

## Rashi's Commentary on the Song of Songs: The Revolution of the Peshat and its Aftermath

### I.

The Song of Songs is among the most beautiful books in the Bible and perhaps the most problematic among them. The book is unique in contents and literary form, and does not conform to any model of biblical works. It does not deal with the people of Israel, its history and religion;<sup>1</sup> it is devoted to the concerns of the individual person, and with the most private and intimate subject of the individual's concerns – love. The book contains no religious component – even the name of God is absent from it<sup>2</sup> – and no expression of religious sentiments. It contains no moral instruction, and does not struggle with the problems of world order and human destiny. The famous saying of Rabbi Akiva: „He who warbles the Song of Songs in a banquet-hall and makes it into a kind of love-song has no portion in the world to come“,<sup>3</sup> may lead to the conclusion that at least for some people, at certain periods, it was regarded as a secular song, fit to be sung in a „banquet-hall“. <sup>4</sup> All these evoke the question –

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<sup>1</sup> The name ‚Israel‘ appears in the book only once, in a humoristic passage which describes King Solomon as sleeping in his bed „encircled by sixty warriors of the warriors of Israel, all of them trained in warfare, skilled in battle, around his bed, each with sword on thigh, because of terror by night“ (Cant 3,7–8). The English translation follows the NJPSV, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> Unless we explain the suffix *yah* in the noun *shalhevetyah* (Cant 8,6) as an abbreviated form of the Tetragrammaton. Even then, the phrase is interpreted as a form of superlative rather than as a reference to God. See, among others, Y. Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied* (HTKAT), Freiburg et al. 2004, 273–274. M. Pope omits the word altogether. M. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB), New York 1977, 653, 670–671. According to some commentators, the author made a conscious effort to avoid the name of God (e. g. A. Hacham, *Song of Songs*, Jerusalem 1973, 8 [in Hebrew]).

<sup>3</sup> Tosefta, Sanhedrin 12,10. English translation by J. Neusner, *Tosefta*, New York 1981, 237. See also BT Sanhedrin 101,a.

<sup>4</sup> A secular understanding of the Song of Songs probably underlies Rabbi Jonathan's explanation of the order of Solomon's literary works: „When a man is young he composes songs; when he grows older he makes sententious remarks; when he becomes an old man he speaks of the vanity of things“. *Song of Songs Rabbah*, 1,10. The English translation is by M. Simon, *Song of Songs Rabbah*, London 1939, 17.

which is of course well-known – of the canonicity of the Song of Songs: How did it happen that the book was included in Scripture?<sup>5</sup>

As is well known, the Jewish sages of old solved this problem by defining the Song of Songs as „holy“ (קודש). According to their view, the Song of Songs is concerned with the divine, rather than with the human sphere, and this view too was epigrammatically expressed by the famous statement of R. Akiva: „The scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is holiest of all“.<sup>6</sup> As has been claimed by many, and strongly emphasized by Gershon Cohen, this view is not an imaginary, forced solution in a situation of ‚no alternative‘, but quite the opposite: It is fully anchored in the literary conventions of the biblical literature and its figurative language.<sup>7</sup> The metaphor of marriage for the relationship between God, the husband, and Israel, the wife, is very common in the prophetic literature, as in Hosea, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel.<sup>8</sup> According to this view, the Song of Songs should be seen as countering the feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, and anger expressed by the severe rebuke of the prophets, and expressing the love, the memory, and the total commitment of the two lovers to one another, the people of Israel and the God of Israel.<sup>9</sup>

The allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, which transferred its topic and contents from the human realm to the divine, was realized in early Judaism in two different forms. The one, the dominant interpretation of Rabbinic Judaism which I have just mentioned, regarded the Song of Songs as a national / historical allegory, which depicts the relationship between Israel and God throughout history. Following this presupposition, the details of the book were deciphered as referring to key events and persons in Israel's history: the patriarchs, the oppression in Egypt, the redemption from Egypt, God's revelation at Sinai, the giving of the Torah, etc. The second way of relegating the Song of Songs to the sphere

<sup>5</sup> The question has been discussed by all studies of Old Testament canonization, as well as in all commentaries and introductions to the Song of Songs. It has been usually connected with the Rabbinic discussion on the „impurity of the hands“ (Mishnah, Yadayim 3,5). For a non-conventional view of this issue, and of the process of canonization, see recently M. Haran, *The Biblical Collection*, Vol. 1, Jerusalem 1996, 23–78; 201–275 (in Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> Mishnah, Yadayim 3,5. English translation by J. Neusner, *The Mishnah*, New Haven and London 1988, 1127. This statement is often quoted. See for instance, Tanhuma, Tezaveh, 5; Song of Songs Rabbah 1,11; Rashi's commentary on the Song of Songs 1,1, and more.

<sup>7</sup> See G. D. Cohen, *The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality*, in: *Studies in the Varieties of Rabbinic Culture*, Philadelphia 1991, 3–17.

<sup>8</sup> As in Hosea 2,4.18; Jer 2,2; Ezek 16; 23; Is 50,1; and more.

<sup>9</sup> So explicitly by the Karaite commentator Japhet ben Eli, who regards the Song of Songs as a response to the rebukes of the prophet Ezekiel. See D. Frank, *Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem*, in: J. D. McAuliffe / B. D. Walfish / J. W. Goering (eds.), *In Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Oxford 2003, 55.

of the divine was followed by the Jewish mystical circles, especially in the concept of Shi'ur Qomah. In a bold anthropomorphic interpretation, the physical description of the lover in the Song of Songs was viewed in the mystical literature as the description of the Godhead.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the differences between these two lines of interpretation, they share the basic presupposition that the Song of Songs is 'holy', and should be understood as an allegory of the relationship between the human and the divine spheres.

The understanding of the Song of Songs as allegory was early adopted by Christianity, where it integrated beautifully into its general approach to the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> The Song of Songs became one expression, but perhaps the most significant one, of this general stance.<sup>12</sup>

The allegorical reading of the Song of Songs dominated the Jewish scene for over a thousand years,<sup>13</sup> and was in full force even among the Karaites<sup>14</sup> – until Rashi.<sup>15</sup> As far as the Song of Songs is concerned, it is not enough to describe Rashi's approach as „the introduction of a new methodology“, or the „founding of a new school of exegesis“. Rather, Rashi's approach to and interpretation of the Song of Songs are no less than a revolution. It is the purpose of this article to describe and characterize this revolution, and to follow its development among Rashi's followers.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Scholem, Shi'ur Koma; die mystische Gestalt der Gottheit, in: *Von der Mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, Zürich 1962, 7–47; M. S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, Tübingen 1985; M. S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*, Washington DC 1983; S. Lieberman, *Mishnath Shir Hashirim*, in: G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York <sup>2</sup>1965, 118–126 (in Hebrew). For a general review of this concept and literature, and the debate around it, see G. Scholem, Shi'ur Komah, EJ 14, 1418–1419.

<sup>11</sup> The relationship between the Jewish homiletic literature on the Song of Songs and the works of the Christian Fathers has been pointed out by several scholars and debated by others. For a summary of this discussion, see T. Kadari, *On the Redaction of Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, Ph. D. dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2004, 5–6 (Hebrew with English abstract).

<sup>12</sup> For a review of the Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs see Pope, *Song of Songs* (see n. 2), 112–132. On the Christian Song of Songs commentaries as a specific literary genre, see E. A. Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*, Philadelphia 1992, with extensive bibliography.

<sup>13</sup> It should perhaps be remarked that we may find in Rabbinic literature sporadic statements which explain certain verses of the Song of Songs in their literal sense. For some examples of these interpretations see S. Japhet, *The human body and its beauty in mediaeval peshat exegesis of the Song of Songs*, in: M. M. Bar-Asher et al. (ed.), *A Word Fitly Spoken, Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an*, Presented to Haggai Ben Shammai, Jerusalem 2007, 134–163 (in Hebrew).

<sup>14</sup> For the stand of the Karaites, see below.

<sup>15</sup> Rashi is the acronym of „Rabbi Solomon the Izhakite (son of Isaac)“ (1040–1105). For his life and works, see, among others, A. Grossman, *The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France*, in: M. Saebó (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation*, Göttingen 2000, vol. 2, 332–345.

## II.

Rashi's best known innovation in the field of biblical exegesis is the introduction of the *Peshat* methodology, the interpretation of the biblical text according to its 'plain meaning'.<sup>16</sup> This innovation, however, is to Rashi's merit only in the Ashkenazi cultural milieu, that is in Northern France and Germany. He was preceded in the Eastern Judaism of Babylonia, Israel, Byzantine and Spain by the great commentators of both Karaite and Rabbanite affiliation, beginning with Saadia Gaon.<sup>17</sup> However, within the general framework of biblical exegesis, the Song of Songs occupies a special place. There is no evidence, at least so far, that the Song of Songs was ever interpreted before Rashi according to its 'plain meaning'.<sup>18</sup> Even the Karaites regarded the Song of Songs as 'the absolutely concealed', as a text that has no exoteric meaning.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The terms *Peshat* and *Peshut* seem to elude translation. They are represented in English mostly by 'literal meaning' or 'contextual meaning', but both definitions refer only to some aspects of the Hebrew term and do not exhaust it. I use the more literal rendering of the term, 'plain meaning' to signify that the *Peshat* refers to 'the text as it is', from a rational point of view, in its language, syntax, context, genre, and literary structure. See S. Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categories in Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash*, Jerusalem 1986, 14 (in Hebrew). As will become clear in the following discussion, exegetes who adopt this methodology differ from one another in the conceptualization of the term *Peshat* and in its practice.

<sup>17</sup> See R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia as Biblical Exegetes*, in: Saebø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament* (see n. 15), 74–88; A. S. Halkin, *The Jewish Exegesis in Arabic Outside Spain (including the Ancient Karaite Exegesis)*, in: M. Greenberg, (ed.), *Jewish Bible Exegesis: an Introduction*, Jerusalem 1983, 15–28 (in Hebrew); U. Simon, *The Spanish Exegetes*, *ibid.* 29–60 (in Hebrew). Recent studies of the Cairo Genizah have brought to life biblical *Peshat* exegesis written by Greek speaking Jews in the Byzantine empire, but research on these works is still in its beginning (see N. de Lange, *Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah*, Tübingen 1996; I. M. Ta-Shma, *Byzantine Biblical Exegesis from the End of the 10<sup>th</sup> and the Beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, in: *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature*, vol. 3, Jerusalem 2006, 241–255 (in Hebrew); R. Steiner, *The Byzantine Biblical Commentaries from the Genizah: Rabbanite vs. Karaite*, in press. Grossman claims that some philological exegesis of biblical texts existed also in Germany in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. A. Grossman, *The Jewish-Christian Polemic and Jewish Biblical Exegesis in Twelfth Century France (On the Attitude of R. Joseph Qara to the Polemic)*, *Zion* 51 (1986), 59–60 (in Hebrew).

<sup>18</sup> It is generally accepted that the commentary on the Song of Songs ascribed to Saadia Gaon was composed by a later author. See J. Kafah (Kafih), *Hamesh Megillot*, Jerusalem 1962, 9–11 (in Hebrew). A one page sermon on the Song of Songs by Saadia Gaon is included in the work 'A Commentary on *Wayosha*' by R. Saadia Gaon of Blessed Memory' preserved in Ms. Or. 8658 in the British Library. The sermon refers in a homiletic style to a few verses in the Song of Songs. See: H. Ben-Shammai, *Two Findings in a Forgotten Manuscript: Samuel ben Hofni's Commentary on *Ha'azinu*, and Saadia Gaon's Commentary on *Wayosha**, *Kiriat Sefer* 61 (1986 / 1987), 313–332 (in Hebrew).

<sup>19</sup> On the Karaite view, see below.

What precisely is Rashi's approach to the Song of Songs? The Song of Songs is the only biblical book to which Rashi wrote an introduction; this introduction in turn contains some of his most important methodological statements.<sup>20</sup> The introduction is composed of two parts, which deal respectively with the methodology of the commentary and the overall form and contents of the Song of Songs.

The first methodological statement is the following: „One thing God has spoken, two things have we (MT: I) heard' (Ps 62,12). One verse may have several meanings, but at the end of the matter, the literal meaning of the text must not be abolished“.<sup>21</sup>

This is the basic presupposition: The biblical text, by its very essence as a word of God, is multivalent. Therefore one may, and should, find in it ‚several meanings'. Nevertheless, whatever way the exegete may follow and whatever interpretation he may provide for the text, he cannot, and must not, ignore the basic, literal meaning of the text.<sup>22</sup> Later on Rashi will define more explicitly the parameters of this ‚literal meaning'.

This basic presupposition evokes a methodological question, to which Rashi attends next: How should one explain a biblical text whose meaning is from the outset non-literal? This question applies to any text written in figures – an image, a metaphor, a parable, or an allegory. Since the meaning of the text is non-literal, is it still necessary to discuss its literal meaning? Rashi refers to this question from the perspective of the prophetic literature, of which the Song of Songs is regarded as one component: „Although the prophets formulated their words in figures (דוגמא), one should explain the figure according to its form and order, just as the biblical verses are arranged in order, one after the other“.<sup>23</sup> According to

<sup>20</sup> On Rashi's introduction to the Song of Songs see Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categories* (see n. 16), 77–86.123–124; idem, דוגמא in *Rashi's Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Tarbiz 52 (1983), 41–42, = *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible*, Jerusalem 1991, 13–14 (in Hebrew).

<sup>21</sup> This is a combination of two separate statements quoted in the Talmud (B. Sanhedrin 34a), one in the name of Abaye and one in the name of „the school of R. Ishmael“. Kamin regarded the combination of the two statements as the innovation of Rashi. Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categories* (see n. 16), 181–182. M. Cohen has recently suggested a possible Spanish antecedent to this combination. M. Cohen, *A Possible Spanish Origin to Rashi's Peshuto shel Mikra*, in: A. Grossman / S. Japhet (eds.), *Rashi* (in Hebrew), in press. In presenting the text of Rashi's commentary I was greatly helped by the English translation of Prof. M. Signer of Notre-Dame University. I wish to thank Prof. Signer for letting me use his translation before publication.

<sup>22</sup> This statement is probably intended as opposition to the well-known claim of Rav Kahana, that he had reached the age of eighteen and studied the whole Talmud, but had never before heard that the literal meaning cannot be abolished (BT Shabbat, 63a).

<sup>23</sup> Rashi employs the term דוגמא for „figure, figurative language“, a term which recurs in the commentary of the Song of Songs over twenty times. Kamin discussed this term extensively, and regarded it, together with some other components of

this statement, even when it is obvious that the biblical text is figurative, as in the case of the prophetic speeches, the necessity to explain the literal formulation of the text is not abrogated. The form of the biblical text, its phrasing, formulation and arrangement, should all deserve the commentator's attention.

Rashi's position, then, is different from that of the Karaite commentators, who also dealt with this question. The Karaites distinguished in the prophetic literature between two categories of figurative language. The first category includes prophetic speeches in which the prophet explicitly provided the tenor of the figure – a well known and repeated example for this category is the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5. The second category includes figures which are 'absolutely concealed', that is, which have absolutely no exoteric meaning. This is the category of the Song of Songs, which should be interpreted only according to its hidden meaning.<sup>24</sup> For Rashi, by contrast, there is but one category of prophetic figurative language, and its interpretation should include the two levels of the text, the figure and the tenor.

The third issue, to which Rashi attends in the introduction, is the evaluation of the exegetical tradition on the Song of Songs, as represented in the traditional homiletic literature.<sup>25</sup> His attitude on this matter is rather critical: The state of the homiletic exegesis is so unsatisfactory that a new, different commentary is indicated: „I saw for this book several Aggadic midrashim ... but they do not accord with the language of the Bible or the order of the verses“.<sup>26</sup> With these words Rashi actually delineates

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Rashi's terminology, as influenced by Latin terminology and Christian exegesis. See Kamin, *שנומ* (see n. 20), 47–50; idem, *Rashi's Commentary on the Song of Songs and Jewish-Christian Polemic*, Shnaton, *An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, 7–8 (1983 / 1984), 245–247, = *Jews and Christians*, 58–60 (see n. 20). Her position was criticized by I. M. Ta-Shma, *On the Commentary of the Aramaic Piyutim in Mahzor Vitri*, *Kiriat Sefer* 57 (1982), 707–708 (in Hebrew), whose main claim was that the term *שנומ* had been in use before Rashi and cannot be regarded as his innovation. Kamin in turn responded to Ta-Shma's arguments (*Shir Hashirim*, 247, n. 122), but it seems that the whole issue deserves further study.

<sup>24</sup> See Frank, *Commentaries* (see n. 9), who quotes and translates excerpts from the introductions of Salmon ben Jeroham and Japhet ben Eli to their commentaries on the Song of Songs: „Others, such as the Song of Songs, require scholars to set forth their meaning, to explicate their purposes and subtlety, and to strive to reveal their benefits“. Salmon b. Jeroham's introduction, Frank, *commentaries*, 55. „From beginning to end, not a word of it is to be taken exoterically. It is rather condensed speech, rich in meaning, which may be understood only through [recourse to] the prophetic books“ (ibid).

<sup>25</sup> Rashi does not mention earlier commentators. Kamin is of the opinion that Rashi followed this strategy in order to present his own position as an innovation. Rashi's *Exegetical Categorizations* (see n. 16), 86. I prefer a simpler explanation, namely, that Rashi was not acquainted with commentaries on the Song of Songs, except for the homiletic ones.

<sup>26</sup> See also his comment on Song 2,7: „There are many aggadic homilies, but they do not integrate into the order of the text“. The two terms: 'integrate' (*מזיזבין*), and

his criteria for *Peshat* exegesis: Such interpretation should do justice to the language of the biblical text and to its structure. Since the homiletic interpretations do not fulfill these requirements, a new kind of commentary is indicated.

In the conclusion of the methodological introduction Rashi sets the goals of his own commentary: (1) „to capture the literal meaning of the verses“; (2) „to explain them in order“; (3) and „to integrate the homilies established by our Rabbis, each midrash in its place“.

The new commentary, then, should take account of two spheres of exegesis: the literal meaning of the text, and the „midrash of our rabbis“. In this categorization, Rashi actually equates the tenor of the figures with „the midrash of our rabbis“, and thus defines the allegorical interpretation as midrash. Accordingly, this sphere of exegesis should follow the homiletic tradition, with the only requirement being that the homilies be placed in the commentary „each midrash in its place“.

In the second part of the introduction Rashi presents his view regarding the nature of the Song of Songs and the basic lines of its contents. According to his view, the Song of Songs is a prophecy in the form of a parable. Solomon saw in a vision „under the inspiration of ‚the Holy Spirit‘ (ברוח הקודש) that they will endure one exile after another, and one destruction after another, and they will mourn in the current exile their earlier greatness ... and they will recall God's graces and their transgressions, and the good things that he promised to grant them at the end of days ...“. Therefore Solomon composed the Song of Songs in the figure of a woman in a „living widowhood,<sup>27</sup> longing for her husband, clinging to her beloved, recalling her love for him in her youth. Her beloved too, suffers her agony, and recalls the graces of her youth and the splendor of her beauty ... to let her know that ... her divorce is not final; that she is still his wife and he is still her husband“.

According to this view, the Song of Songs is an allegory about the situation of the people of Israel „in this exile“ – in Rashi's own time – which Solomon saw in a vision and for which he composed his prophecy. It deals with the relationship between the Jewish community and their God against the background of destruction and exile, in the contemporary reality among the Christian nations of the world.

So far the theory as presented in the introduction. Its two great innovative components are the methodology – the demand to consider the literal meaning of the text as a *sine qua non* of the commentary – and the definition of the literary essence of the Song of Songs as a prophecy in the figure of a „woman in a living widowhood“, intended for „this exile“. In light of these statements one expects to find in the commentary two components: a systematic and complete interpretation of the literary

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„order“ (סדר), were greatly emphasized by Kamin in her discussion of Rashi's methodology. See idem, *Rashi's Exegetical Categories* (see n. 16), 72–82.

<sup>27</sup> This unique idiom is taken from 2Sam 20,3.



level of the parable, and a systematic and complete interpretation of the allegorical meaning, which would include selections from the Rabbinic Midrash.<sup>28</sup> In practice, however, this program is not carried out. The deviations from the plan are of several types, but in general one may say that only some verses and textual units are interpreted according to the plan, namely, first the literal meaning and then the allegory.<sup>29</sup> The more common structures employed in the actual interpretations are the following three:

- (1) The commentary begins with the interpretation of the literal meaning, does not complete it, and moves very soon to the allegorical one.<sup>30</sup>
- (2) The commentary moves between one level to the other, without clear distinction between them.<sup>31</sup>
- (3) The literal interpretation is absent altogether.<sup>32</sup>

Rashi's theoretical presupposition, that the literal meaning of the text must not be ignored, led him also to regard the literal meaning, at least in principle, as the basis of the allegorical interpretation. Nevertheless, the impression conveyed by the commentary is that, notwithstanding his theoretical declarations, Rashi's attention is given to the allegory. Quite often in the commentary it seems that the literal meaning is determined by the allegorical one rather than vice versa, and that the true basis of the interpretation is the allegory.

<sup>28</sup> This expectation is indeed fulfilled in Rashi's commentary on Isaiah 5, where a detailed interpretation of the literal meaning precedes the allegorical one. The method is not always followed in the interpretation of other prophetic parables and allegories, such as Ezek 16; 17; 19, and more.

<sup>29</sup> For a systematic presentation of the two levels of interpretation, defined by the appropriate terms, see for example the commentary on 1,4: *Draw me after you*: I heard a hint of love from your messengers that you intended to draw me [after you], and I said: Let us run after you to be your wife. *The king has brought me to his chambers*: Even today it is a joy and rejoicing for me that I clung to you. *Let us recall your love*: Even today, in my living widowhood, I always recall your early love, [that was better] than all feasts of pleasure and joy. *They loved you rightly*: A strong love, a straight love, without deceit or obstacles, with which I and my ancestors have loved you in those days. This is the plain meaning according to its context. According to the figurative interpretation they recall before him the grace of youth, the love of betrothal, their having followed him in the desert, a land of drought and gloom, where they had prepared no provisions for themselves. They believed in him and in his messenger. They did not say: How shall we go forth into the desert, a place without plants or food? They went after him, and he brought them into the inner chambers of his enfolding clouds. In this they are still happy today and rejoice in him, despite their suffering and their misfortunes. They take pleasure in the Torah, and recall his love [which is better] than wine and how their love for him is upright. A similar systematic presentation of the two levels may be found in the comments on 1,5, 8, 14; 2,9–13, etc., but in general without the employment of the defining terminology.

<sup>30</sup> See for example the commentary on 1,6.10.11; 2,2.8, etc.

<sup>31</sup> For example 1,3.7.16; 2,9.13.14, etc.

<sup>32</sup> See, e. g., the commentary on 1,11.12; 2,15–17; chapter 3 in its entirety, etc.



## III.

Rashi's greatest follower in biblical exegesis is his grandson Rashbam,<sup>33</sup> who built on the foundations laid by Rashi another building, different in theory and practice.<sup>34</sup> Here again, the point of departure for the discussion is the introduction to the commentary on the Song of Songs. In the introduction Rashbam addresses several issues, such as the audience of the commentary, the goal and method of the commentary, the author of the Song of Songs and the place of this work among the author's other books, the mode of composition of the Song of Songs, its topic, literary nature, and the broad lines of its contents.<sup>35</sup> The goal of the commentary is presented in the introduction in rhymed lines (which I am unable to preserve in translation): „To teach and tell its plain meaning, according to its category (genre?) and expression, as it is structured and phrased“.<sup>36</sup> In these concise rhymes Rashbam presents one single goal: to explain the Song of Songs according to its „plain meaning“. Rashbam's position differs, then, from that of Rashi in both its point of departure and the description of his method.<sup>37</sup> He makes no reference to the homiletic tradi-

<sup>33</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (ca. 1085 – after 1159). For his life and works, see D. Rosin, R. Samuel b. Mëir (רשב"ם) als Schrifterklärer, Breslau 1880, 1–22; S. Japhet / R. B. Salters, The Commentary of R. Samuel Ben Meir, Rashbam, on Qoheleth, Jerusalem 1985, 11–18; Grossman, Jewish Exegesis (see n. 17), 358–363.

<sup>34</sup> Rashbam's commentary on the Song of Songs was published in 1855 by A. Jellinek, and another edition of this commentary was included in Y. Thompson, The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs, DHL Dissertation, The Jewish Theological Seminary New York 1988. I have now completed a new critical edition of this commentary, based on all the available manuscript material, which is soon to be published.

<sup>35</sup> These items are similar, but not identical, to the topics included in the „academic introductions“ in the non-Jewish literature of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Minnis mentioned the following characteristic subjects: the name of the book, the name of the author, the author's intention, the topic of the book, its literary method, the order or arrangement of the book, its benefits, and the academic discipline to which it belongs. See A. J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship. Aldershot 1984, 4. Rashbam wrote introductions to his commentaries on Genesis and Leviticus, and perhaps also to Lamentations (now included in the compilatory commentary to this book). A. Jellinek, Commentarien zu Esther, Ruth und den Klageliedern, Leipzig 1855, 35–36. For the introduction to Leviticus see now I. Kislev, Whoever Has Heeded the Words of Our Creator – Rashbam's Methodological Preface to Leviticus and the Relationship between Rashi's and Rashbam's Commentaries, Tarbiz 73 (2004), 225–237 (in Hebrew). The question is therefore whether Rashbam's writing of an introduction to the Song of Songs is just a continuation and imitation of Rashi, or a reflection of a new literary feature, influenced by the surrounding intellectual milieu.

<sup>36</sup> ללמד ולספר את פשוטו / בשיטתו / ומלתו / כאשר יחקן על מכורו / בלשונו All the terms in this short passage belong to Rashbam's characteristic vocabulary, but the concise statement does not include all the features of his exegetical method.

<sup>37</sup> His position also differs from that of his contemporary Abraham Ibn Ezra, who may be seen – at least in regards to the Song of Songs – as a follower of Rashi. The discussion of Ibn Ezra's methodology is beyond the scope of this article. See for the

tion, neither in appreciation nor in criticism, and presents his work as standing completely on its own, with no reference to anything that preceded him. In fact, the word „midrash“, and the verbal root שׁר״שׁ, do not appear in the commentary even once, neither in the introduction nor in the commentary. Throughout the commentary there is no mention of earlier rabbinic sources, not one.<sup>38</sup> Rashbam sees as his goal to provide the learned student a commentary on the Song and Songs that is thoroughly *Peshat*, in definition and essence. This goal is made even clearer by the execution – the commentary itself.

What, then, is Rashbam's position regarding the allegorical aspect of the Song of Songs? Does the exclusion of midrash mean that he explains the Song of Songs as a secular composition, with no allegorical meaning at all? The answer to this question is firmly in the negative. Further on in the introduction Rashbam presents the literary nature of the Song of Songs and its mode of composition, and there he describes it as a figurative work: „as a young woman wailing and mourning over her lover, who left her and went far away. She recalls him and his eternal love for her“. In his comment on Songs 1,1 Rashbam then explains that „King Solomon composed it under [the inspiration of] the Holy Spirit, because he saw [in vision] that the people of Israel would complain in their exile about the Holy One, who kept away from them, like a bridegroom who departed from his beloved, and he began to compose his song on behalf of the Community of Israel, who is like a bride to him“.

The understanding of the Song of Songs as an allegory, which depicts the relationship between the people of Israel and their God throughout history, is for Rashbam – as much as for Rashi – an axiom which does not need to be proven. He therefore proceeds to explain the Song of Songs on two levels: the parable and the allegory. In a systematically structured composition, Rashbam deals with these two levels of meaning in each and every textual unit, first the parable, and then the allegory. The interpretation of the parable is introduced by a lemma – a phrase taken from the beginning of the unit to mark its beginning; the allegorical interpretation is introduced, consistently and systematically, by a specific term: „image“ or „figure“ (Hebrew: דמיון) – which is repeated in the commentary thirty five times. By contrast, no term precedes the level of the parable. The structure of the commentary, and what seems a matter of terminology, are both a corollary of Rashbam's methodology,

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time being, S. Japhet, *Exegesis and Polemic in Rashbam's Commentary on the Song of Songs*, in: N. Dohrmann / D. Stern (ed.), *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange*, Philadelphia 2007 (in press).

<sup>38</sup> Even the general term „the language of the Talmud“, which may be found in Rashbam's other commentaries (e.g. on Job 1,11; 2,5; 11,5; 33,1; 40,17; see S. Japhet, *The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) on the Book of Job*, Jerusalem 2000, 49, 212–215 [in Hebrew]) appears in the commentary on the Song of Songs only once (on Song 4,3). At this point it appears also in the commentary of Rashi.

which he presents in the introductory statements. Rashbam regards the entire commentary, on its two levels, as the 'plain meaning' of the text. According to his view, what determines the nature of the interpretation are the nature and genre of the literary work. If a text is written in figures, it requires a corresponding interpretation; therefore, the allegorical interpretation is not external to the text but essential to it. Thus, the allegorical meaning of the Song of Songs is not a midrash, which by definition is external to the text, but one aspect of the plain meaning. This is also the motive for the use of terminology. Rashbam refrains from introducing the interpretation of the parable by the term *Peshat* because it would be misleading. This term applies to the commentary as a whole, including its allegorical section.<sup>39</sup>

The best example of Rashbam's view on this matter outside the commentary on the Song of Songs is his famous comment on Exod 13,9: „And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder between your eyes“. Normative Jewish tradition explained this verse literally, making it the basis for the commandment to wear phylacteries. Rashbam, by contrast, explains the phrase „a sign on your hand“ figuratively: „It will always be a reminder for you as if it is written on your hand, like the verse (Song 8,6): ‚Let me be a seal on your heart‘; and further: „and a memory between your eyes: like an ornament or a gold chain that is customarily put on the forehead for decoration“.<sup>40</sup> Rashbam prefaces this interpretation by the statement: „According to the profound plain meaning (לפי עומק פשוט)“. Namely, the metaphorical meaning of the text, rather than the literal one, is the 'plain meaning'.<sup>41</sup> In the same manner, the allegorical level of the Song of Songs, defined as „figure“ (דמיון), is one aspect of the 'plain meaning' and should be interpreted with the same methodology and with the same tools appropriate for the *Peshat*.

<sup>39</sup> Minnis ascribes such a view to Thomas Aquinas, in the middle of the 13th century, and finds its origin in the change of the attitude of the scholastic scholars towards the literal meaning and the author of the text. „All kinds of figurative language, including metaphors, parables, and similitudes, involve significative words and are, therefore, part of the literal sense“. Minnis (see n. 35), 74. The similarity between Rashbam in the middle of the 12th century and the scholastics of the 13–14th centuries, as well as the differences between them, deserve further study.

<sup>40</sup> The translation of Rashbam's comments follows the English translation of M. Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus, An Annotated Translation*, Atlanta 1997, 129.

<sup>41</sup> This is one of Rashbam's best known interpretations, and has been discussed by all students of his work. See, among others, Rosin, *Rashbam als Schrifterklärer* (see n. 33), 66.83; S. A. Poznanski, *Kommentar zu Ezechiel und den XII Kleinen Propheten von Eliezer aus Beaugency*, Warschau 1913, xliii (in Hebrew); E. Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion. Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir*, Ramat Gan 2003, 187.248–250; Lockshin, *ibid.*, and more. See also S. Japhet, *The Tension between Rabbinic Legal Midrash and the 'Plain Meaning' (Peshat) of the Biblical Text – An Unresolved Problem?* in: C. Cohen and others (eds.), *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, Winona Lake 2004, 413–418.

The implication of this view in regards to the homiletic tradition is a total exclusion from the commentary of the homiletic exegetical method.<sup>42</sup>

In the commentary Rashbam carries out his program in the most systematic way, and explains the Song of Songs in its entirety on the two levels: a complete, detailed interpretation of the parable, and a complete presentation of the allegory. In order to achieve this goal he employs a special technique: He divides the Song of Songs into 'textual-units', some of them of just one verse but most of them of a longer scope, and explains each unit in three parts: interpretation of the parable by way of a close paraphrase, a presentation of the allegorical meaning of the unit, and a third section devoted to the further clarification of various details.<sup>43</sup> This technique is followed systematically throughout the commentary.<sup>44</sup> The result of this method is a great emphasis on the parable; the story of the young woman who bemoans her lover is much longer and more elaborate than the part devoted to the allegory.<sup>45</sup>

To sum up: Rashbam's methodological innovations are mainly two. On the theoretical level he exhibits a different concept of the 'plain meaning', with far-reaching implications for the exegetical work. The allegorical interpretation is conceived as an integral part of the plain meaning, and is bound by the rules applicable to this method. The homiletic method of interpretation is consequently totally excluded. On the practical level, Rashbam proposes a systematic and consistent structure, in which each of the textual units is explained on two levels, first the parable, and then the allegory.

#### IV.

As we have seen thus far, both Rashi and Rashbam accept the traditional dictum that the Song of Songs is 'holy', a prophecy under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, an allegory for the relationship between the people of

<sup>42</sup> It should be emphasized that it is the homiletic methodology that is absolutely excluded from Rashbam's exegesis, not all of the interpretations found in the midrashic corpus. Some of these interpretations, which are seen as conforming to the demands of the strict 'plain meaning' methodology, may be found in all of Rashbam's commentaries.

<sup>43</sup> The general lines of this technique have been observed by all those who have dealt with Rashbam's commentary on the Song of Songs, beginning already with Jellinek (see n. 34), in 1855. For a more detailed description of this technique, see, for the time being, Japhet, *Exegesis and Polemic* (see n. 37). On Rashbam's specific technique of paraphrase, see Japhet, *Rashbam on Job* (see n. 38), 111-119.

<sup>44</sup> The only exceptions are the absence of allegory in the interpretation of the first verse (Song 1,1), and the exchange of places between the second and third parts on a few occasions.

<sup>45</sup> The brevity of the allegorical interpretation is prompted also by other motives, most importantly by Rashbam's view on the relationship between the parable and its tenor. I deal with this issue in another place.

Israel and their God. For both commentators – as well as for many others – this is an axiom that does not need to be proven. Neither Rashi nor Rashbam seems to be aware of the hermeneutical problem inherent in this view, namely that this proposition is entirely external to the actual text and genre of the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs does not present itself either as a prophecy or as an allegory.<sup>46</sup>

As I mentioned above, this issue was explicitly addressed by the Karaite commentators of the Song of Songs, who tried to overcome the problem by proposing that there are two kinds of figurative works in the Bible: the prophetic parable, which includes an explicit reference to the tenor, and thus enables the reader to follow the prophet's message by his own words; and the parable, which is „the absolutely concealed“ (נסתר מוחלט), illustrated by the Song of Songs, where the interpretation is completely in the hands of the exegete.<sup>47</sup>

In the French school of exegesis this problem was addressed by an almost unknown commentary, an anonymous and entirely neglected work, published by Adolph Hübsch from a Prague manuscript.<sup>48</sup> The little that can be said about the provenance of the commentary is that it was composed in France and displays the influence of both Rashi and Rashbam, which points to its date.

The commentary has a short introduction, as follows:

„*The Song of Songs by Solomon*: The scribe is telling us that Solomon composed this song, but these are not the words of Solomon. The beginning of the book is ‚Let him kiss me of the kisses‘ (1,2). So also ‚the words of Qoheleth‘ (Qoh 1,1) are the words

<sup>46</sup> See the struggle of H. Fisch, who on the one hand defines the Song of Songs as „The allegorical imperative“, and on the other hand tries to justify its non-explicitness: „If the Bible points to poetic imagery as in a way the only path of knowledge, it also points just as surely to the limits of art, the impotence of poetry“. Song of Solomon, in: *Poetry with a Purpose*, Bloomington (IN) 1988, 101. „Of God himself, of his choice of a people and the mystery of choosing, even this poem of poems will not directly speak. It will offer us instead a riot of images but it will take care to tell us that these are but images“. Ibid. 103.

<sup>47</sup> See above.

<sup>48</sup> A. Hübsch, *The Five Megilloth*, Prague 1866. The commentary was described by S. Salfeld, *Das Hohelied Salomo's bei den jüdischen Erklärern des Mittelalters*, Berlin 1879, 52–56, who also mentioned reviews by Geiger and Berliner (ibid. 52 n. 4), and following him, by Poznanski, *Kommentar* (see n. 41), lxxxvi–lxxxvii. Hübsch did not identify the author of the commentaries, but four of them – to Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth and Esther – were later on identified as having been written by R. Joseph Kara or his school. The commentary on the Song of Songs, however, displays no affinity with this school, and such an ascription had already been rejected by Poznanski (p. xxx). On some issues in this commentary see S. Japhet, „Lebanon“ in the Transition from Derash to Peshat: Sources, Etymology and Meaning (With Special Attention to the Song of Songs), in: S. M. Paul / R. A. Kraft / L. H. Schiffman / W. W. Fields (eds.), *Emanuel, Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov*, Leiden 2003, 717–718; idem, *Human Body* (see n. 13), 148–152.

of a scribe, and also in Proverbs 'The Proverbs of Solomon son of David' (Prov 1,1). These are the words of a scribe, [telling] that the author of the proverbs in this book is Solomon, but the beginning of the book is later on.<sup>49</sup> And the interpretation of 'the Song of Songs' is: This is one of the songs composed by Solomon, who wrote many songs, as it is said: 'And his songs numbered one thousand and five' (1Kgs 5,12). Why was this one written of all the others? It was written because it was loved by the people".

According to this statement the Song of Songs is just 'a song', one of the many that were composed by Solomon. It was included in the Bible, 'written' in the phrasing of the commentator, because it was popular. In his comment on 1,2 the commentator continues this line of interpretation:

*„Let him kiss me of the kisses of his mouth.* According to its plain meaning, Solomon had one wife that he loved better than all his wives, and she loved him too; he wrote this song about her, and about her great love and everything that went on, as he tells later on. The following verses support the view that he had one wife that he loved better than all, as it is said there: 'There are sixty queens and eighty concubines' whom he married, but 'only one is my dove' whom I love more than all. This wife asks that her request be given. What is her request? Let the king my husband kiss me of the kisses of his mouth. This is the correct kiss, as there are some who kiss on his hand and her hand."

The commentator thus outlines the literary nature of the Song of Songs and the main lines of its contents. According to 'the plain meaning' (לפי פשוטו) it is a love song that Solomon composed for his most beloved wife, and describes the circumstances of this love. At the same time, the author expresses his awareness of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. In the continuation of the introduction, after the passage I cited above, he says: "The Midrash is that it was written as a parable about them. It was written because they explained it as referring to oppression, and their creator wanted, indeed desired, to redeem them and to set them apart from the nations to be his people, and they long for him and trust him that he will not leave them for a long time and will save them in his compassion and great mercy. Solomon saw all this in vision and wrote it as a parable about himself and his wife and her friends."

In this rather long explanation – which stands out against the general concise style of the commentary – the author presents the view of his predecessors. The Song of Songs was interpreted by others as an alle-

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<sup>49</sup> The author thus refers to all three of the books attributed to Solomon: Song of Songs, Qoheleth and Proverbs. His position is that while the books themselves contain Solomon's actual sayings, the headings and introductions were composed by a 'scribe'. His view of Qoheleth is based on Rashbam's commentary to this book (see Japhet / Salters, Rashbam on Qoheleth [see n. 33], 34–35); his view of Proverbs is based perhaps on the observation of Rashi. See E. Visel, Rashi's View on the Composition of Some Biblical Books, in: Japhet / Grossman (eds.), Rashi (see n. 21). I have found no explicit antecedent to his view concerning the Song of Songs.

gory, the main lines of which are concisely presented. In defining this allegorical interpretation, however, the author does not resort to any of the terms which his predecessors employed – either *דרומא* (Rashi) or *דמיון* (Rashbam). Rather, he describes it as 'midrash', to be clearly distinguished from his own 'plain meaning'. He claims, moreover, that this midrashic interpretation was the reason for the inclusion of the book in the Bible: „It was written because they explained it as referring to oppression, etc.“

The anonymous author does not specify the target of his critique, but considering his date, and the great influence of Rashbam's commentary on his own, it would seem that the target of his criticism is indeed the view of Rashbam. By returning to the definition 'midrash' for the allegorical interpretation, he rejects Rashbam's view that the allegory is immanent to the Song of Songs. Therefore, a commentator who truly wishes to be faithful to the plain meaning of the text should avoid it altogether. This view is illustrated by the actual commentary. The author does not describe the Song of Songs either as a prophecy or as a parable, and does not refer to the 'holy Spirit'. He interprets the book throughout as a love song, concerned exclusively with the past love between Solomon and his wife. It is indeed a popular song, 'loved by all', but has no relevance for the present.

In order to illustrate this line of interpretation, I will quote a few lines of his comments:

1,4: „*Draw me after you, let us run*. Solomon had a custom: Wherever he would go he would take his wives with him, and as he had many wives, he would take one of them at one time and two or three at another time. This one, because of her great love, was asking him to take her with him everywhere ...

1,6: *The sons of my mother quarrelled with me*: At one time Solomon went away and she returned to her mother's house, and her brothers, the sons of her mother, bullied her and put upon her the burden of watching the vineyards. They said to her: You cannot settle in the house of our father in the same way that you settled in the king's house, in great pleasure of everything. This is how her face was blackened, and she was telling that to her friends: So and so happened to me in my mother's house ...

1,7: *Beside the flocks of your fellows*: It is a king's custom when he goes out of his house, that his wife does not come out with him, except for one day, or before his return on the third day. But this one was speaking to Solomon thus: When you go out of the house, tell me where you are going to stay with your forces, so that I know your stations and will not pursue you on other ways and to other camps“.

This commentary, then, by its very nature, precludes the possibility of explaining the Song of Songs as an allegory. The Song of Songs is not seen as a song of remembrance and longing on the one hand and of hope for return and renewal on the other, as proposed by Rashi and Rashbam, but rather as anchored in the past, in one historical moment in the private life of King Solomon. There is no connection between this song and the actual condition of the Jewish community, and it has no bearing on the current situation of the people of Israel.



## V.

A further step in the same direction is taken by another anonymous commentary, published by Mathews.<sup>50</sup> In scope and contents it is more impressive than the previous one, but it shares with the other commentary its basic approach: It explains the Song of Songs according to its plain meaning, that is, as a love song. The author of this commentary has not been identified, but various considerations lead to the conclusion that his provenance was northern France, at the end of the 12th or the beginning of the 13th century.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, the anonymous author does not present the theoretical basis of his commentary or the methodological considerations that underlie it. The commentary begins at the head of a page with the interpretation of verse 2, and this led Mathews to the conclusion that the beginning of the commentary – which included the introduction and the exegesis of the first verse – was truncated.<sup>52</sup> The loss is indeed significant because, as we have seen, the introduction and the interpretation of the first verse are commonly the places where commentators proposed their methodology and presented their views regarding the nature, author and composition of the Song of Songs. In the absence of an explicit statement on these matters, our only recourse is to search for an answer in the commentary itself. Even a cursory reading makes it clear that the author explained the Song of Songs as a secular love song, did not present it as a parable, did not regard it as a prophecy and did not include an allegorical interpretation.

## VI.

The fact that we have in our possession two commentaries in the same vein – interpretation of the Song of Songs exclusively on the plain level,

<sup>50</sup> H. J. Mathews, *Anonymous Commentary on the Song of Songs*, FS Moritz Steinschneider, Leipzig 1896, 238–240, Hebrew section 164–185.

<sup>51</sup> So Mathews, *Commentary* (see n. 50), 238–240, followed by Poznanski, *Kommentar* (see n. 41), lxxxix–xc. The commentary has not received the attention it deserves. It was briefly described by C. D. Ginsburg (*The Song of Songs and Coheleth* 1857, with a prolegomenon by S. H. Blank, New York 1970, 56), even before its publication. Some extracts of this commentary were published by A. Dukes in the *Journal Jeshurun* 4 (1864), 88–94. Salfeld devoted to it some sentences (*Hohelied* [see n. 48], 77), and was followed by Poznanski, *Kommentar*, lxxxix–xc. It was also mentioned by Pope, who based his report on Ginsburg (*Song of Songs* [see n. 2], 108f). I have recently devoted to it the article: *The Lovers' Way: Cultural Symbiosis in a Medieval Commentary on the Song of Songs*, in: A. Hurvitz and others (eds.), *Shalom Paul Jubilee Volume*, in press. I also dealt with some aspects of this commentary in two other articles: *Lebanon* (see n. 48), 723, and *Descriptions of the Body* (see n. 13).

<sup>52</sup> *Anonymous Commentary*, 240. This is a very plausible suggestion, but since the commentary exists in a single manuscript (Bodleian Library, O 625) there is no way to prove it, or to complement the missing part.

with complete avoidance of the allegorical meaning – and the fact that notwithstanding the differences between them the two commentaries have a common background – northern France at the end of the 12th or the beginning of the 13th century – indicate that what they represent is not an accidental and personal literary expression, but a general cultural phenomenon. One may wonder if there were not more works of the same kind which did not survive, for even these two works survived each in a single manuscript.<sup>53</sup>

I should perhaps emphasize at this point that this kind of commentary on the Song of Songs – an exclusive adherence to the plain meaning and total avoidance of any kind of allegory – is a unique phenomenon, with no parallel in the long history of Jewish exegesis of the Song of Songs until the modern period.<sup>54</sup> These commentaries stand as an end point of an intellectual process which began with Rashi, about 100–150 years earlier. Rashi presented his demand to consider the plain meaning of the text as a reaction to the enormous accumulation of homiletic interpretations, which obscured the meaning of the actual biblical text and in a way made it redundant. Nevertheless, Rashi retained the homiletic tradition and even extended it in the allegorical part of his commentary, and in fact regarded the allegory as the bearer of the book's message. At the end of the road, and over about a century and a half, this intellectual process led to a total severance from the homiletic tradition, and complete rejection of the Midrash. The allegorical meaning of the Song of Songs, regarded as Midrash, was put aside and ignored.

As I have already said, these commentaries are generally dated to the end of the 12th or the beginning of the 13th centuries, a time of intensive intellectual activity in the different Jewish centers. In the sphere of biblical exegesis these are the peak days of the *Peshat* school, and perhaps also the beginning of its decline; new allegorical commentaries on the Song of Songs, expressing philosophical and mystical approaches to the Bible, begin to flourish;<sup>55</sup> and the traditional national / historical interpretations

<sup>53</sup> Walfish includes five more commentaries in the category of „(pure) Peshat“, all from the Sephardi-Italian cultural milieu (B. D. Walfish, *An Annotated Bibliography of Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs*, in: S. Japhet (ed.), *The Bible in the Light of its Interpreters: Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume*, Jerusalem 1994, 571 (in Hebrew). Only one of the authors is known by name – Rabbi Isaiah de Trani of the 13th century (ibid. no. a. 2. a. 1, 524–525); the other four are anonymous (nos. b. 2. d. 1–4, 555–556). This general categorization needs refinement, which is beyond the scope of this article, but see also below.

<sup>54</sup> For examples from the modern period see, among others, H. Graetz, *Schir Haschirim, oder das Salomonische Hohelied*, Vienna 1871; Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied* (see n. 2); J. Klein / M. Fox, *The Song of Songs*, in: *The Biblical World Encyclopedia*, Jerusalem 1987 (in Hebrew).

<sup>55</sup> Like the philosophical commentaries of Joseph Ibn Aknin (1150–1220); Moses Ibn Tibbon (the 13th century); and later Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1279–1340) and Gersonides (1288–1344); the mystical commentaries of Ezra Girondi (d. around 1240); Isaac ben Moses Sahula (born 1244). For a full list and classification of the commen-

retain their vitality and influence through the Midrashic literature and the Aramaic Targum.<sup>56</sup>

What were the causes of this unique phenomenon? Two lines of explanation present themselves. One line is to regard this phenomenon as an internal Jewish intellectual development, one more stage in the development of the *Peshat* methodology. This development may be compared to a similar one in the interpretation of the Pentateuch. Rashi presented his task in the commentary on the Pentateuch as twofold: to explain the plain meaning of the text and to include a selection of midrashic traditions.<sup>57</sup> Two generations later Rashbam declared that his goal was to interpret the Pentateuch exclusively according to the plain meaning (his comment on Exod 21,2 and parallels). As a parallel to this progression one may see three stages in the interpretation of the Song of Songs: Rashi, who saw his goal in explaining both the plain meaning and the allegorical one, defined as Midrash; Rashbam, who rejected the Midrash methodology but kept the allegorical interpretation and regarded it as an aspect of the *Peshat*; and lastly, the two anonymous exegetes, who gave up the allegorical interpretation altogether, defined it as Midrash and therefore as irrelevant, and restricted their commentaries to the plain meaning.

The parallelism with the exegesis of the Pentateuch brings up at once the question of the commentators' stances towards allegorical interpretation as such. As is well known, Rashbam declared in his commentary on the Pentateuch that his own choice to interpret the biblical text exclusively according to its plain meaning did not imply a denial of the validity of the midrashic interpretation.<sup>58</sup> Should we attribute the same stand also to the anonymous commentators on the Song of Songs and claim that although they avoided the allegorical interpretation in their own works, they did not deny its validity in and of itself? Or do their works express

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taries, see Walfish, Bibliography (see n. 53), 571. See also E. Wolfson, Ascetism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs, in: *In Reverence of the Word* (see n. 9), 92–118.

<sup>56</sup> For a list of the midrashic works on the Song of Songs, see M. D. Herr, *Midrash*, EJ 11, Jerusalem 1971, 1511.1513. For a comprehensive review of Song of Songs Rabbah, see Kadari, *Redaction* (see n. 11). For the Aramaic Targum of the Song of Songs as a 'midrashic paraphrase', see Y. Komelosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Targum*, Tel Aviv 1973, 77–81 (in Hebrew); P. S. Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible 17A, Collegeville (Minn) 2002, with extensive bibliography. The large number of manuscripts and editions of this Targum testifies to its popularity (Alexander, *ibid.* 1.45).

<sup>57</sup> See his famous statement on Gen 3,8. For a discussion of this statement and its parallels, see Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization* (see n. 16), 62–78.

<sup>58</sup> See his famous statement on Exod 21,2 and elsewhere. The meaning of these statements, and in particular the measure of emphasis on the validity of Rabbinic law and its sources, were interpreted with some nuances by different scholars. See, among others, Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion* (see n. 41), 11–33, and through the index; Lockshin, *Rashbam on Exodus* (see n. 40), 225–226; Japhet, *The Tension* (see n. 41).

the methodological conviction that there is no place for an allegorical interpretation altogether?

We find the first of these alternatives in a Spanish anonymous commentary on the Song of Songs, found in Ms. Oxford Hunt 268. The commentary begins with the author's declaration that he will restrict himself to the exegesis of the plain meaning because he is not up to the difficult task of interpreting the allegory. In the commentary itself he is generally faithful to this decision, with two exceptions: He does include one allegorical interpretation on Songs 3,15; and he quotes Rashi's introduction, in which the latter delineates the general allegorical meaning of the Song of Songs. This position is probably also shared by Rabbi Isaiah de Trani, who interpreted the Song of Songs according to its plain meaning, but devoted the introduction of the commentary to the allegorical meaning and stated explicitly that this was the true message of the Song of Songs.<sup>59</sup>

This is not, however, the position of the two anonymous authors that I discussed above, whose work discloses a reserved attitude towards the allegorical interpretation as such. Their position towards allegory should be seen as a reflection of the general intellectual atmosphere, and in the context of the Jewish-Christian debate.

The second half of the twelve and the thirteen centuries are precisely the time when explicit statements against allegory as a method of interpretation may be found in Jewish literature, although, more often related to the interpretation of the Pentateuch. The principal claim in this debate is that the stories of the Pentateuch are neither allegories nor typologies, but reports of actual historical events. It is consequently demanded that the text of the Pentateuch be explained in its plain, literal and historical meaning.<sup>60</sup> The importance of this issue in the framework of the Jewish-Christian debate is attested by its appearance in all the polemic works of the time: *The Book of the Covenant*, *The Wars of God*, *Joseph the Zealot*, and *Nizzahon Vetus*.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See his commentary to Song 1,2. A. J. Werthheimer, *The Commentary of Rabbi Isaiah de Trani the First on the Prophets and Hagiographa*, Jerusalem 1991, vol. 3, 271.

<sup>60</sup> The debate around the allegorical interpretation of the biblical texts preceded the Jewish-Christian debate on this issue, and was originally connected with philosophical currents and anti-nomistic tendencies within the Jewish communities themselves. Most known are the words of Saadia Gaon about the necessity of allegorical interpretation on the one hand and its boundaries on the other. According to his view, allegory should be applied only when the literal meaning of the text contradicts human experience, perception of the senses, perception of the intellect, other biblical texts or Rabbinic tradition. See R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia as Biblical Exegetes*, in: Saebó (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament* (see n. 15), 80. Already in Ibn Ezra's introduction to the Pentateuch – which was certainly influenced by Saadia – the allegorical approach to the biblical text is related to Christian biblical exegesis.

<sup>61</sup> R. Josep Kimhi, *The Book of the Covenant*, ed. E. Talmage 1974, 37–39; Yaa-kov ben Reuben, *The Book of the Wars of God* (1170), ed. J. Rosenthal, Jerusalem

Sarah Kamin devoted a very interesting article to the polemic against allegory in the commentary of Joseph Bechor Shor on Num 12,6–8. Bechor Shor concluded his arguments with an unequivocal statement: „With this, the arm of the world's nations has been broken, for they say that whatever Moses said was allegory, namely riddles and parables, not what he actually said. They turn the prophecy to another topic and change its meaning altogether“.<sup>62</sup>

A polemic against the Christian interpretation of Numbers 12 may be found already in the commentary of Rashbam. Against the Christian claim that the story of Moses' marriage to an Ethiopian wife was an allegory for the appearance of Jesus, Moses according to the spirit, and his marriage to the Church, the Ethiopian woman according to the spirit, Rashbam claims emphatically that the story depicts a historical event: the marriage of the historical Moses with an Ethiopian princess, at the time that he resided in the house of Pharaoh and conducted his wars.<sup>63</sup> Bechor Shor makes a decisive step forward. Not only does he use the term ‚allegory‘ as a definition of Christian methodology, but he makes an exegetical effort to deny the validity of this methodology. In contrast to the general claims of other scholars Bechor Shor based his arguments on the text itself: „He composed a calculated and well-balanced interpretation, based on the language and context of the text“ on the very same verse in which God himself testified to the mode of his revelation to Moses and the prophets: „With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles“ (Num 12,8). „Bechor Shor's decision to choose these verses of all others as a vehicle for the dispute with the allegorical attitude is possibly a result of his acquaintance with the function of these verses in Christian exegesis“.<sup>64</sup>

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1963, 24.25, and more; Joseph ben Nathan Official, *Joseph the Zealot, An Anti-Christological Interpretation of the Bible* (13th century; describes the Paris debate of 1240), ed. J. Rosenthal, 1970, 38.117; D. Berger, *The Christian Jewish Debate in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia 1979, Hebrew section 105, and the interpretation of the passage, 309. See also the appendix: *Law and Allegory*, *ibid.* 355–361.

<sup>62</sup> J. Nebo, *The Commentaries of Rabbi Joseph Bechor Shor on the Pentateuch*, Jerusalem 1994, 259. See S. Kamin, *The Polemic Against Allegory in the Commentary of Rabbi Joseph Bechor Shor*, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1984), 367–392, = *Jews and Christians* (see n. 20), 73–98.

<sup>63</sup> On the polemic tendencies in Rashbam's interpretation of the Moses stories, see E. Touitou, *Peshat and Apologetics in the Rashbam's Commentary on the Biblical Stories of Moses*, *Tarbiz* 51 (1982), 227–238; *idem*, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, 164–176, Kamin, Bechor Shor (see n. 62), 378–379, n. 31, = *Jews and Christians* (see n. 20), 84–85, n. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Kamin, Bechor Shor (see n. 62), 388, = *Jews and Christians* (see n. 20), 94. The earlier quote is from 389 (= *Jews and Christians*, 95). On the Christian exegesis of Numbers 12, as represented particularly by the commentary of Rupert of Deutz, see Kamin, *ibid.* 372–382 (= *Jews and Christians*, 78–88). Kamin points out that Bechor Shor's exegesis is intended also for intra-Jewish polemic (*ibid.* 389–390 [= *Jews and Christians*, 95–96], and n. 61).

This is the intellectual context in which the positions of the two anonymous commentaries on the Song of Songs should be viewed. According to them, the Song of Songs is a love poem that the historical Solomon wrote to one of his historical wives, in a specific historical situation. While the precise identification of the protagonists is not as explicit in the commentary published by Mathews, as it is in the commentary published by Hübsch, its anchor in historical reality is no less emphasized. Both authors describe the scenes of the Song of Songs in their physical, geographical, and historical contexts.<sup>65</sup>

The composition of commentaries on the Song of Songs devoted exclusively to the plain meaning of the text may be explained by the two factors put together. On the one hand, it represented a development in the concept of the *Peshat* and its application to the Song of Songs, which resulted in the total exclusion of the allegorical interpretation; on the other hand, it embodied a general stand against allegorical interpretation of scripture as such – whether Jewish or Christian – and the interpretation of the biblical text in its plain meaning, as an expression of a concrete historical reality.

This position brings us back to the basic question which I mentioned at the beginning of this article: If the Song of Songs is neither a prophecy inspired by the Holy Spirit, nor an allegory on the relationship between the people of Israel and God of Israel, how and why was it included in the canon? How do these two exegetes answer this question? As I mentioned above, the attitude of one exegete, and whether or not he engaged in this question, is unknown. The other author refers to it explicitly: „It was written because it was loved by the people“. With this answer we return to the point of departure: the view of the Song of Songs as a ‚kind of song‘. At least for this author, this fact did not preclude its canonization.

During the 13th century the *Peshat* school of exegesis gradually declined and eventually disappeared. This was also the fate of the *Peshat* methodology in the interpretation of the Song of Songs. Historical vicissitudes, on the one hand, and the emergence, and eventual dominance of other, more forceful currents in Jewish spirituality, on the other hand, put an end to the ‚*Peshat period*‘ in the intellectual history of Judaism, its questions and solutions.

<sup>65</sup> The consequences of this approach are paradoxical. The theoretical aim of these commentators is to explain the Song of Songs against the historical background of its composition. In the absence of true historical perspective, however, the actual exegesis of the work reflects rather the historical situation of the commentators themselves. See for the time being, Japhet, *The Lovers' way* (see n. 51); idem, *Human Body* (see n. 13), 143.147–148.152.158–159.