The Song of Songs In Early Jewish Mysticism

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For my friend Bob Cover: The lecture he never got to hear.
Ḥaval al d'avdin!

I

Of all the metaphors for the divine/human relationship which the Jewish mystics inherited from the earlier, exoteric Jewish tradition, none was more central to them than that of the Divine Bridegroom and Israel as His beloved spouse. God as lover of Israel had shared center stage in the early rabbinic imagination with God as father and king, the twin images of divine transcendence most generally associated in later times with the religious language of Judaism. With the contraction of midrashic thinking in the Middle Ages and its displacement by philosophical theology as the dominant Jewish way of speaking about God, the traditions of sacred eros, scandalous to the philosophers, became virtually the unique legacy of the mystics.[1] As though to spite their philosophical opponents, the Kabbalists – as Jewish mystics were called from the 13th century – developed an erotic mythology that would shock not only the respectable Maimonidean, but even the earlier and more daring midrashic masters themselves.

The Biblical basis for talk of a love affair or marriage between the Creator and the people of Israel is in fact rather meager: not a mention in the Torah itself, and a somewhat sparse collection of passages from Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, a good many of which spoke of God's

marriage to His people in order to chide Israel for her unfaithfulness rather than to praise her or to extol the match. These passages were enhanced, indeed overwhelmed at a rather early date, by the "evidence" of the *Song of Songs*. This witness, however, to the love of God and Israel, was not without its problems.

The debate as to the original *Sitz im Leben* of those poems which constitute the Biblical Song of Songs is not yet concluded. Some have chosen to read these poems much as the Biblical text itself seems to present them: a series of love, courtship and marriage poems between shepherd and shepherdess. Other, perhaps more penetrating readers, see the Canticle as a somewhat more sophisticated and urban literary product rather than as a collection of country folk-songs. The references to the tower of David and the daughters of Jerusalem, perhaps even to the Solomonic superscription, are but the beginning points of this reading. The text is seen as too artful, too conscious of its own rhythms, too lavish in its use of metaphor to be a randomly strung together group of traditional songs.

But the real debate over the Canticle's origin is that which concerns its purported cultic background. Love poetry of this sophistication, so the argument goes, could only have existed in a cultic context in the ancient Near East. Shepherd and shepherdess are, in one way or another, god and goddess or deity and consort. Of course, ancient Near Eastern gods do fall in love with human females and vice versa, so one partner or the other in a particular poem may indeed be a mortal, and mortals may have dramatically acted out one or both roles in the cultic performance in which the poems were set. But the poems themselves, so exultant and unabashed in their celebration of eros, could not be other than a part of that erotically charged and fertility-centered Canaanite religion that was such anathema to the prophets of Israel.[2]

Each side in this debate will of course be able to adduce its parallel sources and ancient witnesses. But those who choose to view the song as a cultic product will have on their side, albeit obliquely, the rather surprising support of Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph, the leading rabbinic teacher and theologian of the early second century. The canonicity of the Canticle was still being debated in Akiva's time, and it was he

who insisted on its inclusion with the now classical formulation: "The whole world is not worthy of the day the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all of Scripture is (or all the Songs are) holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."[3]

What did Akiva have in mind? Clearly it was not just romance; love was indeed a supreme value in Akiva's religious worldview,[4] but it was hardly the erotic passions of that country shepherd's existence which he himself had abandoned that he extols here as the "Holy of Holies." For Akiva it was clear that the Song of Songs is a holy book, which is to say that its verses describe a love that involves the Deity. Since Akiva's God is the singular and essentially masculine figure of the Biblical and rabbinic traditions, it seems fair to say that the Song, from Akiva's point of view, is about the love between that God and His beloved consort, bride or spouse, whoever that may be. It is in this sense that Akiva – with the later synagogue and church fully behind him – lends support to the view that the Song of Songs is sacred or cultic in its original or "true" meaning. Unable to retain the old pagan names or references to cultic practice, the shapers of the canon knew, perhaps instinctively, that this was a sacred poem, and as such preserved it, though denuded of such references in the moment it was frozen into the Biblical text it does have a surprisingly "secular" appearance. By Akiva's day, battles with the ancient cults of Palestine long won and forgotten, a new pair of names, *qadosh barukh hu* and *yisra'el*, could be assigned to these ancient and properly revered verses of sacred eros.[5]

We all know, of course, that the rabbis read the Song as a love poem between God and the Community of Israel. The best witness to this reading is the Targum, here very much an extended Aramaic paraphrase of the Song – as was required – rather than a translation.[6] The Targumist's reading is primarily a historical one, in which the verses of the Song recount the narrative of Israel's redemption from Egypt, standing before "her" God at Sinai, wandering through the wilderness, coming into the Promised Land, building the Temple, sinning with other gods, being cast out, and again awaiting God's redemption. There is something quite reductive about the spelling out of God and Israel's love in such full historic detail. "Thy two breasts"

as "the two tablets of the law" or as "Moses and Aaron" does leave something to be desired in the realm of literary eros.

The late Saul Lieberman has claimed, however, that this historical allegory was, to Akiva and his circle, merely the exoteric reading of the most sacred Song. Noting that Akiva spoke of the day when the Song of Songs was *given* to Israel, a term otherwise applied only to the Torah itself, Lieberman shows the early rabbis to have believed in the revelation of the Song, spoken by the angels or by God Himself and revealed to Israel in a moment of theophany, either at the splitting of the Sea or at the foot of Sinai, one of those two moments when God descended in His chariot and was actually seen by the Community of Israel.[7] Another statement of Akiva's (though preserved in somewhat garbled form) says that "had the Torah not been given to Israel, the Song of Songs would have sufficed for the conduct of the world"[8] – indeed a rather intriguing possibility.

Akiva seems to belong to those who see Sinai as the setting of the Song, and the Song itself as the crown of that great apocalyptic moment when the heavens opened and all of Torah – primordial, written, oral, and yet to be developed – was brought forth.[9] Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a leading scholar of the generation before Akiva, assigned it rather to the Sea. This may be related to the midrashic tradition that sees God as having revealed Himself as a wise and elderly judge at Sinai, but as a young warrior for the defeat of the Egyptians – each according to the moment's needs. Surely the God of Canticles is the youthful figure, not the elder. (Jewish ritual practice, incidentally, follows Eliezer's view, assigning the reading of the Song to the latter days of Passover.) The sages seem to agree, however, that the esoteric meaning of the Song is a description of the body of God as seen by Israel in the moment of revelation: the lover, described so passionately limb by limb, is the Holy One as Israel saw Him. No wonder they forbad the public teaching of this esoteric midrash! The love dialogue between God and Israel, properly understood, was not a recounting of Jewish history, but an erotic hymn in which divine lover and earthly beloved whispered to one another descriptions of secret and intimate beauty.

This midrash, as Lieberman further shows, was the exegetical

context for what became known as *shi'ur qomah shel yotzer bereshit*, the measurement of the Creator's form. In a series of fragments preserved amid the Hekhalot sources (early "Palace" mysticism), gigantic measurements of the limbs of the divine body are offered, entirely unaccompanied by explanation. This speculative tradition, so Lieberman claims, grows directly out of that midrash which stated:

> His Head is a Gold Diadem (Cant. 5:10) – this is the King of Kings who appeared to Israel in many images. Doing battle with Pharoah at the Sea He appeared as a youth, because a youth is fitting to battle . . . and just as they saw Him, as it were, so too they saw the *Merkavah* which had come down to the sea.[10]

The *shi'ur qomah* tradition, preserved by the Near Eastern rabbis into the early Middle Ages, was vigorously denounced by the rationalist Maimonides, dismissed as the creation of some Roman preacher and surely not of the Sages. It was the Kabbalists who were able, in the face of the Maimonidean denunciation, to preserve it. When Maimonides proclaimed in his Code, "One who says that God has a body or a depictable form is a heretic," Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières, the earliest figure to be associated with Kabbalistic tradition, replied in a gloss, "Greater and better persons than he believed it."[11] This *shi'ur qomah* tradition, however imperfectly preserved or understood by the time of its 12th-century migration to Languedoc, provided justification (and perhaps impetus as well) for the strong erotic current in the Kabbalists' own theosophical speculations, including a prominent new role they gave to their reading of the Song of Songs.

II

Writing at a very late date in the history of Kabbalistic exegesis, Elisha Gallico of Safed (late 16th century) says that he knows of four readings of the Canticle, to which he hopes to add a fifth.[12] The four he knows are:

a first reading in which "the Community of Israel longs for and seeks out her lover and He responds in kind" – presumably the midrashic reading;

a second one relating to "the Torah and its students," where the

Song concerns "the desire of students to attain to Torah, both hidden and revealed." This he rightly ascribes to a recent innovation, the commentary *Ayelet Ahavim* by his compatriot Solomon Alqabets;

a third in which "intellect and matter" are the loving pair, or an Aristotelian reading; and

a fourth in which "the soul, drawn from beneath the throne of God, longs to return to the spiritual delights of her master's home, in which she delighted before her descent into this world," or the Neo-Platonic.

What then has become of Kabbalistic exegesis? Can it be that this latter-day Kabbalist ignores the contribution of that tradition in which he stands? Did the Kabbalists add nothing to the interpretation of the Canticle? Far from it. As they did in many areas, the Kabbalists entered into the mainstream of rabbinic exegesis and proclaimed it their own. Like the early rabbis, the Kabbalists claimed that the Song was about the love between the Blessed Holy One and *knesset yisra'el*, the Community of Israel – but with a difference. For the Kabbalist, the "Community of Israel" no longer designates a human group in its primary meaning, but refers to the *Shekhinah*, the feminine-receptive element within the Godhead, designated elsewhere as Kingdom, Jerusalem, Temple, Sabbath, Moon, Sea, Bride, Glory, and a myriad of other symbolic terms. To say it in a nutshell (a well-known Kabbalistic appellation for the guarding of mystery), medieval Jewish esotericism sees the *hieros gamos* (divine wedding) taking place *within* God, rather than between God and Israel. This development is made possible by the major innovation in Kabbalistic thought, the *sefirot*, symbol-laden stages in the divine self-revelation.[13] The static unity of God, a cornerstone of Jewish philosophy, is converted by the Kabbalists into a dynamic unity of one-in-ten. The ten *sefirot* are bound to and leap forth from the One, in the words of a widely-used image, "like a flame attached to a coal," having all the irregularity and yet the unity of the multiple darting tongues of a single fire.

The essential subject matter of all Kabbalistic teaching is an account of this pulsating inner life of divinity: how the hidden One, beyond all description, takes on the multiple garments of God as we know Him – and in this case we do well to add – and Her. God the lover,

warrior, judge, king, father, mother, son, daughter, all have particular loci in the sefirotic system. As already indicated, personal metaphors by no means exhaust the Kabbalists' store: the Zohar, the greatest work of Spanish Kabbalah, seems to give as much play to images of light and water as it does to those of person. To use the water imagery for a moment, we may say that the most hidden levels of divinity are described as "the depths of the well." At the surface of this well there bubbles forth a spring, and thence there proceed six intertwining rivers, all of which ultimately flow into the sea, or the *Shekhinah*. The tenth *sefirah* thus represents the divine fullness, the energy of God at the crest of its flow, ready to spill over into the lower worlds.

But the *sefirot* are used not only to describe the orderly and uninterrupted flow of divine energy into the world. The myth of evil, that which causes the flow to cease, is an essential part of the Kabbalistic system; through it elements of alienation, emptiness and longing are added to the picture of divinity. The link between the *Shekhinah* and the upper nine stages of divinity is broken by the power of human sin, the this-worldly embodiment of cosmic evil. Only human goodness in the form of fulfillment of God's commandments can re-establish the broken connection, bringing the *Shekhinah* back into the good graces of her spouse and restoring some measure of divine presence to the lower worlds as well. In this drama of alternating longing and fulfillment within God, it is easy to see that the Canticle will have a major role to play.

> Upon my couch at night
> I sought the one I love –
> I sought, but found him not.
> "I must rise and roam the town,
> Through the streets and through the squares;
> I must seek the one I love."
> I sought but found him not.
> I met the watchmen
> Who patrol the town.
> "Have you seen the one I love?"
> Scarcely had I passed them

When I found the one I love.
I held him fast, I would not let him go
Till I brought him to my mother's house,
To the chamber of her who conceived me.
(Canticle 3:1–4; JPS translation)

Who are we latter-day readers to tell the Kabbalist that the real subject of this passage is some obscure shepherd girl who has stumbled into Solomon's Jerusalem, rather than the eternal mythic female ever longing for the renewed espousals of her youth?

The first Kabbalist to comment on the Song of Songs, Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, composed in about 1250 a commentary often ascribed to his more famous contemporary, Moses Nahmanides.[14] He prefaces his commentary with a brief lexicon, a list of terms which, as he tells the reader, you will find in no dictionary. "Lebanon," "wine" and "spice," he tells us, all refer to *Ḥokhmah*, the second of the ten *sefirot* and the most recondite of which we may speak. "Apple" and "garden" both refer to the Glory or *Shekhinah*, while "lily," with its six petals, refers to the six intermediary channels. He also warns us – perhaps because he knew our generation was to come – against over-interpretation: many verses in the Song, he says, are there simply to carry out the imagery begun elsewhere, and for no other purpose. This rather conservative exegetical declaration was ignored by most of Rabbi Ezra's Kabbalistic successors.

The work is called "Song of Songs," he tells us, because in the words of Psalm 19, "Day unto day utters speech"; this Song is sung by each of the divine "days" or *sefirot*, beginning with the lowest, Throne or Glory, and culminating with *Ḥokhmah* above. Thus the Sages have described the Canticle as "that song which God sings each day." As an example of Rabbi Ezra's exegesis, we may quote his reading of the opening verse, "Let Him kiss me":

> The words of the Glory, desiring longingly to ascend, to cleave to that sublime and unequalled light. The ascent is one of mind and thought, and thus is spoken of in a hidden manner (i.e., in the third person). The kiss symbolizes the joy of the soul's attachment to the source of life . . . "for your kisses are sweeter than wine": read: are sweet when from wine, and emanated light increases when it comes from wine, the wisdom of God's "I," the rung of sublime light (*Ḥokhmah*), to which all desire to

> cleave and ascend. "Are good" (in the plural) refers to the abundance of sublime light that is divided and sparkles forth in every direction, as Scripture says, "When he kindles (*be'hetivo*) the light" and "God saw the light, that it was good."

The association here of devotional and sefirotic mysticism is typical of Ezra's work. The "Glory" here is the devoted bride whose longings for union with her spouse also represent the longing of the worshipper's soul for reunion with God.

Ezra's immediate successor in the Kabbalistic exegesis of Canticles was Isaac Ibn Sahula, who lived in the Castilian town of Guadalajara and wrote during the 1280s. Ibn Sahula is primarily known to the student of Hebrew literature as the author of *Meshal haKadmoni*, an erudite and witty collection of fables and morality tales that achieved considerable popularity in the later Middle Ages. He lived in the same town as the author of the Zohar, whom we shall discuss presently, and his works contain the earliest known quotations from the Zohar literature, an important link in Gershom Scholem's masterful detective work a generation ago in conclusively assigning that work's authorship. Sahula's only other preserved work, surprisingly unpublished until now, is his commentary on Canticles, which survives in but a single Oxford manuscript.[15]

Sahula's approach to the text is a two-pronged one; he uses the by now widely accepted notion that a text may be – nay, must be – read on both hidden and revealed levels. His esoteric commentary remains, even after careful reading, just that. Believing that the mysteries of the *sefirot* should not be revealed to the uninitiated, Sahula's references are short, elliptical and often obscure. He will interpret one verse simply by quoting another, leaving it to the experienced reader of Kabbalistic lore to put the two together and come out with some – hopefully the intended – referent to esoteric teaching.

On "the kisses of his mouth" he says, in a lovely rhymed Hebrew couplet: "I have heard that there is an awesome secret to the word 'His mouth,' a powerful staff, a rod of beauty. And who knows whether his mouth and his heart are in accord, encouraging the humble?" From parallel comments elsewhere, especially in the Zohar, and from a general familiarity with Kabbalistic rhetoric, we can make an educated guess that "mouth" here is being read as the *Shekhinah*, a "powerful

staff" because of her associations with the left (or judging) side of God, but here held in the hand of *Tiferet* or Beauty, the essential masculine principle within divinity. *Tiferet*, located at the center of the Kabbalistic diagram, is also often called "Heart," so that the accord of mouth and heart probably refers to the union of these two, or at least to the uplifting of the *Shekhinah* so that she can be on the same rung as her spouse. All of this involves a certain amount of guesswork on the part of the reader. This may be why, after all, Sahula's manuscript never found a publisher.

If the esoteric commentary is hard to decipher, however, the exoteric interpretation is a source of real delight. Here Sahula makes generous use of his considerable urbanity and literary skill. For him, the "plain" meaning of the Song of Songs is what can best be characterized as devotional: it is an allegory of the eternal human striving for perfection, identical, in his reading, with the longing of the ideal soul for the blessed presence or *Shekhinah* of God. On this level he is willing to speak quite openly about "the kisses of his mouth":

> Our sages have already informed us about the rung of the "kiss" in telling us concerning the verse "Moses the servant of the Lord died there by the mouth of God" (Deut. 34:5) that he died by a kiss.[16] This being the case, we know what a high rung the kiss must be, that by which Moses our master passed from this transitory and fleeting life into life eternal. Then too there is a tradition claiming that Moses did not die at all, but ascended and serves in heaven.[17] This kiss would be a flowing forth of spirit from its source. . . . Even speaking in a revealed manner we may say that the kiss represents the beginning of thought and the end of deed. The sage mentions it as he opens his book so that the reader may be aroused to long for this high rung . . . the entire verse, then, is about the quest of the perfected person to attain this precious rung in the circle of the upright community. "Let Him kiss me" means "May He help me to cleave to Him!" speaking the language of those lovers who cling to one another in the intensity of their love and kiss with the kisses of their mouths.

While this exoteric commentary is formally Kabbalistic (it still makes mention of the *sefirot*), in Elisha Gallico's categories it should clearly be listed among the Neo-Platonic, concerned as it is throughout with the individual soul and its longing to return to God. Rather obviously missing from Sahula's commentary is the national-collectivist allegory which had featured so prominently in the reading of

the early sages. The "Community of Israel" has on the one hand been hypostatized to the point of inclusion within the Deity, and on the other it has been atomized into an aggregate of individuals, each on a different rung in the striving for God. Lip service is paid here to "the circle of the upright community," but little more. Even in medieval Judaism, with all its deeply collectivist tendencies, the struggle for spiritual attainment was ultimately a lone one.

III

Finally we come to consideration of the Zohar itself. Suffice it to say, by way of introduction, that the Zohar makes all other users of Kabbalistic symbolism look like amateurs. Moses De Leon, in those years of inspiration when he wrote in the name of the ancient Rabbi Simeon, raised the literary instrument of Kabbalah to dazzling new heights. His bold style is utterly enthralling; the reader is convinced that De Leon has succeeded in conveying within the language and style of the text itself something of the intensity of his own inner experience. Surely the language of the Zohar, which was to become an essential part of the vocabulary of Jewish spiritual expression for the next five centuries and beyond, has within it something of transcendence.

There is no consecutive commentary of the Zohar on the Song of Songs. The section of *Zohar Ḥadash*[18] which begins to comment on the Song never goes beyond the first few verses. That text and the six-page section in volume two of the Zohar – a digression, as the Zohar comments, on the building of the tabernacle[19] – form the most concentrated treatments. But the fact is that there exists hardly a page in the entire Zohar in which the Canticle is not in a broader sense discussed. Quotations from this relatively brief Biblical book are everywhere, and even where it is not quoted, its theme remains central to the author's consciousness.

The Zohar takes the Solomonic superscription of the Song more seriously than had most prior Jewish commentators. While all agreed that Solomon was the author, we have already seen that the "true" origin of the Canticle was both higher and earlier; to those rabbis Solomon was presumably recorder or perhaps final editor of a text that had been passed down from the day it had been "given" until his

generation. The name *Shlomo* had also, since early rabbinic times, been read supraliterally as "the king of peace," meaning God Himself, and the rabbis had established that all references in the Song to Solomon, but for one, were to God.[20]

Basing itself on a divergent rabbinic tradition,[21] the Zohar asserts that the "day the Song was given" was in fact the day that Solomon completed his building of the Temple, and that there is an utter convergence between the King of Peace above and His earthly counterpart beneath.

> Rabbi Yosi opened with the verse: "The Song of Songs which is Solomon's." King Solomon composed this song when the Temple was built, when all the worlds, above and below, were perfected into a single wholeness. Even though the companions have some dispute about this, the Canticle was spoken only in this wholeness, when the moon was full and the Temple was built, just as it is above.[22]
>
> From the day the world was created there was no hour of joy before God like that in which the Temple was erected. The tabernacle that Moses had put up in the desert in order to bring the *Shekhinah* down to earth – on the day it was erected another tabernacle went up above.[23] Thus Scripture says *the* tabernacle was erected. *The* tabernacle refers to that other one that went up with it. This was the tabernacle of the angel Metatron, no more. But when the first Temple was erected, another first Temple was erected with it. It existed in all the worlds. Its light shone through them all and the cosmos was perfumed; all the upper windows were opened for the light to shine. There was no joy in all the worlds like the joy of that day. Then those above and those below proclaimed the song, and that is the "Song of Songs" – the song of those musicians who play before the blessed Holy One.
>
> King David composed "A Song of Ascents" and Solomon composed the "Song of Songs," the song of those musicians. What is the difference between them? They seem to be one, and indeed they are. But in the days of David the musicians had not yet taken their proper places, for the Temple was not yet built. . . . On the day the Temple was erected all of them were established in their places and the candle that had not shone began to shine. The Song was created for the supreme King, the King of peace; it is more exalted than any praise which had yet existed. The day when that song of praise was revealed in the world was a day of perfection throughout, and that is why it *is* the Holy of Holies.[24]

It was not out of special devotion to Solomon that the Zohar chose to credit him so firmly with the Song. The Zohar was much involved

with its own reconstruction – on a purely theoretical and contemplative plane – of Temple piety and the cult of sacrifice. This in turn has to do with its tremendous emphasis on mythical cosmology and the vision of cosmic wholeness. Its author saw himself living in a blemished universe, one in which the full flow of *Shekhinah's* blessing into the world could not be fully experienced. He longed frequently for the great time of wholeness, that period when the smoke of the earthly altar would rise into the heavens and arouse the altar in the Temple above, causing divine radiance to shine throughout the cosmos and the world to be filled with grace. Even the mystic, living as he does in an exiled cosmos, can have but a taste of what all Israel had known fully in the days when the Temple had stood. That the most perfect of songs should have been spoken on that most perfect of days in the most perfect of places should not surprise us when we hear it from the Zohar's author.

Still, this passage has gotten our author into a bit of trouble. He seems to be placing Solomon on a higher level than Moses, the one who is clearly "lord of all prophets" and whose encounter with God was never to be equalled. Elsewhere in the Zohar, as throughout Jewish literature, it is Moses who embodies the sublime vision, and the Zohar is sensitive to the unspoken criticism. In prophecy, De Leon admits, Moses knows no equal. But when it comes to the poetic muse, matters are somewhat different. Moses' song – that of the sea – was still attached to matters of this world; he was thanking God for Israel's deliverance and singing praises of His miraculous deeds.

> But King David and his son Solomon spoke a different sort of Song. David sought to arrange the maidens and to adorn them along with the Queen, to show the Queen and her maidens in all their beauty. This is his concern in his Psalms and praises; it was they, Queen and maidens, he was seeking to adorn. When Solomon arrived he found the Queen adorned and her maidens decked out in beauty. He then sought to bring her to her bridegroom and to bring him under the canopy with his bride. He spoke words of love between them so that they be joined as one, so that the two of them form a single one in the wholeness of love.
>
> In this did Solomon rise high in praises above all other humans. Moses was wedded to the Queen in this world below so that there be a whole union among the lower creatures. Solomon brought about the complete union of the Queen above, first bringing the bridegroom under the

canopy and only afterwards joyously inviting both of them into the Temple which he had built . . .

Blessed are David and Solomon his son for having brought about the union above. From the day God had said to the moon "Go and diminish yourself!"[25] she had not been fully coupled with the sun until King Solomon came forth.[26]

Moses the prophet still needs to bring the *Shekhinah* into the lower world. He has a people to worry about, a people wandering the wilderness who need assurance that God is indeed in their midst. The prophet's concern is his flock. Solomon, the mystic hierophant, can afford to be utterly selfless: it is not of his own love that he speaks, or even the love of earthly Israel for their God. He is the attendant, or perhaps the officiant, at the union of bridegroom and bride, offering his song as an epithalamium, a gift to the sacred couple, intending nothing more and nothing less than to fill all the universe with his freely given words of love. Here indeed the Song is cultic, in the full sense of the term. But now the cult is that of the mystic, in whose loving heart bride and bridegroom are joined as one.

1. See my earlier discussion in "The Children in Egypt and the Theophany at the Sea," *Judaism* 24:4 (1975), p. 446ff.

2. The scholarly discussion on the origins of the Canticle is summarized by Marvin Pope in his Anchor Bible edition of the Song of Songs, (Garden City, N.Y., 1977); see especially the extensive annotated bibliography, p. 252ff.

3. *Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5.

4. Cf. Judah Goldin, "Towards a Profile of the Tanna Akiba" in *JAOS*, 1976, p. 38ff.

5. The rabbinic reading of the Song of Songs has been discussed by Gerson D. Cohen in "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," Samuel Friedland Lectures, 1960–1966 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1966).

6. Cf. Raphael Loewe, "The Targum to the Song of Songs" in *Biblical Motifs* (Lown Institute, *Texts and Studies*, Vol. 3; Cambridge, Mass., 1966).

7. Saul Lieberman, "*Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim*," published as Appendix D to Gershom Scholem's *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960).

8. *Agadath Shir Hashirim*, ed. Solomon Schechter (Cambridge, 1896), line 22. I suggest that the line, which is incomprehensible in its present form, be emended to read *ilu lo nittenah torah, kedai hayyetah [=hayah] shir hashirim linhog et ha'olam.*

9. *Mekilta de-RaSHBI*, ed. Y. N. Epstein, p. 143; Lieberman, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

Compare with Akiva's view of the Sinaitic revelation as discussed by A. J. Heschel in *Torah min haShamayim*, Vol. 2 (London, 1965).

10. Lieberman, *op. cit.*, p. 121; also see p. 122, n. 24.

11. *Mishneh Torah*, Teshuvah 3:7, and cf. I. Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières* (Philadelphia, 1980), p. 282f.

12. For a complete introduction to Kabbalistic thought, and sefirotic symbolism in particular, see the sections on *sefirot* and *Shekhinah* in Isaiah Tishby's *Mishnat haZohar* ("Wisdom of the Zohar"), the long-awaited English publication of which has been announced by the Litman Library in London. A brief and necessarily much more general introduction to the subject is to be found in my essay "The Zohar: Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Spain," in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany, 1984), p. 97ff. On the symbolism of the *Shekhinah* see also the more analytic treatment by Gershom Scholem in "Schechina: Das passive-weibliche Moment in der Gottheit," in his *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit* (Zurich, 1962; Hebrew version in Scholem's *Pirqey Yesod beHavanat haQabbalah u-Semaleha*, Jerusalem, 1976).

13. On the myth of evil in Kabbalah see the appropriate chapters in Tishby, *op. cit.*, and Scholem's chapter "Sitra Achra: Gut und Böse in der Kabbala," available in both Hebrew and German versions as cited in the preceding note.

14. The most accessible edition of the Hebrew is that published by Hayyim Dov Chavel in *Kitvey RaMBaN* (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 473ff. The French translation by Georges Vajda (Paris, 1969) is accompanied by valuable introductions and notes.

15. MS Oxford, Neubauer 343. This writer has prepared a critical edition of that manuscript, soon to be published. Fragments of a Psalms commentary by Sahula are also extant.

16. Rashi, *ad loc*; cf. *Baba Batra* 17a.

17. Cf. *Sotah* 13b and the discussion by L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 6, p. 161, n. 951.

18. A collection of passages from the Zohar corpus that were omitted from that work's first editions. They were published as a separate work under that title in Salonika, 1597. Scholem has determined that these passages are authentic to the original body of Zohar writings, i.e., are the work of Moses De Leon. Cf. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941), p. 159ff.

19. Zohar 2:143a–145b.

20. *Shevu'ot* 35b.

21. *Shir haShirim Rabbah* 1:2; cf. Lieberman, *op. cit.*, 119.

22. The earthly Temple parallel to the heavenly Temple.

23. Cf. *BaMidbar Rabbah* 12:11.

24. Zohar 2:143a–b.

25. The reference is to the well-known legend in *Hullin* 60b, where the moon is told to diminish herself in return for her unwillingness to share her rule with the sun. For the Kabbalist, "moon" is an alternate symbol for *Shekhinah*.

26. Zohar 2:144b–145a.

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