



THE SONG OF SONGS 1:1-4 A BIBLICAL READING

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There is a passage in the Mishnah (Yadayin 3:5) which modern commentators on the Song invariably quote, usually at the beginning of their work, to give tone at the kick-off before getting down to the real game. Here it is:

Heaven forbid! (literally Forbearance and peace!) No one from Israel has ever disputed concerning the Song of Songs that it does not render the hands unclean, since the whole world is not worthy of the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies ...

This passage is attributed to Rabbi Akiva, one of the great sages of Israel who rose to eminence at the end of the first century CE. Akiva was not only the supreme halakhist of his time, he was also one of the two great figures of the early Jewish mystical literature (the other being Rabbi Ishmael) in which he is the hero of the famous story, The Four Who Entered Pardes.

That Akiva held the view that the Song of Songs is the holy of holies is so beyond our range of comprehension that we are unable to give what he might have meant any serious consideration. Nevertheless the view taken in this paper is that the ancients possessed a capacity for non-rational discernment which we have largely lost, and that the Song of Songs, among the biblical books, is the most serious victim of that loss. So how can what has been lost be regained? Or perhaps I should say, how have I gone about my attempt to regain it?

In the Introduction to the 1955 edition of Mandelkern, the *Hebrew Concordance on the Bible*, Rabbi Dr Harry Freedman writes:

For a study of the exact meaning of words, particularly of a language that is no longer spoken, or written for a considerable length of time, comparison of their uses in particular contexts is essential, and for this a concordance is indispensable ... What words mean at any moment is no clear and certain indication of what they once meant. That can be ascertained only by a careful and exact study of them in their own milieu and setting ... The language of the Bible, its etymology, philology, and grammatical structure in all its nuances, must therefore be studied primarily through the Bible itself, by careful examination and comparison of the different contexts in which words are used.

But in using this way of reading the Bible one must already have a view about the nature of the work one is studying, what is rather patronizingly referred to in academia as bringing one's presuppositions to bear on it. One of my presuppositions is that the chaps who gave the Song a place in the canon were not quite the simpletons they are now assumed to be, allowing Near Eastern erotic poetry to slip through their innocent fingers, thus necessitating instant allegorization to cover their mistake. In this paper I shall look at some key points in the first four verses of the Song, and attempt to expound them in much the same spirit, I believe, as those chaps would have read them, and by the means described by Freedman above.

The title, Song of Songs, *Shir ha-Shirim*, is customarily passed over and attention focused on the ascription to Solomon. But a cursory glance at any concordance reveals that the word *shir* is used in the context of praising God. It is found particularly in the Psalms, most frequently in headings, and in such typical lines as: 'Sing to the Lord a new Song.' *Shir ha-Shirim* could, then, as well be translated 'Hymn of Hymns', and is so translated in the Peshitta, the Syriac translation. That *shir* occurs hundreds of times in the Hekhalot, the early Jewish mystical literature, to which we will come at verse four, is further confirmation that *shir* is to be understood in relation to the praise of God.

The attribution to Solomon, the builder of the Temple, in which hymns are sung, agrees with the title. But it also tells us that the Song is Wisdom literature, since wisdom was the gift given to Solomon by God in response to his request for it. In addition to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song, a number of other works are attributed to Solomon, notably, The Wisdom of Solomon, the Psalms of Solomon and the Odes of Solomon. Brevard Childs, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* writes: 'As Moses is the source of the Law, and David of the Psalms, so is Solomon the father of sapiential writing.'

Then follows the opening three verses:

*May he kiss me from the kisses of his mouth
for your breasts are better than wine.
For fragrance your oils are good;
your name is oil poured forth,
therefore the maidens love you.
Draw me, we will run after you;
the king has brought me into his chambers.
Let us be glad and rejoice in you,
let us praise your breasts more than wine;
righteous ones love you.*

The verb 'to kiss', *nashaq*, was the first word to which I applied the method described by Freedman of examining every occurrence in its context. It was a moment of revelation. I had expected quite a lot of kissing to be going on in several of the books - those of Samuel and Kings, for instance. But the thirty or so instances of the word *nashaq* reveal that there are no lovers kisses in the Bible - unless the three occurrences in the Song are taken to be exceptions. In addition it was the discovery - confirmed throughout my investigation of the language of the Song - that there is a consistency in the way words are used throughout the biblical books, in spite of their diversity, which was completely unexpected. Here are some examples of the use of *nashaq*:

- 'And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him; and they wept' (Gen. 33:4).
- 'Then Samuel took a vial of oil, and poured it upon [Saul's] head, and kissed him' (1 Sam. 10:1).
- 'Let the men that sacrifice kiss the calves' (Hos. 13:2).
- 'Righteousness and peace have kissed each other' (Ps. 85:10).
- 'He who gives a right answer kisses the lips' (Prov. 24:26).

It follows then that neither is the second word *peh*, 'mouth', used with sexual connotation in biblical language. BDB only manages three references under 'mouth, organ of kissing', and the other two, apart from our verse, are references to idol worship (1 Kings 19: 18 and Job 31: 27). 'Mouth' stands primarily for the organ of speech, or as that into which words are put: 'Speak to him and put words in his mouth' (Ex. 4:15). 'The Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth (Num. 22:38). 'I ...

will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him' (Deut. 18:18). 'He has put a new song in my mouth' (Ps. 40:3). And so on.

The next line, 'for your breasts are better than wine', introduces a key motif, and I think it is not too much to say that breast imagery in the Song, properly understood, is central to its meaning. There are two words used for 'breast', *shad* and *dad*, and for this latter word you will be accustomed to reading 'love', wherever it occurs, which is how it has been read since the pointing of the Song by the Masoretes, probably in the ninth century. An investigation into this question reveals that the Masoretes took the word *dad*, and pointed it to look like a noun for 'love' spelt defectively, eliminating in the opening verses the implicit parallelism between milk and wine. That the reading of some form of *dad*, was 'breasts' until the eighth century when, Philip Alexander tells us, the Targum to the Song was most probably written, is confirmed by the Targumist who evidently reads 'breasts' here, but shies off, inexplicably on the face of it, onto the story of the golden calf. The implication is, it seems to me, that the Targumist takes the breasts as a metaphor for the two tablets of stone and is, in the classic Rabbinic style, indicating this by using a contiguous line or episode, namely, the breaking of the two tablets of stone by Moses. That the Targumist links the breasts with the two tablets of stone is further suggested at 8:1 where he explicitly links 'the breasts of my mother' with the Torah.

The Targumist (Alexander believes the Targum to have been written by a single author), is driven by the desire, on the one hand, to evacuate all mystical elements from the Song, in which purpose he succeeds, and on the other to controvert Christian interpretation, in which purpose success is difficult to estimate. Raphael Loewe, in a long article, 'Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs' (1966), shows clearly that the Targumist is fighting on these two fronts, a *zweifrontkrieg*, as Loewe calls it. Nevertheless, the Targumist's move to interpret the breasts as a metaphor for the two tablets of stone is wholly consonant with the poet's intentions as suggested by two other occurrences where he explicitly refers to two breasts (4:5 and 7:4). Thus the breasts represent the nourishment which comes directly from God, or hardly less directly from his Torah.

The Torah is indeed the means by which the people are to be nourished, and it is represented primarily by the metaphor of stone, symbolizing permanence and durability, for the Torah must, in the first place, be engraved on the hardest, the most unyielding material available so that it might not easily be effaced and thus forgotten, or defaced and thus misinterpreted. But other metaphors are needed. The importance of the Song for the biblical literature is that it picks up from Hosea (2:2) and Isaiah (66:1) the metaphor of 'breasts' for that aspect of the Torah which is yielding, comforting and, above all, nourishing. Thus the breasts represent the feminine aspect of Torah, called both 'wife' and 'mother' in the Wisdom literature, an implicit metaphor unlike stone which is always explicit.

The attribution of breasts to God, as here in the opening verses of the Song, is unique in the Hebrew Bible, but we find it again in the Odes of Solomon, where the metaphor is used much more explicitly: 'And my own breasts I [God] prepared for them, that they might drink my holy milk and live by it' (Ode 8:14).

The Hebrew of verse 3 is clearly a play on the word 'oil' (*shemen*), and 'name' (*shem*). 'For fragrance your oils are good, your name is oil poured forth'. 'Your name', 'his name', 'the name' without a personal name attached can only be a reference to the holy Name. That this name is oil poured forth refers, I believe, to the holy anointing oils which were one of the five elements lacking in the period of the Second Temple during which period, it is widely agreed, the Song was written. Thus, the verse is, I think, telling us that the holy Name is all that is necessary to make up for this deficiency. And, if this is correct, it may be deduced that the author supports the Second Temple which, as far as I have been able to discern, is also suggested in three other places (3:6; 8:6; and 8:8). But in that case there must be another occurrence to make five to accord with the

number of elements missing, since that would agree with the way the poet works. That it is possible to deduce support for the Second Temple may have been decisive in the acceptance of the Song into the canon.

'... therefore the maidens love you.' The 'maidens', '*alamot*', suggest, on investigation into the use of the plural form, that these opening lines are liturgical. The *alamot* appear in procession both at Psalm 68:25 and in the procession of the ark into the Temple at 1 Chronicles 15:20. The verb in the next line, 'to draw' – 'Draw me, we will run after you' – is much used of the drawing power of divine love: 'I drew them [Israel] with bands of love' (Hos. 8:4), and, 'I loved you [Israel] with an eternal love, therefore I drew you with *hesed*' (Jer. 31:3).

The next line continues the sense of movement, 'the king has brought me into his chambers'. 'Chambers' here uses a form which only occurs otherwise in relation to the building of the Temple at 1 Chronicles 28:11: 'And David gave to Solomon his son the pattern of the porch ... and of its inner chambers.' These two lines, 'Draw me, we will run after you', and 'the king has brought me into his chambers.' are appended, in the Hekhalot literature to the Story of the Four Who Entered Pardes which, in the rabbinical literature, is found in four sources: the two Talmuds, the Tosephta, and the Song of Songs Rabbah. We will return to this subject shortly.

Some variation of the next line, 'Let us be glad and rejoice in you' occurs countless times in relation to God, most often in the Psalms. 31:7: 'I will be glad and rejoice in your mercy' (*hesed*). 32:11: 'Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous ones', 118:24: 'This is the day which the Lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice in it', and many times elsewhere, for instance, Isaiah 25:9: 'we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.' Thus our ancient reader would have taken the next line, which repeats the thought of verse 2, 'Let us praise [or remember] your breasts more than wine', as address to God.

The last line of our four verses is: 'Righteous ones love you.' The reading 'rightly' is, inevitably, favoured in modern translations. The King James' Bible has, 'the upright love thee', which agrees with the Targum's reading of *mesarim* as *meyyashsherim* 'righteous' (Alexander), which form occurs at Proverbs 9:15 plus the definite article.

This intertextual approach, it seems to me, provides us at the same time with both the plain meaning and the hidden meaning. Plain because the reader familiar with biblical language would know at once to whom the Song is addressed, and hidden because the meaning is concealed from those who read it in isolation from the Bible as a whole. But, to return to our opening quotation from the Mishnah, what might have been the issue which prompted Rabbi Akiva's assertion that the Song of Songs is the holy of holies?

One answer, which is consistent with what we know of Jewish mystical speculations and practice in the time of Akiva, was opened up for us by the pioneering work of the great modern scholar, Gershom Scholem. In a seminal chapter called 'The Age of *Shiur Qomah* Speculation and a Passage from Origen,' Scholem proposed connections between a magico-mystical treatise called the *Shiur Qomah* ('The Measure of the Body') and the Song of Songs in its description of the beloved at 5:10-16, and a passage in Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs. Origen, who lived in Caesarea in the late second century and early third, is known to have had a great deal of contact with the Rabbinic centre there. Here is part of the passage from Origen which Scholem quotes:

... the four they [the Hebrews] call '*deuteroeis*', that is to say, the beginning of Genesis, in which the creation of the world is described, the first chapter of Ezekiel, which tells about the cherubim; the end of the same, which contains the building of the Temple, and this book of the Song of Songs, should be reserved for study till the last.

Such a tradition regarding the Song is not known from Rabbinic writings but Scholem accepts Origen's evidence (as has everyone since), and he goes on to say:

The Song of Songs, because it contained a detailed description of the limbs of the lover, who was identified with God, became the basic scriptural text upon which the doctrine of the *Shiur Qomah* leaned. But it is clear that the authors of our fragments of *Shiur Qomah*, instead of interpreting the Song of Songs as an allegory within the framework of the generally accepted midrashic interpretations, saw it as a strictly esoteric text containing sublime and tremendous mysteries regarding God in his appearance on the throne of the Merkavah [God's throne-chariot] ...

According to this view, it could well have been the esoteric nature of the Song which raised the question in the Mishnah about whether it renders the hands unclean or, put in a more comprehensible way, whether its character is consonant with the law of Moses, and the vision of the prophets. Akiva combined the role of being the supreme expositor of the law of Moses, with being the only one of the Four of whom it is written that he entered Pardes in peace and came out in peace. Thus Akiva represents the reconciliation of two mutually antagonistic traditions, that of mystical practice and that of the Law, when he claims that 'no one in Israel has ever disputed concerning the Song of Songs' because 'the Song of Songs is the holy of holies'.