Photograph by Alan S. Orling

JPS דור דור
SCHOLAR ודורשו
OF DISTINCTION
SERIES

GERSON D. COHEN

STUDIES IN THE VARIETY OF RABBINIC CULTURES

The Jewish Publication Society
Philadelphia • New York 5751—1991

The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality

I

Sometime around the year 100, the supreme council of rabbis in Jamnia took up the question of the canonicity of certain books of the Bible. Among the legacies of earlier generations was the sanctity of such books as the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. According to the reports of one of the earliest of the Tannaim: "Originally, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes were suppressed; since they were held to be mere parables and not part of the Holy Writings, [the religious authorities] arose and suppressed them; [and so they remained] until the men of Hezekiah came and interpreted them."[1]

Indeed, some of these verses must have required a good deal of interpretation, for their plain sense did not exactly commend them as Holy Writ. How could the same category of sanctity be applied to the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, and Chronicles—let alone the Pentateuch and the Prophets—as to verses such as these:

> Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field
> Let us sit among the henna flowers
> Let us get up early to the vineyards
> Let us see whether the vine hath budded
> Whether the vine blossom be opened
> And the pomegranates be in flower;
> There will I give thee my love [Song of Songs 7:2–13].

Need we wonder that despite the belief that these verses were the products of Solomon's pen, some were skeptical of their sanctity? This uneasiness about the book must have continued down to the end of the first century, for even as late as the convocation at Jamnia some still expressed doubts about the true nature of the book. Against these doubts, Rabbi Akiba protested vehemently and cried: "Heaven forbid! No Jew ever questioned the sanctity of the Song of Songs; for all of creation does not compare in worth to the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. Indeed, all Scripture is holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy."[2]

Ironically, modern students of Scripture have vindicated the misgivings of Rabbi Akiba's opponents, for they have unanimously dismissed the theory that the Song of Songs was originally a religious work. However, even this "modern" view had adherents in the days of Rabbi Akiba. Indeed, he himself pronounced an anathema against those who crooned the verses of the Song of Songs as erotic jingles.[3] To be sure, modern critics are well aware of the position of Rabbi Akiba, which was accepted by all subsequent schools of traditional Judaism. Modern exegetes, accordingly, respectfully indicate that the Song was included in the canon only because it was believed to be an allegory of the dialogue of love between God and Israel and then turn around and interpret the text quite literally.

Let us, therefore, ask the historical question that needs to be asked. The rabbis of the first and second century, like the intelligent ancients generally, were as sensitive to words and the meaning of poetry as we are. How, then, could they have been duped—or better yet, have deluded themselves and others—into regarding a piece of erotica as genuine religious literature, as the holy of holies! Should not the requirements of elementary common sense give us reason for pause and doubt? Perhaps, after all, the poem was known to them as a religious work; or—granted that modern literary criticism is correct in its appraisal—perhaps, many of its earliest readers felt that the Song, with all its direct and uninhibited expressions of sensual love, best expressed their highest and most profound religious sentiments. Perhaps they seized upon it—regardless of the intentions of its author(s)—as a work of authentic religious expression. If so, why? Why should ancient Jews, who after all were quite modest and socially correct, expose themselves and their most precious book to the kind of "misuse" and misunderstanding that ancients and moderns alike have manifested?

To answer glibly that the work was accepted as an allegory merely evades the basic issue. The problem is, really, why anyone should have thought of treating the work as an allegory in the first place. There must have been works aplenty that were excluded from the canon and that were not reinterpreted. One must, therefore, ask why the scales were

tipped in favor of this particular poem that was *a priori* so religiously questionable.

The problem is all the more serious when the Jewish reverence for the Song of Songs is studied against the background of the ancient world. The ancient Israelites and Jews were, of course, sufficiently familiar with idolatrous rites and, above all, with the significant role fertility cults and sacred prostitution played in neighboring cultures. Their religious authorities were horrified by them. This is manifested by the Pentateuchal prohibition not only of sacred prostitution itself, but even of the contribution of a whore's price to the Temple of the Lord; by the repeated prophetic denunciations of anything that remotely hinted at such rites and by the total elimination of the fairer sex from any official role in the Temple; indeed by the prohibition against women even entering the inner courtyard of the Temple. The institution of "sacred marriage" would have been unthinkable to the Hebrew king or priest. Why, then, did a theme such as that of the Song of Songs come to represent a conversation of love between Israel and its God? Note that the very same circles that were insistent on the most scrupulous observance of the prohibition against representing God by any image or likeness not only admitted, but *advocated* the canonization of a work whose idiom makes anthropomorphism a triviality by comparison!

The conclusion is inescapable that the work filled a gap, a void no other work in the Bible could fill. Its very daring vocabulary best expressed, and was, perhaps, the only way of expressing what the Jew felt to be the holiest and loftiest dimension of religion—the bond of love between God and His people. In the final analysis, it is not the canonization of the Song of Songs that needs to be explained but the Jewish conception of the bond of love between God and Israel that made the canonization possible.

II

The explanation, paradoxically enough, is to be sought in the type of religious expression current in the ancient Near Eastern milieu out of which Israelite religion sprang. In the ancient Near East, men spoke of, and to, their gods in terms that were projections of relationships that obtained between humans on earth, most often in terms that reflected—and extended—their relationships with their own rulers. Like the Israelite, the Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, Babylonian, and Canaanite of ancient times often addressed his god(s) "by lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" (Milton), as creator, master, king, source of life, revealer of law, healer of the sick, guardian of the orphan and widow, protector of the righteous, and so on and on. The attributes of the ancient gods expressed the functions their worshippers hoped these kings and deities would fulfill.[4]

Indeed, there are even expressions of intense affection on the part of

the worshipper toward his god. However, one metaphor that cannot be found in the literature of any ancient religion outside of Israel is the description of the god as lover or husband of his *people*.[5] This seems odd, for an examination of the myth and rituals of these other religions will reveal a profound paradox about the pagan renunciation and the Israelite adoption of such a metaphor. The ancient peoples had many graphic myths about the lives, struggles, and loves of their gods—myths which ancient teachers like Plato found most objectionable on moral grounds. What is more, the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean world, Semitic as well as Hellenic, regularly celebrated rites of fertility in which carnal union with the gods was enacted in the temple or sacred grove. On the other hand, the religion of Israel alone had no myth, no account of the struggle of God against the forces of chaos, and no sexual ritual. The Lord was master of fertility as he was master of the universe and the fullness thereof. However, the Hebrew God was inscrutable and could not be worshipped by rites that were magical and coercive. Whenever some Israelites did attempt from time to time to introduce rites that smacked of fertility cults, they immediately evoked the wrath and excoriation of those jealous guardians of Israelite faith—the prophets. And yet, after all this, the Hebrew God alone was spoken of as the lover and husband of his people, and only the house of Israel spoke of itself as the bride of the Almighty.

It goes without saying that the source of the metaphor of God as husband of Israel cannot be located in the Canaanite Baalistic rituals in which some, or even many, Israelites may have participated. In the first place, as we have indicated, pagan rituals expressed no such relationship. But even if they had, we would still have to explain how fanatical monotheists, who would have no truck with such rituals or with terms associated with them, could have made peace with such a figure of speech and then proceed to make it central in their thought.

The solution must be sought within Israelite religion itself. A reconsideration of the terms and metaphors employed in this connection suggests that they derive from the very heart of the Jewish religion itself and are actually a midrashic development from the very first prohibition of the Decalogue, "You shall have no other gods beside Me." Absolute fidelity on the part of Israel to one God, come what may, is the sum and substance of the message of the Bible. Now in the life of the ancient Israelite there was only one situation reflecting that kind of absolute relationship, and that was the vow of fidelity of a woman to her husband. Infidelity is a euphemism for adultery, promiscuity, looseness, and prostitution, and it is precisely in these terms that the prophets, from Amos to Ezekiel, represent the hankering after, or the adoption of, the ways of the pagans. The sixteenth chapter of Ezekiel is a religious indictment of the people in terms that even by the canons of ancient tastes must have

sounded as quite prurient. And yet its imagery does not seem to have shocked the faithful Jew of Babylon, or of later generations, for it was but a forthright and graphic expression of the theological relationship as the Jew understood it. The promiscuity portrayed by Ezekiel was principally religious infidelity and a violation of the vows of a "religious marriage." The jealousy of God, which the prophet assumes, is properly characteristic of a husband. The very same commandment that forbids the worship of other gods or the making of graven images concludes with a thundering warning: "For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God." The identical root *qana*, impassioned or jealous, is used elsewhere in the Pentateuch, Numbers 15:14, in the technical sense of a husband who is jealous of his wife. In other words, the earliest documents of Israelite religion had already expressed the requirement of religious fidelity in the terms employed for the demands of marital fidelity.

No other ancient people entertained such notions or metaphors of its gods, for no ancient people conceived of itself as having the same intense, personal, and exclusive relationship with its god that Israel did. The God of Israel was not merely the God of earth, of the Land of Promise, and the Lord of the Heavens. He was specifically the God of Israel, the Lord and Master of a particular group, who, in turn, owed Him special marks of duty, the duty of the most intense loyalty, that of a wife to her husband. Ergo, the God of Israel, who would brook no fealty or service to other gods, became the husband of Israel, and the people became His bride.[6]

There can be no more doubt about the antiquity of this conception than there can be of its general acceptance in all circles of ancient Israelite religious leadership. The Bible is replete with more than mere hints of this conception of the relationship between God and Israel. For instance,

> You must not worship any other god, because the Lord, whose name is Impassioned [*qana* = "jealous"], is an impassioned [*qana*] God. You must not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust [*we-zanu* = "whore"] after their gods and sacrifice to their gods.... And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust [*we-zanu*] after their gods and will cause your sons to lust [*we-hiznu* = "seduce"] after their gods [Exodus 34:14–15].

Or, to quote from a historical work: "And they hearkened not unto their judges, for they went astray [*zanu* = 'whored'] after other gods, and worshipped [Judges 2:17]." The instances we have cited could be multiplied many times, and if we cite one more it is only because of the familiarity it ultimately gained as part of the liturgy of the *Shema'*. In the final section of this recitation from Scripture, the fringes were ordered to be worn on

the corners of garments, "so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your *lustful urge* [Numbers 15:39]." That the lust here is not merely sexual is clear from the following verse: "Thus shall you be reminded *to observe all My commandments* and to be holy to your God."

As there is a positive aspect to the relationship between husband and wife, so, too, there was in the Israelite conception of the relationship between God and His people. It is, therefore, most significant to establish that this positive aspect, namely the loyalty of Israel to its God, was expressed in terms that implied fidelity and love in the very same ancient strata of the Bible that proclaim the negative formulative of jealousy we have been emphasizing. To return again to the Decalogue: "For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who *love* Me and keep My commandments." Note that already the Decalogue couples, and in a sense thus defines, loyalty to God with love of God and with the faithful observance of His commandments. If one, therefore, wonders what is meant by the moving verses of Deuteronomy, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might [Deuteronomy 6:5]," one need only look elsewhere in the same book to find the content of this ostensibly platitudinous phrase clearly spelled out: "And now, O Israel, what is it that the Lord your God demands of you? It is to revere the Lord your God, to walk *only* in *His* paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul [Deuteronomy 10:12]." And shortly after that: "Love, therefore, the Lord your God and always keep His charge, His laws, His norms, and His commandments [Deuteronomy 11:1]." Clearly, if disloyalty was whoring, obedience and observance of the commandments were the concrete expressions of fidelity; in the language of the metaphorical relationship, of love.

Thus far we have made almost exclusive reference to documents stemming from the legal and priestly circles of ancient Israel. We have done so deliberately, to emphasize that neither the conception of the relationship between God and Israel nor the key terms in which it was later expressed were the exclusive contribution of the prophets. The latter, to be sure, spelled it out, amplified it, and gave it a new intensity. However, they had inherited it from more ancient circles of popular and priestly monotheism.

III

No student of the Bible can fail to be shaken by the pathos and rage of the prophecies of Hosea, who drew much of his imagery and religious insights from his picture of a tragic experience of marital love.[7]

In Hosea's chastisement, the totality of Israel—what the rabbis call

knesset Israel—is represented by the mother-wife figure, while the individuals of Israel are designated as the children. The mother has been seeking false and foreign lovers, but in the end she will say: "I will go and return to my first husband; for then it was better with me than now [Hosea 2:9]." Here, God is openly and forthrightly—unabashedly anthropomorphically—represented as Israel's husband.

Even if we should grant that Hosea's prophecies were based on his own experience, we must still wonder whether Hosea presumed to construct a religious allegory merely out of his personal frustrations. Is all that we have in the message of Hosea the transference of his own experience to a theological plane? Would it not be more correct to say that Hosea saw a religious message in his own experience or, as is more likely, deliberately enacted a religious allegory, *because* his Israelite mind had been taught from childhood to think of the relationship between God and Israel in terms of marital fidelity, in terms of love! That is indeed the case, and it is significant that Hosea's imagery added nothing to what is already *implied* in the Decalogue. Harlotry meant to him principally religious infidelity, idolatry, worship of strange gods. The greatness of his message thus lies not in the originality of its concepts, but in their direct and poetic formulation. Hosea's poetic power lay not only in his raging passion against the infidelity of Israel, but in his promise of restitution in the same figure of speech:

> And I will *betroth* thee unto Me forever, yea, I will *betroth* thee unto Me in righteousness and in justice, in loyalty and in *love*. And I will *betroth* thee unto Me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the Lord [Hosea 2:21–22].

This is a promise not of a new relationship, but of a restitution, of repair and restoration to an *original* form.

Nevertheless, in the final analysis, Hosea did contribute something new to the literature and vocabulary of Israel. Hosea made explicit, put into bold relief, a motif that had hitherto been but one among several expressing the relationship between God and Israel. Hosea was the first and for that matter the only one to prophesy daringly: "And it shall come to pass on that day, saith the Lord, that you shall call me 'My husband,' and you shall not call me any longer 'My Baal' [Hosea 2:18]"—a word having the *double-entendre* of mastery and idolatry. No less daring was the *double-entendre* of his vision of the time when Israel would "know the Lord" alone, for in the context of the promise of betrothal the phrase, which to Hosea meant obedience,[8] had distinct overtones of marital union. What had been merely implicit in the speech of the past, Hosea brought out to the full light of day.

Henceforth, this motif was to appear again and again in the speech of the prophets. Jeremiah, the prophet of doom and consolation, took up

both aspects of the imagery and gave them renewed poignancy. As modern critics have often noted, Jeremiah was a careful student of the prophecies of Hosea and had been deeply influenced by them. "Thus saith the Lord," he proclaims, "I recall the devotion of your youth, your bridal love, how you followed me through the wilderness, in a land that was not sown [Jeremiah 2:2]." To Jeremiah the idyllic beginnings of Israel's history were the days of the espousals of Israel to its God in a troth of law and love. Accordingly, Israel's turning its back on the covenant is portrayed in similar terms: "Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number [*Ibid.* 2:32]." There is no need to refer to the many instances of the usage in Jeremiah and especially in the prophecies of his disciple, Ezekiel. They are legion and familiar. What it has been our purpose to stress is the direct and continuing chain of the imagery of Israel the wife and God the husband, and in Jeremiah's turn of phrase, of Israel the bride and God the lover. Each of the prophets contributed his own poetic variation on this motif, but the theme itself was a classical one even in ancient times, integral to the Hebrew concept of religion.

The identical theme was taken up by the anonymous prophet of the exilic period commonly referred to as the Second Isaiah. However, in the work of this prophet of hope and consolation, it is the vision of the restitution of the ancient relationship that is graphically portrayed. To the Second Isaiah, Jerusalem is a widow, a picture he may well have appropriated from the author of Lamentations: "How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! How she is become as a widow [Lamentations 1:1]." In the context of Lamentations, of course, the widowhood of Jerusalem represents despoliation, depopulation, and desolation. But "Isaiah" quickly turned a figure of speech into a symbol: "Fear not," he cries to Zion the desolate,

> for thou shalt not be ashamed. Neither be thou confounded, for thou shalt not be put to shame; for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and the reproach of thy *widowhood* shalt thou remember no more. For thy Maker is thy husband, the Lord of hosts is His name; and the Holy One of Israel is thy redeemer, the God of the whole earth shall He be called. For the Lord hath called thee as a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit; and a wife of youth, can she be rejected? saith thy God. For a small moment have I forsaken thee. But with great compassion will I bring thee back to Me [Isaiah 54:4–7].

This is a very delicate transition from the popular metaphor of a land widowed of her inhabitants to a land whose reunion will be with her Maker as husband. Isaiah carefully refrains from ever stating the metaphor too positively. In this, as in a subsequent passage, he cautiously shifts from one meaning to another:

> Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken. [We would say "divorced"; and once again I must stress that the addressee of his speech is the Land rather than the people.] Neither shall thy land any more be termed desolate; but thou shalt be called, My delight is in her [a term for marital love][9] and My land, Espoused; for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be espoused. For as a young man espouseth a virgin, so shall thy sons espouse thee; and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee [Isaiah 62:4–5].

Since in the prophecy of Second Isaiah, this is a return, a restoration, we need hardly wonder that later rabbinic exegetes, who fondly searched every word of the Bible for new and undiscovered meaning, would seek to locate in Scripture the exact time of the consecration of this marriage between the bride of Israel and its God. What better occasion could be, and indeed was, selected for this than the theophany at Sinai, when the daughter of Jacob, the house of Israel, was given the Torah as its marriage-ring?[10] What was specifically rabbinic in this interpretation of the narrative in Exodus was the play on words and consequent reading of a metaphor into verses where it was conspicuously absent. But once again, the rabbis were merely amplifying what they had already found in Scripture. To the rabbinic Jew, the Bible was a unit. What was stated in one book could be and should be found elsewhere, even where it is not explicit in the plain sense of the text. Since the theme of an inseparable marital bond between Israel and its God appeared implicitly in the Pentateuch and explicitly in the prophets, the historical beginning for the relationship had to be located.

IV

It is against this background that we are able to understand the pattern of mind that could see in the Song of Songs the very type of expression that would convey positively and fully what was implicitly or but briefly stated in the works of the prophets. Or, to put the matter differently, from the point of view of the Jews of early rabbinic times, without such a work as the Song of Songs the Bible was not quite complete. The prophetic metaphor had been employed either as an admonition against idolatry or as an eschatological vision of the restoration of Israel to its proper relationship with God and to its reunion with its bereaved country. But what of the believing and faithfully observant Jew of rabbinic times? How was he to articulate in the here and now his affirmation of, and his delight in, God's love, his satisfaction in the unique relationship between God and Israel expressed through the Torah and its commandments?

A glance at the book of Psalms is most instructive in this connection, not for what it has but for what it lacks. On the one hand, no other book

of the Bible is so continual a paean of love to the Almighty as the book of Psalms. And yet, despite all of its affirmations of submission and devotion, the book of Psalms lacks one quality that the Song of Songs does possess, and that to the rabbinic Jew was all-important: the assurance of the inseverable *marital union* between God and Israel.

The Psalmists speak to and of God as Lord, King, Master, Creator, Father, and so on; they address Him directly and familiarly, but they do not turn to Him as a lover, as the bridegroom of Israel. This omission is probably no accident and has left its mark on subsequent Jewish liturgy. Whatever the reason for this, what is important to stress at this point is that the most challenging figure of speech employed by the prophets was conspicuously missing in the Psalms. Was it indeed impossible to assert somehow what the Jew had come to feel, his yearning and love for his lover, for the One who had designated His name over His people? The Song of Songs filled this gap, and in a way that satisfied religious needs.

Here I will let the ancient students of Scripture speak for themselves: "Why is the work called the Song of Songs? To indicate," the rabbis say, "that the Song is really a collection of songs responding to each other."

> In all other hymns [in the Bible] either the Almighty sings the praises of Israel, or Israel sing the praises of the Almighty. . . . However, only here in the Song of Songs their hymn to God is answered by a hymn to them. Thus, God praises Israel, saying [Song 1:15]: "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold thou art fair"; and Israel responds with a paean to Him [with the words of the very next verse]: "Behold, Thou art fair, my Beloved, yea, pleasant."[11]

In other words, whereas the other books of the Bible do indeed proclaim the bond of love between Israel and the Lord, only the Song of Songs is a *dialogue* of love, a conversation between man and God that gives religious faith a kind of intensity no other form of expression can.

These then were some of the needs that the Song of Songs filled. As the work of Solomon it was prophetic revelation. As revelation it was the truth. But it was truth in a special sense. It was the most intimate of truths, the type that was vouchsafed only to the true believer. As the ultimate form of theological expression, it was comparable to the one moment in the year when the high-priest entered the royal chamber, as it were, the Holy of Holies, and confronted his God privately on behalf of the house of Israel. It was this moment of supreme religious experience to which Rabbi Akiba compared the effulgence of emotion evoked by the Song of Songs when he said that all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs—the Holy of Holies.

For an appreciation of the role the Song of Songs played in the canon, it matters not at all who really composed the Song and when. What

counted for the Jews who sanctified it was that they believed it to be of Solomon's pen. And this they could readily believe, for the Song was in keeping with a metaphorical usage found and even spelled out, as we have seen, in the Torah and the prophets.

V

It is significant that of all the rabbis who should so vigorously express the importance and unique sanctity of the Song, it should be Rabbi Akiba. It is he who is represented in rabbinic literature as being one of the four types of ancient Jews who indulged in mystical speculation. It is further reported that of the four only Rabbi Akiba emerged as sound in his faith as he had been when he entered.[12] What this report emphasizes is the precipitous height of such an ascent to God—its glories and its dangers. Intense religious passion is risky, for its symbolism can easily be cheapened to the *risqué*. Long after it had been accepted into the canon, the Song of Songs, or at least its interpretation, was accordingly reserved for the elite, for the select few, who had proven their trustworthiness through maturity and their way of life.[13] And even when it was taught publicly, the allegorical interpretation was carefully sifted to avoid open discussion of the mystical states and doctrines the knowledgeable considered to be embedded in it. It was an *allegory* of love, and it was enough for the average man to know that only in the most general terms. To the extent that the Song was interpreted publicly, its verses were represented as being allegories of Jewish history, of the publicly documented contacts between the collectivity of Israel and the divine command. The profoundest secrets of the Song, of its innermost allegory, were restricted to the few, to select individuals, who entered the chambers of mystical knowledge in solitude.[14]

VI

In the final analysis, all that we have really explained up to this point is why the Song of Songs *could* have been admitted into religious Jewish literature. What remains to be explained is why the work was published and allegorized at the time in history that it was.

Scholars are for the most part in accord that while the Song of Songs may contain very ancient strata, the work as we have it now cannot have been completed before the Macedonian conquest of the Near East and rise of Hellenistic culture. In other words, both the work itself and the rabbinic allegory must be considered as aspects of the Jewish culture that emerged as a consequence of the impact, and under the influence, of Hellenism.[15]

In all likelihood, the allegorizing activity took place not long after the Song itself was compiled and both the book (understood quite sensually) as well as the religious interpretation of it reflect two sides of the identi-

cal cultural temper. The motif underlying both of these is Love. To the literalist, it is love in a sensual sense, while to the religious exegete it is love in a spiritual, *meta*-physical sense. Now Love-fulfilled, as an *abstraction*, as the highest and therefore the most desirable human experience, was a subject placed in the forefront of the intellectual agenda by the Platonic dialogues. It is from these dialogues, the textbook of the ancient intelligentsia, that the meaning of true love came to be discussed throughout the Hellenistic world. Wherever Greek literature and philosophy went, the problems of Beauty and Love went with them. Literature and artifacts of the early Hellenistic period reflect a considerable increase in the uninhibited concentration on erotic subjects, this interest being expressed in the religious sphere by a growing emphasis on the person of Aphrodite. In the latter half of the fourth century B.C.E., the Greek temple in Knidos displayed for the first time in history a nude Aphrodite, attracting world-wide attention for the daring innovation in the representation of the goddess no less than for the artistic masterpiece of its sculptor, Praxiteles.[16] Hellenistic civilization, it will be recalled, was the soil out of which arose many schools of ethics and thought, each purporting to teach the true, the pure, the noble, the beautiful. For virtually all of these schools Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* had provided an ultimate goal, an expression of the highest human emotion and state.[17] Indeed, the fixation on, and the definition of, the proper human motives and emotions, are two of the characteristic contributions of Hellenistic thought. Inevitably, Jewish teachers and thinkers, who claimed that their own tradition possessed the sum and substance of all truth, beauty, and goodness, would have to show how their way of life met the needs and demands of the religious spirit. Hence, it is no accident that in this very period many circles in Judaism first reflected deep concern with the intentions of the heart, with purity of thought, with chastity of motives, with love.

Love was thus in the air of Hellenistic civilization, and so were the many programs for the attainment of love. Some of them were quite carnal, the objects of contempt of the philosopher no less than of the rabbi. But other forms were quite the vogue in certain religious-philosophical circles, and to the rabbi these forms were frequently no less repugnant, indeed religiously even more dangerous than the vulgar, carnal type. No rabbi could tolerate the type of "enthusiasm," the spiritual ascent to and the union with the deity, that these forms bespoke. However, if love could not be ignored, it could be channeled, reformulated, and controlled, and this is precisely what the rabbinic allegory of the Song of Songs attempted to achieve.[18]

In the Song itself, the love between male and female is never consummated,[19] and throughout the rabbinic interpretations of the Song, one is aware of a marital relationship between two individual entities that are

never united as one flesh. Israel and God are always distinct beings, and never can the twain unite. What binds them in their relationship is the *contract*, but Israel never becomes the mystical body of its deity. The Jewish mystic of ancient times may rise to Heaven and *behold* the glory of the throne, but he will never cease to be an onlooker from the outside, a human whose being and essence can never be altered. The very rapture of the Song became a prophylaxis against the pantheistic enthusiasm and knowledge (*gnosis*) that the Jew must have known from the world about him.[20]

Ultimately then, the Song of Songs bespeaks the great paradox of the biblical metaphor of God as the bridegroom or husband of Israel. On the one hand, the tabu against representation of the deity precluded the attribution to Him of any sexuality; and this was buttressed by the prohibition of any cultic sexual rites. On the other hand, the Bible unquestionably affirmed the masculinity of God and spoke of Him graphically as the husband. Both sides of the paradox were fruitful in producing the unique totality that is rabbinic religion. By denying the sexuality of God, Judaism affirmed His utter transcendence, His absolute freedom from the drives and passions that beset the gods of mythical religions and that made of them but *super*-men. By proclaiming His masculinity, on the other hand, Judaism affirmed His reality and, equally important, His potency. It thus avoided the pitfall of the impersonal deity of the Greek philosophical monotheists, on the one hand, and the mythically anthropomorphic deity of paganism on the other. To go one step further, by denying His sexuality, it eliminated the possibility of a magical and coercive (homeopathic) ritual. By conversely acknowledging His masculinity, it contended that God was a person to whom one could turn with a *supplicatory* ritual. To such a person one could proclaim fealty, submission, and love. However, let it not be forgotten, this love could reach the pitch of ecstasy, but never the stage of mystical *union*. The latter form, the neo-Platonic-Plotinian ecstasy, was but the other (and philosophical) side of the pagan coin of a mythical man-like god. The Hebrew husband-wife metaphor insisted to the last on reaffirming the God of Moses, Hosea, Jeremiah, and the Second Isaiah, who could only be heard or seen, and even then only by the elect.

NOTES

1. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, Ch. 1 (Translated by J. Goldin. New Haven, 1955), p. 5.
2. *M.* Yadayyim 3:5, and see S. Lieberman, "Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim" in G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960), pp. 118f.

3. *Tosef.* Sanhedrin 12:10 (ed. Zuckermandel), p. 433.

4. See M. Smith, "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East," *JBL*, LXXI (1952), 135f. and especially 141f. I owe the quotation from Milton, *Paradise Lost*, V, 573 to E. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (Boston, 1938), p. 15; cf. also Bevan's own formulation on p. 30.

5. Smith, *loc. cit.* See also T. Ohm, *Die Liebe zu Gott in den nichtchristlichen Religionen* (Krailling vor Munich, 1950); J. Moffatt, *Love in the New Testament* (London, 1930), pp. 9f.

6. For similar, but by no means identical explanations of the origins of the marriage motif and its relationship to the allegory on the Song of Songs, cf. D. Buzy, "L'Allégorie Matrimoniale de Jahve et d'Israël et la Cantique des Cantiques," *Vivre et Penser*, III (1945), 79f.; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on The Book of Exodus* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1959), p. 163 (brought to my attention by Prof. J. Goldin); C. Spicq, *Agapê* (Leiden, 1955—*Studia Hellenistica*, No. 10), p. 113 nn. 3–4; E. A. Synan, "The Covenant of Husband and Wife," *The Bridge*, IV (1962), 150. The crucial distinction between "marriage" of the god to the land and a marital relationship between God and the people of Israel is made by A. Roifer in *Tarbiz*, XXXI (1960–61), 140 n. 80.

7. On Hosea's marriage imagery, see H. L. Ginsberg, "Studies in Hosea 1–3," *Yehezkel Kaufman Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 50f.

8. Cf. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Trans. by M. Greenberg. Chicago, 1960), pp. 372 f; *idem, Toledot ha-Emunah ha-Yisraelit*, VI, 113.

9. Cf. Genesis 34:19; Deuteronomy 21:14 etc.

10. See L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, VI, 36 n. 200. Cf. also I. Heinemann, *Altjuedische Allegoristik* (Baselau, 1936), p. 31, par. b. For customs in early modern times based on this concept, cf. A. Ben-Ezra in *Hadoar*, 4 Sivan 5721 (1961), 473.

11. Midrash Shir ha-Shirim 1:11 to Song of Songs 1:1.

12. *Tosef.* Ḥagiga 2:3–4 (ed. Lieberman), p. 381.

13. Scholem, *op cit.*, pp. 14f., 36f.

14. Lieberman, *ibid.*, p. 125.

15. See M. Rozelaar, "Shir ha-Shirim 'al Reqa' ha-Shirah ha Erotit ha-Yevanit ha-Hellenistit," *Eshkolot* (Scholia), I (1954), 33f. That allegorical interpretation is one of the hallmarks of Hellenistic literary exegesis is too well known to need belaboring. Whatever distinctions are pertinent between Greek and Jewish allegorization with respect to other Biblical books, in the case of the Song of Songs the Hellenistic features are quite apparent; for in this instance, the allegorical interpretation was doubtless regarded as the true meaning by those persons or circles who read it as Scripture. Cf. Heinemann, *op cit.*, p. 64f. This does not mean to say that many persons did not read the book in its literal sense, or even that strictly religiously oriented groups regarded the literal meaning as false. To them the plain sense of the verses was specious, but could be cited as evidence for "archeological" data. Thus, Heinemann's contention in *The Methods of the Aggadah* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1949), p. 156, that Eupolemos cited Song 4:4 in its literal meaning is misleading, for Eupolemos did not cite the verse so much as glean historical information it; cf. J. Freudenthal, *Hellenistische Studien*, II (Breslau, 1875), pp. 114 (bot.), 229 lines 21–24. More recently, Professor E. E. Urbach has argued that the allegorical interpretation of the Song cannot be traced to much before the destruction of the Second Temple, and that the mystical interpretation was probably the contribution of R. Akiba. He further points to *M.* Ta'anit 4:8 as clear evidence for an earlier sensual understanding of the Song, presumably even in orthodox circles. Cf. E. E. Urbach, "Rabbinic Exegesis and Origenes' Commentaries on the Song of Songs and Jewish-Christian Polemics" (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz*, XXX (1960–61), 148f. However, neither the citation in the Mishna nor the lateness of the dateable statements of allegorical interpretations are really any proof that the work had not been studied esoterically much earlier. The mere fact that the work was housed in the library of the Dead Sea Sect is sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that the work was not regarded as an erotic one long before the destruction of the Temple. Moreover, the exact point of the citation in *M.* Ta'anit, 4:8 is obscure. In all likelihood it is a later gloss that was appended because of the *religious-allegorical* significance associated with the verses; cf. C. Albeck's note in his commentary to *Mishna Seder Moed*, p. 498. However, even if the verse was indeed part of the celebration described in the Mishna—as contended by J. N. Epstein, *Mavo le-Nusaḥ ha-Misha*, II, 686f.—it may have been taken out of an "original"

religious context for this dance. In conclusion, it must be emphasized that no one—not even R. Akiba—ever claimed that many ancient readers did not understand and recite the book in its sensual sense. But that is not really the issue. The question is whether those circles who were responsible for its preservation as a record of revelation did so. We think the logic of the evidence points to a negative answer.

16. For these observations I am indebted to Professor Elias Bickerman, who also referred me to M. H. Chehab, "Les Terres Cuites de Kharayeb," *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth*, X (1951–52), XI (1953–54); cf. especially X, 79f., where the frequency of Hellenistic erotic figurines illustrates the new trend in popular religion. Cf. also G.M.A. Richter, *The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks* (Revised ed. New Haven, 1950), pp. 54, 58f., 100f., 260f.; K. Clark, *The Nude* (New York, 1959), pp. 109f.

17. Cf. A. E. Taylor, *Plato, the Man and His Work* (New York, 1956), p. 226; *idem, Platonism and Its Influence* (Boston, 1924), p. 9. On Eros as the object of man's yearning for the good and the beautiful as well as for immortality, cf. W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, II, 189f.; F. M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy* (New York, 1957), pp. 230f.; A. J. Festugière, *Epicurus and His Gods* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 17, 62. On Love as an epithet for the divine (Isis), see S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1942), p. 140. On the permeation of the "symposial" genre into Jewish literature, cf. M. Stein, *Dat va-Da'at* (Cracow, 1937–38), p. 61; on the influence of Greek doctrines of love on Jewish thought, *ibid.*, pp. 142f.

18. Taylor, *Plato*, p. 209, notes the affinity between the *amor mysticus* of Eros to the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs.

19. M. H. Segal, "The Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum*, XII (1962) 475, takes Song 4:16 and 5:1 to signify consummation. Whether or not that is the meaning of these verses, the ancient allegorists certainly did not understand them that way. Indeed, the phraseology is sufficiently metaphorical to enable avoidance of any real sexual interpretation.

20. See S. Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" *Biblical and Other Studies* (Edited by A. Altmann. Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 135f.