

The Interpretation of Song of Songs in 4 Ezra

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Rabbi Aqiba said, "No man in Israel disputed the fact that Song of Song renders the hands unclean (i.e., is regarded as sacred), for the whole world is not equal in value to the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all scriptures are holy, but Song of Songs is Holy of Holies" (Mishnah Yadayim 3.5). Rabbi Aqiba's attitude to Song of Songs is expressed in equally emphatic terms in Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:10. There he pronounces that "he who trills his voice (in singing) Song of Songs in taverns and makes a sort of ditty of it has no portion in the world to come."

R. Aqiba, then, had strong sentiments about Song of Songs: it holds a position of special sanctity, surpassing the rest of scripture, and to sing it in an inappropriate way and unsuitable place is a grave transgression indeed. The reason this was the case most probably depended on how Song of Songs was interpreted. Norman Gottwald discusses the interesting question of whether its status as scripture precedes its allegorical interpretation or follows it.¹ Despite the discussion of Song of Songs'

¹ N. Gottwald, "Song of Songs" in *IDB* (Nashville & New York: Abingdon, 1962) 4.422-423. Roland E. Murphy is even more cautious when he says in *ABD* 6.150, "It is not possible to discern the reason for its inclusion in the biblical canon, or when the

status in Mishnah Yadayim of which R. Aqiba's dictum quoted above forms part, Rabbinic Judaism seems to have had no accepted process of canonization, certainly neither synodical decisions nor canonical determinations.² It received the substantive body of the Canon already gathered and the discussion of which Aqiba's statements are part, as Beckwith remarks, were "not regarded as authoritative, since contrary opinions continued to be expressed throughout the second century."³

Gottwald speaks of "hints of allegorical treatment" of Song of Songs in the latter part of the first century CE, citing Josephus who calls Song of Songs "hymns to God" and three places in 4 Ezra, 5:24, 5:26 and 7:26 that use similes for Israel drawn from Song of Songs. The Josephus reference is apparently to a more general passage in *Against Apion* 1.8, which refers to four books of hymns to God.⁴ We find it

decision was finally made." David Meade makes some significant remarks about its Solomonic attribution and the role such an attribution may have played in the acceptance of the book as sacred scripture: D.G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon. An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 53-55. He also considers the allegorical interpretation to have been current in the first century, though he adduces no supporting arguments.

² These issues have been the subject of much discussion: many relevant remarks are made by Roger T. Beckwith. "Formation of the Hebrew Bible," *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, 2.1; Assen/Maastricht & Philadelphia: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 1988). 58-60, 69.

³ *Ibid.* 60. He is perhaps a bit conservative in his general approach, but surely correct on this point. He does not suggest any reason for the discussion to have continued well down into the second century C.E. (see, for example, p. 59, paragraph [5]).

⁴ Gottwald gives no reference.

difficult to see in these words a clear reference to an allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs, except in very general terms.

Of Gottwald's list the three 4 Ezra passages remain and, while discounting one of them, we shall add one further passage to the list. These passages will form the basis of the present article.

4 Ezra 7:26

We translate 7:26 as follows:

For behold, the time will come, when the signs that I have foretold to you will come,
that the city which now is not seen shall appear,
and the land which now is hidden shall be disclosed.

In this form of the text there is nothing that evokes Song of Songs. Gottwald, however, is referring to the textual form that appears in the Latin and Syriac versions of 4 Ezra. The Latin reads, *apparebit sponsa apparascens civitas* "and the bride shall appear even the city appearing" and the Syriac is similar.⁵ Yet, Volkmar, followed by Gunkel, Violet and Box suggested very persuasively that this is a corruption of Greek $\nu\acute{\upsilon}\nu \mu\grave{\eta} \phi\alpha\iota\nu\omicron\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta$ to $\nu\acute{\upsilon}\mu\phi\eta \phi\alpha\iota\nu\omicron\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta$, "now is not seen" being corrupted to "bride appearing". The uncorrupted text appears to stand behind Ethiopic and Georgian versions here and is clearly original.⁶ Thus, this verse has no allegorical allusion to the

⁵ So the Authorised Version Apocrypha reads, "and the bride shall appear, and she coming forth shall be seen," based on the same Latin text.

⁶ See Michael E. Stone. *Fourth Ezra. A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 202.

bride in Song of Songs, and the apparent allusion is simply a corruption in the Greek text lying behind the Latin and Syriac versions.⁷

4 Ezra 5:24 and 26.

In 5:23-27, Ezra in an impassioned address enumerates seven chosen items, each the choice of its kind. Three of these seven are clear: one choicest "region" of the lands is the land of Israel (5:24), Zion of the cities ((5:25) and one river—the Jordan—of the waters (5:25). He also speaks of the vine being choicest of the trees (5:23), the lily of the flowers (5:24), the dove of the birds (5:26) and the sheep of the flocks (5:26).⁸ Some of these images are found fairly widely in biblical literature, such as the vine and the lily. In the reference in 5:24, there is a possible use of an allegory of Song of Songs 2:2, in which passage the beloved woman is compared with a lily; Israel is so compared already in Hosea 14:6. It is possible, therefore, that the passage from Song of Songs was in the background of this passage. It is worth noting that the Hebrew words in Song 2:1 (לתהבצ) and 2:2 (שושנה) are different. Presumably 4 Ezra is using the second word.

In 1990 we described the source of the imagery in 4 Ezra 5:26 as "an allegorical interpretation of Song 2:14 and 5:2".⁹ Those two verses, which are very similar, read:

2:14 O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
 in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
 let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,

⁷ Conceivably, the corruption itself was engendered or influenced by the image of the bride from Song of Songs, but that must have happened in the second century C.E. at the very earliest.

⁸ There is a similar passage in *Apocalypse of Sedrach* 8:2: see Stone, *4 Ezra*, 128.

⁹ Stone, *4 Ezra*, 130.

and your face is lovely.

5:2 I slept, but my heart was awake.
Listen! my beloved is knocking.
"Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one;
for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night."

On reconsideration of the verses as they stand in 4 Ezra, I am led to question whether this is really the case. Is the dove called the choicest of the birds because the beloved in Song of Songs was already interpreted allegorically of Israel? Or alternatively, is the beloved in Song of Songs called a lily and a dove because these were fairly frequent in similes expressing the choicest, the most beautiful and the most excellent? Each of the seven images in 4 Ezra is either obvious or else commonplace in biblical writing, as has been documented in our commentary. In Rabbinic texts, as was pointed out, the sustained simile of Israel and the dove is to be found, but this is in texts cited in Lieberman's "Midrash Song of Songs", by the time of which works the allegorical or symbolic interpretation of Song of Songs was widely-known.¹⁰

If, however, the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs could be shown to be current in 4 Ezra, it could plausibly be considered to have engendered 4 Ezra's use of the images of the lily and the dove, both of which were applied by the poet of Song of Songs to the beloved woman. Otherwise, such a conclusion is not necessary.

4 Ezra 4:37

This verse occurs in a passage of predictive discourse, which is introduced by a somewhat cryptic prediction (4:26-32). Following that we read:

4:33 Then I answered and said, "How long and when will these things be? For our years are few and evil." 4:34 He answered me and said, "You do not

¹⁰ See note 20, below.

hasten faster than the Most High, for your haste is for yourself, but the Highest hastens on behalf of many. 4:35 Did not the souls of the righteous in their treasuries ask about these matters, saying, 'How long are we to remain here? And when will come the harvest of our reward?' 4:36 And Jeremiel the archangel answered them and said, 'When the number of those like yourselves is completed;

for he has weighed the age in the balance,
4:37 and measured the times by measure,
and numbered the times by number;
and he will not move or arouse
until that measure is fulfilled."

The second-last phrase of the verse 4:37 refers to the resurrection of the dead and uses terms implying sleep. The same sort of language is used in 4 Ezra 7:32 and 7:35.

What is intriguing is that the two very similar verbs, perhaps the identical ones that were in the original of 4 Ezra, occur together in Song 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4.

Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5 and cf. 8:4

I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, By gazelles or by hinds of the field: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready (desires)!

אם תעירו ואם תעוררו האהבה עד שתחפץ:

The triple repetition of the phrase "do not awake or arouse" in Song of Songs (even though 8:4 differs slightly) is notable and clearly was significant to the author of 4 Ezra, who picked it up. The continuation of the verse in Song of Songs is also suggestive from our perspective. Most likely, an allegorical exegesis of Song of Songs lies behind the verse in 4 Ezra here and "love" which must "desire" to awaken

is redemption or the Redeemer.¹¹ This is then an early allegory on Song of Songs, perhaps the first in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.¹²

4 Ezra was written about 95 CE during the lifetime of R. Aqiba b. Yosef (ca. 50-132 CE). From Aqiba's statements on Song of Songs, quoted at the beginning of this article, it is clear that his attitude to Song of Songs implies an allegorical interpretation of the book. The understanding of the book as an allegory of the love between God and Israel makes it "Holy of Holies" (קדוש קדשים).¹³ Judah Goldin in an important article refers to the saying of Rabbi Aqiba in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* on Exodus 15:2.¹⁴ In an aside from his central point, which deals with Aqiba's attitude to both human and divine love, Goldin remarks, "The verses beginning with 'My Beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy,' etc. manifestly were explained in some mystic or perhaps even secret, gnostic manner as a glorious but bold description of the person

¹¹ Interestingly, no similar understanding was found in the midrashim, see Stone, *4 Ezra*, 98n.

¹² P. S. Alexander, "The Song of Songs as Historical Allegory: Notes on the Development of an Exegetical Tradition," *Targumic and Cognate Studies - Essays in Honour of Martin McNamara*, eds. K. J. Cathcart and M. Maher (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 14-29. On page 15, note 3 he remarks, in the context of the existence of manuscripts of Song of Songs at Qumran, "This suggests that already by the first century BCE the book was being read allegorically, since it is hardly conceivable, given the religious outlook of the group behind the Scrolls, that they would have read the text literally." Of course, it would strengthen his argument greatly if proof were to emerge from textual material dated to that time.

¹³ Of course, Aqiba is also playing on the linguistic parallel of the two expressions *šir ha-širîm* and *qodeš qodašîm*.

¹⁴ Judah Goldin, "Toward a Profile of the Tanna, Aqiba Ben Joseph." *JAOS* 96 (1976), 38-56.

of God. ... Perhaps the interpretation of those Song of Song verses bordered on the esoteric."¹⁵

If Goldin is correct, then the presence of allegorical explanation in 4Ezra is not surprising, even though there the subject אהבה "love" is interpreted eschatologically. Perhaps "love" is taken to signify the Redeemer, or the redemption of the righteous as we have noted.

In the Aqiba saying in *Mekhilta* (which we are not claiming is an actual transcription of a discussion between Aqiba and Gentiles)¹⁶ the conclusion is implied that the verses describing the bridegroom in Song of Songs, are interpreted by allegory as a description of God himself. In an important essay Gershom Scholem observed that the origin of the *Shiur Qomah* speculation, the doctrine of the mystical "body of God", is linked to the same description of the lover on Song of Songs 5:11-16.¹⁷ Moreover, he maintains that this tradition originates in second-century Jewish speculation, and supports this claim by adducing a passage from Origen's prologue to Song of Songs in which it is regarded as an esoteric text.¹⁸ Scholem explains Origen's statement that this was so "because it contained a detailed description of the limbs of the lover, who was identified with God". Thus it became the Scriptural basis of *Shiur Qomah* speculation. Saul Lieberman supports this view of Song of Songs with a

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶ See Goldin, "Aqiba ben Joseph," 41. The same understanding of this passage is also forwarded by S. Lieberman in the work cited in note 20 below, p. 123.

¹⁷ G. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: JTS, 1960), 36-42 and especially 36-37. He had already dealt with *Shiur Qomah* in G. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (rev. edn.; New York: Schocken, 1966), 63-67, especially p. 63.

¹⁸ Origen, *Prologus in Canticum* in *PL* 13.63; Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 38.

plethora of early rabbinic texts as we have noted.¹⁹ Therefore, Scholem maintains, the authors of the oldest fragments of *Shiur Qomah* saw Song of Songs not just as an allegory but also as a strictly esoteric text "containing sublime and tremendous mysteries regarding God". His position relating to the dating of the texts has been challenged in recent years, as has the text of *Shiur Qomah* as a meditation on the description of the bridegroom in Song of Songs 5. Yet, the Tannaitic origin of the tradition and its connection with Song of Songs 5 seems plausible.²⁰ For our argument it is necessary only to show the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs, and its

¹⁹ See note 20 below. Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany: SUNY, 1992) discusses various aspects of *Shiur Qomah* in the early mystical texts, but does not address the issue of its origins, nor need he within the parameters of his book: see 99-103. He addresses the function of this tradition on pages 151-2 (in discussion with David Halperin) and 162-163.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39. Scholem appositely opens his essay with a reference to Ezekiel 1:26 in which the figure on the chariot appears as "the likeness of the appearance of a man". Scholem's position both as to the date of the documents called *Shiur Qomah* and as to the function of Song of Songs in that speculation has been challenged. See M.S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham: 1983), 13-41 and M.S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (TSAJ, 9; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1986), 1-3. In the first work cited, Cohen distinguishes on p. 51 between the type of speculation lying behind the texts of *Shiur Qomah*, and the document itself. He dates the document to the latter part of the first millennium, but does not rule out the applicability of Scholem's arguments to the type of speculation involved. Compare also David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot. Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1988), 362. In Appendix D to Scholem's book, Saul Lieberman published a study of references to Song of Songs as an esoteric text in Tannaitic literature. See in שיר השירים *Jewish Gnosticism*, 118-126. His position on this is endorsed by Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest*, 60.

contemporary relationship to the ideas of the measurements of the Deity adds a dimension to this discussion that is not necessary, and that certainly is not reflected in 4 Ezra.

So, it is not our contention that in 4 Ezra we have evidence for the esoteric interpretation of Song of Songs that is mentioned in the preceding paragraphs and which is connected with *Shiur Qomah*. Nor does 4 Ezra witness to the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs that refers it to the bridegroom God and the bride the Assembly of Israel, which was a necessary pre-requirement of the development of that esoteric speculation.²¹ But it does witness to a different allegorical interpretation, conceivably of an eschatological cast, in which the love is redemption or the Redeemer.

This leads us to a number of significant conclusions. We know from the Rabbinic sources focused on R. Aqiba and other early Tannaim, that Song of Songs was interpreted allegorically. Goldin and Lieberman both are justly careful about attributing *Shiur Qomah* esotericism to R. Aqiba, even in light of the material in *Mekhilta* mentioned above (and see note 20). But this does not exclude allegorical explanation of Song of Songs, only the particular development of the allegory that led to *Shiur Qomah* esotericism, a mystical theory according to which Song of Songs is the central revelatory text for the mystical knowledge of God.

It follows, therefore, that in the first century CE at the latest, allegorical explanation of Song of Songs was current, as is clear from the Aqiba material. If we give 4 Ezra 4:37 appropriate weight, there may have been competing allegorical

²¹ See on this Y. Zakovitch, *Song of Songs* (Miqra le-Yisra'el; Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, 1992), 32-34 (in Hebrew).

explanations, of which the pseudepigraphical apocalypse preserves a different or variant form from that dominant in rabbinic circles. Insufficient evidence is available at present for us to sketch the structure of that allegorical explanation, but its very existence in an apocalypse contemporary with Rabbi Aqiba opens up exegetical and religion-historical perspectives not generally in the purview students of the apocalyptic of Jewish mystical literature.