yet returns to its dovecote, so too did Israel" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2). This reveals that exile and diaspora were not Israel's final destination. The rabbis exhorted the Israelites: even while journeying far, they must remember their mission to return home.

This single metaphor encompasses the divine-human covenant, religious institutions, national history, festival customs, legal obligations, and national destiny—nearly every facet of Israelite religious life. While the original text uses the dove simply to evoke the beloved's eyes, the rabbis expanded it into an all-encompassing narrative, leveraging the interpretive space left by the poem's concise, emotionally resonant language.

Beyond linking the Song of Songs' metaphors to the Torah, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* transforms the text's metaphorical objects into new "metaphors" for national and religious themes. For example, the verse "Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies" (Song 4:5). is interpreted as a symbol of Moses and Aaron—just as breasts embody a woman's beauty and nourishment, Moses and Aaron represent Israel's spiritual sustenance and glory (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:5:1). Their equality is emphasized through a secondary metaphor: "A king placed two fine pearls on a balance scale—neither outweighed the other; so too did Moses and Aaron" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:5:1). This chain of equivalences forms a self-referential interpretive cycle, leaving little room for the original romantic context.

Other bodily metaphors receive similar treatment:

"Your hair is like a flock of goats" (Song 4:1) refers to the twelve thousand Israelites who fought against Midian, whose spoils were offered to God (Numbers 31:5, 54) (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 6:6:1).

"Your teeth are like a flock of ewes" (Song 4:2) symbolizes the 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:1:2; 4:2:2).

"Your navel is a rounded bowl" (Song 7:2) represents the Sanhedrin—its

"roundness" evoking the circular chamber where rulings were issued, and its "pivotal role" mediating between God and Israel (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 7:3:1).

In this way, the Song of Songs' physical imagery loses most of its erotic and romantic connotations in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*. Desire and emotional expression are subsumed by extensive Torah references, yet the rabbis implicitly weave erotic undertones into the divine-human relationship—suggesting that God's love for Israel inherently carries a passionate, almost erotic tension (Wolfson 2023, p. 131). Before the full maturation of allegorical exegesis, this love remains tightly bound to the text, presenting a state of "chaotic unity" between literal and symbolic meaning.

The Repetition of Tradition: The Ascent of Love into History

Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah articulates and reinforces two core convictions: God is Israel's unique, supreme deity, and Israel is God's chosen, one-of-a-kind beloved. These two convergent perspectives are both articulated and reinforced in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, by means of the same method of intertextual construction through historical references and quotations from other books. Moreover, the interaction between God and humanity is vividly portrayed through Israel's transgressions and God's salvation, forming a pivotal turning point in the love between God and humanity.

(i) The Most Excellent Beloved

From Israel's perspective, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* emphasizes God's uniqueness and paramount importance to Israel. The line "What is your beloved more than another beloved?" (Song 5:9) is interpreted as the nations of the world addressing Israel, asking in what ways Israel's God surpasses other gods. The immediate response, "My beloved is all radiant and ruddy" (Song 5:10), is interpreted as Israel's answer. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* explains that white symbolizes God's attribute of mercy, while red represents His attribute of justice—both of which Israel's God possesses to a greater degree than others. Another interpretation expands the meaning of red to encompass the Exodus crossing of the Red Sea and the fiery nature of the Law (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:9:1). Regardless, for Israel, their God remains the supreme deity—metaphorically, the ultimate Beloved. God is Israel's Beloved, and even in times of spiritual absence, Israel clings to faith. "Where has your beloved gone, O fairest among women?" (Song 6:1) *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* imbues this question with a malicious tone, suggesting it is the mockery of the nations toward Israel. But the congregation of Israel would respond: You have no share in Him; why do you ask? Since I am joined to Him, how can I depart from Him? Since He is joined to me, how can He depart from me? Where He is, there I will be? (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 6:1:1) This is Israel's confident

declaration, showing that its trust and faith in God are unshakable, undisturbed by other nations or beliefs.

(ii) The One and Only Beloved

Mirroring the previous section, Israel is God's chosen, one-of-a-kind beloved, possessing a unique identity bestowed by God. In the narrative of love, God's love for Israel is almost always mentioned first. "For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave" (Song 8:6). The Rabbinic commentary explains that the waters and floods represent the nations of the world. Throughout Israel's history of exile and dispersion, the oppressive forces of these nations could not extinguish God's love for Israel. In interpreting the phrase "love is fierce as death", the primary meaning referenced is God's love for humanity: may God bless your love, as strong as death. Furthermore, the desire or longing for a beloved and for love in the Song of Songs is also reflected in the interpretation of the relationship between God and humanity. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* records three kinds of desire: first, the desire of Israel, directed solely toward their God, which is precisely the heartfelt cry of the Israelite people: "I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me" (Song 7:10); second, the desire of a woman, directed solely toward her husband; and finally, the desire of sin, directed only toward Cain and his kind (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 7:11:1). Ultimately, Israel often possesses beauty in God's eyes, and His praise resembles the adoration of a lover. "You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners" (Song 6:4); "How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden!" (Song 7:6). According to *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, both passages describe the beloved Israel as beautiful and delightful because they observe the commandments, practice circumcision, engage in prayer, and perform repentance (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 6:4:1), and even though idols were ubiquitous in Jerusalem and Samaria, they did not worship them (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 7:7:1).

(iii) Sin and Redemption

The rabbis recorded in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* had evidently witnessed two Temple destructions. They were deeply concerned with Israel's transgressions and God's subsequent punishments, seeking within their interpretations ways to mend the relationship between God and humanity. "I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone" (Song 5:6). This signifies God's withdrawal from Israel, while Israel repents for His departure (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:6:1). Specifically, chapter 5 narrates a story of opening and closing doors. After hesitation, the female protagonist finally decides to open the door for her lover who urgently seeks her, only to find him gone upon opening it. She then goes out searching for him, is beaten by

the guards, and pleads with the women to help her find him (Song 5:1–16). In *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, the rabbis interpret that God was initially soothed by Israel opening the door, leading to the first decree permitting the Jews to return and granting permission to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1–4). However, Israel's subsequent conduct angered God, causing Him to turn away again. Thus, the rabbis express a heartfelt lament from Israel's perspective: "I sought God and called Him, but the seventy years of the Babylonian exile had not yet been completed, and He did not answer me" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:6:1). Another interpretation of this passage suggests that after God established the covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, some Israelites made a golden calf, provoking God's anger. This motif appears elsewhere, such as in "passion fierce as the grave" (Song 8:6). *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* indicates this reflects God's wrath after Israel provoked Him through idol worship (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 8:6:4). This historical context receives more detailed commentary in the exposition preceding this section. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai notes that this verse refers to the punishment described in Exodus following Israel's transgression: "Therefore the Israelites stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward" (Exodus 33:6). While other rabbis disputed the causal connection, there was broad agreement regarding the Israelites' transgression. For instance, Rabbi Shimon ben Harafta remarked: "Wretched is the bride who sins under the wedding canopy" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 8:5:1). As mentioned earlier, marriage is a central theme in rabbinic discussions of the Song of Songs' love, precisely because of the parallels between covenant and matrimony. The story of the golden calf represents a breach of the covenant. It can be seen as the female protagonist in the Song of Songs seeking her departed lover only after damaging the relationship, thereby isolating herself and facing persecution from the patrols.

Overall, the tension in Israel's relationship with God is most pronounced during times of sin. The climax of this love is manifested in Israel's repentance, prayers, and cries to God after being abandoned, followed by God's miraculous return to Israel to bring salvation. For instance, the commentary on verse 7 of chapter 11 mentions that the Israelites daily anticipated and hoped for the blessing of the Holy One to bring their redemption, reciting the words from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The commentary on verse 8 of chapter 7 draws upon the narrative in Daniel, where the Israelites refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship the golden image, regardless of whether God would deliver them (Daniel 3:17–18). Regarding "If she be a wall" in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 8:9, one interpretation offered is that God declares: if Israel remains steadfast in its conduct like a wall, He will establish and save it (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 8:9:2).

Furthermore, in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, the roles of God and humanity are distinctly defined: God is the male figure who enacts salvation, while Israel is the female figure who calls for salvation. An absolute hierarchy exists between them, yet simultaneously, a pattern of communication akin to lovers' affection is present. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* records this interpretation: "She lauded Him and He lauded her. She lauded Him from top to bottom, and He lauded her from bottom to top. She lauded him from top to bottom, because He was On High and rested His Divine Presence on earth. He lauded her from bottom to top, as she is on the lowest level and He is destined to elevate her" (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:16:6). This mutual praise, shaped by unequal stations, may also reflect the gender dynamics of romantic relationships in the rabbinic era.

Conclusion

In the Rabbinic commentary on the Song of Songs in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, the religious function of love in the Song of Songs is vividly manifested: it retells national history and deepens the relationship between God and humanity, thereby cultivating and shaping the religious consciousness of the Israelites. As Gerhard Langer observes, this understanding of history within the midrashic literature is itself shaped by biblical faith; a conviction that core events in Israel's history and those pivotal to its identity formation are all found within the Hebrew Bible (Langer 2023). This very premise underpins the extensive use of intertextual methods in the interpretation of *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*. Consequently, the love depicted in the Song of Songs, while presenting the relationship between God and humanity, also serves as a vehicle for recalling and summarizing significant historical events. Examples include the covenant narratives frequently referenced in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah*, the incident of the golden calf, and the circumstances of the exile following the destruction of the Temple. Rabbinic interpretations of the Song of Songs' love narrative commenced even before the canonization debates arose. This interpretive journey consistently revolved around the rabbis' historical and theological perspectives, finding expression and extension through the biblical text. However, the beauty of secular love as captured in the original text of the Song of Songs—or rather, its literal meaning—and the implicit portrayal of secular life it contains, fall outside the scope of this interpretation. This approach bears a striking resemblance to Origen's, as both avoid allowing the Song of Songs' themes to lean toward secular love. Rather than constructing the sacred by denouncing secular love and its carnal imagery, the rabbis adopted a positive interpretive strategy. They established the Song of Songs as a holy book, restricting its usage contexts; they deconstructed the texts forming its love theme, weaving love into sacred history. Thus, sacred history and the relationship between God

and humanity became central and irreplaceable themes in Rabbinic interpretation. The intertextual Derash method serves as a key to understanding the transformation of the form of love in the Song of Songs: it reveals how rabbis of the time perceived, accepted, and addressed exceptional texts and ideas, as well as how they transmitted them to other indirect readers through interpretation. However, the construction of a specific realm of meaning is accompanied by the loss of broader interpretive space. Given the limited means by which people accessed and comprehended scriptures at that time, how the abandonment of secular love should be approached hermeneutically remains a question difficult to answer. When rabbinic interpretation used the Song of Songs to open the door to the study of Torah and sacred history, the question is no longer what method to use to unlock the Song of Songs, but whether to acknowledge the realm of meaning accumulated by the Song of Songs before it became the "holy of holies."

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