MESSIANIC INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG OF SONGS IN LATE-MEDIEVAL IBERIA

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The *Song of Songs* offers its readers a confusing and sometimes opaque dialogue between a female lover or bride and a male lover or bride-groom. Medieval exegetes, both Jewish and Christian, perceived that it was a love story.¹ Nearly all agreed, however, that it was not a story of love between two merely human individuals; there was a deeper meaning to the narrative. Allegorical, symbolic, and moral readings of the *Song of Songs* were thus the rule throughout the medieval period, though they varied strikingly both in their content and in their approach to the “plain” meaning of the text.²

For Christians, for example, beginning with Origen in the third century, the female lover was commonly taken to represent the Church and the male lover God, in particular in his incarnation as Jesus.³ Among rabbinic Jews, however, in line with the imagery favored by the biblical Prophets, the central line of interpretation held that the female lover represented the people of Israel and the male lover represented God. The *Song* was also associated from early on with the spring Passover season and with the specific themes of the holiday itself, a central one being messianic redemption. In early rabbinic messianic thought, the Exodus functioned as a *type* of divine redemption,

¹ It is impossible to give a comprehensive listing of scholarship on either the medieval interpretations of the *Song of Songs* or the history of Jewish messianism here, so I will only refer readers to the most relevant literature.
² For a bibliography of medieval Hebrew commentaries, see Barry D. Walfish, “Annotated Bibliography of Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs,” in *Ha-Miqra’ bi-Re’i Mefarashav: The Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem, 1994), 518–571.
a model of all previous ones and certainly of the final future one.\(^4\) By assimilation, then, the Song emerges as the allegorical depiction of redemption. An example is the early *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* (5th or 6th c.),\(^5\) in which homilies for the beginning of Nisan weave together the Exodus from Egypt with the future redemption by means of verses from the Song. Whether as cause or as effect, the homiletic identification of the Exodus with the messianic redemption, and of the Song as a symbol-bed of both, formed part of the eventual theological justification for the public reading of this text on the Passover holiday, the festival of redemption.\(^6\)

Beginning with strands drawn from classical rabbinic literature and liturgical poetry, a consistent reading of the Song as a figurative narrative of the ongoing historical relationship between the Jews and their God was consolidated by the time of the seventh-century Aramaic Targum, which has itself been called a “profoundly messianic document.”\(^7\) From there (and from the many disconnected pieces of this interpretation that appear in the Talmud and *midrashim*), this reading was established as the traditional (called the “midrashic” or “of our rabbis”) interpretation among Jews of the medieval period. It is in

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\(^5\) In *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, by far the most intensive use of Song of Songs verses appears in piska 5, meant for *Shabbat ha-ḥodesh*, which centers on the verse beginning “ha-ḥodesh ha-ẓeh” (Exodus 12.2).

\(^6\) It is not known at what point the Song of Songs came to be recited in synagogue during the holiday of Passover, or how common it was. Among the Palestinian *piyyutim* composed around the Song, not all were associated with Passover, and even where they were, as Günter Stemberger has emphasized, this would not necessarily imply a synagogue setting for a reading of the book itself. Günter Stemberger, “Die Megillot als Festlesungen der jüdischen Liturgie,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 18 (2003): 261–276. I thank Clemens Leonhard for alerting me to this article and for sharing his thoughts on this subject with me. In the Diaspora, the first attestation of this practice occurs in the tractate *Soferim*, which states that the Song is to be read on the last two days of Passover. But the date of that work is unclear and the relevant part may have been composed at a later time in Europe. The first quotations from *Soferim* are found in eleventh-century Ashkenaz and none appear in Iberian literature until the fourteenth century; no fragments of it are found in the geniza material. See Debra Reed Blank, “It’s Time to Take Another Look at ‘Our Little Sister’ Soferim: A Bibliographical Essay,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 90 (1999): 1–26. Mahzor Vitry, from around 1200, also testifies to the custom of reciting Song of Songs during Passover, but specifies a different setting for its recitation than appears in *Soferim*.

\(^7\) Philip S. Alexander, trans., *The Targum of Canticles* (Collegeville, MN, 2003), 56.