A Vocabulary of Desire

The Song of Songs in the Early Synagogue

By

Laura Lieber

BRILL
2014
LEIDEN | BOSTON

CHAPTER 1

"A Garden Enclosed": The Song of Songs as a Gateway to Synagogue Poetry

The Song of Songs stands alone within the biblical canon: a highly sensual book within the body of sacred Scripture, a love song to an unknown lover (or Lover?), rich with enigmatic, evocative images that tease the senses even as they confound them. It is a slippery text that resists all simple readings, and even as it weaves together phrases that resonate with other biblical passages it stands apart from them, *sui generis*.

We should not be surprised that the loveliest, most enigmatic poem of the Hebrew Bible inspired later poets. Perhaps most famously, its language colors the lyrics (sacred and otherwise) of the great medieval Andalusian poets—Solomon ibn Gabirol, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi among them. This book, however, looks to an earlier generation of Hebrew poets: the *payyetanim* (synagogue poets) of late ancient Palestine.

The Song of Songs is a well-known, if enduringly challenging, work; the liturgical poems of late antiquity are largely unknown. Here, in this volume, we will try to understand how poets of centuries past understood the Song, which may in turn help us read the Song in new ways. At the same time, we will also come to know the poets of late antiquity themselves a little better—receiving a glimpse not only into their minds, but into their world.[1]

Singing the Song

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your lovemaking is sweeter than wine!" So opens the biblical Song of Songs, and immediately the questions begin. Who speaks, and to whom? Where are these lovers in space and time? Why does the speaker switch from narration ("him") to direct address

1 For an accessible summary of the sweep of Hebrew poetry, from the biblical period to the mid-twentieth century, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. and trans. by T. Carmi (New York: Penguin, 1981), remains unequaled. Carmi's introductions to this volume provide a fine summary of the history of Hebrew poetry and its versification, while the anthology of texts itself—despite the often abridged texts and the idiosyncratic translation technique—well represents the range of poetic styles in the early periods, in particular.

("your")? What are these explicitly erotic verses doing in holy Scripture? With this exuberant exclamation—which, in its assertiveness and its wishfulness, its tensions between absence and presence, and its implicit assumptions and willful disregard for linear narrative, sets the tone for what follows—the biblical Song makes its claims upon the listener. There can be no passive response to the Song: it demands engagement. Few can resist its sensuous and evocative language, and many readers and exegetes (ancient and modern) seem to feel a compulsion to "rescue" it from misunderstanding. The text itself exerts a hold upon its readers; its words seduce.

Chief among the questions confronting readers of the Song is that of its very nature: Is it a religious work, or a secular text, or were such distinctions meaningless in the world of antiquity? While in recent decades the question of the Song's sacred or profane nature has been hotly debated, for most of the last two millennia the answer to this question has seemed obvious: the Song is in the Bible, ergo it must be "religious." Indeed, the second-century Jewish sage, Rabbi Akiva, described the Song of Songs as the holiest of scriptures, saying that "all the scriptures are holy but the Song of Song is the holy of holies" (*m. Yad.* 3:5);[2] according to one tradition, he went so far as to assert that if the Torah had not been given, the Song of Songs would have sufficed to guide the world (*Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim* 1:1[3]). The interest of the present work is in understanding the implications, practical and experiential, of Rabbi Akiva's assertion. What would it mean to govern the world by the Song of Songs? How did a text that was treated, as an early rabbinic text recalls, like a barroom ditty become the Bible's most sacred text?

The Song of Songs has a long history of being read as a religious text, but "secular" readings of the work (or, more precisely, interpretations that do not assume the text is a religious allegory) are also possible, and in recent decades have become common. But a simple either-or, sacred-secular binary obscures

2 To later ears, the phrase "holy of holies" would not merely have been heard as a superlative describing the book's sanctity but as a descriptor which would put the text on par with the physical structure of the interior of the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus, while the Temple has been destroyed and access to the architectural Holy of Holies has been lost, a literary analogue was provided in the form of the Song of Songs.

3 The most recent and complete edition of this midrash is by Z.M. Rabinovitz, in *Ginzé Midrash* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1977), 250–295. For a discussion of this specific passage and related traditions, see E.E. Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputations," *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, ed. Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971), 247–275.

the complexity of the labels and underestimates the exegetical potential of the text. Even when approached within the framework of a religious understanding, the Song defies any simple, singular interpretation. The Song's resistance to reductionism, its persistent ambiguity, and its unresolved rhetoric, combined with its pervasive, seductive imagery and language, suggest why the Song became a wellspring for a whole body of secondary religious poetry. In perhaps the most surprising turn of events in its early history, the Song—a work that apparently lacks religiosity and possesses sensuality in abundance—was elevated in late ancient Judaism (specifically, during the fifth–seventh centuries CE in Palestine) to the lofty status of prayer.

The World of Piyyut

Poetry is a powerful mode of religious expression. It favors stately diction and self-conscious, disciplined, and artful constructions that befit a stately liturgical context. The imaginative context of worship lends itself to formality: the liturgy shapes the moment when the subjects approach their Sovereign, seeking favor and giving thanks. At the same time, worship is an intimate moment when children, in all their need and weakness, approach their Father, and a covenanted people, clinging to its history of mutual promises, approaches its Spouse. Poetic diction—whether hymnic, elegiac, mystical, or lyrical—is the antithesis of casual. In poetry, the author weighs, tests, and considers every word and phrase, and the terseness of poetic rhetoric (even in long poems) makes each word count that much more. Furthermore, the terse rhetoric of poetry enables the poet to exploit the rich theological potential of ambiguity. Ambiguity and evocativeness serve, on the one hand, to draw listeners in by engaging them intellectually, but on the other hand they provide a rhetoric for articulating the ineffable. Prayer thrives on the balancing of tensions—immanence and transcendence, humility and confidence, petition and praise—rather than their resolution; ambiguity and paradox generate energy and motion within a poem. The language of poetry provides a way of speaking about beliefs and actions otherwise very difficult to articulate: it favors vivid images and visceral rhythms and creates meaning through juxtaposition, which fosters rather than resolves tensions and paradoxes, making it the ideal language of prayer and one particularly fruitful for generating (if not clarifying) theology.

In Jewish (and Christian) tradition, poetry is an enduring modality of prayer; one thinks specifically of the Psalms and their prominence in religious ritual from the days of the Temple in Jerusalem to the present. And, while the book

of Psalms is a vast and diverse body of writings, many of the most enduring psalms have lasted both because they articulate a potent, complicated theology in evocative but relatable terms and because they speak in the first person. That is, they give the person who prays them a voice—an individual voice even when spoken in a collective context—and they create intimacy with God without sacrificing divine majesty.

If the Psalms were the poetry of the Temple, other sites of worship, including the early synagogue, had room for their own poetic traditions, too. When Jonah prays within the belly of the big fish, his prayer reads like a pastiche of psalm quotations. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find psalm-like compositions (the *hodayot*) that mimic biblical style. In the apocryphal Wisdom of Ben Sira are passages that recall not only the poetry of Psalms and the biblical wisdom tradition (including the magnificent poetry of Job) but also one substantial section (chapters 44–50, beginning with the resonant line, "Let us now praise famous men") that may be the earliest example of a kind of poem recited in the synagogue on Yom Kippur—a forerunner of the Avodah genre of poetry composed when the Temple still stood.[4] Hellenistic narratives, particularly Tobit and Judith, also employ poetry as the language of prayer, and the Prayer of Manasseh, a brief apocryphal work, consists of a single poetic text that draws heavily on the style and language of the Psalms.[5] The Talmud also includes poetic texts (although, given the sheer size of the Talmud, remarkably few), notably several laments and eulogies, as well as the personal prayers of some sages (e.g., Mar bar Ravina in *b. Ber.* 17a) and the enigmatic Song of the Kine (the hymn sung by the cattle bearing the ark in 1 Sam 6:12), recorded in *b. 'Avod. Zar.* 24b. The Song of the Kine may itself be a work of the Heikhalot mystical traditions, which produced a large body of ecstatic hymns. While we possess no theoretical treatises on poetry from this period of Hebrew literature, it seems that when authors sought to compose personal prayers of confession and gratitude or national prayers of thanksgiving, poetry—specifically psalm-like poetry—was the language of choice.

Around the fourth century CE, we see the rise of a new kind of Hebrew poetry, composed specifically for the liturgy, which the rabbis refer to as *piyyut* (from

4 On Sir 44–50 as a proto-Avodah, see the introduction to Aharon Mirsky, *The Liturgical Poetry of Yose ben Yose* [in Hebrew], 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1991), 11–90. For examples of Avodah poetry in translation, with a fine critical introduction, see Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology of Ancient Poems for Yom Kippur* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2003).

5 Many Persian- and Hellenistic-period Jewish texts—Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, the Greek Esther, and others—offer abundant examples of prose prayer, as well.

the Greek *poiein*, meaning "to do, to make"—the same word that gives us the English terms "poetics," "poetry," and "poet"). The new name itself indicates an awareness that these poems were innovative in some fashion, and these works (composed for the High Holidays and the penitential season preceding them) differ noticeably from biblical poetry. Piyyutim from the early and classical periods (fourth–seventh centuries CE) typically have a fixed rhythm, albeit not actual meter, and by the sixth century they display true rhyme; at the same time, parallelism weakens as a rhetorical device. Like some biblical poems (Ps 119, for example), piyyutim often employ acrostics as a structural device, but in ways more intricate and complicated than seen in the biblical text. Piyyutim are also typically substantially longer than most biblical poems. Beyond these formal features, piyyutim—reflecting the developing norms of the statutory prayers in Judaism—often employ the first-person plural voice ("we") rather than the individual-confessional first-person singular voice ("I"). Furthermore, piyyutim show a distinct affinity for rabbinic writings and rabbinic traditions of exegesis. The piyyutim of late antiquity are deeply intertextual. Both the Hellenistic poems and the piyyutim draw on the language of the Psalms and other biblical books; their use of intertextuality, however, differs: in the Hellenistic works, quotation and allusion supply lofty language and convey weight and sanctity; in the piyyutim, intertexts bear, along with the resonant language of the biblical phrase itself (which is often taken from a prose source), a history of interpretation as well. While the language of piyyut is often deeply biblical, its content—its themes, motifs, and fundamental assumptions about the biblical text, how it should be read, and what it means—brings these works into the orbit of midrash. But whereas people study midrash, they pray piyyutim.

Piyyutim first appeared in Byzantine Palestine, around the fourth century CE. Despite initial geonic opposition to this liturgical innovation, the new style of poetry spread throughout the Jewish world, becoming the most voluminous genre of Hebrew writing from late antiquity to the Middle Ages.[6] Although the majority of early piyyutim were composed as special adornments for the prayers of the autumn penitential season, within a few generations piyyutim were ever more frequently composed for the weekly Sabbath service. By the sixth century, we find the master poet Yannai composing intricate *qerovot* in a style that would be familiar to listeners for centuries to come (the *qedushta shel sheva* in chapter 5, of this volume, represents an earlier version of the form). The *qerova*—a kind of poem that used the themes and motifs of the

6 Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism* (Cincinnati, OH: HUC Press, 1998), 110–187.

weekly Torah portion to embellish the opening blessings of the Amidah—and its variants, the *qedushta* and the *shivata*, remained a staple of synagogue poets until the ninth or tenth century. At that point in time, another type of piyyut, the *yotzer* (which embellishes the Yotzer Or blessing that prefaces the Shema), rose to prominence and eclipsed the popularity of the *qerova* in its various forms.[7] In late antiquity, alongside the composition of Hebrew poetry for synagogue use, we see the composition of poems in Aramaic (often recorded in Targum manuscripts) that cluster around specific Torah portions and historical episodes, as well as *epithalamia* (wedding poems) and eulogies.[8] By the Middle Ages, few liturgical moments lacked poetic embellishment: poets had composed works to adorn almost all the statutory prayers of the synagogue service as well as life-cycle events such as circumcisions and weddings. Every prayer was an occasion for poetry, and all evidence indicates that liturgical poems were wildly popular in their day. In the words of the prayerbook, "Our mouths were filled with song."

For all their popularity, the sudden appearance of piyyutim in the world of Hebrew poetry raises many questions. The earliest piyyutim we possess—including the Shofar service by Yose ben Yose for Rosh Hashanah, the various Avodah poems for the Yom Kippur liturgy, and other works from the fourth century CE—appear fully developed, and we have little knowledge of the intermediate steps in the development of these lengthy, innovative works from the poetry of the Bible and Hellenistic Judaism. To be sure, elements of the early and classical-era piyyutim have antecedents in biblical poetry and often employ rhetorical techniques that resemble rabbinic tropes, but the novelty and innovation of piyyut should not be understated.

Jewish and Christian Hymnography

The fourth century CE witnessed the rise of liturgical poetry in the Christian tradition as well. In the West, we find Hilary of Poitiers, Juvencus, and

7 A full bibliography of the history of piyyut exceeds the scope of the present essay. For a selection of the most important works in the field, readers are encouraged to consult Laura Lieber, "Piyyut," in *Oxford Bibliographies in Jewish Studies Online*, edited by David Biale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), doi: 10.1093/OBO/9780199840731-0059.

8 Specifically, the Sabbath of the New Moon of Nisan (Exod 12), the seventh day of Passover (Exod 15), Shavuot (Exod 18–19), the Death of Moses (Deut 34), the Ninth of Av (Lamentations); and the holiday of Purim (Esther). Marriages and funerals were the two life-cycle events most commonly treated in the Aramaic poems.

Ambrose of Milan composing hymns and lyrics, while in the East, the first of the great Byzantine hymnographers, Ephrem the Syrian, was active. Early Christian sources (particularly from the West, prior to Constantine) articulate a profound ambivalence towards the composition of new poetry; works inspired by the Psalms and other biblical poems were, of course, acceptable, but poetry on the classical (Greco-Roman) model bore the taint of paganism, and the idea of innovation smacked of frivolity, worldliness, and artifice. Even more, the early Christian community's valorization of poverty and the lower social classes made "culture" itself a point of contention. Well-educated, cultured polytheists, who could boast of a rich and brilliant literary tradition, disdained the uncouth Christians and their unimpressive writings, while Christians self-consciously embraced the ideal (if not the practice) of a plain, unvarnished style. As W. Evenpoel notes, "Even when [Christians] themselves were actually producing highly rhetorical prose, they stated emphatically that they were merely continuing the work of the fishermen."[9] Nonbiblical poetry, to these early Christians, represented all that was worldly, carnal, and superficial. Over time, Christians did begin to compose poetry (particularly as wealthier and better-educated gentiles joined their ranks), but the rise of "Christian poetry" was slow and halting. When poetry did begin to become common in the West, poets justified its composition by contrasting the truthfulness of their hymns with the lies of pagan myth, by citing David the Psalmist as a model, and by arguing that only poetry permitted one to sing the praises of God in a truly exalted fashion. After the Roman Empire became Christian under Constantine, the tension between Christianity and high culture seems to have eased, and poetry offered an avenue for creating a Christian alternative to pagan literature.

We have no records of such self-conscious anxiety about poetry in Jewish sources from Palestine in the early centuries of the Common Era; objections to piyyut are voiced instead in Babylonia, in the context of the geonic drive towards conformity in Jewish texts and ritual.[10] (As with the history of poetry in Christianity, once geonic hegemony was ensured, the Geonim began to accommodate liturgical poetry, and just as we find bishops composing poetry after Constantine, once the geonic academies consolidated their leadership, we find Saadia Gaon composing a variety of liturgical poems.) Later generations of

9 "The Place of Poetry in Latin Christianity," in *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, ed. J. den Boeft and A. Hilhorst (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 36.

10 For an excellent summary and discussion of geonic opposition to piyyut, see Langer, *To Worship God Properly*, 110–186.

Jewish writers, aware of the strangeness of the sudden appearance of piyyut in the liturgy, hypothesized that poetry arose because of Christian persecution of the Jews and interference in the rituals of the synagogue. But piyyutim predate the period of Byzantine oppression of the Jews (particularly the various edicts of Justinian, which appear to have been largely unenforced in any case), and the rise of piyyut coincides with both the rise of Christian hymnography and a boom in synagogue construction. Finally, it seems unlikely that a body of sophisticated, complicated literature would have arisen in a period of cultural besiegement and disarray. These Hebrew poems, while at times polemical, are hardly despairing and certainly not haphazard. The origins of piyyut, unmentioned in contemporary sources from late antiquity, do not seem to lie in persecution. Some less linear and more interesting impulse appears to be in effect.

The contemporaneous development of Jewish and Eastern Christian hymnography—both appeared in the fourth century and flourished in the sixth—suggests some kind of common source, or even the influence of one upon the other.[11] In simple terms, it is sometimes posited that the synagogue borrowed a new style of poetry from the majority (Christian) culture, in a form of conscious or unconscious acculturation. Alternatively, others have suggested that styles of synagogue poetry entered the church, either directly (brought by converts) or indirectly (because the synagogue gave such works an aura of authenticity).[12]

11 Although Western Christian hymnography, such as the Latin hymns by Ambrose, also emerged in the same time frame as Jewish liturgical poetry (Hebrew and Aramaic), it is not usually considered as a factor in the development of piyyut, due to its cultural as well as geographical distance from the contexts in which Hebrew piyyut emerged.

12 The classic study of this issue is Jefim (Hayyim) Schirmann, "Jewish Liturgical Poetry and Christian Hymnology," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s., 44 (1953): 123–161. Ezra Fleischer, in *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* [in Hebrew], rev. ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), 63–97, depicts piyyut as a wholly internal Jewish development, as does Aharon Mirsky in *Ha-piyyut: Hitpatḥuto be-Eretz-Yisra'el uva-golah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991); see pp. 11–29, 30–46, 57–76, 86–92, 146–165, and 202–208. By contrast, Eric Werner, in *The Sacred Bridge: The Interdependence of Church and Synagogue during the First Millennium*, vols. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) and 2 (New York: Ktav, 1984), focuses on the idea of Christian influence in Judaism, a line of thinking taken up more recently by Seth Schwartz (*Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE–640 CE* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 263–273) and Lee I. Levine (*The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005], 584–588). More recently, Ophir Münz-Manor has been developing a more nuanced approach to the question; see his recent article, "Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1 (2010): 336–361.

It is tempting to imagine direct paths of cross-cultural influence; Romanos the Melodist (sixth century CE) is said, in a hymn for his feast day, to have been "of the Hebrew race," a remark once taken to mean that he or his parents had converted to Christianity from Judaism.[13] But even if we take this statement at face value—which today's scholars rarely do—we must remember that Romanos was raised in Emesa (modern Homs), the heartland of Syriac Christian poetry, and spent his professional life in Constantinople. There is nothing "simple" about Romanos's biography, let alone the history of Christian hymnography and its relationship to Jewish poetry. And for every scholar convinced of cultural borrowing, there is one who insists that all innovation can be explained solely by recourse to "native tradition."[14]

Ultimately, the poems themselves argue against simple, direct borrowing across confessional (and linguistic) lines. On the one hand, the poetry of the Christian East, in particular, coincides with and at some level resembles that of Byzantine Palestine: Ephrem the Syrian is roughly contemporary with Yose ben Yose, the first of the Hebrew *payyetanim* known by name and the last poet of the pre-classical period; and Romanos was roughly contemporary with Yannai, the greatest Hebrew poet of the sixth century, as well as the great Syriac poets, Mar Narsai and Jacob of Serugh. In the early period, the forms are comparable: both the Jewish and the Syriac hymns (i.e., *madrashe*, in contrast to the non-stanzaic verse-homilies, called *memre*) have relatively uniform structures in which stanzas of a certain length are followed by refrains or choruses.[15] There are differences, however. Hebrew poetry of this early period is typically quadripartite verse—that is, a line of poetry consists of four units, each of which contains two stresses. The opening line of the Aleinu prayer (actually an excerpt

13 On Romanos's origins, see J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origins de la poésie religieuse à Byzance* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 167–181.

14 See the recent discussion in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 62 (2010), which publishes three articles on Romanos by Ricardo Maisano ("Romanos's Use of Greek Patristic Sources," 261–273), Johannes Koder ("Imperial Propaganda in the Kontakia of Romanos the Melode," 275–291), and Mary B. Cunningham ("The Reception of Romanos in Middle Byzantine Homiletics and Hymnography," 251–260), originally presented at a 2005 colloquium on Romanos.

15 Translations of Syriac poetry have become increasingly available in recent years. See, for example, Kathleen McVey and John Meyendorff, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989); Sebastian Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997); and the many fine scholarly, bilingual editions of poetry by Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh, and others being brought out by Gorgias Press.

from an early piyyut) exemplifies this structure: *'a-lei-nu le-sha-be-aḥ / la-a-don ha-kol / la-tet ge-du-lah / le-yo-tzer be-re-sheet*. Syriac poetry, by contrast (both stanzaic and non-stanzaic), is based on syllable count, and Ephrem used over fifty different syllabic patterns in his *madrashe* alone. Ephrem employed choirs (including female choirs) to sing the refrains in his works; we know little about the performance of early piyyutim, although by the time of Eleazar beRabbi Qallir (commonly referred to as ha-Qallir or ha-Qalliri) in the late sixth century, the sources do indicate the use of choirs, and it is possible that repeated elements of earlier poems, such as those by Yannai, functioned as choral or communal refrains.[16] The Hebrew poems, meanwhile, contain extensive block quotations that do not adhere to the verse patterns, both from Scripture (prefaced by the introductory phrases "as it is written" and "as it is said") and, in the Avodah poems for Yom Kippur, from the Mishnah. The quotations from Scripture suggest a kinship between piyyutim and rabbinic midrash. The Syriac poems, while intricate and allusive, do not employ quotations in this manner.

The differences between Hebrew and Syriac poetry of the fourth century are significant; those between Jewish piyyutim and Christian poetry of the sixth century—in many ways the golden age of hymnography—constitute a chasm. The great Greek-language Christian poet of this period, Romanos the Melodist, was born in Syria but made his reputation in Constantinople. Like his Syriac-language precursors and contemporaries, he employed a form that consists of stanzas and refrains; Romanos in particular was famous for creating depth of character and dramatic action, even within the relatively simple framework of the *kontakion*, the genre of poetry with which he is most closely associated.[17] By the sixth century, however, Jewish liturgical poetry had changed considerably. The forms of piyyut that appear in this period (as early, perhaps, as the fifth century, but certainly by the sixth) are remarkable for their intricacy. Unlike the earlier generation of Hebrew poems, or the poetry of Syriac and Greek Christianity (or the Latin lyrics of the West), piyyutim—including all the works studied here—were like cantatas in that they adorned the weekly

16 Indeed, we should not assume a single performance style for any given work; differences in communities—urban versus rural, wealthy versus impoverished, preferences for innovation over tradition, education or lack thereof, and so forth—would likely have resulted in different manners of performance even if the text itself was stable.

17 Several accessible translations of Romanos exist, including Marjorie Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, 2 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1970); Ephrem Lash, *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995); and R.J. Schork, *Sacred Song from the Byzantine Pulpit: Romanos the Melodist* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

service, but they were of symphonic complexity, composed of multiple units that each have a distinctive and dramatically different structure. Some contain refrains while others are more linear; some include quotations while others rely only on allusion; some are terse, others leisurely. Like symphonies, they have complicated trajectories of motion, shifting from adagio to allegro and back again. The question is not only "Where did this genre of piyyut come from?" but also "Where did the *constituent elements* of these poems come from, and how did they come to be knit together?" The answer, of course, will likely never be known. Some units of sixth-century piyyutim seem to have their roots in midrash, while others are more closely related to earlier styles of poetry. The genius of the fifth- and sixth-century poets may well lie in their decision to amplify the complexity of their piyyutim by varying the styles used within single compositions—not an achievement of sheer formal originality but something more akin to editorial inventiveness.[18]

But one element common to these poems—whether we are looking at the Syriac poetry of Ephrem, the Greek poetry of Romanos, or the Hebrew poetry of Yose ben Yose, Yannai, and Qallir—is the emphasis on poetry as a language of prayer and devotion, a rhetoric for creating relationships between the poet and his listeners and between the congregation and God. To an extent, this derives from the context for which the poems were written: recited in the synagogue or church, these works were not only homiletical (and pedagogical) but also liturgical, and liturgy functions as a kind of dialogue. But many of these poems go further: they not only create conversations in which the congregation either actively participates (through refrains) or passively joins (through emotional sympathy), but they collapse various boundaries between past and present, heaven and earth, Scripture and life, inviting listeners in a deep and complicated way to relive and to personally experience an array of events and emotions from their respective traditions.

The Song of Songs Piyyutim

Liturgical prayers are shaped by the texts they embellish in terms of both form and content. Piyyutim, because they embellish prayers, are inherently dialogical. This feature is especially prominent in poems based on the Song

18 This discussion of the differences among Syriac, Greek, and Hebrew poetry ought not obscure their many fascinating and provocative similarities, a topic that awaits further inquiry. See the fine initial study by Münz-Manor, "Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East."

of Songs, a biblical text composed exclusively of conversation, apostrophe, and declamation. In addition to being prayer texts, however, piyyutim are also a kind of literary exegesis. And if Jewish poetry is akin to midrash, then it is hard to imagine a more provocative text than the Song. Indeed, the Song of Songs was subject, very early on, to uniquely concentrated poetic attention, perhaps because it works so well both as a springboard for dialogue and interpretation.

The earliest piyyutim allude to the language of the Song occasionally, but they do not treat it extensively. We do not see Hebrew poems that embellish substantial portions of the text of the Song until the fifth or sixth century CE, but from the sixth century onward, poems embellishing the Song (for Passover but also for other occasions) become quite popular. Indeed, of the five holiday scrolls (*megillot*) in the Jewish lectionary, none of the other scrolls—Esther (read on Purim), Ruth (Shavuot), Lamentations (the Ninth of Av), or Ecclesiastes (Sukkot)—received equally extensive embellishment, even if Lamentations may come close. The Song of Songs is unique both in terms of the number of poems based upon it and the number of centuries the tradition of embroidering the Song spans, from the fifth or sixth century CE well into the Middle Ages. At least twenty piyyutim that embellish all or significant portions of the Song have survived in some form, making it among the most popular intertexts for piyyutim.[19] Similarly, the body of piyyutim from late antiquity reveals the importance of the Passover holiday—particularly the first day of Passover—as we can see from the fact that Yannai himself composed four piyyutim for the first festival day, two of which are Song of Songs piyyutim included in this volume. The only holiday that rivals the first day of Passover in the Palestinian rites from this period, in terms of the poetry associated with it, is Yom Kippur.

Throughout this volume, I use the shorthand appellation "Song of Songs piyyutim" to describe piyyutim that embellish significant portions of the Song, or even the entire scroll. The anthology of such poems presented here displays the formal, thematic, and contextual variety of early and classical piyyut generally. In terms of genre, the poems here include the most important early forms

19 For a partial list of poems, see appendix 3 in Ezra Fleischer, *The Poems of Shelomo ha-Bavli: Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of the Sciences and Humanities, 1973), 378–379. Fleischer here lists fourteen poems modeled on Solomon ha-Bavli's mid-tenth-century (Rome) *yotzer*, "A Light of Salvation Shines for the Upright (*Or Yesha' Me'usharim*)." Elisheva Hacohen, in "The Song of Songs and Its Songs" [in Hebrew], in *The Festschrift for Mordecai Breuer*, vol. 2, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: Academon, 1992), 399–416, examines the three *yotzerot* in the standard Ashkenazi *machzor*—by Solomon ha-Bavli, Meshullam bar Qalonymos, and Simeon bar Isaac—all of which significantly postdate the works studied here.

and embellish the major liturgical rubrics of the Jewish service: the Amidah ("the standing prayer," also known simply as *ha-tefillah*, "the prayer"), recited aloud in the morning and afternoon and regarded in rabbinic tradition as taking the place of the Temple sacrifices; and the Shema (a collection of biblical verses framed by prayers), recited in the morning and evening. At some point—certainly by the fourth century CE, it seems—the "angelic liturgy" of the Qedushah, consisting of Isa 6:3 and Ezek 3:12, was incorporated into both the Amidah and Shema on the Sabbath and holidays, and several of the poems gathered here reflect its prominence.[20]

The genres represented in the Song of Songs piyyutim include the *shivata* (a poem which embellishes all seven blessings of the Sabbath or Festival Amidah and was presumably recited on the afternoon of the Sabbath during Passover), the *qedushta* (a poem which embellishes the first three blessings of the morning Sabbath or Festival Amidah, culminating in the recitation of the mystically charged Qedushah), and the *yotzer* (which embellishes the Yotzer Or rubric of blessings surrounding the morning Shema). Most, but not all, of these poems reflect the liturgical context of Passover. Despite their diversity of genre and liturgical station—that is, the benediction or biblical passage, recited in a prayer, to which a piyyut is joined—these poems share a basic structure, albeit one which each poet tailors to his own creative impulse. The basic structure is simple: the opening words of each verse of the Song (either all 117 verses, or a significant portion thereof), in linear order, are quoted at the beginning (or, on occasion, at the end) of each line of verse.[21] In effect, then, the biblical Song becomes the framework for the architecture of a new poetic creation. In some Song of Songs poems, every verse of the Song is embellished, but not every word: the poet quotes only the opening words of each verse, although he may allude to phrases occurring later in the verse. Many of the piyyutim also include units that develop the language of the Song more loosely (comparable to a jazz riff more than an orchestral symphony), and one work included here—*The Groom's Qedushta* by Qallir—employs the Song as

20 A full synopsis of Jewish prayer in late antiquity exceeds the scope of the present study. Interested readers should consult Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns*, trans. Richard Sarason (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970); as well as Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: JPS, 1993); and Langer, *To Worship God Properly*. Also, Stefan Reif's entry, "Jewish Liturgy and Prayer," is forthcoming in the *Oxford Bibliographies in Jewish Studies Online*.

21 Such a structure is known also from piyyutim embellishing other texts; but application of this structure to an entire book of Scripture is known only for the Song of Songs and Lamentations.

an architectural device only in part and not comprehensively. In all the poems anthologized here, the Song is integrated not only into the poetry but also into the performance of the statutory liturgy, as the poets weave the language of the Song into the themes of the statutory prayers. Complicated acrostics and rhyme schemes add layers of complexity to the formal structures of these poems, as well.

While the genres of piyyut are already rife with formal and liturgical constraints, in late antiquity and the Middle Ages a significant number of poets, great and obscure, accepted the additional challenge of writing works whose diction and structure are largely determined by the Song. We can presume that for many poets the impetus was the association of the Song of Songs with the Passover story and its ongoing observance. The first reference in rabbinic literature to the liturgical use of the Song is relatively late, in the minor talmudic tractate *Soferim* (14:18), which dates from the geonic period (ca. eighth century, possibly of Palestinian origin). *Soferim* 14:4 records the blessing that was recited prior to reading the scroll at that time, but this reference postdates the earliest piyyutim we have on the Song. Much earlier sources—the tannaitic midrashim in particular (notably the *Mekhilta*, which interprets Exodus)—suggest that the Song was associated with Passover as early as the second century CE. The midrashic evidence, however, is unclear, and often suggests that there was at least as strong a gravitational force pulling the Song towards the stories of Exod 18–19 and the holiday of Shavuot—the day of revelation, an event subsequently mythologized and liturgicized as the wedding of God and Israel—as there was pulling the text towards the opening chapters of Exodus and the festival of Passover—the holiday which, to extend the allegory, recounts the lovers' elopement.[22] The piyyutim themselves suggest that this dual association of the Song with both the Exodus and Sinai continued into late antiquity, as we have fragments of piyyutim for Shavuot that seem to employ a Song of Songs structure, and the Song is frequently quoted in poems as well as midrashim on the theme of revelation. While the majority of Song of Songs piyyutim were composed for recitation during Passover, almost all make at least oblique reference to the Song's "revelatory" tradition of interpretation as well as its redemptive readings.[23]

22 Ezra Melammed describes a Persian Jewish custom in which the Song was read on Sabbath evenings during the period of the counting of the Omer, between Passover and Shavuot. See his *Shir ha-Shirim: Targum Arami, Targum Ivri, Tafsir bi-leshon Yehudei Paras* (Jerusalem: n.p., 1971), 76.

23 This connection is developed in the commentary accompanying the poem in chapter 5.

The way in which the Song was recited in the ancient synagogue during Passover likely varied. According to *Sof.* 14:18, one half of the Song was read on each of the last two evenings of Passover; the masoretic notes to the Song mark the caesura at Song 4:14. In another attested custom, however, it was read in its entirety on the morning of the Sabbath that falls during the intermediate days of Passover, or on the last day alone. And Ezra Fleischer, in his reconstruction of the liturgical setting of Yannai's *shivata* for Passover, argues that the piyyut was performed during the afternoon (Minchah) service on the first day of Passover.[24] Song of Songs piyyutim were recited in a variety of settings and fashions. In one case, a Palestinian Jewish poet named Moshe divided the Song into five segments and composed a complete piyyut based on each, and in this fashioned portioned out the Song over all five intermediate days of Passover. The Ashkenazic liturgy preserves five Passover piyyutim that embellish the entire scroll, distributed across the festival: a *yotzer* by Solomon ha-Bavli (tenth century, Rome) for the first day; a *yotzer* for the second day by Meshullam bar Qalonymos, a scion of the great Qalonymide dynasty of Ashkenaz (tenth century, Rome and Mainz); a formally unusual anonymous *qedushta* for the first day, which survived in the rites of Mainz and a peculiar northern Italian community (a very old piyyut, perhaps from fifth-century Palestine); a *yotzer* for the Sabbath that falls during Passover by Simeon bar Isaac the Great, a figure associated with the Hasidei Ashkenaz (tenth century, Mainz); and additional works by numerous other medieval *payyetanim*, such as a *yotzer* for the Sabbath of Passover by Benjamin bar Samuel (eleventh century, Normandy), employed in some French communities as an alternative to Simeon's *yotzer*. Outside of the Ashkenazi orbit, numerous other Song of Songs piyyutim were composed and recited as part of the communal liturgy; but most of them were no longer in use by the time of the printing press, and therefore never earned a place on the pages of printed prayerbooks. They were rediscovered by scholars, in manuscripts, both in the Cairo Genizah and elsewhere.

In composing these Passover piyyutim, the medieval *payyetanim* drew upon the rich and varied models available from late antiquity; the most likely paradigms were the two Song of Songs piyyutim (a *shivata* and a *qedushta*) by the great poet Yannai (sixth century, Galilee); he in turn may have been influenced by earlier works, such as the anonymous *qedushta* partially preserved in rites

24 Ezra Fleischer, *Eretz Yisrael Prayer and Prayer Rituals* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), 118–120. As Gabriel Wasserman notes, it became a custom (only attested much later than the period of time covered in this book) in the communities of Libya and Afghanistan, to read the scroll of the Song itself at this service.

from Mainz and northern Italy. Eleazar birabbi Qallir[25] (late sixth–early seventh century, Galilee), traditionally considered to be a student of Yannai and certainly the most prolific poet of Byzantine Palestine, also composed at least two Song of Songs poems for Passover (a *shivata* for the Prayer for Dew and an early Song of Songs *yotzer* which, through its influence on Solomon ha-Bavli, would become paradigmatic), as well as similar piyyutim for Shavuot (many of which survive only in fragmentary form) and a largely intact groom's *qedushta* for the Sabbath after a wedding that draws heavily on the Song. Aramaic poems composed for recitation during Passover also display an affinity for the Song.

This volume presents an anthology of these early works, poems that presumably helped shape compositions popular in the medieval rite and that reflect particularly intriguing formal and thematic variety. The six works included in part 2 of this volume—two by Yannai, three by Eleazar birabbi Qallir, and an anonymous work that likely predates the other five—highlight the fluidity, diversity, and flexibility of piyyutim embellishing all or part of the Song. Two additional poems, an Aramaic piyyut for Passover from the classical period and a lyric reflecting the medieval Andalusian transformation of the genre of Song of Songs piyyutim, bookend the second part of this study. The poems selected for inclusion constitute the wellspring for a major tradition within the vast body of medieval Hebrew poetry. They represent both paths taken and paths abandoned. Because these works reflect the liturgical customs and exegetical traditions of Byzantine Palestine, it is almost certain that they were written there, in the land of Israel; therefore, their authors were probably familiar with the topography evoked by the biblical book (the Song of Songs is rich with geographic references and descriptions of the land of Israel). Furthermore, the poems were composed and originally recited in a period when Hebrew, and Hebrew poetry, were probably still comprehensible to the Jews worshipping in the synagogue, even if Hebrew was no longer a language of daily conversation. These early piyyutim thus provide a contrast to the medieval Hebrew poems, which were composed in a context when Hebrew was less likely to be understood, in a diction that is far less organic (and comprehensible) than those of the early piyyutim, and in geographical settings far removed from that of the biblical Song.[26] Furthermore, these poems came into being

25 This poet is usually referred to as ha-Qalliri or simply Qallir, but should not be confused with the similarly named poet Eleazar birabbi Qillar (see preface, n. 1); on this latter poet, see Shulamit Elizur, *The Liturgical Poetry of Eleazar birabbi Qillar* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988).

26 The comprehensibility of early piyyut remains disputed; see the discussion in Laura Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut* (Cincinnati, OH: HUC Press, 2010), 93–104.

at precisely the same moment in history when the major rabbinic biblical exegetes, the compilers of the midrashim, were active, and in the same cultural milieu; thus they can be read as participants in the exegetical culture of Jewish late antiquity—works both shaped by and shaping conventions of biblical interpretation. Finally, these poems can be seen as literary complements to the stunning material remains of the ancient synagogue: mosaics aglitter with fleeting quotations to adorn glimmering sanctuaries. In short, the early piyyutim selected for inclusion in this volume reflect the vibrancy and creativity—material and intellectual—of Judaism in late ancient Palestine.

Poems embellishing the Song reflect one "lineage" within the world of Jewish poetry and liturgy. Piyyut as a mode of literary-religious expression originated in Palestine and was then carried, through Italy, into the Rhineland, the birthplace of Ashkenazi Judaism. The influence of the Song of Songs on liturgical poetry, evident from the earliest periods, was not limited to this Palestinian-Ashkenazic tradition, however. The language of the Song—and the intensity of these piyyutim, if not their specific form—also completely suffuses the lyrical Hebrew poetry of medieval Andalusia. The philosophically attuned Andalusian poets often used the language of the Song in hymns that introduce the prayer "The Soul of All the Living" (*Nishmat Kol Ḥai*). The poets' choice to associate the Song with this new liturgical station reflects not only their intellectual interest in the soul but also the exegetical flexibility of the Song, which could evoke equal eloquence from writers in this new setting. The Song was interpreted as a national allegory—it became a duet between God and Israel—but in the Spanish Middle Ages, it was transformed by its encounter with Neoplatonic philosophy and became a love song between God and the individual soul. Meanwhile, the earliest surviving Christian liturgical hymn based on the Song was not written until the ninth century, and the genre did not flourish in the Christian tradition until the twelfth century (particularly in northern France) as part of a larger revival of interest in the Song in the Latin West.[27] While it is unlikely (although not impossible) that the Hebrew poetry of the synagogue in some fashion inspired the Latin poetry of the medieval church, the use of the Song in these Latin lyrics helps clarify and sharpen our understanding of how the Song was used in piyyut.

27 On the history of the Song in Western Christianity, see Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); and E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

This tradition of composing "meta-poetry"—poetry built out of preexisting poetry—speaks to the pull and power of the Song itself. The Song simply is "the poem of poems"—the archetype and ultimate of its form. And it had a particular appeal for liturgical poets—who, as we have already observed, did not write a comparable quantity of similarly intricate poems based on the other festival scrolls—because it gave them drama, dialogue, yearning, and love, along with an overlay of sanctity provided by figurative readings of the Song and its liturgical setting. The most powerful emotional expressions and the most evocative sensual language are thus wedded to the most fundamental of religious concepts in Judaism: covenant.

Eros and Prayer

The distillation of the Song of Songs into prayer enables a potent alchemy: in a fundamental way, both speak the language of desire. Eros describes unfulfilled yearning—the tantalizing proximity to something deeply desired but unconsummated. The Song of Songs is, by this definition, the most erotic book in the Bible: the lovers, ever in each other's orbit, never quite connect in the present tense. They have memories of intimacy and anticipate a future of sensual joy together, but enigmatic forces—fate, bad timing, siblings, city guards—keep them apart for the duration of the Song. The Song of Songs is a book of seeking more than finding, but it articulates the promise of being found quite clearly. Prayer, too, exists precisely because of the gap between the person at prayer and the deity to whom prayer is directed, and the desire to bridge, if not close, that gap through declamations, entreaties, actions, and intentions. Both the Song and prayer are endeavors of desire, and of the expectation that desire keenly felt will be fulfilled.

Certain formal similarities between the text of the Song and the practice of prayer lend a particular potency to the synthesis of the two. Most of the Song of Songs is "spoken," but it is a blend of dialogue and direct discourse, in which the two parties speak directly with each other, and monologue or apostrophe, an indirect form of discourse in which the male and female lovers speak about (typically in praise of) their beloved. Prayer engages in a similar rhetoric, combining direct address of God with indirect assertions of God's power, generosity, mercy, historic kindness, and future promises (which will surely be kept). Furthermore, just as the Song is populated by minor characters, who encourage and respond to the two main characters—the male lover's friends and the woman's companions—the statutory prayers of Judaism are heard not only by the deity but by the rest of the community at prayer (and,

from the payyetanic perspective, by the heavenly hosts as well). Thus, even when the voice of the prayer is private, the voice of an individual "I," it becomes the voice of an implicit "we." Just as the woman of the Song addresses her beloved, her companions, and her beloved's friends, the Jew at prayer speaks to God, to the community, and to the angelic hosts (which, at the moment of the recitation of the Qedushah, join humans in praising God).[28] The two-way conversation of the Song, with its additional layers of friends and companions, makes the rhetoric of this biblical text more intricate than other poetic texts in Hebrew; but its complexity mirrors well the complicated dynamics of prayer. And if liturgical prayer is, generically speaking, a nuanced mixture of direct address, apostrophe, and narration, then these features are amplified in the Songs piyyutim, which were performed (whether in the first-person singular, in the first-person plural, as direct address, or as narration) by a cantor-poet in the presence of a congregation (which itself may have participated in the performance), aided by choirs, in the presence of a divine auditor.

Many biblical texts can be used as prayers, and piyyutim embellish any number of biblical texts, but the potential for synergy between prayer and the Song of Songs is remarkable. Liturgical poems based on the Song unleash the deep spiritual potential latent within it while simultaneously amplifying the profound yearning implicit in prayer. It is a powerful union of text and context. Layered on top of this already charged chemistry is the message of the Passover story: dramatic redemption from centuries of oppression. The Song's aura of anticipation—the book ends with the lovers separating but anticipating a passionate reunion—translates easily into messianic yearning. It seems no coincidence that Rabbi Akiva, the greatest proponent of the Song in rabbinic tradition, who also believed that the redemption of Israel was imminent, yoked the Song, with its language of human love, to the Shema, which speaks of covenantal love, at the moment of his martyrdom at the hands of Rome.

It was this great mystic-sage, Akiva, who regarded the Song as the essence of the Torah not because he saw the Song as a cryptic tome of law, but because he saw the essence of the Torah as love: God's love for Israel, and His desire for Israel's love in return. Or, when translated into the context of the liturgy,

28 For a treatment of the issue of divine address in piyyut, see Tzvi Novick, "The Poetics of Yannai's Sixth: Between Scripture, God, and Congregation," in *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honour of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Wout van Bekkum and Naoya Katsumata (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 69–82.

the Torah is the voice of God speaking to Israel, and prayer is the voice of Israel responding to God. The Song of Songs encapsulates this dynamic—"Oh, my beloved, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet!" (Song 2:14)—and provided the ancient exegetes, including the poets of the synagogue, with a language for expressing the emotional richness of the covenantal relationship. As powerful as other metaphors in the tradition are—parent/child, shepherd/sheep, and sovereign/subjects—only the metaphor of marriage conveys the element of mutual and reciprocal choice at the heart of the story of God and Israel. God, when He took Israel out of Egypt and gave them His Torah, chose Israel; and Israel, when they went forth from Egypt and accepted the Torah, chose God.

The Song of Songs was already regarded in antiquity as a remarkable work; its title is a superlative, naming it "the best of poems." Its language is the language of love, and no other biblical book provides such a wealth of sensuous language, or offers such a picture of (and hope for) reciprocal, joyful union. The enigmatic nature of the Song and its uniqueness within the canon, rather than resulting in the text's marginalization or exclusion, served instead to generate a wealth of emotionally rich and powerful interpretations, as the tones and images of the Song were translated into the sacred—and erotic—history of God and Israel. It is perhaps natural that postbiblical poets (first Jewish, then Christian) found inspiration in the Song's themes of mutuality and reciprocity, its sense of yearning layered over assurances of reunion, as well as in its evocative language. Poetry—itself a rhetoric well suited to articulating the ineffable, for speaking intimately yet loftily, for engaging rather than lecturing—provides a natural language for liturgical prayer. The Song, while hardly an overtly religious work, nevertheless offers a profound, and important, vocabulary for theology. The Song, as long noted, emphasizes the woman's voice and her perspective, and according to standard allegory, the woman speaks for the people, whether the nation of Israel or the individual soul. In prayer, too, the human voice dominates, and the deity—it is hoped—pays heed. Israel at Sinai vowed their attentiveness to God's word; the Song, by implication, promises reciprocation, each time Israel prays.

So organic is the synthesis of the Song and prayer that it can be difficult to remember that the book was once, according to tradition, on the edges of the canon, not necessarily understood to be "religious" at all. The story of the Song is one of migration from the margin to the center—from the banquet hall to the essence of scripture, from the tavern to the synagogue sanctuary—and, in various periods including the present day, back again. Indeed, one could argue that no other biblical book has inspired so much in the way of commentary, verse for verse, than the Song, because no other book has cried out so much, "Interpret me!"[29] Its sanctity is hardly obvious, and yet tradition asserts it in the strongest terms.

The Song of Songs piyyutim anthologized here constitute an early and crucial piece of the Song's early history of interpretation. Their exegetical content (uniquely public and performative as it is) situates these poems in the context of more familiar forms of rabbinic exegesis, namely midrash and Targum. The next chapter takes up the history of interpretation of the Song, beginning with early rabbinic literature and moving on to midrash and the Song's Targum, and integrates piyyut into this history.

29 In rabbinic literature, a number of verses are said to call out, "Interpret me (*darsheni*)!" *Pesiq. Rav Kah.* 10:2 applies the phrase to Song 7:3.

CHAPTER 2

"Let Him Kiss Me": The Place of Piyyut in the History of Interpretation of the Song

The origins of the Song of Songs are mysterious: its authorship, date, provenance, and life-setting remain unknown and unrecoverable. Is it an example of folk poetry, a work of "popular" writing from Israelite antiquity, or is it a sophisticated pastoral lyric, with its rustic pretense merely a form of artifice? Is it an Israelite version of ancient Egyptian love songs, composed by King Solomon for his Egyptian bride or for Abishag the Shunammite, a vestige of the sacred marriage rites of ancient Mesopotamia as preserved in biblical Israel, or a Hellenistic-era idyll woven from the fabric of the Bible itself? Does it celebrate "secular" love and carnal sensuality or was it, from the start, a "religious" work, obliquely using metaphors to articulate almost ineffable truths about God and Israel, the Land, and the individual soul? Does it celebrate human eros or divine love, or does it deny any differentiation between the two? Does it remember the days of Eden, or anticipate the restoration of Edenic bliss at the end of days? The Song of Songs is as enigmatic as it is evocative.

The Song ultimately defies any attempts to answer such questions. Its unnamed lovers—human or otherwise—exist in their own world, apart from any obvious chronology, and they resist easy classifications or interpretations. Its readers find in it what they seek, unless they seek certainty. Almost willfully, the book refuses to submit to any single interpretation. The synthesis of sensual vividness and narrative opacity has, over the millennia, proven to be an irresistible lure to exegetes of every stripe: Jewish and Christian, monastic and worldly, religious and secular. To interpret the Song, an interpreter must, in some fashion, attempt to understand "what it means," and this means that, despite their impossibility, questions of origin, context, and authorial intent cannot be wholly avoided. The author of the present volume has an easier task: to elucidate what the Song meant to the ancient poets whose works are studied here. But, to understand these late ancient readings, the earlier history of the Song and the history of its interpretation—a history of which these piyyutim are a vital part—should be set out. This poem, after all, was once on the margins of the canon, yet within a few centuries of its composition it became the holiest of all scriptures, or even a textual "holy of holies."

The Early History of the Song

The superscription to the Song asserts a Solomonic connection: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's."[1] Traditionally, this phrase is taken to indicate that Solomon authored the Song. The image of Solomon as a master poet harks back to 1 Kgs 5:12, which credits Solomon with writing over a thousand songs as well as three thousand proverbs. The Song's superscription, which may derive from the multiple mentions of Solomon in the body of the Song (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12), indicates that the Song was considered either the best work of poetry ever, or at least the best of Solomon's voluminous writings. We do not know when the Song received this title, but it appears in all the ancient versions, reflecting a durable tradition. Despite this assertion of Solomonic authorship, modern scholars date the Song long after Solomon's reign, to the Persian or even Hellenistic period. This ascription is based largely on the language of the Song (which seems to include Persian and Greek loanwords), and it is supported by the Song's apparent familiarity with (and allusions to) preexilic works, including many of the prophets and Deuteronomy, as well as less substantial but intriguing elements, such as the similarities between this poetry and Hellenistic pastorals. Such a late date of composition would lessen the probability that the Song is directly dependent on Egyptian or Mesopotamian literature, yet we know that oral traditions can preserve, transform, and adapt ancient traditions. It thus remains possible that the Song, composed in the postexilic period and influenced by Persian and Hellenistic images and aesthetics, bears the imprint of much older poetry, a kind of palimpsest. It is unlikely that Solomon authored the Song, but he may well have heard songs that echo this Song's language

The two ancient bodies of writing that most provocatively echo the language of the Song of Songs are the love lyrics of ancient Egypt and the sacred marriage poetry of the Fertile Crescent (including Sumer, Mesopotamia, and Ugarit).[2] None of these ancient sources fully parallels the complicated Song: Egyptian poetry is, by contrast, static and lacking in dialogue; and Semitic poetry is conspicuously "religious"—that is, it features deities—even as it is less erotic (even

1 The same construction associates some Psalms with David; alternatively, the grammar could suggest that the Song was understood as dedicated to Solomon—in his honor, not by him or about him.

2 For the Song in its Egyptian context, see Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). For approaches that emphasize the ancient Near Eastern context, see Marvin Pope, *The Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible 7C (New York: Doubleday, 1977); and Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994).

if it is sexually explicit). And yet, the Egyptian and Semitic works highlight two key elements of the Song as it came to be understood: the Egyptian lyrics articulate yearning with profound eloquence; and the Sumerian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite hymns situate the metaphor of marriage in a religious context (in a period that predates the earliest biblical sources that develop the marriage metaphor, the books of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). The Song of Songs, when read in the context of the biblical canon, can be regarded as a synthesis of these two impulses, articulating yearning for God in the language of human eros.

The piyyutim fashioned on the scaffolding of the Song reflect a renewal of the synthesis of these ancient genres: they amplify the language of human love in an emphatically liturgical-ritual setting. Whatever the Song was "originally"—sacred or secular, both or neither—by late antiquity it was being read as a love song between God and Israel.

The Song, the Rabbis, and the Implications of Allegory

We know very little of how the Song entered the biblical canon, for all that the canon powerfully shapes how the Song's readers have interpreted the text. The inclusion of the Song among the sacred scriptures of Judaism implies that it had religious significance for those who canonized it. Religious readings of the Song appear to be quite ancient—and, as has come to be argued with increasing conviction, may reflect how the text was originally conceived and received.[3]

3 As Ellen Davis observes, many—even most—modern readings of the Song of Songs share "the assumption that the Song is in the canon because the rabbis who voted it in had no idea what they were reading" ("Reading the Song Iconographically," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], 172–184 at 172; also available online at *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 3, no. 2 [August 2003], http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume3/number2/ssr03-02-e02.html). For examples of this "initial-secular" approach, see the translations by Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990); and Chana and Ariel Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995). The alternative understanding—that the Song was, from its inception, a deeply religious text—will be explored in the following chapter; on this hypothesis, see Gershon Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 3–17. David Carr splits the difference when he writes, "[The] public realm in ancient Israel probably did not strongly separate human male-female love from human-divine love the way moderns do. Instead, many understood divine-human love to be male-female love *governed by much the same principles as male-female love on the human level*" ("Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 [2000]: 233–248 at 244, italics original). According to Carr, then, the theological eros of the Song is not inherently problematic; rather it is the Song's specific construction of gender (e.g., the very assertive female) that would have stood out.

The versions attest to its inclusion in all ancient canons: it is not only present in the Greek version and the Vulgate, but in fragmentary portions among the Qumran texts as well. The Solomonic incipit may have played a role in securing the text's canonical status, and some form of allegorical interpretation may already have been attached to the Song in the early centuries of the Common Era. That said, Solomonic authorship did not shield the work from explicitly sensual readings. The Mishnah recalls a dispute over the canonicity of the Song (along with that of Ecclesiastes, another work attributed to Solomon) in the early second century CE, which suggests that religious interpretations had not yet displaced secular interpretation. The passage from the Mishnah is complicated but important to consider carefully. Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai recounts a tradition that "On the day on which they seated Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the Academy, [it was decided] that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render the hands unclean [i.e., they are sacred]" (*m. Yad.* 3:5). Based on the evidence from the two Talmuds (*y. Ber.* IV, 7d; *b. Ber.* 27a–b), the event Rabbi Simeon mentions is the deposition of Rabban Gamliel as the head of the academy at Yavneh which, if historical, sets the canonization of the text around 100 CE.[4]

Even so, as the Mishnah goes on to recount, the canonicity of the book was apparently not yet fully settled. Some thirty years later, Rabbi Akiva is depicted defending the text's sanctity. He vigorously denies anything other than a religious reading of the Song: "God forbid! No person in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worthy the day on which the Song was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies" (*m. Yad.* 3:5)—that is, it is the holiest of all scriptures.[5] According to another

4 It is possible that the phrase "On the day on which they seated Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah in the Academy" is a later interpolation, which would mean that Rabbi Simeon is recounting a much older tradition, one from the pre-70 CE Sanhedrin. This would explain which "seventy-two elders" he received the tradition from. See the discussion of this passage in Philip S. Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles, Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes*, The Aramaic Bible 17a (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 34–35.

5 It is intriguing to consider here how Akiva conflates sacred text and sacred space: after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, holiness is located not in the physical space of the sanctuary but in the holiness of Scripture.

tradition, Rabbi Akiva stated the Song's importance even more strongly: "Had the Torah not been given, the Song of Songs would have sufficed to guide the world" (*Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim* 1:1[6]). According to the Tosefta (a source that slightly predates or was contemporary with the Mishnah), Rabbi Akiva regards anyone who treats the Song profanely—by trilling it in a tavern, for example—as losing his portion in the World-to-Come (*t. Sanh.* 12:10). Akiva's variously remembered protests offer indirect evidence that even in the early second century CE there were those who treasured the Song as something other than a "religious" text. To these "secular" singers of the Song, Solomon may still have been understood as its author. He was, after all, the most famous lover of the Hebrew Bible, with his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kgs 11:3). According to *m. Yad.* 3:5, Rabbi Judah, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Simeon—rabbis of the generation after Akiva—were still discussing the canonicity of the Song. Its status was not fully resolved, apparently, until sometime during the middle of the second century CE. The minor talmudic tractate *Avot de Rabbi Natan* preserves a memory of this dispute when it recalls that "originally, it is said, Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes were suppressed, for they were held to be mere parables and not part of Scripture" (*Avot R. Nat.* A.1).

The key to Rabbi Akiva's reading of the Song, and possibly to its incorporation into the scriptural canon, seems to be the understanding that "Solomon" is the name not of a mortal king (one with many wives and lovers), but of God (whose one true love is Israel): "The King to whom peace belongs" (*ha-melek še ha-šalom šelo*). "The Song of Songs which is Solomon's" does not connote ancient royal authorship, but divine; it tells the reader that the Song is by, about, and in honor of the deity. The Song belongs to God, and (as Akiva says in *m. Yad.* 3:5) God gave it—as He gave the Torah, the only other book described as "given"—to Israel. This divine understanding of the name "Solomon" enables the Song to be read in the context of the prophets, who also used the metaphor of marriage to convey the emotional significance of covenant: Jeremiah, who likens the wilderness period to a honeymoon (chapter 2); Hosea, who uses the language of adultery to convey how Israel's faithlessness has ravaged God and the language of marriage to describe their restoration (chapters 1–2); and Ezekiel, who vividly—even disturbingly—expands on the themes and motifs of his predecessors (chapter 16). Such a reading comes almost effortlessly to the Song, but even as the Song acquires a wealth of new allegorical significance when it is placed in the company of the prophets, it moderates the violence

6 See Chapter One (p. 4).

and misogyny of the prophets. Whereas the prophets use the language of marriage in a struggle to articulate the nature of (religious) infidelity, the Song uses the language of romance to reaffirm the powerful inevitability of the union. It is not that there are no dark shadows in the Song—it is punctuated by threats of violence and danger, and the lovers' separation from each other structures the work as a whole—any more than the prophetic books are devoid of tenderness. The Song is, however, a salve, or even an antidote, for the wounds God and Israel inflict upon each other in the prophets. It balances the anger of the prophets, who give voice to the pathos of God, with the most eloquent affirmations of love in the entire Bible. The Bible would not be quite the same book without the Song; the canon would be wanting without it.[7]

The allegorical reading of the Song, at least in some communities, was apparently established well before the time of Akiva, and certainly it was the dominant understanding after the second century.[8] It is unlikely that the community at Qumran read the text literally, although we do not know specifically how they did read it. The apocryphal work *4 Ezra* (likely a Jewish work from the late first or early second century CE) seems to allude to the Song in a way that identifies the woman of the Song as Israel and the male as God.[9] Josephus (*Contra Apion* 1.8) implied that the Song was a "hymn to God," a categorization that requires some form of nonliteral understanding of the text. In the New Testament, which should be read as a Jewish sectarian text, the book of Revelation states, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door,

7 For a discussion of the "original" genre of the Song, see below, chapter 3. My understanding of the religious significance of the scroll, from very early times, follows that of Ellen Davis, Edmee Kingsmill, and Gershon Cohen.

8 For an introduction to the challenges (and rewards) of studying allegorical interpretation in medieval sources from a modern perspective, along with a specific history of the Song's interpretation along these lines in Christianity, see Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, 3–12.

9 *4 Ezra* 5:23–28 states: "I said, 'O sovereign Lord, from every forest of the earth and from all its trees you have chosen one vine, and from all the lands of the world you have chosen for yourself one region, and from all the flowers of the world you have chosen for yourself one lily, and from all the depths of the sea you have filled for yourself one river, and from all the cities that have been built you have consecrated Zion for yourself, and from all the birds that have been created you have named for yourself one dove, and from all the flocks that have been made you have provided for yourself one ewe, and from all the multitude of peoples you have gotten for yourself one people; and to this people, whom you have loved, you have given the law that is approved by all. And now, O Lord, why have you handed the one over to the many, and dishonored the one root beyond the others, and scattered your only one among the many?'" (NRSV trans.) The terms "lily" and "dove" in particular evoke the woman of the Song, while the appellation "vine" recalls Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5).

I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (3:20)—apparently alluding to Song 5:2.[10] In the following centuries, Christian readers would solidify their identification of the male protagonist of the Song with Christ and of the female protagonist with the church.

Mishnah *Ta'anit*, while somewhat later than some of the above-mentioned sources, supports the antiquity of allegorical interpretation through its explicit reading of "Solomon" as a divine name. The conclusion of Mishnah *Ta'anit* (4:8) describes how on the fifteenth of Av and the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the "daughters of Jerusalem" (the same term describes the female "chorus" in the Song) would put on borrowed white garments, go to the vineyards (a recurring image in the Song) and seek marriage partners. The conclusion segues from a description of human matchmaking rituals to a quotation from the Song:

> Likewise [Scripture] says, "*Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart*" (Song 3:11): "*On the day of his wedding*"—this refers to the giving of the Torah; "*on the day of the gladness of his heart*"—this refers to the building of the Temple, may it be rebuilt speedily in our days.

According to this mishnah, the possessive pronouns in Song 3:11—"*his* wedding" and "*his* gladness of heart"—refer not to the human king, Solomon, but to the deity. If this text mentioned only the Temple, we might imagine it referred to Solomon, the monarch who built the Temple in Jerusalem. But Solomon was not among those who received the Torah, and he was certainly not the one who gave it. Thus this mishnah's interpretation of the Song implies that Sinai is the location of the nuptials, and the Temple—often referred to simply as "the House" in rabbinic writings—becomes the locus of the consummation of the union. This divine wedding thus becomes the model or inspiration for human nuptials, blending human and divine eros together.

In the end, all the surviving evidence suggests that the Song was accepted as both canonical and holy by the first century CE. Non-sacred understandings of the Song may have persisted beyond that period (as implied by Rabbi Akiva's complaint in the Tosefta, and the *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*'s "memory" of the Song's

10 On the New Testament as a Jewish text, see *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); on Revelation in particular, see pp. 463–465.

suppression), and even in rabbinic sources we find a discussion of whether all the mentions of Solomon in the Song refer to God (*b. Shev.* 35b; cf. *Song Rab.* 1:11). Even this talmudic passage, however, indicates how accepted and assumed the allegorical interpretation of the Song had become. A figurative reading offered a persuasive interpretation of the text and, even more importantly, it infused Judaism with a reassuring theological language that was sorely wanted in the wake of the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE and the catastrophe of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE.

Marriage, we should note, is an appealing religious metaphor, because it emphasizes the mutuality of choice that underlies the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. But it is also a dangerous metaphor, because marriage—unlike the bond between parent and child, or even sovereign and subjects—can be so readily dissolved. Jeremiah explicitly deploys the language of divorce when describing the fall of the northern kingdom: "I had put faithless Israel away for having committed adultery, and had given her a bill of divorce" (3:8); in the verses following, God threatens the kingdom of Judah with the same fate if she does not repent. Deutero-Isaiah, however, writing in the period of Restoration, rejects the idea that the covenant has been broken and nullified by the destruction of the Temple and the exile. He asks Israel, "Thus says the Lord: 'Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, by which I put her away?'" (Isa 50:1). "The House"—God's Temple in Jerusalem—may have symbolized the union of God and Israel, but it was not the substance of their relationship. The covenant, Deutero-Isaiah teaches, could endure displacement, even separation. In the early centuries of the Common Era, Christian supersessionism reawakened the earlier anxiety of abandonment. Judaism needed to counter not only the suggestion that God had divorced Israel, but that He had taken up with a new, preferred partner. The Song of Songs, read allegorically, denies the possibility that God's love for Israel or Israel's love for God could ever cease, and it affirms, in the strongest terms, the exclusivity of their union. The positive lesson of the Song as allegory far outweighs, then, the problems the Song might have posed when read literally.

The Tannaitic material indicates that a figurative reading of the Song could be taken for granted early in the Common Era. The narrator of *m. Ta'an.* 4:8 does not need to linger expansively on his reading of Song 3:11 or persuade his audience of his point, and in *m. Yad.* 3:5 (and *t. Sanh.* 12:10), Rabbi Akiva, the most vocal and eloquent defender of the Song in the halakhic sources, is presented as speaking to colleagues already convinced of the Song's sanctity. The potency of the Song's allegorical reading appears not in the halakhic writings, which focus on the canonical status of the Song, but in the aggadah where the text itself is interpreted. And we see allegorical understandings of the

Song throughout the earliest midrashic sources, works contemporary with the Mishnah and Tosefta, and most particularly in the earliest midrash on the book of Exodus, the early-third-century CE *Mekhilta*, which supplies further evidence for Rabbi Akiva's devotion to the Song. The halakhic sources convey some of Akiva's passion for the Song; the aggadic writings indicate why he treasured it so.

Among the most famous Akivan explications of the Song is his comment on Exod 15:2 ("this is my God and I will praise Him") in *Mekhilta Shirta* 3:

> Rabbi Akiva says: Let me speak to the nations of the world about the gloriousness and the praiseworthiness of the One-who-spoke-and-created-the-world, for the nations of the world are asking Israel, *"How is your beloved better than another that you adjure us so?"* (Song 5:9b), that thus you are dying for Him and thus you are killed for him, as it says, '*therefore the maidens* [*alamot*] *love you*' (Song 1:3)—they love you to the point of death [*ad-mut*]—as it is written, "*Thus for your sake we are killed all day long*' (Ps 44:23). For you are beautiful and you are mighty; come and intermingle with us!"
>
> But Israel says to the nations of the world: "Would you even recognize Him? Let us tell you just a few of His praises: '*My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, towering over the multitudes*' (Song 5:10)."
>
> When [the nations] hear that such are His praises, they say to Israel, "'*Let us walk with you!*' (Zech 8:23), as it is said: '*Whither has your beloved walked, O most beautiful of women? Whither has your beloved turned, so that we may seek him with you?*' (Song 6:1)."
>
> But Israel says to them: "You have no portion in Him; rather, '*He is my beloved and I am his*' (Song 2:16); '*I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine, he who browses among the lilies*' (Song 6:3)."

Akiva here weaves verses from the Song into a complicated dialogue between Israel and the foreign nations. The audience of this midrash, of course, is not actually the nations, even if that is the literary conceit. Akiva here speaks to the Jews, and in this brief teaching he affirms God's positive qualities, valorizes the (new) concept of positive martyrdom, exposes the superficial nature of non-Jewish piety (the qualities that so impress the nations are not God's mighty acts but His looks) in contrast to Jewish understanding of divine truth, reveals that the actions of the nations are motivated by jealousy, and affirms that the nations are indeed right to be jealous, because there is no room for them in the exclusive and reciprocal relationship between God and Israel. The truths Akiva delineates here for his listeners are timeless; the dialogue he creates between

the ancient verse from Exodus and the Song applies to his own context in the second century. Most importantly, however, Akiva here recasts the contemporary Jewish situation—the aggressive, awkward approach of the nations, juxtaposed with the willingness of Jews to die for their seemingly absent and silent God—in the form of a romantic comedy (God and Israel are the romantic leads in the story, and the nations are the bumbling, misguided, and ill-fated suitors), albeit one with tremendously high stakes. Akiva here articulates important theological points that could easily be narrated in a more direct fashion, but by recasting his understanding of both the world and Scripture as a drama infused with the language of the Song, he creates for his listeners a narrative with emotional potency and vivid imagery. It is a brief, dynamic novella that places the listeners in the starring role.

The Song of Songs, then, provided ancient Jewish exegetes with a powerful vocabulary that expressed God's love for Israel, and even more eloquently, Israel's love for God.[11] Whereas much of the biblical text is spoken by the divine voice, in the Song it is the human, feminine voice—the voice of Israel—that dominates. Her voice, then, became a voice that later writers could adopt. Rabbinic writers found this voice important and appealing; the Song of Songs so permeates midrash that it is difficult to imagine rabbinic writings without its evocative vocabulary. In part this prominence is explained by the theological and emotional appeal of the book, but it is bolstered by the association of the Song with key events in Israel's sacred history: the Exodus from Egypt (courtship and elopement), the gift of Torah at Sinai (marriage), and the indwelling of God's presence in the Tabernacle and, subsequently, the Temple (union). Thus, the Song appears prominently not only in the *Mekhilta* but also in *Sifre* (an early-third-century compilation on Numbers and Deuteronomy) and the *Pesiqta de Rav Kehana* (which embellishes the festival portions of the Palestinian lectionary), and it is the subject of its own midrashic compendia, *Song of Songs Rabbah* and *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim* (the greater and

---

11 To be sure, the Song received similar symbolic readings in Christian tradition from very early on, most notably in the writings of Origen. For a comparative introduction to early Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Song, see Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 83–94, as well as the works by Matter, Astell, and Dronke listed in the bibliography of this volume. Because poetic interpretations akin to the Song of Songs piyyutim do not appear in Christian sources until the tenth century (and do not flourish until the twelfth), they are not a focus of this study, although consideration of such works would enrich our understandings of medieval Hebrew lyrics on the Song.

lesser midrashim on the Song).[12] It also appears frequently in other midrashic sources, as well as in the aggadah in the two Talmuds. The Song's romantic narrative, its allegorical expression of Israel's sacred history, and its powerful theology all bring the Song into conversation with many biblical books. The *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, as noted above, states that the Song was once regarded merely as a parable or *mashal*; rabbinic exegesis takes the parable of the Song and turns the rest of the Torah into its *nimshal*, its explication, Far from being a lock to which the key has been lost (as the commentator known as Pseudo-Saadia described the Song), the Song becomes a key for unlocking Scripture.[13]

Modes of Exegesis: Midrash, Targum, and Piyyut

Midrash is one of the most important rabbinic genres of writing. In its essence, midrash is the extraction of deeper truths from the biblical text by juxtaposing individual words, phrases, or verses; or, on a smaller scale, a playfully serious punning on the biblical text from which new meanings can be deduced. Midrash is a phrase-centric, even word-centric, approach to the text, one in which small, discrete elements of Scripture are endowed with layers of significance by the reader's understanding of Scripture's divine origin. Biblical words and phrases become keys that unlock meanings concealed within other verses.

Midrash is a witty, playful, and ultimately very learned genre. Its teachings can be transparent and lucid or challengingly opaque. The texts in which midrashic exegesis is preserved are literary compilations of oral teachings that circulated independently (with the result that variants of popular teachings appear in multiple locations). Some of the interpretations preserved in midrashic compendia originated in the rabbinic academies (or among circles of rabbinic disciples) while others may have been created in a more popular setting, such as the synagogue Torah service. While it was once commonplace to assume that midrash reflects the content of rabbinic homilies in the early synagogue, the truth is that we know little of the role of the rabbis in the early synagogue; some sages were deeply interested in its rituals and activities, while others kept far away.[14]

Thus, midrashim reveal much of what the rabbis thought; they do not, however, provide a reliable guide to what they taught at the popular level. In the case of the Song of Songs, none of the extant midrashic texts—including the *Mekhilta* and *Song of Songs Rabbah*—can tell us how the Song was taught in the early synagogue. We can learn what Rabbi Akiva thought the Song meant from these writings, but we cannot know to what extent these interpretations percolated through Jewish society more generally. Furthermore, when conceptualizing the God-Israel relationship, rabbinic sources tend to emphasize the father-child metaphor over the marital metaphor, perhaps because this relationship is rooted in biology and is, in biological terms, unbreakable. As Michael Satlow notes, "In all of tannaitic literature the metaphor of the relationship of God and Israel as a marriage appears very infrequently ... Later rabbinic sources use the marital metaphor with only slightly greater frequency."[15] It is not that the marriage metaphor is absent or suppressed: when disparate midrashic threads are read together, very powerful, even erotically charged narratives can be reconstructed, particularly within traditions associated with Jewish mysticism, and thus by extension with Jewish prayer. But compared to the paternal metaphor, the marital metaphor is latent and underdeveloped.[16]

12 Each of the five scrolls associated with holidays—the Song (Passover), Ruth (Shavuot), Lamentations (the Ninth of Av), Ecclesiastes (Sukkot), and Esther (Purim)—is the subject of its own "Rabbah" commentary, as are the five books of the Pentateuch. However, *Songs Rabbah* and *Lamentations Rabbah* are probably the oldest of the midrashic volumes on the *megillot*. See H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrashim*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 342–349.

13 For a biblicist's perspective, see Marc Brettler, "Unresolved and Unresolvable: Problems in Interpreting the Song," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 185–198. For an approach that reflects the rabbinic traditions of interpretation, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Scripture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 105–116.

14 For a concise and convenient summary of this issue with abundant reference to relevant texts as well as material artifacts, see Stuart Miller, "The Rabbis and the Non-Existent Monolithic Synagogue," in *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction in the Greco-Roman Period*, ed. Steven Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), 50–61.

15 Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 50; note his careful discussion of this trend, particularly the way rabbinic readings often subvert the contextual meaning of prophetic passages which employ the marital metaphor (50–57).

16 See Arthur Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), especially 69–87, for a discussion of marriage imagery in rabbinic literature. The metaphor of marriage, accompanied by highly erotic imagery, appears with tremendous force in the medieval kabbalistic traditions, particularly in the Zohar (fourteenth-century Spain).

Why did it take so long for the marriage metaphor, which provided such a powerful language for the articulation of covenant and its mutual responsibilities in the biblical text, to regain its popularity? As discussed in the previous section, it may be because the trope of marriage, as evident in the prophetic literature, introduces the possibility of divorce, and could have been seen in late antiquity as playing directly into Christian supersessionist claims that God had put aside the Jews and taken a new nation-wife.[17] In addition, the rabbis may also have been more comfortable identifying with "sons" rather than "wives," perhaps as an assertion of their own masculinity,[18] but even more so because of the paternal metaphor's expression of hierarchy (the father-son metaphor creates a greater distance between parties) and obligation (the son's duties to his father are clear; the marriage relationship is more reciprocal and mutual). The overwhelming popularity of the marriage metaphor in the piyyutim (particularly the Song of Songs piyyutim) highlights the inconsistency and infrequency of this metaphor in rabbinic literature. Piyyut and midrash emerged from the same cultural context and shared exegetical techniques, but the *payyetanim* adopted a distinctive approach to the Song: the narrative voices in the poems freely identify with the female speaker, and the poets delight in closing the distance between the parties, emphatically creating reciprocal and intimate portraits of the God-Israel relationship. Viewed from this perspective, piyyutim bypass dominant exegetical trends in rabbinic writings and reach back to the biblical texts, reinvigorating the prophetic metaphor while simultaneously countering Christian exploitation of the metaphor's vulnerability.

In the search for insight into how the Song was understood in Jewish antiquity, the Targum (Aramaic version) of the Song is another critical source.[19] Late antiquity witnessed the birth and flourishing of this translational genre, which ultimately has its roots in the Levitical explanations of the Torah reading mentioned in the book of Nehemiah (chapter 8). According to rabbinic legal sources, translation was to be performed orally, following the recitation of clusters of verses from the Torah scroll, but as early as the third century CE,

17 The supersessionist use of the marriage metaphor is attested in very early sources; for a fine and nuanced treatment of this topic, see Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius*, 83–94.

18 See Michael Satlow, "'Try to be a Man': The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity," *HTR* 89 (1996): 19–40; see also Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

19 The definitive edition of the Aramaic text of the Song of Songs Targum is that of Raphael Hai Melamed, "The Targum to Canticles according to Six Yemen Mss. Compared with the '*Textus Receptus*,'" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 12 (1921–1922): 57–112. Alexander's English translation, *The Targum of Canticles*, is a tremendous scholarly resource.

written manuscripts of the Aramaic translations appeared. These manuscripts, we can hypothesize, resemble in some fashion how the Torah was translated in the synagogue setting, although some Targumim appear to be more "scholastic" than liturgical. In general, Targumim are linear renderings of the biblical text they translate; sometimes the translations follow the Hebrew closely, while others introduce extensive narrative expansions on a regular basis. The narrative expansions, in turn, often resemble midrashic traditions associated with the same verse in the midrashic sources. Targum, however, is a relatively straightforward genre, compared to midrash: it explains what a verse "means," in a one-to-one fashion, as opposed to midrash, which is discursive in nature and values cleverness, argument, and variety. The Targums often integrate the results of midrashic exegesis while omitting the reasoning behind the interpretation. Thus, for example, *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:19 equates the word "wine" with "the seventy nations" based on rabbinic numerology: "'Wine' (*yayin*): This refers to the Gentile nations. [The first letter,] '*yod*' is ten, [the second letter] '*yod*' is ten, [the final letter] '*nun*' is fifty [i.e., 10 + 10 + 50 = 70], alluding to the seventy nations." This numerological tradition equating "wine" with the "seventy [nations]" underlies the Aramaic translation of Song 4:10, where the phrase, "How much better is your love than wine," is rendered as: "How good to me is your love, more than that of the seventy nations."

Midrash, in short, is about detail, diversity, and "showing your work," while Targums aim for the concise expression of meaning. For example, out of the phrase "the kisses of his mouth" (Song 1:2), *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:13 mines an extensive narrative about the revelation at Sinai and the nature of Torah, both written and oral. This passage weaves together legends about angels with intertexts from Deuteronomy and Exodus and creates a detailed picture of how the Torah was given and what it consisted of. The targumic rendering of this same verse contains a skeleton of this basic tradition: "Solomon the prophet said: 'Blessed be the name of the Lord who gave us the Torah by the hand of Moses the great scribe, inscribed on two tablets of stone, and [gave us] six orders of the Mishnah and the Gemara by oral tradition, and conversed with us face to face (as a man who kisses his companion) out of the great love with which He cherished us, more than the seventy nations.'" Although the phrasing and development of the interpretation differs between the two genres, the essence—the assertion that the biblical "kisses" refer to Torah—is shared.

It is important to realize that these texts—*Song of Songs Rabbah* and the Song of Songs Targum—are roughly contemporary: both date from around the eighth century CE, at least in their final forms. The similarities, then, do not betray a simple kind of dependence but instead reveal how shared traditions can crystallize in different forms. The Targum of the Song does not, however,

shed any more light on how the Song was taught in the early synagogue than do the midrashim. While it is possible that the Song was already being translated into Aramaic in the early Palestinian synagogues (probably on Passover, but possibly on Shavuot—it was associated with many occasions), the extant Targum of the Song postdates the piyyutim studied here.[20] Like the piyyutim, the Song's Targum derives from Palestine and shares many of the same exegetical traditions, but it is a later witness to the matrix out of which the piyyutim emerged.

As suggested in the few quotations above, the Targum is more a "version" of the Song than a translation, and it combines a deep familiarity with rabbinic traditions of interpretation along with a tremendously innovative, consistently historical reading of the text. That is, the Targum of the Song—unique among late ancient sources—uses the Song to retell the history of Israel, beginning with the Exodus and culminating with the messianic redemption. Along the way, it recounts the period of the wilderness, the conquest of the land, the building of the Temple, its destruction and the Babylonian exile, the restoration and the building of the Second Temple, the final exile, and the ultimate redemption. This chronologically linear reading of the Song appears to originate with its Targum, although one major medieval piyyut, the *Passover Yotzer* by Meshullam bar Qalonymos (tenth century, Rome/Mainz), appears to borrow it.[21] The Song of Songs Targum was remarkably popular and its manuscript tradition unusually stable; we possess numerous manuscripts of the Targum—many more than of *Song of Songs Rabbah*—and the Targum itself was translated into other languages, including not only Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and Yiddish, but also Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Turkish, and even Hebrew. While the popularity of this text suggests that it must be studied closely by those who wish to understand how the Song was understood by medieval Jews, the Targum cannot be seen as a source of the earliest interpretations of the Song. The Song was already important and an object of popular fascination before the Targum we now possess came into being.

While midrash and Targum are the most familiar and accessible expressions of Jewish exegetical creativity in late antiquity, piyyut—liturgical poetry—constitutes another storehouse of early interpretation. Of these three genres of exegesis, liturgical poetry is the one source that was, without dispute, located in the ancient synagogue, and thus there is significant value in placing piyyut alongside the midrashic and targumic traditions, so that the three may be

20 *Soferim* 18:4 describes the public reading of Lamentations with a Targum, and it is possible that the surviving Targum of the Song could have served this function.

21 See the discussion in Hakohen, "The Song of Songs and Its Songs."

studied together. Furthermore, piyyutim embellishing the Song are roughly contemporary with traditions that were ultimately collected in *Song of Songs Rabbah* and predate the Targum of the Song. Thus, if we want to understand how the Song was presented in a popular setting in late antiquity, the piyyutim are our oldest and best source. And yet, while many modern commentaries on the Song acknowledge midrash as the *locus classicus* of Jewish interpretation of the book, and a number cite the Targum as both an "ancient" version (despite its lateness) and a source of popular Jewish understanding, few commentaries display any awareness of the utilization of the Song of Songs in piyyutim, and even fewer display any knowledge of the content of such poems. The reasons for this oversight are complicated but due primarily to the marginality of piyyut studies outside the Hebrew-speaking world, as well as a tendency in the nineteenth century to date the piyyutim to the Middle Ages rather than late antiquity, thereby removing them from the purview of scholars interested in the early interpretation of Scripture. The result is that these works, which shed a unique and important light on the early interpretation of the Song, have been almost entirely overlooked. The piyyutim presented here include the earliest running commentaries on the Song and the oldest witnesses to synagogue interpretations of the Song that we possess.

Piyyut: A Rhetoric Embedded, a Rhetoric Apart

Midrash, targum, and piyyut are complexly interrelated genres of writing. Like midrashim, piyyutim derive much of their rhetorical and aesthetic force from their intertextuality and diversity; and like the Targum, the Song of Songs piyyutim (unusually for piyyut) take a linear approach to the Song, explicating it verse by verse in running order. But each kind of exegesis is shaped by unique formal and contextual constraints, and authors and interpreters display individual creative flair as they respond to specific genre-based demands.

Midrashim were edited into a cacophonous seminar of competing and complementary interpretations, ordered by their relationship to specific verses of Scripture. While the *Song of Songs Rabbah* anthology dates to roughly the eighth century CE, it no doubt contains traditions from earlier centuries. As a genre, midrash prizes innovation (the new interpretation, the *hiddush*), multivalence, and diversity: How many divine voices can be heard in these divine words? Midrashic sources record disputes and arguments over interpretations; named sages are depicted as disagreeing with each other, and the overall effect—inherent in the exegetical mode and amplified by the redaction of these traditions into composite works—is of raucous multivocality. At the

same time, midrash can be uneven in its coverage of a biblical text; some verses attract volumes of commentary and debate, others barely a gloss, and some are skipped entirely.

Song of Songs Rabbah offers discrete and discontinuous interpretations of the Song, and—perhaps surprising to those who expect it to articulate a thoroughgoing allegory of God and Israel as spouses—it devotes minimal space to the marital metaphor. It does, as one would expect, typically identify the male speaker as God and the female as Israel (either the present-day Israel or Israel at various historical moments), but it downplays the erotic tone of the volume. The emphasis on the marriage metaphor in early Hebrew poetry and liturgy—the early piyyutim, the seven marriage blessings, and various early epithalamia—distinguishes these writings from the mainstream of rabbinic prose. As Satlow notes, "[The] piyyutim, like patristic writings [which also favor the marital metaphor in a religious context], illustrate the choices that the rabbis did *not* make."[22]

Targum, by comparison, is more selective and streamlined than midrash, assigning one meaning—whether brief or expansive—per verse. In cases where multiple targumim of a biblical text survive, the interpretation may hew closely to the Hebrew (as with Targum Onqelos) or it may be rich with aggadic embellishments (as in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan), but the translation is comprehensive and linear, and presented anonymously, univocally, and without internal discussion. Both midrash and Targum are prose genres,[23] and both—especially midrash—make use of the expansive, open-ended nature of prose: the interpretation can be as lengthy as necessary. In midrash, this means that the exegete can explicate his interpretation: in *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:36, the exegete tells us exactly what he's doing when he proposes a different way to interpret the consonantal text: "Do not say 'daughters (*banot*) of Jerusalem' but 'builders (*bonot*) of Jerusalem'"; likewise, at 1:19, the exegete calculates the numeric value of "wine" letter by letter, showing how he arrives at the sum of seventy. Midrash affords us insight into the mechanics of rabbinic exegesis, as the rabbis didactically spell out their methods of reading. Whether originating in the academy or the synagogue, or both, these midrashim are pedagogically aware, even as they frequently delight. Targum, while arguably an even more pedagogical genre (it functioned, at least in theory, to teach what Scripture "meant") smooths over its own mechanics more carefully. Its persuasiveness

22 Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 56; italics original.

23 The Aramaic poems embedded in some Targum manuscripts were probably not part of the actual translation-performance.

comes from its presentation of an extended, continuous, linear gloss on the text. Thus, the Targum does not spell out how it derives "seventy nations" from "wine," it simply offers its interpretation. The translator has as broad a canvas as needed for conveying the meaning of a verse, but eschews exegetical explications in favor of exegetical results.

Piyyut differs significantly from its prose cousins, both because of its form (poetry) and its context (the statutory prayers). Liturgical poetry must answer to multiple formal constraints: the need to quote externally determined biblical verses in formally determined locations, such as the beginning or end of a strophe, stanza, or unit; the incorporation of acrostics and rhyme; the maintenance of rhythm; the inclusion of externally determined intertexts and liturgical formulas; and the need to function as prayer—to move people both intellectually and emotionally through powerful words. As prayer texts, they function in a profoundly different way than a homiletical or pedagogical text, even as they share with such works many essential assumptions and objectives.

If midrash and Targum played a role in the early synagogue, they would most likely have done so in the context of the Torah service, where the translation of the scriptural readings (Targum) or their explication and homiletical application (midrash) could have functioned as a study session. Piyyutim, by contrast, integrated statutory prayers into their very structure and were thus prayers rather than study opportunities *per se*. The liturgical nature of the poems affects both their function (prayer texts should be interpreted differently from study texts) and their structure. At the same time, piyyutim do engage with the content of the Torah service, even if they were performed in a different part of the service. The poems embed biblical verses, both those determined by the calendar (that is, the Torah reading for the Sabbath or holiday and the haftarah) and other verses (intertexts) whose selection may reflect either the poet's individual choice or traditional midrashic associations among verses.[24] The need to incorporate prayer texts and the lectionary provides a baseline of formal complexity; the nature of poetry is such that virtuosity is displayed not through exhaustive coverage of a topic or explication of a lemma but by formal intricacy. Thus, in this volume, some poems are relatively simple (notably the anonymous *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim* and Yannai's *Shivata*) while others are bogglingly baroque (Eleazar's *Shivata shel Tal*, which interweaves Pss 23:2, 92–93, and whole catalogues of agricultural crops into its various poetic units).

24 Festival poems display more variety in form than weekly compositions, making it harder to determine which elements of the poems derive from convention and which reflect the poets' creativity.

Beyond these large-scale formal constraints, poetry derives much of its potency from its terseness. Whereas midrash and Targum have no restrictions on length, piyyutim typically treat a given verse in no more than a stich or two, and within a stanza only a snippet of the verse itself can be quoted. Piyyutim that embellish every verse of the Song (which contains a total of 117 verses) can be quite lengthy, but nevertheless their exposition is terse rather than leisurely. The brevity of poetic rhetoric, compounded by its allusiveness and, in the case of piyyutim embellishing the Song, the ambiguity of the base text itself, can create a kind of opacity—a puzzlement, as the reader attempts to grasp what is meant. But that lack of clarity can, in turn, generate a kind of openness that is as rich as any multivocalic midrash. These works do not tell the listeners what the Song means, and they certainly do not tell us what its individual verses mean, but they hum with latent new meanings.[25]

A detailed study of the familial relationships among piyyut, midrash, and Targum exceeds the scope of the present study and has been discussed by the present author elsewhere.[26] The Song of Songs piyyutim, as poems composed for a festival, differ significantly from the routine poems for the weekly service, and the six works studied here are remarkable for their distinctiveness. They differ from typical (Shabbat) piyyutim in that they derive their structure from the biblical text itself; that is, a quotation appears in every strophe (sometimes in every stich) rather than just at specific locations at the conclusion of a unit.[27] Parsing out specific texts verse by verse is a typical feature of holiday poems:

25 It should be noted that pre-classical Hebrew poetry, such as that of Yose b. Yose, is also richly textured by the language of the Song of Songs; this contrasts with a relative lack of allusion to the Song in early Christian poetry, a topic that merits more substantial and systematic exploration.

26 Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis*, 132–190.

27 In a regular *qedushta*, for example, the first verse of the Torah portion is quoted in full after the first poetic unit, prefaced by the phrase, "As it is written." Intertexts are quoted afterwards, prefaced by "And as it is said." The poem that precedes these quotations will typically allude quite strongly to the verses to come, but it does not quote them, certainly not as the incipit to each stanza. Similarly, later units of a piyyut may quote the opening words of the first or second verse of the Torah portion as a kind of refrain, but they do not embellish in a linear fashion full lines of texts.

A word about technical terminology is in order here, as well. "Stich" is used to describe the shortest unit of poetic composition (equivalent to a colon). A "line" of poetry may be a single stich or two stichs, depending on the composition of the unit. A "strophe" is a complete stanza, and the specific composition of a strophe will vary from unit to unit within the same piyyut, as well as from piyyut to piyyut: some strophes are composed of two stichs (i.e., they are bicola) while others are composed of four.

in the poems for Shavuot, we find piyyutim embellishing Prov 8, Ps 68, and the Decalogue; and, for Passover, in addition to the Song of Songs piyyutim, we have poems structured on the Song at the Sea.[28] Even here, such works are exceptional, and often medieval rather than Byzantine. Furthermore, the Song of Songs is the only *megillah* to receive this treatment; we have no Byzantine-era piyyutim embellishing all of Esther, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, or even Lamentations in a way that resembles the Song of Songs piyyutim. Even within the payyetanic corpus, many of the poems included in this volume are exceptional.

In the end, just as the Song is unique in the biblical canon, piyyutim embellishing the Song—poems which use it structurally rather than merely allusively—are anomalous. They do not so much interpret the Song as extend and rework it. These poems, existing at the boundary of interpretation and innovation, transform the biblical text into the substrate for wholly new—and utterly distinctive—compositions. Often, as noted above and detailed in the annotations, these reimaginings of the Song resonate with broader traditions of interpretation of the Song, but the poets are also strikingly original. These works are not in and of themselves commentaries, but rather the raw material from which literary interpretations and liturgical experiences could be constructed.

The piyyutim presented here offer six unique approaches to the Song of Songs. Each in its own way opens up the language of the biblical Song and makes it a source for new poetry—but new poetry that is unmistakably rooted in tradition. In this, the piyyutim resemble, in subtle but significant ways, their source material. The Song of Songs itself can be seen as a kind of "proto-piyyut": a deeply intertextual, evocative work that derives much of its power from the way it engages its audience in its rhetorical, emotional, and potentially theological enterprise. Context plays a critical role in how we understand the Song. It may not be inherently "religious," but read in the context of the Bible—let alone the synagogue—it becomes profoundly so. Neither the early history of the Song nor the story of its canonization may ever be recovered, but the effects of its canonization are manifold. It is as a canonical text that we must try to understand the Song, without, however, ignoring its roots in ancient love lyrics and religious rites. In the synagogue, these two ancient modes live again. Read allegorically, the Song becomes a key that unlocks layers of meaning within the biblical text; by extension, the Song of Songs piyyutim transform the Song into a key that opens the gates of prayer for their listeners.

28 There are exceptions; for example, Yannai's Shabbat piyyut for Lev 15:25 contains one unit that parses out Prov 31 ("the woman of valor"), one verse per stanza. But this structure does not govern the entire piyyut, just one segment.

The Song, understood as celebrating the covenant of love between God and Israel, provided Jewish poets of late antiquity with a vocabulary for extending the love song into the present day. The Song not only reflects the sacred history of Israel, it resonates in the contemporary moment. The poets sing the Song of Songs anew.

In the end, the Song of Songs and its poetic descendants are dynamic works aiming to achieve complicated ends, and they challenge modern readers in part because so much of the substance of these works—their performance, their effect, their sound and true context—exists beyond the written page. Yet, the written page is all we have. With full awareness of the difficulties such a study presents, the following chapters will attempt to trace the complicated relationships among text, allusion, and audience.

CHAPTER 3

"Your Voice is Sweet": Piyyut As an Extension of Biblical Rhetoric

Language from the Song of Songs permeates Jewish liturgical poetry from late antiquity. It is rare to find a poem by Yannai or Qallir—the two master-poets of the classical period of piyyut—that does not, at some point, quote from or allude to the Song at least in passing. Poets used the Song to color the story of Abraham's response to God's call (Gen 12), to add depth to the retelling of Sarah's barrenness (Gen 16), to make vivid the moment of God's indwelling in the Tabernacle in the wilderness (Exod 40), and, of course, to embellish the drama of the Exodus and Sinai narratives. Wherever the themes of covenant, revelation, or intimacy between God and Israel were present in Scripture, either explicitly or latently, the Song, with its powerful vocabulary of love and desire, could be (and generally was) introduced. Piyyutim embellishing the Song directly represent the fullest development of this more general tendency of the early poets.

As noted in the previous chapter, the Song of Songs pervades payyetanic literature. In several ways, the Song can even be seen as a kind of forerunner of the genre, as a "proto-piyyut." In particular, the Song's deep biblical intertextuality—what Ellen Davis refers to as its "familial relationship" with the Hebrew Bible—and its allusive rather than explicit treatment of theology anticipate the form and function of piyyut.[1] Several recent analyses of the Song—notably studies by Ellen Davis, André LaCocque, and David Carr—have emphasized the Song's organic connection to the canon, although where Davis and Carr see it as a deeply religious text, LaCocque regards it as a pointed, polemical parody of the Bible.[2] Given the history of the Song—particularly its apparently rapid acceptance by numerous Jewish communities, as attested by its presence in the Septuagint and the Qumran material, even if its canonicity

1 Davis, "Reading the Song Iconographically," 175. Much of the discussion that that follows reveals a debt to my colleague Ellen Davis, who first suggested that the Song may be a "proto-piyyut" in November 2007 when I was a visitor to the Duke campus, and whose invitation to co-teach a graduate seminar on the Song of Songs enabled me to pursue these ideas in the context of a theological interpretation of the Song.

2 Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire"; André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

remained uncertain into the Common Era—the readings of Davis and Carr are more persuasive. As Davis states, "Where LaCocque hears deliberate irreverence, rebellion against the tradition, I hear adoration—that is, prayer—in a distinctly traditional mode."[3] Understood in the way Davis posits, piyyut organically extends and develops the mode of expression that finds its biblical articulation in the Song.

The Song of Songs as Proto-Piyyut

The Song presumably dates from the Persian period at the earliest, possibly originating in a Hellenistic Jewish context. The word "palanquin" (*appiryon*) in Song 3:9 appears to be Persian, as is the word for "orchard" or "park" (*pardes*) in Song 4:13. The style of Hebrew employed is also late: the preference for the relative particle *she-* rather than the more typical *asher* (found only in Song 1:1, where it is presumably a later superscription), for example. If a postexilic (possibly even Hellenistic) date is accepted, then it is possible that the author of the Song had much of what would become the biblical canon already in hand. It is, in turn, possible to imagine that the Song was intentionally engaging the literary tradition that preceded it, and consciously "inserting" itself into the theological and literary dialogue that came before.

Intertextuality, particularly allusion, is a subtle but not casual rhetoric.[4] The points of contact between the Song and earlier traditions seem intentional rather than accidental, and they range from the global to the very specific.[5]

3 Davis, "Reading the Song Iconographically," 174.

4 For a fine, concise analysis of the relationships among and differences between forms of intertextual reference and dependence (allusion, quotation, borrowing, etc.), particularly in the Hebrew Bible, see Benjamin Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6–31.

5 The most complete cataloguing of the Song's intertextuality is provided by Edmée Kingsmill, first in her dissertation and then in her monograph, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Kingsmill sees the Song as a fundamentally allusive work whose "vocabulary leads to texts which indicate that a network of biblical allusions is being woven into the Song for the purpose of conveying a picture opposite to that we find in the prophets who, confronted by the continual 'adultery' of Israel, poured forth their condemnations with unwearying passion" (6). While Kingsmill's assertion of intent goes beyond what the present author would claim with any certainty, she correctly identifies the consequences of the Song's intertextuality. Kingsmill's sensitivity to the biblical texture of the Song is crucial and her recognition that its voice acts as a balance to the prophets represents a critical insight.

On the largest scale, the Song's use of garden imagery connects it to two other gardens in the biblical text: the garden of Eden (Gen 2–3[6]) and the precincts of the Temple (which, in turn, reflects God's House in the heavens, lending the image of the garden both temporal and spatial dimensions).[7] The garden-ness of Eden is self-evident: the opening chapters of Genesis describe it in lush and ample terms. The resemblance of the Temple to a garden (and thus to Eden) manifests in its iconography: the menorah shaped like a blooming almond tree (Exod 37:17–24); columns bedecked with lilies and pomegranates (1 Kgs 7:18–22); a bronze "sea" rimmed by lions, oxen, and cherubs, "wreathed with bevel-work" (1 Kgs 7:29); walls embossed with palm trees, flowers, and cherubs like those which guard the entry to Eden (1 Kgs 6:29); and an interior design that concealed stone walls behind cedar and cypress paneling ("not a stone was seen," according to 1 Kgs 6:18), so that the interior of the Temple had the scent of a forest—with the consequence that, in rabbinic parlance, "the Lebanon" was the name not of the northern forest which yielded the wood that built the Temple but of the Temple itself.[8] As Ellen Davis writes:

> On that dry stony hill in Jerusalem, Solomon had created a second Lebanon, the majestic and myth-laden mountains of the North. The whole Temple was a sensuous and at the same time spiritual triumph over what would seem to be the limits of nature and geography.[9]

The Temple creates anew the "garden of God" (a term used not in Genesis's description of Eden but in Ezek 28:13). It is difficult to establish the relationship between these two biblical gardens and to determine whether the architects of the Temple had Eden in mind, or if (perhaps more likely) the lush iconography of the Temple colored later images of primordial paradise. In Ps 36:9, pilgrims to the Temple "drink from the river of Your delights (*'edanekha*, literally "your edens")." The garden of Eden was the site of both primordial joy and a devastating rupture between God and humanity; the Temple, in which God dwells (1 Kgs 8:10), restored the union and healed the rift. During the period of the first Temple, the garden of Eden and the garden of the Temple constituted

6 The garden of Eden is also mentioned in Ezek 28, 31, 36; and Joel 2:3. Significantly, both Ezekiel and Joel connect the garden to the Temple, juxtaposing references to the one with the other.

7 For a detailed structuralist analysis of Gen 2 and the Song, see Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1978): 513–528.

8 Ezek 31:16 juxtaposes "Eden" and "Lebanon" in ways that may indicate the antiquity of "Lebanon" as a shorthand for the Temple.

9 "Reading the Song Iconographically," 178.

bookends of humanity's history with God, representing an original intimacy and its restoration. The razing of the Temple in 586 BCE destroyed not only the physical terrain of the new garden of God but also the sense of union between God and His people. The reconstruction of the Temple in the Persian period signified the restoration of the relationship, but with the Second Temple's destruction at the hands of the Romans, the wheel turned once again towards estrangement.

The Song, written in a postexilic context (perhaps prior to the rebuilding of the Temple under Persian auspices), turns to the lush imagery of the garden and attempts to heal the rift once again, not through architecture but through imagination. It speaks a language not of sin and punishment but of intimacy, longing, and loss. If its original author or editor sought to convey an allegorical message, he did not signal symbolic content the way similar biblical texts do. For example, Isaiah identifies his parable of the vineyard (Isa 5:1–6) as an allegory when he decodes it: "For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the House of Israel and the people of Judah are the seedling He doted on" (Isa 5:7). As Marc Brettler notes (borrowing the language of Pseudo-Saadia), unlike Isa 5, Hos 3, and Ezek 16, "there is no key in the Song to suggest that it should be read as anything other than literal": the Song is a *mashal* (parable) without a *nimshal* (explication).[10] But the Song does not lack markers of its deeper significance. The Song signals its theological concerns through its intertextuality, by the way it joins in the larger biblical discussion about the nature of covenant and love. A theological understanding of the Song is not simply a willful act of imaginative reading.

A few examples will illustrate the Song's resonance with other biblical passages. The Song provides an abundance of garden imagery, aligning it with the Eden-Temple correspondence described above. The garden represents both the literal and metaphorical locus of lovemaking: the bower where the lovers come together is a garden, but so is the very body of the female lover, which itself is transformed into a topography of desire. The garden imagery in the Song particularly resonates with Temple iconography. The Song depicts a garden bejeweled, a nexus of nature and artifice: lilies, cypress rafters, and pools of water are juxtaposed with images of gold and ivory. The same concentration of rich and luxuriant vocabulary occurs in descriptions of the Temple. We should note with Ellen Davis the correspondence between the prophetic vision of a fecund land as the sign (embodiment) of faithfulness (she cites Isa 35:1–10) and the fact that "the Song most clearly depicts not two gorgeous human beings,

10 "Unresolved and Unresolvable," 186.

but rather a gorgeous land, an idealized form of the land of Israel, in fact, newly lush with bloom and bursting with animal life."[11] Throughout the biblical corpus, the condition of the land reflects the health of God's relationship with humanity; the Song describes a relationship at the peak of well-being. The garden is where divine nature meets human nurture: creation as a whole is God's garden—influenced for good or ill by human actions and intentions—and the Temple a microcosm of that realm where wildness is tamed by craftsmanship.

Garden imagery is allusion on a large scale, but the Song also includes language that resonates with smaller, more specific units of Scripture. Some allusions are direct, while others subvert or respond to earlier texts; in general, the Song can be seen as responding to ideas and challenges in earlier texts. Consider, for example, the Song's repeated use of the clumsy locution "the one whom my soul loves" (*she-ahavah nafshi*), repeated five times (Song 1:7, and four times in 3:1–4). The syntax is as awkward in Hebrew as it is in English, and such a descriptor is little help to anyone wishing to identify the beloved. The key to understanding the purpose behind the repetition of this phrase seems to be Deut 6:5: "You shall love (*ve-ahavta*) the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul (*nafshekha*), and with all your substance." Even in antiquity, these two phrases—"the one whom my soul loves" and "love the Lord your God ... with all your soul"—came together in the figure of Rabbi Akiva, who valorously defended the Song's sanctity and died a martyr's death with Deut 6:5 on his lips. Exegetes in late antiquity—among them the *payyetanim*[12]—recognized the resonances between these two verses and used them as intertexts. Each unlocks the other. Deuteronomy commands Israel to love God with all one's being; the Song, written in the wake of a history of exile, responds, "I do!"

Other examples abound, once one begins to look for them. For example, both Davis and LaCocque (albeit to very different ends) note deep resonances between the language of the Song and Hos 14, the prophet's vision of God's reconciliation with Israel. Hosea 14:5–9 speaks of "love," "shade," "vines," "blossoms," "fragrance," "wine," "Lebanon," "cypress," and "fruit"—all words that resonate with the vocabulary of the Song, and to some degree with Temple imagery as well. The Song, in some sense, realizes the vision of Hosea. In turn, Jer 31:20 finds an echo in Song 5:4. In the prophetic passage, God's anguished yearning for His beloved child Ephraim causes His "bowels to churn" (*hamu me'ai*); in the Song, the woman, expressing a physical response to her lover's

11 "Reading the Song Iconographically," 183.

12 Yannai's *qedushta* for Deut 6:4 makes significant use of the Song.

departure, reciprocates, saying, "my bowels churned on his account" (*hamu me'ai 'alav*). Yearning is a bodily sensation; God and Israel pine for each other "with their guts." The female lover's jubilant affirmation, "I am my beloved's and his desire (*teshuqato*) is for me!" (Song 7:11) becomes the antidote to the curse language of Gen 3:16, "Your desire (*teshuqatekh*) shall be for your husband and he will rule over you." The Song does not supply a happy ending—at the Song's end, the lovers remain apart, anxious for reunion—nor does it recreate Eden: it is not, for example, a love song between Adam and Eve. Instead, it asserts Paradise's latent presence, its looming potential that awaits realization. The Song takes the dire language of biblical curse and prophetic doom and undoes them, heals them, using their own images and concepts. The core of covenant, the Song teaches, is sound. Appearances of estrangement are illusory, and separation—exile—is temporary because the love is true, mutual, and reciprocal.

This deeply intertextual way of reading of the Song both supports "traditional" understandings of the Song—that it is a profoundly "religious" work of literature—and goes against them. The medieval sage Abraham ibn Ezra wrote: "The Song of Songs absolutely must not be reckoned among the works of desire."[13] I, however, would argue that the Song is, in fact, a work of tremendous desire—but not *merely* such a work. Instead the Song is both a seriously "constructive" theological work and a poem of eros, not "simple" human yearning but rather the longing of Israel for reunion with God. It is, simultaneously, a stunningly original work and an organically emerging tapestry of biblical images and language.

This combination of originality and tradition—the subtle, unsignaled use of biblical tropes and phrases that both add texture to the Song and weave it into the biblical corpus—typifies piyyut, and particularly the Song of Songs piyyutim. For all its integration of biblical language, the Song is a peculiar text: it shifts constantly among speakers and perspectives, leaving readers uncertain and a little unbalanced or bedazzled. It uses vivid sensory imagery yet refuses to correlate to our sensory processes. The Song of Songs piyyutim—unlike the Targum, for example—rarely try to smooth out the biblical Song and make it cohere. Instead, they extend and amplify many of the Song's peculiarities. If the Song is a late and thoughtful voice of religious imagination within the biblical canon offering consolation after the fall of Jerusalem, the Song of

13 This statement appears in the introduction to the standard recension of his commentary on the Song of Songs. See Mordecai Z. Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), especially 46–48.

Songs piyyutim pick up the conversation in the wake of another destroyed Temple—another garden ravaged by foxes[14]—and renew it.

Piyyut as Rewritten Song

While each of the Song of Songs piyyutim presented here is distinctive, all of them amplify elements of the rhetoric of the Song, both by alluding to specific intertexts and evoking larger themes. A few examples will demonstrate the flexibility of payyetanic composition and show how these poems respond to and develop the kaleidoscopic features of the biblical Song.

The opening lines of Yannai's *Shivata Shir ha-Shirim* display the organic complexity of payyetanic intertextuality. The stanza reads:

A song / let me sing to my Beloved
Let Him kiss me / in the vineyards of Ein Gedi
Towards the scent / of (my) henna (and) my nard—
Lead me (*after You*) / to the city of my appointed festival
I am dark / but You are a shield about me[15]

The very first line blends together Song 1:1 with Isa 5:1, the opening of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard. The next two lines rework the language of the Song itself, weaving the initial words of Song 1:2 and 1:3 together with phrases from Song 1:14 and 4:13. The fourth line alludes to Isa 33:20 ("the city of *our* appointed festivals" is transposed into the first-person singular) as a shorthand for describing Zion. The final line quotes from Ps 3:4.

This intertextuality is not signaled in any way beyond the position of the quotation at the start of the line; the poet does not indicate that he is quoting or alluding here the way he does when he adduces formal intertexts at the end of the lengthy middle units, for example ("As it is written ..."). Instead, it is as if each phrase in the biblical text is a gem, and the poet, like a jeweler, selects phrases and transfers them from one setting into another, creating a new composition out of old stones. Strikingly, few of the verbal associations here have antecedents or parallels in aggadic sources. The association between the Song of Songs and the Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5) has been noted by exegetes since the Middle Ages, but no major aggadic work (midrash or targum) associates

14 Lam 5:18, particularly as read by Rabbi Akiva in *Lam. Rab.* Prologue 24.

15 Yannai, *Shivata Shir ha-Shirim*, lines 1–5; translated in full in chapter 6, below.

the two works directly.[16] Here Yannai combines the two verses seamlessly, with "the song" (*shir*) of Song 1:1 becoming the "love song" or "song of my beloved" (*shirat dodi*) from Isa 5:1, as the poet simultaneously speaks in the voice of the Song's narrator (Solomon?), the voice of the prophet, and the voice of his congregation. This reading, to be sure, depends on the listener's awareness of the source material. Just as it is possible to read and interpret the Song without hearing its intertextuality (an omission that has significant consequences for interpretation), these lines, too, can be comprehended without awareness of their allusiveness.

The absence of explicit referents for the figurative language in the poem makes some of Yannai's lines opaque, despite their simple language. What is the significance of Ein Gedi? What do henna and nard describe in this context—and what, for that matter, did they mean in the Song itself? Is the poet's wish to be led to Zion nostalgic, messianic, or a merging of the two? And what does the poet's assertion that it is "dark" connote? Independently, each of these verses of the Song has a substantial history of interpretation, but the poet's engagement with these traditions is oblique, at best, and the result is an enigmatic composition. Overall, Yannai's reading of the Song emphasizes the resonances between the sensuality of the Song and Temple ritual: the oasis of Ein Gedi was associated with the cultivation of spices in Yannai's day, which in turn links up with the mention of henna and nard—aromatics that may symbolize the Temple incense and fragrance of offerings—in the next. The allusion to Zion in the fourth line follows naturally, and the poet's reference to darkness in the fifth line suggests how the Temple has, at present, fallen dark, but this darkness does not mean a lack of divine protection or care. This interpretation is, however, suggested by the constellation of quotations and allusions; in fact, were it not for the blessing that concludes the stanza—the first blessing of the Amidah, which praises God as "the shield of Abraham"—nothing in this poem would seem innately liturgical or even religious. Yannai stays true to the Song's tone even as he reconfigures its language into a potently suggestive mosaic of allusions.

To be sure, not every stanza of every poem is as enigmatic as the opening of Yannai's *shivata*. The anonymous *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim*, for example, inhabits the other end of the spectrum. This poem indicates its focus on Torah without ambiguity (and without any recourse to intertextuality) in its second

16 Saadia Gaon, writing in the tenth century, considered the Song of the Vineyard to be the eighth of the ten great songs, with the Song of Songs being the ninth; see Alexander, *Targum of Canticles*, 206–209.

line: "*Let Him kiss me from the kisses*—of (His) mouth / with two kisses: the written Torah and the Oral Torah."[17] This language is even more forthright and terse than the similar teaching in the Targum to this verse and in the midrashic parallels (*Song Rab.* 1:2, *Lev. Rab.* 22:1, *Pesiq. Rav Kah.* 4:7, etc.). Yet its directness has the effect of intensifying the erotic connotations rather than diluting them. Where the prose sources add words to clarify what it means for God to "kiss" and to nuance the mechanics and experience of divine relation, here the poet focuses on the immediate content of his interpretation: God's kisses are His Torah; revelation is an intimate experience of love.

At other moments, the poets occupy a middle ground: clearly "religious" and yet evocative and open to multiple interpretations. The *Shivata shel Tal* by Eleazar ha-Qallir offers an example of this in its treatment of Song 1:1–2:

The Song of Songs	I will chirp to Him who delights in what was leapt over
Let Him kiss me	with a charm of delight and protection
	I approached with additional offerings in order to draw out (my) prayer
	The case of both parties I would speak with all my heart[18]

This stanza alludes to a number of verses: Isa 38:14 ("I chirped like a swift or a swallow"); Isa 31:5 ("shielding and saving, protecting and rescuing"); Ps 102:1 ("A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his plea before the Lord"); Exod 22:8 ("the case of both parties shall proceed before God"); and Ps 77:7 ("I meditate and search my heart"). In some cases, these verses resonate with aggadic traditions, such as the interpretation of Ps 102:1 in *Midrash Psalms*, which states, "How long must a person remain in prayer? Until his heart is faint." In general, however, the biblical text provides the raw material for Eleazar's own creativity. Those who catch the allusions (even just some of them) can appreciate the poet's knowledge and cleverness, and they can appreciate the poet's comparison of his song to that of the prophet Isaiah, and ponder the juridical imagery—stern or lighthearted?—implicit in the reference to Exod 22:8. Even those who fail to catch the allusions, however, would likely hear the poet's references to his liturgical context: the rhymes on the root *p-s-ḥ* all indicate *pesach* (Passover); the "additional offerings" (*musafim*) indicate that the poem was recited during the additional (*musaf*) service; and the poet explicitly tells us that this poem is "prayer." There is no ambiguity about the

17 *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim*, line 2; translated in full in chapter 5, below.

18 Eleazar ha-Qallir, *Shivata shel Tal*, lines 9–12; translated in full in chapter 8, below.

piyyut's religiosity. And yet, the tone that emerges from the intertextual mosaic is distinctive. These lines are not "interpretations" of the Song so much as they are extensions of it, or even a wholly new composition that happens to share the opening words of its verses with the Song.

Each of these poems shares a kind of Song of Songs DNA: they all have a genetic (or, more accurately, generic) structure in common, yet each poem expresses unique traits. No two piyyutim say the same thing, let alone in the same way, even those by the same poet. Like the Song of Songs itself, these works are intertextual, drawing on the language of the Bible—the piyyutim are simply "more so" than the Song, with almost every line of every piyyut textured by an allusion to a biblical source. The allusions enrich the poetic composition with their own nuances, borne with them from their original contexts, and the intertexts themselves can also be reread in the context of the Song. Just as the Song engages dynamically with earlier biblical texts—responding to God's wish to be loved in Deut 6:5, or undoing the curses of Eden—these piyyutim change the biblical texts they quote simply through the act of quoting them in a new context. When Yannai quotes Isa 5:1, he cleanses Isaiah of his venom; the song is, in truth, now a love song, not a bitter indictment of faithlessness figured as a garden gone to ruin. At the same time, the allusion to an unambiguously allegorical text influences the allegorical interpretation of the piyyut strongly, from its opening lines onward. Similarly, the sorrowful prayer of "the lowly man" in Ps 102:1 becomes, in Eleazar's composition, a confident, triumphant invocation. A listener who hears the allusion simultaneously hears the poet borrowing the humility of the base text. Intertextuality is chemistry.

The Song of Songs engages the theological tropes and traditions of the Hebrew Bible through its intertextuality. It cultivates a third garden, one of the imagination, that complements the gardens of Eden and the Temple. The genre of piyyut displays the same flair for intertextuality as the Song, but even more intensively and explicitly. The biblical text becomes a box of colorful gems from which the *payyetanim* craft their mosaics, mounting biblical phrases in fresh settings where they sparkle with new meanings.[19]

The piyyutim included in this volume also resemble the Song in larger thematic ways. Almost all interweave garden and Temple imagery, picking up and articulating connections subtly present in the Song itself. Connections and

19 The study of Jewish liturgical poetry has, in recent years, been greatly enriched by the insights of Michael Roberts, who coined the term "jeweled style" to describe the poetic aesthetic of late antiquity. See his monograph, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

references implicit or latent in the Song find a voice in the piyyutim. In his *qerova* for Passover, the *Qedushta shel Shir ha-Shirim* (chapter 7), Yannai finds the combination of Temple and ritual imagery particularly compelling and makes it one of the foci of this composition. The other poems also develop clusters of specific themes from the biblical source text. Just as the Song implicitly affirms the general biblical theology that the health of the earth reflects the health of the relationship between God and humanity, the *qerova* for the Prayer for Dew by Qallir (*Shivata shel Tal*) dwells at length on the produce of the land, offering a veritable catalogue of crops and trees. The anonymous *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim* develops the resonance between love and covenant, putting the Song's message of yearning and union at the center of a poem that focuses on law and covenant. The *Yotzer Shir ha-Shirim* by Qallir (chapter 10) uses the Song's equation of the woman with a garden to blur the boundaries between the people of Israel and their land, translating theology into a kind of sacred geography. Qallir's *Groom's Qedushta* turns the Song of Songs into a celebration of love on every scale, from the intimate to the cosmic. And in his *shivata*, Yannai seems to revel in the very ambiguity and eroticism of the Song, translating it explicitly to his liturgical setting, to be sure, yet leaving much of the Song's most evocative imagery unresolved.

Each of these piyyutim is distinctive, but because they draw on the Song's verbal structure as a resource, all the Songs piyyutim share certain rhetorical features that originate in the Song. Particularly important are those elements that relate to poetic voice. Most of the Song is dialogue: it consists of conversations between the two lovers and their companions. Within this conversational structure, the female speaker's voice is particularly prominent. She speaks not only to her lover but about him: sometimes she apparently soliloquizes but often she addresses her companions, the daughters of Jerusalem. The rhetoric of the Song relies a great deal on words being heard and overheard—a device that is conducive not only to lyric but to liturgy.

The Song's presentation of itself as a kind of dialogue merges seamlessly if not simply into the conversation that is at the heart of prayer; at the same time, the Song's creation of sensations of proximity and absence evokes the phenomenology of prayer. In prayer, Israel is the primary speaker; God, who is praised, petitioned, thanked, and reverenced, participates in the dialogue primarily through divine attentiveness. In both the Song and its liturgical setting, the presumably "weaker" party is the active agent—the assertive one, despite her status. At the same time, narrative flow in the Song is often slippery; it is not always clear who is speaking to whom in a given verse. The poets not only feel free to reassign the speaker of a given verse or phrase (a freedom shared with midrashic interpreters) but to read themselves into the poem in dynamic

ways. At times, the narrative voice of the poem speaks for a congregation; sometimes the poet articulates the divine perspective, and in other instances the personal voice of "I"—so common throughout the Song—seems to be the personal voice of the poet himself. He is an individual within a community. He speaks to the congregation and to God, and for each party as well. Each poem, then, continues the biblical conversation while crafting a liturgical dialogue of its own. The resonances between the Song and the dynamic of prayer are not obvious at first; the Song is hardly a typical liturgical text (although Ellen Davis characterizes it as a prayer), and the great length of many Song of Songs piyyutim can obscure their overt ritual-liturgical function. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of dialogue is something that the two kinds of writing share at a very basic level, and the piyyutim provide a particularly compelling laboratory for considering prayer as a conversation, and the poet as the mediator of the dialogue.[20]

The Collective and Feminine "I": Voice, Gender, Perspective

Most of the Song of Songs is a dialogue: the lovers speak to each other, or they speak to their companions about each other. A natural consequence of this rhetorical structure is the predominance of first- and second-person voices, a feature that carries over into the piyyutim based on the Song. In many cases, the poet adopts and extends the Song's existing voices, treating them allegorically: the feminine speaker—the feminine "I" of the Song—becomes the voice of Israel, and the male speaker the voice of God.[21] In other instances, the narrator seems to speak in a more personal voice, sharing private musings with his listeners.

As organic as the dialogical nature of the Songs piyyutim may be, this feature of their rhetoric is worth pausing to consider, particularly because these

20 On the issue of poetic address, see Laura Lieber, "The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry," *Journal of Religion* 90 (2010): 119–147; and Tzvi Novik, "The Poetics of Yannai's Sixth: Between Scripture, God and Congregation," in *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honor of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Wout van Bekkum and Naoya Katsumata (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 69–82.

21 Ann Astell coins the terms "feminine 'I'" and "feminine 'we'" in *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, 136–176. I have adapted her insightful analysis of medieval Christian lyric by emphasizing the collective nature of the identification implied by the piyyutim. For a fuller discussion of my application of literary theory to these works, see the introduction to part 2, below.

poems were not composed to be read in the context of devotional or scholarly study but were, instead, intended for public performance. This performative, liturgical context renders the various voices—the narrator's "I," the congregation's "we," their combined address of God as "You"—substantial and real. They are not simply imagined but are instead audible and enacted. Furthermore, the poet does not simply address God in these poems; he speaks at length in the divine voice, both when cued by the language of the Song (i.e., when the Song is in the male's voice) and at moments of the poet's choosing. The poet's role in these poems is particularly multifaceted and dynamic: he orchestrates a symphony of parts while crafting, even playing, all the roles. He mediates the relationship between God and Israel, acting the matchmaker as he brings the potentially estranged partners together once again and helps them navigate the obstacles presented by their own actions and the jealousy of others. He provides all these voices.

Most often, the first-person voice of these piyyutim—as in the Song itself—reflects the voice of the female lover, and thus in allegorical readings the voice of Israel. As a result, the poet creates a character who articulates the historical experiences of an entire people: time collapses as the past is internalized. This temporal blurriness, however, reflects a fidelity to the Song rather than poetic innovation. As Ann Astell writes (with regard to a Middle English secular love-lyric), "Even more important, perhaps, [this work] imitates the poetic technique of the Song which minimizes the distinction between present experience and memory, the actual and the imaginary presence of the beloved, the world without and the world within."[22] Thus, when the narrator of the anonymous *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim* states, "*I am darkened*—indeed, on account of the deed of the calf which I made at Horeb // *But lovely*—on account of 'we will do and we will hear' (Exod 24:7) which I uttered at Horeb" (lines 5–6), the major narratives of the golden calf and the covenant ceremony at Sinai are articulated in an "individual" voice. They are presented not as history, but as an individual's memory.

In some instances, the poet may also choose to directly acknowledge the national nature of the narrative voice, as when Yannai writes in his *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim*, "He, in His solitude, is a singular God / I, in my solitude, am a singular nation" (line 92). And the gendered nature of the language frequently leads the poet to speak from an uninhibitedly "feminine" perspective, without any self-consciousness, such as when Eleazar ha-Qallir writes, "Render splendor to your King / from of old He meant to marry me" (*Yotzer Shir*

22 Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, 146.

ha-Shirim, line 82). Intriguingly this line—which clearly places the speaker in the woman's role—separates the narrator-poet somewhat from his listeners, whom he addresses with the imperative "render." His speaking to them in the second person in the first stich (via the imperative verb and the possessive pronoun "your") emphasizes the "individual" sense of the language of marriage in the second stich. "We" did not wed God; "I" did. Yet the poet is not asserting that the narrator has a special relationship with the deity. Instead, the force of this rhetoric is to suggest that every member of the covenant community can assert: "From of old he meant to marry *me*." His voice is theirs; he puts their experience, their history, into words. Hearing these poems is a matter of recognizing one's own story retold.[23]

While there is abundant narration in the poems—as the poets relate experiences and history to their listeners—these piyyutim are rich in dialogue, much of which is addressed to God. In part, this is because much of the Song portrays the female lover speaking to her beloved, but it is a rhetoric amplified by the fact that prayer is human speech directed at the deity. The result is that the poet (and by extension his community) borrows the assertiveness of the female speaker of the Song, even as it is tempered by the petitionary nature of prayer. The tension between assertion and petition, between confidence and anxiety, generates palpable frisson in almost all of these works. Indeed, while in the biblical text it is the male (specifically the deity) who stereotypically takes the initiative, in the Song it is the woman who speaks first, most boldly, and most often—just as in the liturgy (sacrifice or prayer) it is humans who reach out to the divine.[24]

One particularly striking example of this rhetoric occurs in unit 7b (the second *rahit*, or "runner") and unit 8 (called the *silluq*, which transitions to

23 The presence of the self-conscious narrator recalls similar techniques in Greco-Roman theater. See the discussion in George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study of Popular Entertainment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952; reprint, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), especially 102–138. The theatricality of piyyut is a topic that merits further study.

24 See Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire," 240–241. The poem by Abraham ibn Ezra that concludes part 2 of this volume offers a different "take" on the Song. It is written entirely in the male (divine) voice and speaks to a feminized Israel. Yet, the power dynamics of that liturgical poem are also complicated, and the emphasis on the male perspective in a Songs piyyut remains exceptional. It is worth noting, however, that medieval secular love lyrics generally speak from the male perspective; those that reflect a feminine perspective seem to be influenced by the Song of Songs. See Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, 137; and Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 175.

the recitation of the Qedushah) of Yannai's *qedushta* for Passover (*Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim*). Unit 7a (the first *rahit*) ends with an erotic first-person singular plea:

> *I am my Beloved's*
> The longing of yearning / and with love, desired
> With hate afflicted / but from His mouth, kissed
> lines 153–155

The language of desire is explicit in this verse. The poet, speaking in the voice of an individual (which we can understand collectively, introspectively, or abstractly), articulates his yearning for God. He juxtaposes the external reality ("With hate afflicted") with his internal truth ("from His mouth, kissed"). The tension between desire and fulfillment is maximized: the speaker both yearns (an emotion that implies distance) and describes intimate contact. The result is a tantalizing sense of proximity, almost as if the lovers are leaning in for a kiss, close enough to feel each other's breath but not quite touching. The next unit shifts in tone, moving from narration (in which God is described in the third person, e.g., "His mouth") to direct discourse, and from the singular to the plural. In the following unit, 7b, almost every line contains an address to God in the second person ("Your head," "Your ear," "Your eyes," "Your heart," and so forth) followed by a phrase in the first-person plural ("Our heads," "our ears," "our eyes," "our hearts," etc.). This rhetoric builds on Song 6:3 ("I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine"), which begins with the same phrase as Song 7:11 (the verse that opens the final strophe of unit 7a, line 153). It takes the parallelism that presents the two parties as a balanced pair and then explores the many ways in which God and Israel can be, or should be, or will be like each other. Each is crowned, each yearns to hear the other, the memory of each is engraved on the heart of the other, and so forth.

The next section of the piyyut, unit 8, nuances this rhetoric. In the initial lines of this unit, a first-person singular voice speaks and then addresses God, and the length of the line is pared down to a pithy minimum. It begins: "*I am a wall* / and You are my shield // *A vineyard* / and You are my Keeper" (line 168). The terse phrasing strongly recalls the Yom Kippur poem "For We Are Your People (*Ki Anu 'Amekha*),"[25] but in these lines, the language is resolutely intimate, having shifted once again to the voice of "I" rather than the collective "we."

25 The date of "For We Are Your People" is unknown, so we cannot determine whether Yannai is quoting from, alluding to, or writing before that hymn.

Yannai employs a common payyetanic technique when he reads against the grain of the verses he embellishes, here Song 8:10–14. In context, Song 8:13 is spoken by the male, but here it is implicitly read as the woman describing herself: "[*I am*] *she who sits within the gardens* / and You are my Lord" (line 169). The final lines of the unit, however, resume the first person plural, beginning with the assertion "And *we* will be to You a holy people" (line 172). The boundaries between the individual and the community are fluid or altogether absent. The poet is his community, and their past still lives into the present moment. The personal voice and the voices of the people, past and present, are merged.

For the poet to create a narrator who speaks as and on behalf of the community is intriguing; for the poet to speak not only with God but *as* God, in God's own voice, may strike modern readers as bold. In Yannai's *Shivata Shir ha-Shirim*, God sometimes speaks in erotically enigmatic terms: "*Like a scarlet thread* / your lips are lovely ... *Your two breasts* / are goodly" (lines 49, 51). These phrases maintain and even amplify the sensuality of the biblical text. Similarly, in the *Shivata shel Tal* of Qallir, God states, "*As a mare*—I cast down the chariots of sorrow" (line 23); this line imbues both the Song of Songs and the Song at the Sea with the vivid and emotionally charged image of God physically tossing grief aside. (Implicit in this line is the common rabbinic pun on *susati*, "mare," and *sasti*, "joy.") Often, the poems weave "conventional" theological tropes into the language of the Song. For example, in the anonymous *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim*, God praises Israel for her loveliness, which resides in her Torah study: "*Like a rose among the thorns*—(in) brambles, (in) thickets entangled / so, too, is My friend among the daughters, studying her tractates" (line 21). Despite living in exile (described as thorns, brambles, and thickets), the poet teaches, Israel stands out from all the other nations (the "daughters") for her devotion to rabbinic teachings. Eleazar ha-Qallir, in his *Shivata shel Tal*, lauds Israel for her fidelity to the commandments, past and present: "*How lovely you are!*—Anointed with the blood of the Passover and circumcision, in keeping with the teaching of the halakhah" (line 108). God's idea of beauty here differs from ours, but this is nonetheless praise. Indeed, in these poems, God never condemns Israel, even when she transgresses. The poet acknowledges Israel's sinfulness and unworthiness, but he depicts a deity who is unswervingly loving and faithful. In keeping with the Song, where the lovers may doubt themselves but not each other, the poet uses its language to construct a powerful affirmation of the covenant's durability and God's fidelity.

Because the Song of Songs piyyutim take so much of their language from the direct speech of the Song itself, many lines must be cast in the first-person voice of a human or divine speaker. Consequently, both performer and listeners are able to "experience" the divine perspective and relive historical events in personal terms. That is, the rhetoric of these poems offers an intimacy of experience, a chance to hear God's perspective—"in God's voice," as it were—as well as the national history in a way that transforms it into memory. This rhetorical alchemy takes place in a context where one voice—the cantor—speaks on behalf of all the parties. This intimacy—the sense that the community is participating in a close, shared conversation—may explain the occasional boldness of the rhetoric. For example, in terms of their address to the deity, the poets freely use imperatives; they do not ask God to act but instead seek to compel Him.[26]

Like the Song upon which these poems build, the identity of the speaker in these poems often fluctuates, and at times it can be unclear who is speaking to whom. Time is also fluid; the poets shift easily from recollections of ancient history to the present moment, often collapsing any sense of distance between the two. While this erasure of distance between past and present is common in piyyut, it is particularly potent in the context of Passover. The seder meal stands out as a rare example of anamnesis in Jewish ritual—a re-experiencing of a paradigmatic historical event by the community of the faithful, much like the Eucharist in Christianity. The rabbis understood Exod 13:8 ("And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'This is done because of that which the Lord did to me when I came forth out of Egypt'") in very concrete terms. As the Haggadah, the narrative read at the seder, states, each individual Jew is obligated to identify with the ancient Israelites as if he or she personally went forth from Egypt. The seder meal is a symbol-rich reenactment of that sacred story, and the piyyutim share in the seder's anamnetic rhetoric. In the course of hearing any one of these piyyutim, the community at prayer would experience—often through the individualized voice of the narrator, with whose "I" the listener can identify—the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai, even as they also experience joining the angels (who are, in a way, as remote and as proximate spatially as memories of the past are temporally) in praise of God.

The use of the first person draws listeners in. The personal voice accounts for the power and enduring popularity of many of the psalms, and that power endures in Byzantine and medieval piyyutim, as well. The individual voice in a collective setting, such as in the synagogue liturgy, possesses particular potency

26 In this, they borrow both from the woman's forthright speech in the Song and the often direct language of prayer. Of particular note in this regard are units 4 and 5 of Qallir's *qedushta* for dew, *Shivata shel Tal* (chapter 8 below). In these two units—sixteen stanzas in all—the second line of each stanza begins with an imperative addressed to God. Ultimately, these imperatives are petitionary, but the requests are boldly phrased.

because the community members know that they are not passively hearing the cantor-narrator recount private memories; instead, they are participating in shared memories. His voice is theirs. When the speaker in a poem says "I," the listener is able to hear it in his or her own voice, to affirm that yes, "I," too, left Egypt, accepted the Torah, sinned with the calf, entered the land, built the Temple, saw it destroyed, and yet "I" remain lovely, and loved, and "I" worship with the angels. The distance between past and present, between heaven and earth, and between poet and audience itself collapses.

Drawing the Congregation In: Choruses and Refrains

The listener's identification with the poet's voice is a form of intellectual participation in prayer: it takes place entirely in the mind of the hearer, and it is quite possible that not all listeners understood the experiential connotations of the poetry in such complicated ways. Yet intellectual participation is not the only means the poet had for engaging his listeners. In many, if not all of the piyyutim it is possible that the congregation participated vocally by means of choruses and refrains. These elements of the poems draw the listeners in, engaging them orally as well as aurally.

Refrains can be found in biblical psalms, as well as in the earliest piyyutim. Typically these early refrains are short phrases or even single words, such as Ps 118's repetition of "for His steadfast loyalty is eternal (*ki le-'olam ḥasdo*)" or the use of "sound (*qol*)" at the end of every line of Yose ben Yose's *Shofarot* poem for Rosh Hashanah (ca. fourth century CE), although longer examples can be found. Indeed, by the time of Yose, poems with full-fledged refrains (*pizmonim*) appear, one of the major innovations (like rhyme) that mark the beginning of the classical period of piyyut. During the Middle Ages, poems that lacked refrains sometimes had them added (e.g., the refrains added by an anonymous ninth-century *payyetan* to the piyyutim of Rabbi Shimon bar Megas[27]). We know little about the sudden appearance and popularity of these refrains, and evidence for how they were performed is sparse, but the use of refrains offers insight into how piyyutim fit into the context of late ancient literature more generally, as well as a window on how these poems were experienced in the synagogue setting.

27 See Ezra Fleischer, *The Pizmonim of Anonymous: Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of the Sciences and Humanities, 1974).

Refrains and choruses were hardly unique to Judaism.[28] In all likelihood, Judaism and Christianity probably both drew on earlier models of poetry and ritual performance (both that of the Bible and the Greco-Roman world) while also influencing each other. In biblical sources, choral response is associated with major rituals and, in particular, the Levites. Deuteronomy 27–28 recounts a ritual of antiphonal blessing and cursing on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, led by the Levites, in which the people respond "Amen"; 2 Chr 5:12–13 and 7:6—possibly late texts reflecting Persian-period custom rather than preexilic rites—describe Levitical choirs performing at the dedication of the first Temple. The Mishnah, in turn, mentions similar choirs in Second Temple times (*m. Tamid* 7:3–4). While the Babylonian Talmud records negative opinions towards music (see *b. Git.* 7a), Nathan ha-Kohen ha-Bavli, a tenth-century chronicler, mentions that a professional chorus ("a choir of young men with pleasant voices") performed at the installation of the Babylonian exilarch during a Sabbath service.[29] It is likely that refrains and the use of choirs reflect Palestinian Jewish custom which, like piyyut itself, was only gradually and grudgingly adopted in Babylonia.

In general, patterns of significant repetition in manuscripts (often indicated through shorthand notation) may indicate the presence of a refrain, which could be as brief as a single word or as long as a stanza or more. The manuscripts of Yose ben Yose's poems indicate that he employed both the short and long styles of refrains as early as the fourth century. His Shofar service poems, for example, contain single-word refrains that conclude every line: *melakhah*, "kingship," in his *malkhiyot*; *zikharon*, "memory," in his *zikhronot*; and *qol*, "sound," in his *shofarot*.[30] Such simple, highly repetitive structures could have strongly encouraged congregational participation. Other works contain

28 The Syriac poet Ephrem was famous for his female choirs. See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 105–131; and "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women's Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 8.2 (July 2005), http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol8No2/HV8N2Harvey.html.

29 The full text can be found in English translation in N. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), 171–175. Prior to Nathan ha-Bavli's description of the exilarch's installation ceremony in the tenth century, we have no descriptions of the performance of piyyut. It is possible that wealthy or large (urban) congregations may have employed professional choirs, as was the case with the performances of Ephrem's hymns and Romanos's *kontakia* as well as the ceremony of the exilarch's installation in Babylonia, while the same role could have been performed in a smaller or less luxurious setting by a lay choir or the congregation as a whole.

30 Mirsky, *The Liturgical Poetry of Yose ben Yose*, 93–117, 219–221.

much more intricate refrains. For example, Yose's penitential hymn "Truly we have sinned" includes a double chorus: two refrains of four stichs, each of which alternated after each stanza (i.e., the first refrain after the first stanza, the second refrain after the second, and so on in alternation throughout the hymn).[31] In general, Yose's use of refrains displays much variety.[32] Refrains and other highly repetitive structures seem particularly common in the context of penitential poems, perhaps reflecting the litany-like nature of many nonpoetic penitential texts such as the *selichot* compositions, which often employ repetitive catalogue-like structures.[33]

The general evidence from piyyut suggests that refrains were initially simple, if used at all, and only later became elaborate and routine. We do not see definitive evidence of them in the weekly poems by Yannai (sixth century CE, Palestine), although it seems likely he did use simple refrains occasionally, as suggested by the repetition of single words in some *rahitim* (the most formally intricate units in his *qedushta'ot*) and the likely repetition of the opening phrases of biblical verses in the sixth unit of many of his piyyutim. Indeed, the single-word refrain appears in the piyyutim of Yose ben Yose, one of the earliest known synagogue poets, and Yose occasionally employed more complicated refrains as well.[34] Only with Eleazar ha-Qallir, however—a generation later than Yannai—do we see the regular use of complex refrains, on the scale of those used in the poetry of the Greek Romanos, for example. In Qallir's poetry, we find a style of chorus called the *qiqlar*—a short, freestanding refrain (the name is from the Greek *kuklos*, "cycle")—which was, at least in theory,

31 This somewhat resembles one method of performing Ephrem's hymns in the Syriac church: two choirs would sing the hymn, alternating stanzas, and come together for the refrain. It is possible that Yose's penitential hymn could have been performed with two choirs which would have alternated in singing the two refrains—one choir singing the first refrain after alternate stanzas, and the other singing the second—perhaps with complementary alternation in the singing of the stanzas, as well.

32 For examples of the formal variety of Yose's Avodah poems, see Swartz and Yahalom, *Avodah*, 349–365.

33 Laura Lieber, "Confessing from A to Z: Penitential Themes in Early Synagogue Poetry," in *Seeking the Favor of God*, vol. 3, *The Impact of Penitential Prayer beyond Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney Werline (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 99–125.

34 For single-word refrains, see the Shofar service poems by Yose ben Yose in Mirsky, *The Liturgical Poetry of Yosse ben Yosse*, 93–117; some of his penitential hymns include more developed refrains (pp. 118–126, for example); other works, however, such as his majestic Avodah poem "Azkir Gevurot," lack any refrain at all.

performed as a choral response by a professional choir.[35] The Greek name for the form is suggestive of a non-Jewish origin, but hardly conclusive. What is certain is that in the period after Yannai, refrains become both more common and more substantial.

The piyyutim presented here exemplify the irregular use of refrains while also suggesting other modes for congregational involvement. Neither of Yannai's two piyyutim, the *shivata* and the *qedushta*, possesses any obvious refrain, aside from the quotations from the Song. Among Qallir's three piyyutim, the *qedushta* for dew includes a true refrain in the first unit as well as units with highly patterned repetitions of words (notably the phrase "dew of rest," *tal menuḥah*, in fixed locations) which are suggestive of a refrain; the *Groom's Qedushta* includes a full one-stanza refrain in the *qiqlar* and a short refrain (alternations of "the bride" and "the groom") in the first *rahit* (Poem 7a); and the *yotzer* has a four-line refrain in the opening unit but not thereafter. The anonymous *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim* includes a simple refrain in its sixth unit.

The refrain in the sixth unit of the anonymous *qedushta* merits elaboration, both because of the poem's early date and because the refrain itself is simple but effective. It consists of the simple repetition of the phrase "the Song of Songs," eleven times in all. It is easy to imagine a congregation quickly joining in the recitation of such a brief, straightforward chorus, although a choir could also certainly have been employed. The phrase is not particularly well integrated into the unit (the anonymous piyyut is, overall, the least polished of these poems), but the central placement of the refrain in unit 6, at the heart of the composition, suggests its significance. Quite literally, "the Song of Songs" is central to the poem. Every episode narrated in the unit is yoked, through the refrain, to the idea of the Song, whether the connection is evoked organically or through the sheer force of juxtaposition.

The defining formal feature of the poems in this anthology, however, is not the refrain; it is the interweaving of the opening phrase from each verse of

35 For a discussion of Qallir's use of choirs, see Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry*, 132, 148; Leon J. Weinberger regards the refrains as congregational rather than choral (*Jewish Hymnography: A Literary History*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization [London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998], 47). Pinḥas ha-Kohen, roughly contemporary with Qallir, introduced refrains into the *zulat* unit of his *yotzerot*; see Ezra Fleischer, *The Yotzer: Its Emergence and Development* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 281–296. It can be difficult to discern the history of refrains in piyyutim since in the Middle Ages poets would add them to earlier poems which lacked them. Thus poems that can be authentically dated to the early period of piyyut (such as those of Yose ben Yose) may have complicated refrains that date from the tenth century.

the Song of Songs that forms the framework of the poems. This parsing out of an entire book, verse by verse, is—as noted in chapter 1 above—unique to these poems, and it stands to reason that the Song of Songs language itself may have provided an opportunity for participation. The manuscripts do not contain cues indicating such a practice, but it is possible that a community which had committed the Song (or perhaps the general lectionary) to memory would have been able, *sotto voce* or aloud, to join the cantor-poet in the recitation of the words and phrases quoted from the Song (and, likewise, in the longer quotations embedded as intertexts in many of the poems at specific locations in the poems). More dramatically, it may have been that choirs intoned the quotations, creating an antiphonal, dynamic performance in which the bold recitation of the scriptural phrases was juxtaposed with the poet's solo voice intoning the body of each line. By limiting participation to the choirs, however, this type of dramatic performance, if it ever took place, would not have involved the community in the same internal, intimate way as the true refrains. It would not have included the community in the act of speaking the poems and thereby making the poet's voice their own. But it would have been deeply, even physically, engaging and exciting, and it would have brought the words of Scripture alive in a profoundly arresting way. With regard to the Song itself, Ann Astell writes, "Thus the medieval auditor of the Song could never be a mere listener, objectifying the discourse of the *Sponsa et Sponsus*; he or she had to become a speaker in its dialogue."[36] Personal, figurative readings—implicit in the Song itself—are given concrete articulation in these poems and, through intellectual engagement and even vocal or physical participation, such interpretations of the Song are not merely passively received but actively constructed and even embodied.

Widening the View

The focus in this chapter has been on intertextuality and rhetoric: how the Song functions in the context of the canon, and how the piyyutim based on the Song develop and complicate the Song's dynamics, in both literary and experiential ways. The rhetoric of the poems anchors them firmly in the Bible, yet the creations are both original and fundamentally new, even if the majority of words and phrases have roots in the canonical text. The poems reach simultaneously back into the past and out into the present (and future), and in doing so, they collapse the space between "then" and "now," as history is transformed into lived experience. Other boundaries break down as well. The angelology of the poems closes the space between the human congregation and the heavenly hosts at prayer, and the prominent use of various first-person voices invites listeners to experience the poem from the poet's perspectives—not only his human perspectives, but also (when he speaks in God's voice) the divine. Techniques ranging from voice to refrains and choruses engage the listeners in a physical as well as an intellectual way.

The emphasis on engagement in the above analysis, tentative as it is (of necessity, given how much of our understanding of the performance of these works is conjecture), responds to the fact that these piyyutim were experienced in a liturgical setting. Indeed, one way in which these poems assuredly involved their listeners was through the inclusion of fixed liturgical phrases and the statutory blessings (the Amidah in all cases except Eleazar ha-Qallir's *Yotzer Shir ha-Shirim*) that punctuate all the poems at predictable locations and balance the innovative words of the poetry with the comfort of routine and expected phrases. It is as liturgy, ultimately, that all these works were experienced. The poet was often the voice of the congregation, but his listeners' voices were undoubtedly heard as well.

In the next chapter, we will consider the larger contexts of the Song of Songs piyyutim: the ancient synagogue and Byzantine Palestine. In the last century, archaeologists have uncovered a number of synagogues in the land of Israel and the Diaspora from precisely the same period when piyyut developed and flourished. While we do not know for certain that the specific piyyutim presented here were ever heard in the synagogues now available for study, the juxtaposition of these works can be illuminating. Both liturgical poetry and the excavated synagogues complicate the often overly simplified understanding of Jewish culture in late ancient Palestine. The ways in which these poems engage with the pressures and lures of the majority Christian culture and Byzantine political power suggest how these poems both shaped and reflected Jewish views of the outside world, in addition to expressing Jewish theology.

36 Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, 168.

CHAPTER 4

"I Am My Beloved's and His Desire is for Me": The World of the Songs

Piyyutim, as encountered here, are written artifacts. We find them as parchment fragments and within printed books; they are preserved as faint, overwritten palimpsests and in beautiful illuminated manuscripts; they populate some of the oldest surviving *siddurim* and appear in the most current prayerbooks as well. While we date these works to the fourth through seventh centuries, the actual copies we possess were produced generations or even centuries after the time of composition. The first tasks in studying these works are textual in orientation: establishing the words, deciphering the structure, understanding the content, and—in the case of good critical editions—annotating the networks of allusions that make these texts so profoundly intertextual. The tools of literary study—close reading, structural analysis, explorations of themes and motifs—promise to reveal much about the content and composition of these poems.

The textual nature of these works often obscures the fact that they were not experienced as written works but as performed pieces; furthermore, the very success of these poems as liturgical works means that they do not reveal as much about the contexts in which they were first produced as we might hope. If poems were too closely bound to a specific time or place, there would be little reason to preserve them or perform them elsewhere. Viewed from one perspective, liturgy constitutes a fundamentally timeless genre. Lack of specificity is a virtue, for it enables any cantor to step into the creator's shoes and any listener into those of the original audience. With every recitation, these hymns live anew, whether in the synagogues of Byzantine Palestine, medieval Mainz, or a modern congregation. Despite their renewable natures, piyyutim, no matter when and where they were written, do reflect—at least implicitly, sometimes explicitly—the cultural and societal milieu from which they emerged. The authors may have had their eyes focused on the timeless realm of God, but they lived and participated in their own times. The poetry of the early *payyetanim*, including the works in this volume, thus can be understood to shed light—albeit mostly indirectly—on the dimly known world of the Jews of late ancient Palestine.

These poems look both inwards and outwards. If one follows their gaze inward, they offer insight into Jewish culture and the experience of prayer in

the early synagogue. In particular, the piyyutim that embellish the Song suggest a way of understanding not only the metaphor of "marriage" as a way of describing covenant; they indicate elements of ancient wedding customs that would have colored how the metaphorical marriage of God and Israel was imagined by the first congregations to hear these poems. These incidental referents help elucidate and elaborate references to wedding customs from apocryphal and rabbinic sources. In addition to reflecting this aspect of Byzantine Jewish culture, the poems also exist in a dynamic with synagogue art and architecture. The liturgy animates the physical structure of the house of prayer, and late antiquity witnessed both a building boom and the flowering of early piyyut. The two kinds of evidence for synagogues, literary and material, beg to be read together: the Song of Songs piyyutim, composed in the decades and centuries after the most magnificent synagogues were built, suggest how the visual imagery of synagogues was "read" by the poets and their listeners. The intersection between the payyetanic expositions of Song 5:10–16 (the description of the male beloved's physique) and the enigmatic Helios mosaics is particularly compelling.

The piyyutim also, however, lead our eyes outward. Just as these poems shed light on the internal experience of Judaism, they also reflect the larger, Christian-dominated culture of late ancient Palestine.[1] The synagogue may have been a sanctuary and the Sabbath a refuge from the exilic reality that lay outside, but the poets—serving as both liturgists and homilists—had to speak to that reality. These poems, while sometimes otherworldly in orientation, live in their present moment. As a result, in the poems that embellish the Song of Songs, the Song is used to construct a thoroughgoing and deep counternarrative to Christian supersessionism. These poetic responses to Christianity and disempowerment are both implicit and overt, conveyed by allusion and expressed as polemic and ardent messianic fervor—all of which, together, attest to the difficulty of Jewish life under Byzantine Christian rule and articulate the expectation that life under this dominion would soon come to an end. The poets rarely directly address their present circumstances, but their situation permeates their works, and particularly these poems, which celebrate the holiday that commemorates redemption in poetry built on a scaffolding of yearning and love.

1 For an analysis of the sociohistorical context of Jews in sixth-century CE Palestine, see Laura Lieber, "'You Have Been Skirting This Hill Long Enough': The Tension between History and Rhetoric in a Byzantine Piyyut," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 80 (2009): 63–114.

These poems knit marriage, beauty, desire, anxiety, and messianism into coherent wholes. Every poem is distinctive, with each work emphasizing different clusters of often overlapping themes. Yet when they are considered together, their thematic unity emerges, offering a constructive vision of the poets' worldviews: their understanding of the past as a foreshadowing of the future, their acknowledgment of contemporary difficulties along with their confidence in the redemption to come. The Song of Songs, which never speaks of exile or God even as it articulates the yearning of separated lovers who hunger for each other's presence, addresses from an emotional perspective the experiences and hopes of the Jews of late ancient Palestine and provides a vocabulary for constructing a powerful and persuasive riposte to the arguments of the outside world—even as the poets create poems that focus the eyes of the community upward rather than outward.

Wedding Imagery

Some theories about the original life-setting of the Song of Songs have argued that it was an epithalamium—a wedding song—composed for recitation at human weddings or for use in religious "sacred marriage" rites.[2] Neither of these proposals has retained a serious modern following: the human marriage hypothesis, which was articulated as early as Origen and still appears in many modern versions that assign the voices of the Song to a "bride" and "groom," strives rather too hard to tame the illicit elements of the relationship described in the Song, much in the way that marriage rituals channel sexual energy into religious rites. And conversely, there is simply no evidence for the practice of sacred marriage rituals in the ancient Near East or in ancient Israel, let alone in Persian or Hellenistic Judaism.

While the Song is unlikely to have been composed for use in wedding rites (human or divine), its evocative and romantic language—including the male

2 Assertions that Israelites practiced sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) rituals were particularly fashionable in the mid- to late twentieth century. Samuel Noah Kramer was among the most enthusiastic proponents of the Song as a liturgy for sacred marriage, a ritual attested in various ways in Sumerian, Mesopotamian, and Ugaritic writings; see, for example, his monograph, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1969). For a critique of Kramer's argument, see Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 239–243. For a more general critique of scholarly fascination with sacred marriage, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 45–80.

lover's use of "bride" as a term of endearment, and the presence of bower imagery and male and female "attendants"—led to its association in the post-biblical period with the marriage liturgy. Its language colors the Groom's Blessing (*birkat ḥatanim*, mentioned in *m. Meg.* 4:3 and *t. Meg.* 3:7, with the earliest text preserved in *b. Ketub.* 7b–8a), which forms the bulk of the Seven Blessings (*shevaʿ berakhot*) of the Jewish wedding ceremony and the week of feasting that traditionally follows. The traditional association of the Song with the Groom's Blessing is implied by the mention of this blessing in *Song of Songs Rabbah* 2:7. Readings from the Song are common at contemporary weddings, Jewish and Christian, where the text offers a scriptural sanction of the very human bond being celebrated and recognized. And the Song likewise permeates late ancient and medieval epithalamia.

To be sure, in many of the premodern compositions especially, the line between human and divine love is blurred. Thus, for example, Qallir speaks on two levels when he writes in the *Groom's Qedushta* (lines 110–113):

> Arise, my darling (Song 2:10, 13), and wed with love,
> Exult and give thanks to your (f. sg.) king;
> A song pours forth in my groom's chamber (*ḥuppah*):
> Make music: "*Under the apple tree you aroused me.*" (cf. Song 8:5)[3]

On the one hand, the poet here speaks to the bride (implying that she was present at the Sabbath service) of her marriage to the groom (her "king") but, simultaneously, he addresses the feminine Israel on the subject of her marriage to God (her "King"). The theological overtones solemnize and broaden the scope of the poem: every wedding reiterates the "vows" joining God and Israel.

A similar blurring of literal marriage imagery and metaphorical wedding language occurs in the Passover Song of Songs piyyutim, where the setting is predominantly theological (celebrating an event from Israel's sacred history rather than the creation of a new human family), but "mortal" ceremonial language adds color and depth to the poetic imagery.[4] Both the true epithalamia and

3 Song 8:5, written in the woman's voice, states, "Under the apple tree I aroused you (m.s.)." Qallir here presents the same event from the male speaker's perspective.

4 For a consideration of how early piyyutim shed light on marriage customs and rituals from late antiquity, see Laura Lieber, "The *Piyyutim le-Hatan* of Qallir and Amittai: Jewish Marriage Customs in Early Byzantium," in *Talmuda de-Eretz Yisrael: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Ancient Palestine*, ed. Steven Fine and Aaron Koller (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming).

the Song of Songs piyyutim embellish and enrich their imagery by including descriptors of real wedding rituals, although the proportions differ; the epithalamia narrate the marriage in much greater detail than the Song of Songs hymns do, because the wedding is central to the marriage poems but only a supporting element in the Passover poems. Nevertheless, almost all of the Song of Songs piyyutim refer to elements of the marriage rite in the course of describing the love that unites God and Israel.

Explicit references to wedding customs in these works are scattered, but they serve a larger function in these poems in that they help reinforce the romantic, erotic tone of the poems overall. Locations that may not seem intuitively romantic—Sinai, the Ark, the Temple, the Chamber of Hewn Stone where the Sanhedrin met—become bowers where union is consummated and renewed. The words of Torah become jewels given by a lover to his beloved. The flight from Egypt becomes an elopement, or a wedding procession. When images that describe contemporary wedding customs do occur they enrich the poetic imagery and reinforce the tone that is already present through the more overarching, generalized "marriage" metaphor. Most explicitly, Qallir's epithalamium, the *Groom's Qedushta*, employs the God-Israel marriage metaphor in order to broaden the significance of the individual wedding it celebrates: the marriage of two individuals becomes a metaphor for the covenant between God and Israel. As explicit as this double effect is in the *Groom's Qedushta*, all of these poems invoke images from the familiar wedding ceremony in order to make vivid and concretize a theology that would otherwise remain, in a fundamental way, wholly abstract. Marriage merges with myth.

Wedding customs themselves, after all, engage in a kind of mythopoesis. Much of the imagery in wedding ceremonies—crowns, processions, litters, and so forth—derives from the world of royalty, which in turn colors images of the heavenly realm and its King. On the day of the wedding, no matter their "real" social status, the groom is a king and the bride is a queen. The resonance between marital and royal imagery underlies the images of Israel "crowning" God with her prayers, even as God crowns her. The image of mutual crowning not only draws on marriage customs and royal imagery, but also emphasizes reciprocity: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song 6:3).[5] Indeed, intriguing tonal and visual overlaps create an interlocking set of associations among the Qedushah prayer (which all the piyyutim studied here embellish), wedding ceremonies, and Temple ritual: the use of music,

5 On the significance of crowning, see Green, *Keter*, especially 69–87.

the significance of perfume and incense, the trope of coronation, and the enactment of transformative intimacy.

In a fundamental way, the pervasiveness of marital imagery in these poems underscores the power of metaphor. The poets do not rely on mere simile, suggesting that the relationship between God and Israel is "like" a marriage. Instead, God and Israel *are wed*. The Song of Songs is not tamed by this allegorical reading; instead, theology receives an electrifying erotic charge. In turn, the synagogue liturgy, which creates a dialogue and a connection between God and Israel—a moment when the gap between the immanent and the transcendent is bridged, if not closed, through the use of powerful words—enacts union in a way that is simultaneously real and abstract. This intimacy is a broad, powerful transformation of the experience of the high priest in the Holy of Holies or Moses in the Tabernacle. Rather than being restricted in time or to those of a certain rank, it is shared by all who are capable of imagining their participation, and on a regular basis.[6] Passover functions as an anniversary, and every service becomes, as it were, a licit tryst. God and Israel may seem to be estranged or kept apart, but those who attend synagogue and hear the prayers know the truth behind the appearance of exile. Marriage vows were first made at the time of the Exodus and in the shadow of Sinai, and they have been renewed routinely ever since.

References to real wedding customs in these liturgical poems underscore the concreteness of the marriage metaphor overall. While elements of the metaphor defy simple conceptualization, the idea that the covenant is expressed as erotically charged, reciprocal love is nevertheless fundamentally true and real in these poems. And yet, while we can imagine the cantor speaking as the personification of "Israel" and, likewise, we can easily imagine him functioning as the *mesadder qiddushin*, narrating the rituals and actions of the two parties, the explicitness of poetic language raises the question of what—or who—the community may have envisioned when the piyyutim spoke of God as their Beloved. The fact that Song 5:10–16 describes the male lover in graphic detail poses a unique challenge but also lends this issue a particular erotic charge in the Song of Songs poems. The juxtaposition of these verses with the figure of Helios in the Byzantine synagogue mosaics, in turn, becomes uniquely compelling, suggesting as it does that the occupant of the chariot is the male lover—that is, he is God.

6 According to the Palestinian rite, which is presupposed by these piyyutim, the Qedushah would have been recited weekly, on the Sabbath. See Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis*, 241–247.

The Body of God

The prohibition against depicting the divine form does not—contrary to how it has often been interpreted since the Middle Ages in particular—lead to the conclusion that God lacks a form in Jewish tradition. Various biblical texts suggest that God possesses a body that is visible to mortals. For example, Exod 24:9–11 states, "Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and the seventy elders of Israel ascended, and they saw the God of Israel: under *His feet* there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; *they beheld God*, and they ate and drank." Moses and the elders beheld the deity. Such an experience was obviously understood to be dangerous—God chooses not to "raise His hand" against them, although He could have—but the text is emphatic: *they saw God*. A few chapters later, Moses makes an audacious request of God: "Let me see Your glory!" (Exod 33:18). God responds, "One cannot see My face and live" (v. 20); instead, God instructs Moses to hide in the cleft of a rock where God will cover him "with My hand" (v. 22), after which point, "I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen" (v. 23). Much as in the Greek story of Semele, the mother of Dionysius, who begs to behold Zeus in all his glory (as proof that he is really the father of her unborn son) and who is consumed by the radiance of Zeus's glory, the full manifestation of God is more than any mortal can bear, even one such as Moses. But this potency does not negate the reality of God's physical presence, his corporeality. Nor are such depictions of God limited to any particular period of biblical history.

Biblical references to God's corporeality are hardly limited to this one dramatic example; vivid references to divine corporeality appear in the prophetic literature, in particular. The prophetic visions that form the core of the liturgical Qedushah involve apprehension of the divine form. Isaiah's vision begins with the observation, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple" (Isa 6:1). The opening chapters of the book of Ezekiel contain a lengthy description of the appearance of the divine chariot, driven by a shimmering, radiant, god-like being. And the book of Daniel (counted among the Writings, according to the ordering of the Jewish scriptures, but replete with prophetic episodes), one of the latest compositions in the Hebrew Bible as a whole, contains a strange and lengthy vision of "the ancient one of days" (Dan 7:10), where God appears as an old man on a throne.

Rabbinic literature likewise often seems to accept the notion of a corporeal God. The interpretation of "this is my God" (Exod 15:2) in the *Mekhilta* of Rabbi Ishmael (second century CE) understands—as is typical in midrashic

exegesis—that the deictic particle *zeh* ("this") indicates that the Israelites pointed at God, who appeared quite literally as "a man of war" (*Mekh. Shirta* 4). The passage goes on to note: "'The Lord is a man of war' (Exod 15:3): why is this stated? Because He was manifest at the Sea as a warrior (*gibbor*), as it is written, 'The Lord is a man of war'; He was manifest at Sinai as an old man, full of compassion, as it is written, 'They saw the God of Israel' (Exod 24:10)." God does not have a singular physical manifestation, but that does not necessitate an incorporeal deity.

The mystical text known as *3Enoch* (which probably dates to roughly the fifth or sixth century CE but may contain much older traditions) takes the idea of God's corporeality even further. In one passage from the portion known as *Sefer Heikhalot*, as Metatron (i.e., Enoch, who was taken up to heaven by God according to Gen 5:24) tours Rabbi Ishmael through the heavenly palaces, he shows the sage a room in which God's right arm ("arm" and "hand" are often understood as metonyms for "power")—the arm that will someday redeem Israel (the text alludes to Isa 63:12)—is stored until the End of Days. God's body is real, but it is obviously different from those of human beings.[7]

In light of these texts and others too numerous to survey here, the idea that Song 5, which describes the body of the male lover, could be understood as describing the body of God is not farfetched. Indeed, the Song of Songs itself is the basis for the strange text known as the *Shi'ur Qomah* (The Measure of the [Divine] Body), the most graphically anthropomorphic text in Judaism. This work, which dates to roughly the sixth or seventh century CE, depicts the various limbs of God, including their gigantic measurements along with their secret names.[8] As Alexander Altmann notes, "What lends a color of its own to this bizarre tract is the use it makes of Canticles rather than of Ezekiel's theophany. The very term *qomā* (meaning here "body" not "stature") is taken from Canticles (7:8)."[9] While Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot may be the biblical text most commonly associated with early Jewish mysticism, the Song's praise of an ideal male form was ripe for such readings.

---

7 This idea—that God has a real but unique body—is explored in nuance and fine detail in Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

8 For a summary of the debates about the *Shiur Qoma* material, see Shamma Friedman, "Anthropomorphism and Its Eradication," in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash: Struggle for Religious Identity*, ed. W.J. van Asselt, Paul Van Geest, and Daniela Muller (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 157–178.

9 "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomah*.' An Introduction," in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte*, Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 130–154.

There is another youthful male figure from the ancient synagogal world who bears on our discussion of the male lover of Song 5 in synagogue poetry: the figure of Helios, the Roman sun god, in synagogue mosaics. "Helios mosaic" is a shorthand descriptor of a floor decoration found in six early Palestinian synagogues, at Hammat Tiberius, Beit Alpha, Na'aran, Khirbet (Horvat) Susiyah, Husifah, and Sepphoris.[10] All six mosaics share a basic design: within a square frame, a circle depicting the twelve signs of the zodiac surrounds a medallion that depicts a figure (usually identified as Helios, the sun god) riding a chariot drawn by four horses; symbolic representations of the four seasons are located in the corners of the overall design. The central disk (called a *clypeus*) probably evoked the revolving cosmos, the heavens. The figure at the center was, in early periods, understood to be the creator, but in later art, the image of a recently deceased person might be set in the medallion, suggesting an ascent to heaven rather than a descent therefrom. The medallion is intact in the synagogues at Hammat Tiberius, Beit Alpha, Na'aran, and Sepphoris. The Helios figure is not identical in all of these; the figure riding the chariot in the Hammat Tiberius mosaic is depicted as Sol Invictus (a symbol used to depict not only late Roman emperors but also Jesus) with a radiant nimbus of light encircling his head; his left hand holds a globe while his right hand is raised in a gesture of power. The Sepphoris mosaic, by contrast, depicts not an anthropomorphic Helios but the radiant disk of the sun.

These mosaics have generated much discussion from the moment they were discovered. Why would synagogues depict the Greco-Roman sun god in their sanctuaries? It seems unlikely that a single explanation can accommodate these various figures; as Leila Avrin notes, "Multiple explanations of symbols are common in Jewish art from all ages: Zodiac and Helios, often represented in Palestinian synagogues during the Byzantine period, are perfect examples of symbols with diverse interpretations."[11] It is more probable that these images could, simultaneously, connote something as important but mundane as the sacred calendar and something as profound as the mystical revelation of esoteric secrets. The interpretations and associations held by the artisans who

10 For the best, most thorough, and most sophisticated analyses of the Helios mosaics, see the following two discussions: Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 59 (2005): 1–52; and Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), especially 198–207.

11 Leila Avrin, review of *The Frescos of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, by Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler, *Ars Orientalis* 24 (1994), 162; cited by Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 184.

crafted the mosaics (who may not have been Jewish) no doubt existed side by side with manifold interpretations by those who beheld these images. Piyyutim, most of which likely postdate the synagogue mosaics—possibly by several centuries—suggest how liturgy could shape the interpretation of visual art.

Understood figuratively, the male lover in the Song (especially Song 5:10–16, which describes his physique) provides a complement to the other images of God in the Bible and postbiblical tradition: the figure of a virile young male augments those of the mature warrior of Exodus and the old man of Daniel. It may be that the figure of a divine young male never took root in Judaism because of the centrality of such a figure in Christianity. The Song of Songs piyyutim, however—along with the Helios mosaics—suggest that just such a vision of God may have been more popular in late ancient Judaism than the major literary sources (and later Jewish cultural memory) might suggest. The piyyutim in this volume demonstrate the range of interpretations that could be given to the divine form. Four of the piyyutim offer explicit interpretations of Song 5:10–16, and all four works share certain features and assumptions. None attempt to soften the anthropomorphism of the biblical substrate; many of them amplify its strangeness. (Song 5:13 states, "his cheeks are beds of spices," which Yannai reconfigures as "his cheeks / are a bundle of blessings.") Instead, these poems take the vivid, peculiar, and arresting descriptions from the biblical Song and draw lines of connection between these images—fluid and architectural, statuesque and organic—and the people and land of Israel. This interest in the manifestation of the divine Beloved brings these poems into direct conversation with the figure of Helios in the synagogue.

Jodi Magness suggests that the figure of Helios in the synagogue mosaics should be understood as representing Metatron or the *Sar Torah* (the Prince of Torah) who, in Heikhalot mystical texts, could be compelled to bring revelation and knowledge to the initiates; in *Sefer ha-Razim* 4 (The Book of Mysteries), "Helios" is the name of the angel invoked.[12] It may be that some who saw these mosaics beheld the Helios figure and associated it with the revelation of Torah mysteries. But it is also possible that others had their understanding shaped by these piyyutim, and that they saw in them an image not of an angel compelled to descend to earth, but of the Deity Himself coming down. Why might God descend? Perhaps to reveal the Torah (which would make the mosaic a kind of iconic representation of Sinai or a visualization of the ongoing revelation

12 In addition to Magness, "Heaven on Earth," see Michael D. Swartz's treatment of the *Sar Torah* texts and rituals in *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

of Torah), or to act in the world (by redeeming the nation or perhaps, as with Enoch and Elijah, by carrying off an individual), or perhaps simply to be closer to the source of prayer. The piyyutim, for all their diversity, create a composite image of God as one who is splendid, radiant, active, and engaged with both the cosmos and His people. The Helios mosaics depict something similar: heavenly awesomeness intersecting with terrestrial reality, something splendid and terrible, almost impossible to truly envision, yet tangible and proximate. The strange vividness of the poetry is, in essence, a literary analogue to the strange vividness of the mosaics.[13]

The idea that the poems—like the mosaics—were understood as "depicting God" can be unsettling for some modern readers, particularly those accustomed to regarding Judaism as iconoclastic or aniconic.[14] And yet we find images that appear to be depictions of the deity influenced by the Song of Songs in Jewish art well into the Middle Ages. In particular, a medieval piyyut that opens with the phrase "With Me from the Lebanon, My bride" (Song 4:8) and appears in a number of Passover *machzorim* from Ashkenaz in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is frequently illuminated. As Ruth Bartal notes:

> The most frequent iconography is that of a noble couple, clad in rich garments. The man is in most cases a stereotypic figure, always wearing the pointed hat that indicates his Jewish origin. The woman in contrast is not stereotypical but differs in every illustration. Her beauty and noble status are always highlighted, but the attributes chosen by the artists for emphasis differ. These attributes are metaphors drawn from the poem, which the reader, who is familiar with the poem, can easily identify and for whom, well informed as to their exegetic meaning, they serve as signs. In most cases the couple is seated facing one another, with the man turning towards the lady in a gesture of speech, as if in dialogue.[15]

The figures adorn the word *itti* ("with me"), which implicitly emphasizes God's proximity to the person reciting, hearing, or reading the piyyut. The text and the

13 Psalm 19, which compares the circuit of the sun to a bridegroom running a race, provides another verbal counterpart to this imagery.

14 For a critique of the stereotype of Judaism as devoid of figurative art, see Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

15 Ruth Bartal, "Medieval Images of 'Sacred Love': Jewish and Christian Perceptions," *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 2 (1996): 93–110, at 98. See also her monograph *Earthly Love–Divine Love* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009).

image address whoever holds the volume. As with the mosaics, these images are open to varied, even contradictory, interpretations. Perhaps the male and female are merely "symbols" of God and Israel, but it is also possible that they are actual representations of the two lovers, Israel and God "personified." To be sure, it is likely that some readers of such manuscripts would have been horrified by the idea that the images depicted the likeness of the deity (who is, in medieval Jewish art, typically evoked by a drawing of a hand—an interesting counterpart to *3 Enoch*'s depiction of God's hypostatic hand in the heavenly treasury); but others, with the allegory in mind and the images before them, could easily have understood the picture as simply representing what the poem—and the Song of Songs—says.

Among the medieval illuminations of this Passover piyyut, one in particular stands out: in the Levi Machzor (Hamburg, ca. 1350 CE; also known as the Hamburg Machzor), the female figure (Israel), seated on a throne, is both crowned and blindfolded. This image blends Christian polemical depictions of a blind (and defeated) Synagogue with Jewish understandings of reality.[16] Israel may seem blind and defeated, but she is a queen; she sits proud and upright, like the regal Ecclesia of Christian art. The male figure appears to be kneeling, and he holds the woman's hand in his own. Whether the image is read literally as a depiction of God and Israel or symbolically (as a royal couple standing in for God and Israel), the message of this illumination seems to be an implicit polemic. The image responds to a widespread Christian teaching about Judaism and the Jews. The artist may, to some extent, have internalized elements of the majority culture's argument against Judaism, but he inverts that teaching. He stands supersessionism on its head. In the context of a poem for Passover based on the Song of Songs, the artist creates an image that conveys simultaneously the present state (the veil, the world of "appearance") and the future (the crown, the world of "reality" and redemption). Image and piyyut work together.

As the poems in this volume attest, this inversion, the creation of a subtle but persistent erotic-romantic counternarrative to Christianity, is hardly a medieval invention. As we will see in the following section, the authors of all six of the Song of Songs piyyutim studied here found in the Song of Songs a

16 See the discussion of this image in Ivan Marcus, "A Jewish-Christian Symbiosis: The Culture of Early Ashkenaz," in *Cultures of the Jews*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 449–516, at 496–500, and the reading of this piece by Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem and New York: Keter, 1984), 52–53 (fig. 49). Bartal rejects the idea that the eye covering is a blindfold and suggests that it is simply a veil of some kind.

response to the Christian message of rejection and dispossession. The church may present itself as a queen, but it is Israel to whom God says, "With Me, O bride, from the Lebanon ..."

Obstacles to Love: The Experience of Exile

Perhaps the most eloquent polemic against Christianity and the Christianized Roman Empire in these poems is their almost pervasive neglect by the *payyetanim*. The Byzantine Empire—including its military power, judicial coerciveness, and theological claims—is thoroughly marginalized and rarely merits explicit mention at all. It is almost as if the poetry creates, for the duration of its recitation at least, a realm in which God and Israel can exist together, however temporarily: the synagogue becomes their bower.[17] And yet, while the poems offer an experience of respite, none of the poems wholly ignores the shadows that lurk outside, the disappointing if not oppressive reality that waits outside the synagogue doors. The Song of Songs is a book of yearning, not consummation, and the piyyutim place it in the context of Passover, a holiday that anticipates future redemption. This tension between hope and longing colors the piyyutim, all of which simultaneously articulate the powerful bond between God and Israel, acknowledge the reality of temporary obstacles, and affirm the ultimate victory of love over its foes. The darkness can be kept at bay through the force of rhetoric and the power of the poets' imagination, but it cannot be ignored because it provides the tension that energizes the romance, transforming it from a simple story of love into one of triumph.

A typical weekly *qedushta* (the poetry of Yannai provides a substantial collection of examples[18]) has a unit—usually the third poem—that introduces the haftarah (the prophetic complement to the Torah portion). Because the third unit—and usually the haftarah itself—is often "forward-looking," it commonly addresses the contemporary situation and its anticipated remedy. Festival piyyutim, and particularly the Song of Songs poems, lack this regular and predictable structure. Moreover, the level of engagement with the outside world varies widely among such piyyutim. None, however, mounts a sustained, or even substantial, anti-Christian or anti-Byzantine polemic. Nevertheless, recognition of the flawed reality of daily life suffuses each work even as each poem articulates a lovely vision of that reality redeemed. Often, contemporary exile wears the guise of ancient servitude; references to Egypt suggest the oppression of Christian Rome. This device serves to soften the poet's complaints, because it adds the element of historical distance, but it also strengthens the language of impending redemption that colors all of these works.

17 It falls beyond the scope of this volume, yet bears mentioning, that Judaism in Roman and Byzantine Palestine favored monogamy as a norm, despite legal precedent for polygamy (which remained standard in Babylonian Judaism). The biblical text itself, while recognizing polygamy (technically, polygyny) as normal, seems to favor monogamy. The Song is part of this monogamous trend; there is no room for a second bride, lover, or mistress in the Song. The love between the man and woman is mutual and exclusive; Solomon may have had many queens, but the King to Whom Peace Belongs has only one. The church, by extension, can be neither a new wife nor a concubine.

18 For a thorough treatment of Yannai's weekly poetry and over thirty *qedushta'ot* in both Hebrew and English, see Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis*.

Corresponding to the future orientation of the Song of Songs piyyutim is the relative absence of nostalgia in these poems.[19] Nostalgia is not wholly absent: the lovers' yearning for their bower—and Israel and God's yearning for the land of Israel—conjures a memory of "a place of lost bliss."[20] Or, to use a more technical definition of nostalgia, these poems reflect the "unique coexistence of past and present at the same time, or the combination of two timeframes together to become yet another timeframe."[21] In all of these poems, time is complicated and multilayered, with past blurring into future, and present into past. Indeed, precisely because of its complex relationship to time, nostalgia can provide not only the impetus for but also the structure of a poem: a golden past provides an explicit or implicit contrast with the diminished present.[22] Nostalgia differs from lament; nostalgia is more reflective and less raw—and thus lyrics of nostalgia reflect not the searing grief and sorrow of lamentations but rather something more tranquil, perhaps more resigned. At the same time, nostalgia should not be confused with melancholy; nostalgia possesses a tinge of sweetness, an afterglow of lingering happy recollection, while melancholy suggests something more pathological—not merely resignation but despair. In the case of nostalgia, time, which transforms the experience of loss (of a

19 Nostalgia is a key feature of the lyric-elegiac opening unit (*nasīb*) of the classical Arabic ode (*qaṣīdah*). See the discussion in the conclusion of part 2 of this volume as well as Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

20 Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd*, 138.

21 Fatimah Tahtah, cited by Alexander Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus: The Poetics of Loss and Nostalgia in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 5.

22 Laurence Lerner writes, "Nostalgia can provide structure, as well. For nostalgia posits two different times, a present and a longed-for past, and on this contrast a poem can be built" (*The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry* [New York: Schocken, 1972], 44).

beautiful lover, a nurturing land) from acute pain into a subtle ache, serves as the poet's muse.

Certainly there are moments of nostalgia, of yearning for a golden past, in these poems. Without a doubt these poems articulate an ache for what once was (even if each poem understands the past differently). And yet, as much as these poems articulate deep, almost ineffable, desires, and as much as the past forms the paradigm for future dreams, these poems are not ultimately works of nostalgia. Just as they are not laments, they are not elegies. If history has a trajectory, the present may be the low point (nor was the past always rosy), but "this moment" is not the final point. The eighteenth-century Italian poet Torquato Tasso wrote, "The world grows old / and as it grows old, it grows sad," but this nostalgic sentiment finds no parallel in the Song of Songs piyyutim.[23] For our *payyetanim*, as the world grows old, it grows towards renewed happiness and perfection. Jewish religious poetry, buoyed by optimistic hopes in the prophets of old and the messiah of the future, simply cannot succumb to the seductions of nostalgia. As tempting as elegy may be, nostalgia leads to passivity, resignation, despair. It is a poetry of concession and defeat. A lover who wallows in nostalgia will not arise to seek her beloved—what would be the point? Better, perhaps, to stay home and reminisce. In some ways, this resignation represents the danger confronting the two lovers in the Song of Songs itself; repeatedly they entreat each other to act: to arise (2:10, 13), to turn, (2:17), to come (4:8, 7:12), to open (5:2), to return (7:1), and to hurry (8:14); to speak (2:14, 8:13) and to understand that love endures (8:6)—in short, to persist even if only to persist in yearning and to continue seeking. The very nature of their appeals to each other hints at the fact of separation. This delicate balance between acceptance and resistance is one that all the poets represented here nurture.

Whether looking to the past or to the future, all of these poems respond, directly or implicitly, to a present context that was rife with tension and uncertainty, the likelihood of oppression and the prospect of rebellion, the grim reality of exile and life under foreign domination. Yet none of these poems is dominated by darkness; each poem speaks of the promise of triumph and the power of love. Israel suffers for love—feels true passion—but these poems draw their power from their emphasis on love over suffering. Each poet possesses a powerful vision of the truth of God's devotion to Israel and speaks eloquently of Israel's reciprocation of that divine desire and care. Despite expressions of vulnerability, the love is invulnerable. Israel may be anxious, but God's confidence

23 Torquato Tasso, *The Amyntas* (1573); cited by Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia*, 61.

will prevail. Suffering and sorrow are temporary; love is stronger than death—and certainly stronger than Rome.[24]

Turbulence, Transition, Transformation

All six of the piyyutim presented here were composed in the final centuries of Byzantine rule in Palestine. Most probably they were composed sometime between 395 (when the empire was split into eastern and western halves, following the death of Theodosius I) and 637 CE (the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem). This was the heyday of early piyyut, a turbulent, dramatic period in the Eastern Empire, both militarily and religiously. During this time powerful emperors, particularly Justinian I (483–565 CE), sought with some success to expand the borders of the empire and consolidate both their military power and their economic interests. Long regarded by scholars as a period of decline, wherein an empire was weakened by controversy and rendered vulnerable to the Muslim conquest, late antiquity is now recognized as a vibrant historical period, politically critical and culturally rich. This is not to say it was a period of tranquility. There were outbreaks of plague, eruptions of heresy, and frequent wars, both defensive and aggressive. The empire was wealthy and enjoyed significant periods of relative peace; under Justinian a century later, it expanded both eastward and westward. There were episodes of turbulence, such as the attacks of Attila the Hun in the fifth century, the Nika Riots of 532 (during which the Hagia Sophia was burned), and the Samaritan rebellions that periodically rocked Palestine, often in conjunction with Persian aggression.[25] Religiously, these centuries were a period of much tumult in the church: a flurry of councils, creeds, and canons reflected the tensions within Christianity over belief, conduct, worship, and organization. The work of the councils was paralleled

24 I would consider in general that piyyutim participate in "textual resistance." That is, they are textual manifestations of and catalysts for a kind of spiritual if not active resistance (and alternative) to various forms of imperial ("colonial") power. For a fine examination of this phenomenon in earlier Judaism, see Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). This volume contains a valuable theoretical introduction (3–45) and focuses on the period of Seleucid domination of the land of Israel and contemporary Jewish literature of resistance, including the book of Daniel and *1 Enoch*. Apocalyptic traditions play important, if subtle, roles in piyyut; in particular, Daniel is a frequent intertext. This analytical approach to piyyut remains largely unexplored, however.

25 See Lieber, "'You Have Been Skirting this Hill Long Enough,'" 70–73.

by (and at times intersected with) the legislative actions of the emperors, particularly Theodosius II in the fifth century and Justinian in the sixth, both of whom are associated with the promulgation of legal codes (which contained substantial religious legislation, both in terms of establishing orthodoxy and regulating—at least in theory—the rights and practices of non-Christians). The fifth and sixth centuries in particular, for all their theological and military conflict, were a period of tremendous growth and consolidation for the Byzantine Empire. The debates, conflicts, and controversies of this period (to which we date Yannai with fair certainty) speak to a fundamental liveliness and health, not weakness and decline. As vibrant and dynamic as the fifth and sixth centuries were, several of the poems included in this volume (particularly those by Eleazar ha-Qallir) likely date to the repressive reign of Heraclius in the early seventh century, a period of both increasing persecution and concomitantly intensifying messianic expectations.[26]

The dynamic culture of the Jews of Palestine during this period must be seen in relation to this larger societal context. Judaism in the land of Israel was, in comparison to the Judaism of the Sassanid Empire, diverse. The literary sources of late ancient Palestine speak to a love of variety; we have evidence of varied liturgies, Targums, and lectionaries, and evidence that such diversity profoundly irritated the Babylonian authorities, who preferred unity, hierarchy, and systematization. This established preference for local custom over codification is evident from the piyyutim translated here: six poems which, for all that they share a common liturgical structure and exegetical tradition, would not have overlapped in a single setting.[27] It seems unlikely, for example, that a single congregation would have heard multiple Song of Songs *qedushta'ot* on

26 For an analysis of Jewish life in the early seventh century, particularly under Heraclius, see Ezra Fleischer, "A Lament on the Murder of the Jews of the Land of Israel in the Days of Heraclius Caesar" [in Hebrew], *Shallem* 5 (1971): 209–227; and Wout Jac. van Bekkum, "Jewish Messianic Expectation in the Age of Heraclius," in *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641): Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 95–112.

27 The issue of whether piyyutim reflect an early, fluid stage of the development of Jewish liturgy or a rebellion against an extant statutory set of prayers remains unsettled. For an overview of the basic issues, see the lively exchange between Ruth Langer and Ezra Fleischer from *Prooftexts*: Ruth Langer, "Revisiting Early Rabbinic Liturgy: The Recent Contributions of Ezra Fleischer," *Prooftexts* 19 (1999): 179–204; Ezra Fleischer, "On the Origins of the Amidah: A Response to Ruth Langer," *Prooftexts* 20 (2000): 380–384; and Ruth Langer, "Considerations of Method: A Response to Ezra Fleischer," *Prooftexts* 20 (2000): 384–387.

the Sabbath during Passover; instead, we can imagine that different communities heard, adopted, and circulated compositions. Wealthy urban communities, such as those that built the elaborate synagogues in the Galilee, could have employed *payyetanim* as well as other specialists, such as choir singers and translators, to compose and perform piyyutim for their liturgies. From these communities of origin, particularly pleasing works might have spread to less affluent congregations, where perhaps a communal reader would have led the recitation. While the precise mechanics of the production and distribution of piyyutim are unknown, the rich manuscript evidence attests to the popularity and variety of liturgical poetry.

Corresponding to this cultural preference for diversity within the Jewish community are the multifaceted responses of community members to the Byzantine Empire and Christianity. While the evidence is scattered, it seems that some within the Palestinian Jewish community were inclined towards accommodation, or at least a sociable relationship; evidence of common baths, chariot teams, and even eating together suggests that peaceful submission to imperial rule was an option. At the same time, various sources indicate that for some Jews, resentment of foreign rule overcame their antipathy toward the Samaritans; as discussed below, a number of Jews apparently participated in some of the Samaritan revolts and suffered the consequences. In general, however, it seems that by and large Jews in the land of Israel were able to ignore or evade significant repression. The literary and material remains of Jewish Byzantine Palestine are rich, vast, and vibrant, and suggestive of both comfort and confidence.

The piyyutim presented here evoke the collective ambivalence of Jewish society in this period. Their messianic, at times apocalyptic, yearning speaks to a community straining under the imperial yoke and anxious for redemption. But their complexity, length, and learnedness suggest that they were produced by stable communities—communities capable of building magnificent synagogues—that were resigned to their situation. These two attitudes, hope and resignation, are not, ultimately, in conflict; they are twin responses to the same circumstances. A sense of exile pervades all the poems; there is no attempt to deny the unsatisfactory state of the contemporary situation. The experience of oppression may have been emotional more than physical—we have little evidence of any sustained persecution of Jews in this period—but the painfulness of foreign occupation and dominion is a baseline in these works. And yet, for all their messianism, there is no call to arms in the Song of Songs piyyutim. They recognize the wrongness of foreign rule and, at times, revel in prophecies of eventual justice, but they lay responsibility for Israel's suffering on Israel's actions, and they relinquish control over Israel's destiny to

her God. He, not human agents, will decide when the redemption will come. Thus these poems are not in any sense seditious. To be sure, it seems likely that the authors of some of these works—particularly the messianic anonymous *Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim*—expected redemption to come soon. But the poets did not expect, and certainly did not encourage, their listeners to take up arms to hasten their own redemption—a striking and important fact, given the association of Passover with rebellion. Instead, these poems steer a kind of middle course between passive acceptance, which terminates in despair or assimilation, and active rebellion. Just as those who commissioned and built the synagogues of Jewish Palestine did so in defiance of imperial laws,[28] the piyyutim can be seen as works of spiritual defiance that succeed not through overt aggression towards the empire but through the creation of an alternative sacred space. They offer a vision and an experience of a reality that barely acknowledges Byzantine authority and Christian truth-claims; these works constructed theologies not only through their words but through their performance, through their intoxicating union of the festival of freedom (or, in the case of the *Groom's Qedushta*, the celebration of the future of the covenant and the people) with the song of desire. When the enemies of Israel are acknowledged, it is almost invariably in the context of their ultimate defeat and Israel's vindication. The piyyutim are not seditious, but they are deeply subversive.

This subversive stance has its counterpart in the Song of Songs. The lovers do not contest the social strictures that separate them. The woman's plea, "O that you were like a brother to me, that nursed at my mother breasts—if I should find you outside, I would kiss you; and none would despise me!" (Song 8:1), voices a wish, but the wish is not expressed in rebellious actions. The subjunctive mood of this verse indicates that, despite their passionate longing, the two lovers restrain themselves in public; they subvert the rules in private, but they do not incur the wrath of society by flaunting those rules. This discretion does not undermine the romance—indeed, the need for secrecy lends it a racy charge—but the frustration the woman articulates is also real. The poets seem to adopt a similar stance towards the politics of their own day. On the one hand, like the woman in Song 8:1, they articulate their frustration with the current state of affairs. They yearn, eloquently, for a transformation of the world that will enable their communities to experience life as they know

28 See Patrick T.R. Gray, "Palestine and Justinian's Legislation on Non-Christian Religions," in Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson, eds., *Law, Politics, and Society in the Ancient World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 241–270; and Lieber, "You Have Skirted This Hill Long Enough."

it can and should be. But they do not advocate any action against the ruling powers. Instead, like the lovers, Israel should be patient—and confident. The love between God and His people is true, and in the end they will be reunited.

The potency of this message, and its temperance, stand out in the context of Passover. Passover is a holiday associated with messianism; as we see even today in the rituals of the seder: the opening of the door for Elijah, the herald of the Messiah (Mal 3:23); the pouring of a fifth cup, the cup of Elijah, corresponding to the fifth promise of redemption, "and I will bring you into the land," in Exod 6:8; the seder's concluding refrain of "Next Year in Jerusalem." But messianism can be passive or active, and active messianism leads to rebellion. When the Temple stood, Passover was an annual moment of tension between the Jews and the Romans in Judea—a tension augmented by the influx of pilgrims to the holy city. The tension continued and even intensified after the destruction of the Temple. Mishnah *Pesaḥim* 10:6 contains a debate over how the seder should end. In this passage, Rabbi Tarfon is satisfied with a mention of historic redemption; his emphasis is on the past. Rabbi Akiva, by contrast, concludes the seder with a reference to the future, when Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the Temple rites restored. Implicit in this passage is a powerful political agenda. As Aharon Oppenheimer notes, "It is clear that Rabbi 'Aqiva is not referring in his statement to a distant redemption at the End of Days but is expressing a concrete political intention which was realised in the Bar Kokhba Revolt"—a rebellion in which Akiva played some part, and in the aftermath of which he was martyred.[29] Likewise, the accounts of the sages—including Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon from the above mishnah, as well as Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, and Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, who stayed up all night in Benei Barak discussing the redemption from Egypt—may reflect the mood just prior to the Bar Kokhba rebellion, if not the actual planning of the war, as has been sometimes suggested.[30] The powerful message of liberation associated with

29 Aharon Oppenheimer, *Between Rome and Babylon*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 108 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 290.

30 *t. Pes.* 10:12 contains an approximate parallel in which "Rabban Gamliel and the elders" stay up all night discussing not the redemption but the laws of Passover at the house of Boethius b. Zonin in Lod. As Oppenheimer astutely notes, there is a significant difference between an hour-long discussion of redemption and a discussion of the same length focused on ritual rules (*Between Babylon and Rome*, 71–72). Peter Schäfer argues, however, that Rabbi Akiva was not significantly involved in the Bar Kokhba revolt; see his essay, "Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis," in *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 1–20.

the Passover holiday endured throughout the centuries. The Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943 began on April 19, the eve of Passover.

In general, extended meditation on past redemptions and the redemption yet to come—particularly in any era with an actively messianic mood—could serve as a powerful catalyst to revolution. In late ancient Palestine these two elements, the celebration of Passover and active messianic speculation, were situated in a context in which there were also episodes of armed rebellion, uprisings known as the Samaritan revolts. Relations between the empire and the Samaritans soured in the late fourth century, culminating in a series of brutally repressed revolts in 484, 529, and 556 CE. The rebellion of 529 is particularly intriguing. It occurred in response to Justinian's reimposition of discriminatory laws ("On heretics, Manicheans, and Samaritans") and the success of Persian forces in reaching the gates of Constantinople; the leader of the rebellion, named Julian, was crowned king and apparently had messianic pretensions. The imperial response—20,000 Samaritans killed (another 50,000 fled to Persia where they ended up as slaves in Armenian mines), the destruction of Samaritan synagogues, and the execution or forced conversion of many leading citizens—only worsened the tensions. The revolt of 556, which spread from Caesarea all the way to Bethlehem, where the Church of the Nativity was burned, should be understood as a continuation of the Great Revolt of 529, and it is in this final revolt that we have reports of significant Jewish participation.[31]

The Samaritan revolt of 556 supplies key evidence for the context in which the Song of Songs piyyutim were composed. Jewish participation in that revolt proves that during the sixth century, some Jews were indeed willing to take up arms against the empire. The piyyutim must be interpreted against this background of political and military unrest, the result of increasing dissatisfaction with an increasingly oppressive status quo. These elements indicate that rabbinic advocacy of pacifism was more than theoretical. When the rabbis interpret the Song's threefold admonishment not to "rouse or waken love" (2:7, 3:5, and 8:4) as a warning against attempting to force the redemption to come prematurely (*Song Rab.* 2:20, *b. Ketub.* 110b–111a, and the Targum to Song 8:4[32]), their concern is not abstract. The option of actively taking up arms against the empire did not cease after Bar Kokhba's revolt in the second century, and

31 On Jews and the Samaritan rebellions, see Lieber, "'You Have Been Skirting this Hill Long Enough,'" 70–73.

32 Alexander (*The Targum of Canticles*, 193 n. 15) notes in his comment on the Targum verse that the translator understood it as referring to those nations currently oppressing Israel; even after the advent of Islam, Jewish messianism expected the final battle to be against Esau-Edom-Rome.

some sources—Targum Neophyti and the Fragment Targum to Num 11:26, for example—depict the Jews under the leadership of the Messiah ben David as triumphing over their enemies in a bloody battle.[33]

Against this backdrop of oppression and the possibility of armed revolt, the combination of exuberant optimism with a muted messianism in the Song of Songs piyyutim stands out. Each piyyut articulates confidence in the future redemption, of course, but all emphasize that the timing of the redemption lies with God, and humans must try to hasten it. For the most part, however, these poems do not dwell on these matters; they are not extended sermons on the subject of pacifism, nor are they a call to arms. Instead, they implicitly provide strategies for enduring the exile, even as they pray that its duration will be short. They inculcate values of Torah piety and faithfulness to the commandments, imbuing routine and ritual acts with both significance and eroticism: the mitzvot are both symbols and enactments of love. Furthermore, because all of these piyyutim provide a setting for the liturgical blessing of the Qedushah, when Israel joins the angels in prayer, the poets are able to turn the congregation's eyes upwards, away from the imperfection of the outside world and towards the radiance of heaven. In doing this, the poets nullify the gap between present and future—between real and ideal—by closing the gap between heaven and earth. Earthly suffering can be endured because Israel already has access to the heavenly perfection on high. The redemption may or may not come soon, but the Redeemer is already here. Thus, there is no need to rebel against Rome, to join the Samaritans in their revolutions, or to participate in other activities that might antagonize the Wicked Kingdom. The poets cannot offer redemption, but they offer refuge. Do not agitate for the earthly Temple to be rebuilt, and do not despair and visit the house of worship of foreigners: instead, right now, join the angels in the heavenly Temple. The body yearns for freedom, but the soul can taste it in prayer. If only the redemption would come, the poets seem to plead—but until then, they promise, the synagogue will be our bower.

The poets may have sensed that the redemption was about to come; and, indeed, the Persians and then the Muslims, in their conquest of Palestine and their wars against the Byzantine Empire, may well have seemed like forces of divine retribution and redemption. But the redemption did not come, and thus the poets' meditations on divine love and the enduring truth of the covenant

33 *Targum Neophyti* and the *Fragment Targum* to Num 11:26 both assert that the King Messiah will defeat Gog and Magog; see discussion in Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, 24 and 193 n. 16.

between God and Israel remained relevant and compelling. And in concert with these painful historical experiences and compelling theological truths, the Song of Songs remained a powerful lens through which to understand the relationship between God and Israel: a bond marked more by mutual desire than by consummation, an intimate conversation that spans untold distances, a joyful celebration of a truth that transcends history.

The poets studied here responded to the reality of their period even as they sought to overcome it. The Song provided a dramatic and appealing vocabulary for articulating complex, nuanced, and even ambivalent messages. With the passing of centuries and the ongoing exile, the Song's rhetorical appeal would continue to grow, lending its voice and color to poetry throughout the Jewish world and beyond.

PART 2

Texts and Commentary