the Song of Songs

in the Targumic Tradition

Vocalized Aramaic Text with Facing English Translation and Ladino Versions

the Paraphrase Caflia, Amsterdam 1664
Avraham Asa, Constantinople 1744
Yerushalmi, Istanbul 1992

Aramaic Concordance • Aramaic-English, Ladino-English Glossaries

Haribbi Isaac Jerusalmi

LADINO BOOKS • CINCINNATI
1492-1992

HALF A MILLENNIUM

of

TEARS

SURVIVAL

&

GRATITUDE

to the

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

TARGUM OF THE SONG OF SONGS

LEVELS OF RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

Saadia Gaon, Abraham Ibn Ezra & Yosef Ibn Akin

Ezra of Gerona

Ibn Tibbon

Immanuel of Rome

Isaac Arama

Moshe Almosnino

THE SONG OF SONGS: EROTIC POETRY OR EPITHALAMIAM

Origen

Theodore of Mopsuestia

Isodad of Merv

Bernard de Clairvaux

St. Teresa of Avilá

Fray Luis de León

St. John of the Cross

Dr. John Gill & Adam Clarke

Voltaire

Yehuda Lev Ben-Zeev

Maimonides

MODERN SCHOLARLY APPROACH VERSUS ONEIRIC REALITY

Solomon B. Freehof

SEPHARDIC JEWS AND THE SONG OF SONGS

Spain

Egypt

The Ottoman Empire

TEXTS IN FACING FORMAT

Vocalized Aramaic with facing English Translation

Lagino Versions: • Paraphrasis, Amsterdam 1664
• Asa, Constantinople 1744 and
• Yerushalmi, Istanbul 1992

REMARKS ON THE ARAMAIC-ENGLISH PART

ARAMAIC-ENGLISH GLOSSARY AND CONCORDANCE
The LadinO Books Series has issued from time to time representative reprints from the religious literature of the Ladino-speaking Eastern Sephardim, primarily intended for the reading pleasure of those whose mother tongue is Ladino. Therefore, in spelling, punctuation, etc., certain customs familiar to them have been followed. The romanization is practical. It reflects the pronunciation of Eastern Sephardim and their tradition which emphasizes the kaf kuf, the dagesh forte, the vocal sheva, etc., most of which are disregarded by Modern Hebrew. Italics are used not only for foreign words, but also for emphasis as well as in lieu of quotations marks. Wherever Hebrew words are inserted, commas have been eliminated so that readers who are not proficient in Hebrew may skip over these with a minimum of interruption.

The present volume commemorates our exiled ancestors' remarkable Half a Millennium of peaceful life in the lands of the Ottomans since their initial welcome there by Sultan Beyazit II in 1492. It brings together a number of Ladino versions of the Targum to the Song of Songs in an attempt to establish, from literature to music, a continuous thread of special relationships which clearly typifies us as the Jews of Islam, in contrast to our Ashkenazi brethren whose cultural environment differed considerably from ours.

Based on Asa's 1744 version, Yerushalmi's Contemporary Ladino rendition of the Targum is probably the last religious text to be translated into that language.
PREFACE

For over fifteen years, I have been nourishing a preposterous plan! It must have been born the day I decided to offer an elective in the Targum of the Song of Songs and my students complained that the Targum's print in their Rabbinic Bibles was too small. For easier reading, we enlarged the text. Then students complained that quite often the vocalization was misleading: they spotted plural forms where the singular was expected, or feminine agreements where only the masculine made sense. So, additional relief came from "Babylon" with the more accurate superlinear Babylonian vowels. And that is when this project was born.

In our search for reliable texts, we all welcome Critical Editions, replete with exciting variants at our fingertips. How else would we know where to go? But, when these Critical Editions are in print, we hesitate to utilize them in creating our own version of the facts, as best we see them, for those still unprepared to face the complex network of readings so laboriously culled by modern research; or even for the enjoyment of a few lay people willing to approach our classics, if only presented to them in an unencumbered format. Surely, "our own version of the facts" entails risks! Yet, history being a process of re-creation, reasonable risk is unavoidable in the transmission and unfolding of knowledge. Without risk, substantial advantages are also held back from those who need them most. I preferred such a risk to leaving this important piece of Jewish exegesis neglected.

And now to the preposterous Aramaic project. In the past few years, I have put together a composite text based on the best consonantal and vocalic data found in the manuscripts. Working with Raphael Hai Melamed's critical edition of this Targum (1921), Alexander Sperber's Bible in Aramaic (1959-1973), Etan Levine's Codex Vatican Urbinati (1977) and the Yemenite MS. Acc. #66 (1650) found at the Hebrew Union College Library, I have made some deliberate choices. I am, however, open to any alternate reading, liable to improve on these choices.

Of course, no matter how many tough knots I loosened, there always remained residual areas, such as the precious stones in 5:14, which only a gemologist with a side interest in Aramaic can enlighten. But the bottom line of my tour de force is that a few hundred rabbinic students and Christian ministers in our Seminary—who
otherwise would only know of this Targum's existence—have indeed read this entire "reconstructed text" with ease and have seriously pondered its meaning. And now, the time may have come for adventure-minded lay people to court these splendid texts, either independently or with the guidance of their rabbis, my former students, who know all the secrets.

♥ ♥ ♥

The English translation proposed here suffers from a double jeopardy. It flows from the pen of someone who is not a native English speaker—in addition to Turkish, Lagino and Hebrew, my primary language of culture was French—but has also the presumption of departing from a few comfortable norms of translation.

My personal experience with learning foreign languages and years of exposure to them, lead me to the belief that what passes for "accurate" translation is often an excuse for lack of resourcefulness in recasting an idea or an old cliché from one culture to another in satisfactory terms. The result is invariably a "woodenly literal" approach, somewhat accurate but certainly tasteless! דאש means to say. But in a context of despair, I see no problem in using exclaim, while in a context of scorn, I welcome quip as perfectly valid. Or, put differently: how do you say quip in Aramaic? What is called for, I believe, is a total reworking of our dictionaries; or better, the judicious introduction of the thesaurus into the classroom.

Comely is another empty word. I have yet to hear the word comely even once in common usage. Yet in the Targum, words such as people, the Temple, the Shechina, the Kohanim, an ethrog, or a jewel have all been described as י, comely, apparently a feature they share as a common denominator of sorts! Instead, I have taken the liberty—and therefore, the risk—of breaking down that "opaque" word comely into suitable, majestic, beautiful, dignified, pretty and brilliant, respectively. Seasoned preachers, conscious of their role, have always practiced the art of bringing life and meaning to old texts by translating not just words, but also images and symbols. What we need is to emulate their resourcefulness, if we want to involve students and non-specialists in a rewarding appreciation of these treasures.

Since my Aramaic-English concordance pre-dates my computer by more than a decade, this has been my last "fun" project using shoe-boxes and note-cards! Entries are by root, preference being given to verbs, which are then followed by their cognate nouns, with plenty of cross-entries to take care of plene spellings. Words are listed as they appear, with English renditions mostly in the singular to avoid deciding
in the glossary what their contextual translation should be. Students tell me that my indentations help them better find their way in the concordance.

Verbal stems are listed by numbers in keeping with Father Louis Costaz's system in his Syriac dictionary. There was a time when I, too, went by Ithpaʾel and Ithpaʾal, etc., but due to English phonetics, students drove me into despair with their persistent reduction of the characteristic pretonic patah or short ā of the Ithpaʾal to a shewa. Coming from them, both Ithpaʾel and Ithpaʾal always sounded to me like Ithpaʾel! And when pressed about the Ithpaʾel, students would say, "well, that Niphal of Aramaic", a partial answer anyway, until one day we cut the Gordian knot by cleaning the slate and simply calling these Stems 1/1T, 2/2T and 3/3T, in a perfectly symmetric sequence. For the Haphel or Hē Causative, we coined 3H, and for the Saphel or Sin Causative, we had 3S, etc.

♥ ♥ ♥

The Ladino part of this project is designed to show the evolution—or lack thereof—of the language of the Eastern Sepharadim who lived within the borders of the Ottoman Empire for half a millennium (1492-1992). The first book ever printed in the Ottoman Empire was Jacob Ben Asher's Law Code, the Arba’a Turim,¹ typeset by David ben Nahmias and his brother Samuel and finished in Constantinople on the 4th of Teveth 5254 (1493) under the rule of Sultan Beyazit II, the very ruler responsible for extending a hand of welcome to the Sephardic exiles.

Abraham Yaari, in his ha-defus ha-Ivri be-Kosta, "Hebrew Printing in Constantinople"², has catalogued over 750 items which represent a phenomenal output for a community of that size in pre-Modern times. Hundreds of books were also published in Salonika, Safed, Jerusalem, Izmir, Bosna Saray (Sarajevo), Belgrade and other cities of the Balkans.

The earliest Ladino edition of the Targum to the Song of Songs was printed in Salonika in 1600 in vocalized square Hebrew characters, but the tradition of translating this book must undoubtedly go back to Spain.³

Another almost identical edition came out in Venice in 1619. Haribbi Moshe Laniado of Aleppo published it in conjunction with the rabbinic commentary entitled

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¹ Curiously, I have seen no mention of this important fact in any of the 1492-1992 celebrations!
written by Haribbi Abraham Laniado, his father-in-law. For those who are interested in reading this rare Ladino text from Venice, I have prepared an enlarged version with its romanized transcription, which was typed in the space where the Targum text was originally printed.

In Amsterdam, Western Sepharadim picked up this Venice edition, transcribed it into Roman characters, but also hispanized the spelling and some of its vocabulary to suit their taste, and printed it for the first time in 5404 (1644) under the title Paraphrasis Caldaica. The title page states that it was printed with the Industria y despeza de Rehuel Cohen Lobato y Mosseh Belmonte. According to the order of the names, Rehuel Cohen Lobato seems to have taken care of the transcription, while Mosseh Belmonte was the provider of funds. We are also told that the text fue impressa primero en Venecia, was printed first in Venice, a clear reference to the 1619 Haribbi Mosseh Laniado edition.

The Amsterdam edition in Roman characters must have been extremely popular as it went through at least eight printings between 1644 and 1766! It also contained the Pirké Avot—Hebrew text and Ladino translation—both of which are read on the Sabbaths between Pesah and Shavuoth. In my book, I have used the Second edition of the Paraphrasis dated 5424 (1664), because of its better layout. However, even this text was quite small and darkened in many spots. My wife and I enlarged it many times; then, with tears of joy in our eyes, we cleaned every letter, restored the text and reduced it for crisp appearance, a real job of revival of books, inspired by our silent conversations with the once glorious Amsterdam Sephardic community and its illustrious Hahamim!

Haribbi Avraham Isaac Asa was the great Ladinador in Constantinople around the middle of the XVIIIth century. He was much more prolific than his contemporary Haribbi Yaakov Hulli, the initiator of the Me'am Lo'ez commentary project on the Bible. After all, Haribbi Hulli’s personal contribution, interrupted by death, had been limited to the book of Genesis and to about the first twenty chapters of Exodus. Haribbi Asa, on the other hand, has to his credit an updated Ladino version of the entire Bible, the Targum to the Five Scrolls, selections from the Shulhan Arukh.

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4 Later editions mention Belmonte as the translator of the Pirké Avot.
5 1644, 1664, 1683, 1701, 1706, 1712, 1724 and 1766.
6 The family name Hulli is quite common among Sepharadim in Turkey, Israel, etc. But because in Hebrew the Arabic noun Hulli was spelled with a İ, Western transliterators have mistakenly rendered it as Kulli for the sake of being consistent, totally forgetting that in Ladino Kulli/Culi means my behind! A similar gaffe in English would have the family name Fisher transliterated as Fisher! Once a mistake has been exposed, persisting in it for the sake of consistency is indeed diabolicum!
and half a dozen other Hebrew classics. However, as far as I have been able to
determine, the Encyclopedia Judaica has yet to discover Haribbi Avraham Asa! And
again, it was Yaari who first noticed that Haribbi Asa shunned the title-pages of his
publications, always preferring to hide behind acrostic poems bearing his name which
he carefully tucked somewhere inside his books! That is how Haribbi Asa became a
non-person all these years, until Yaari pinned him down as a major Ladinador on a
par with Haribbi Yaakov Hulli.7

Haribbi Asa’s Ladino version must have been modeled after the Salonika or
Venice texts, or even both. Yet in 8:5, Haribbi Asa had a problem with קִשׁ bat, sling
which was rendered as fonda in Salonika/Venice, and as honda in Amsterdam. He
did not like either of these, so he opted for sapan, the only Turkish word found in his
translation.

In addition to Asa’s original 1744 text, which figures in the comparative part of
this study, a more recent version of it, which appeared in the Hebrew-Ladino Bible
printed in Vienna in 1814, has been used in the Addendum, pp. 390-459. But there,
the rashi type was microscopic! I have, therefore, enlarged it many times and
distributed the contents of one printed page over three new pages and provided a
larger romanized version on facing pages for those who wish to use their two hands
in mastering the Asa text.

A fascinating puzzle in the 1744 and in all subsequent Asa texts is the word
דְּבָרְיֶנֶם—which is a double plural: 1) the Hebrew plural לִבְרֵי which also
happens to be the Ladino plural of ריבי, 8 teacher! If this explanation is correct—and
I see no other possibility—then the ל in דְּבָרְיֶנֶם could be a lapsus by an Ashkenazic
typesetter most likely to confuse a ل and a ר!

7 Abraham Yaari, בַּעֲרֵב חַשַּׁב אָחָא רָאשִׁית בֵּעָשָׁה יַעֲשֶׂהְו בַּעֲרֵב. Yerushalayim: Kirjath Sefer 10 (1933-34)
pp. 378-380.
8 The traditional Sephardic pronunciation of רִבּי is rabbi, which probably reflects the Palestinian shift to i of a
short a in a closed, unaccented syllable. The title חֵרְבִּי חֵרְבִּי is a combination of Haham and Ribbi which until
recently was the appropriate way of addressing our scholar-educators. In a Muslim environment, the title Haham
stressed the רֵבעָדָן wisdom aspect of their activities. It also avoided unnecessary friction with the Arabic/Muslim
world, where the word rabbi means “my God”!
Over the years, the classroom has been my foremost laboratory of ideas where students have motivated me with their inquiring questions. Their uncertainties challenged me to think more clearly and to express myself more cogently. I wish I could name here all those who were my partners in this birthing process. The more recent links in this chain are Andrew Koren and David Nelson who volunteered to study with me and in that process enriched me with their wisdom.

The library where we work reflects the kind of books we turn to for our research. All too often we take for granted the superb facilities we enjoy at the Hebrew Union College Library, forgetting that they are the result of years of sustained effort by the entire staff to build, brick by brick and book by book, this inviting place for the study of our past. I am especially grateful to Drs. Herbert Zafren and David Gilner and their ever-supportive staff for making available to me the texts needed for this publication. I am also grateful to Dr. Meyer Rabinowitz and Rabbi Jerry Schwarzbard of the Jewish Theological Seminary for welcoming me to the Seminary Library and making available to me materials belonging to their equally superb library.

My son David was a phone call away for technical support on computer matters. My daughter Hanna Gracia contributed her stylistic talents in improving my words. But she could go only so far. My daughter Peninna Angel displayed her creativity with graphic design, especially on the cover. My daughter Estreya and my son-in-law, Rabbi Cy Stanway, have let their children, our grandson Avraham Isaac and our granddaughter Naomi Rebecca provide us with laughter as this compilation, which celebrates half a millennium of Sephardic survival, was taking shape. My wife Neama Nimet Hananel was with me from beginning to end, reading Ladino and proofreading Syriac. To all of them, I say: יִשְׁמַעְתָּם דַּעְשַׁיָּתָם McCALLARY 실크

♥ ♥ ♥

Expounding a classical text is a risky adventure. It entails recasting the obvious into ever engaging terms; it also purports to decipher the not-so-obvious through irresistible metaphors which spur to action. Of a person who delights in this, tradition says that he is a comely preacher and a comely fulfiller. May the study of this Targum turn such a person into one who eagerly practices what he/she skillfully preaches!

לרבא רפואת חמשת
سورא, פר הושעません

vi
INTRODUCTION

A jewel¹ set in 117 verses! A minuscule anthology of charming utterances on human love unfolding daily in people's hearts since Creation! Such is the book of Song of Songs where there is so much: the Shepherd and the Shepherdess in love amidst gardens and choice spices, catching a glimpse here, drawing inspiration there. This side, the other side, in mutual admiration, mingled with bafflement and tribulation; then, intense drama leading to resolution. These are real people in a world of dreams, somewhat restless but also reassuring, as they confront life's deadliest fire in triumph. Their "songs" put those words in our mouths that we wish we could have said personally. This is indeed the Sublime Song.

Rabbi Akiba's glowing dictum,² "pitting all eternity against that one day, וב אשר אף תחיי כל עולמי, when the Song of Songs was given to Israel", is credited with the switching of this poetic treasure from a כיを作る secual rating³ to the ultimate הקדוש most holy upgrading. Even more: henceforth, it became sacrilegious to use any part of this gem in a secular setting.⁴ The book was thus "religionized",⁵ i.e. made part of the culture of religion as a firm bridge linking transient humanity with its yearning for permanency.

Whether expounded as an expression of God's love for the Community of Israel, or viewed as a manifestation of the longing of the individual's soul for union with the Universal Soul, one thing was absolutely certain: this book could no longer mean what it so clearly purported to say. For any other biblical writing in the Canon, the rabbis had always insisted on a basic שם literal understanding first, before any דבר homiletical fantasy could be woven around it. Not so for the Song of Songs, because its שם literal sense was so embarrassing. It had to be repressed⁶ and

¹ This image is from the Arabic commentary attributed to Saadia Gaon al-Fayyumi: מַעֵר וְאַשֵׁר עַשָּׁהּ נֶפֶשׁ עַל-כָּל עָלָמֶי, a jewel beyond any valuation (in Turkish: kıymet fevkinde bir çevher).
² Yadayim 3:5 states: אָמַר רְבֵּעַשְׁאוֹ: 'אֲנָהוּ פִּילְדּוֹחֲלָה כָּל עָלָמֶה כָּל פּוֹתֵחַ נְפֶשׁ כָּל עָלָמֶה קְדֻשָּׁהוֹ. For echoes on the secular use of the Song of Songs in the ancient Hebrew folkloric tradition, see Ta'anit 4:8.
³ Kalla 1:4 states: הַקָּרָה מַאֲגַר מִזְרַיִים מִזָּרָה מִזְרַיִים, מִזְרַיִים מַאֲגַר מִזְרַיִים מִזָּרָה מִזָּרָה מַאֲגַר מִזָּרָה. See also Sanhedrin 101a, where the reading is different מֵשָּׁל instead of מַשָּׁל flood.
⁵ One cannot help but think of present day efforts to define pornography.
finally suppressed: only the שׂרִד homiletical versions were allowed! Of course, it was always possible for minds with a philosophical or kabbalistic disposition to search and find in it multiple confirmations for their personal bent. Officially, however, the homiletical versions yielded the only permissible literal meaning; in other words, the שׂרִד homiletical became exceptionally the only literal, so to speak!

Recently, Gershom G. Scholem has shown that the mystics of the Shi’ur Qoma or Shape of the Godhead tradition discovered in the book of Song of Songs an ideal haven to anchor their peculiar views regarding the Godhead on sound biblical precedent by focusing on the question raised in chapter five, מֶה דזוּךְ מָעָרָךְ הָיָה how is your beloved different from any other, as well as on the detailed wasf of the beloved which follows. From head to foot, everything was there!

TARGUM OF THE SONG OF SONGS

Thus, the homiletical interpretation of the Song of Songs—the only one allowed—became inseparable from the biblical text. It was also the only one which made the entry of this book into the Jewish canon possible. Combined with the very early, and well-established need for a methurgeman—or official translator—to figure out an accurate Aramaic version/commentary of the text for its liturgical use in the synagogue, the case for an early Aramaic Targum of this book is very strong, indeed. It is even possible, though not demonstrable, that there may have been a few such early Targumim, developed and updated over time, circulating in the land of Israel, as well as in the Babylonian diaspora or elsewhere. Therefore, the relative age of the text of our present Targum—the only one to survive—is a legitimate topic for scholarly discussion.

But, as is the case with most rabbinic writings which became part of the national-religious cultural patrimony of the Jews, it is extremely difficult, if not

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8 Gershom G. Scholem. Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960, pp. 36-42. See also his On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead, and other essays. New York: Schocken Books, 1991, recently available in English, even though the original was part of the second group of the Eratos lectures delivered in 1962 under the title Von der Mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit.
9 See also Joseph Dan, ed. The Early Kabbalah. New York: Paulist Press, 1986, p. 3.
10 Masekhet Soferim XIV:3 has the earliest mention for the reading of the Five Scrolls in the synagogue.
impossible, to sort out the facts of authorship and place of composition by applying routine criteria only. On the one hand, there may be good reasons to assume that a given stratum must have been quite old relative to others. On the other hand, it will inevitably contain lexical and even conceptual data stemming from a "later" period. For people of our times, the tension between these two forces and the discrepancies they generate appear unreasonable at first, simply because our environment does not normally operate that way.\textsuperscript{11} But throughout the ages, pious hands have been simultaneously capable of handing down ancestral texts without the slightest alteration in certain areas, while at the same time taking all kinds of liberties in other aspects they deemed "negotiable".

For instance, the fact that the precious stones mentioned in 5:14 have Arabic names in the Targum does not \textit{per se} clearly assign the whole translation to the early Muslim period, nor does the notion of \textit{giving money to gain (the right) to declare the unity of the name of the Master of the world} in 8:9 plead for the same conclusion, even if it could be proven that it referred unquestionably to the \textit{jizya} imposed by the Muslims on the Peoples of the Book.\textsuperscript{12} All one can infer is that \textit{that} particular version may be from the Muslim period, because those slots—and maybe many others—were part of the expandable and alterable areas available to the discretion of the generation that used these texts as a source of guidance and inspiration in daily life in a manner which goes beyond anything we, who are exposed to a different \textit{media} regime, can ever imagine!

This much can be said about our present Targumic text:

- Its language is Western Aramaic, with Eastern Aramaic elements.
- The present version is traceable to conditions in the VIIth century.
- The land of Israel fits best as its place of origin.
- There is a unitary topic running through it as the Targum recounts the entire history of Israel, as follows:
  - The exodus from Egypt.
  - The sojourn in the desert and the giving of the Law.
  - The conquest of the promised land.
  - The building of the First Temple.
  - The first exile to Babylon.

\textsuperscript{11} What would we think of, let us say, a 1992 edition of the King James Bible, with matters such as gender equality, offensive language, etc. changed according to modern criteria? Would that make the King James Bible a book written in 1992?

\textsuperscript{12} See Loewe, pp. 159-96.
INTRODUCTION

- The return and the building of the Second Temple.
- The second exile and the messianic hope for another return.

Of course, it could be argued, no amount of haphazard juggling of early materials could produce such a result, in the absence of a single author responsible for the coordination of a sea of interpretations into a unitary whole, with a clearly defined topic. And this is a valid objection. But the wealth of material available in the Mishna, Mekhilla, Sifra, Sifré, the two Talmuds, the three Midrashim\textsuperscript{13} on the Song of Songs, as well as the Tanhuma is such that anything is possible.

Finally, it is important to note the fact that this is a Targum—an Aramaic translation—wrapped in a few layers of paraphrastic phraseology, which is what any first-time reader notices initially. Despite Roland Murphy's statement,\textsuperscript{14} in his otherwise excellent work, that:

The extant Aramaic Targum to the Song is less an expansive translation of the Hebrew text than an extended homiletical midrash,

the fact of translation is undeniably present. Yes, there are plenty of "homiletical midrashim" in this Targum. But the vast majority of the words in the Biblical text have also been translated into Aramaic, and can be readily identified as such.\textsuperscript{15} In my Remarks on the Aramaic-English Part, a few samples of identification have been diagrammed. In my classes—except for one or two verses—this method of comparing the two texts has been successfully applied to the entire book!

And so it is that for almost two millennia now, this tiny book of the Song of Songs has generated an inordinate volume of expository literature. It almost acted as a safety valve for those who wanted tailor-made support for their views, but failed to discover anything cogent within the confines of Scripture. If frustrated, they could always turn to the Song of Songs, and lo and behold, everything was there, ready for their asking. Isaac Arama must have sensed this when he wrote:

Since everybody agrees that the Song of Songs is "most holy", all Sages—each according to his predilection—have agreed to pay special attention to it. Thus, the wise discovers in it his wisdom, the mystic his mysticism and the theologian his theology, as can be seen clearly in their respective commentaries. And it is possible that all of them have a point! That is

\textsuperscript{13} They are: a. Midrash Rabba to Shir ha-Shirim or Aggadat Hazita, b. Midrash Zuta to Shir ha-Shirim known also as Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim, c. Midrash Shir ha-Shirim.


why, the Song of Songs is said to be different from any other Song which has only one inner meaning which its commentary helps to bring out. Not so with the Song of Songs whose inner meanings are many, whereby the first meaning becomes a stepping-stone to another one, just as the outward poem is a stepping-stone to the first meaning. This is what makes the Song of Songs "most holy". 16

In the following brief survey, 17 I shall review the exegetical levels of a few Jewish commentators with whose work I am familiar, 18 as well as the impact the Song of Songs has had on people with diverse—and even opposing—backgrounds.

LEVELS OF RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

For its size, the text of the Song of Songs contains by far the largest amount of hapax legomena—words used only once—in the entire Bible. On that score alone, even before they could start weaving their homiletical expositions, most Jewish commentators had an unusual amount of lexical explaining to do to make the text intelligible to their readers. Thus, the average rabbinic commentary includes at least two levels, namely:

- explaining problems of vocabulary and grammar,
- building a homiletical structure along rabbinic lines.

Usually, these are intertwined with no particular rubric to indicate a transition from the one to the other.

To these two levels, very few commentators, such as Ibn Ezra, Ibn Akinin, Immanuel of Rome and Isaac Arama, dared to add an intermediary 19

- literal level according to the plain meaning of the text.

Finally, depending on the particular propensity of the commentator, a

- philosophical level, or a
- kabbalistic-mystical level 20

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17 See Siegmund Salfeld. Das Heilige Salomo's bei den jüdischen Erklärern des Mittelalters. Berlin: Julius Benzian, 1879. This book is still one of the better surveys of its kind despite its age and all that has transpired since its publication.
18 For a substantial anthology of midrashim and commentaries on the Song of Songs running almost through the entire gamut of available texts, see 1955/58 2148, כ芥רְכֶקֶר, יד הרא'תם, דה-אינדו רְכֶקֶר יד הרא'תם. Re-issued in Jerusalem: מְסַרְמִן, 1970.
20 In the Kabbalistic view of the Seferot, this union is that of God to Himself based on the love between the divine I—Celestial Bridegroom—and the divine Thou—or Celestial Bride. See, Gershom G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. New York: Schocken, 1954, p. 227.
was added to supplement and to crown, so to speak, the rabbinc-homiletical interpretation, or to supplant it as in the case of Immanuel of Rome.

The first full commentary on the Song of Songs was written in Judeo-Arabic. It is attributed to SAADIA GAON AL-FAYYUMI (882-942). Even though basically this is a rabbinc commentary, complementing Saadia's tafsir or plain translation of the text into Judeo-Arabic, it also contains—according to Yosef David Kafih,21 who claims to have compared it with Saadia's Book of Doctrines and Beliefs—striking parallels to the author's philosophical writings.

ABRAHAM IBN EZRA (1092-1167) dislikes the philosophical approach, because it is based on the union of the highest soul with the body.22 In his First Track, he devotes a whole segment of his commentary to clarify matters of language before unraveling the text qua text. In his Second Track, under the guise of explaining the metaphor,23 Ibn Ezra is one of the very few to provide a succinct account of the relationship between the Shepherd and the Shepherdess as a love affair, pure and simple. He does this despite his warning in his general introduction where he says: Heaven forbid that the Song of Songs be considered erotic poetry! Rather, it is an allegory. Finally, in his Third Track, the homiletical exposition is given, based on the rabbinc sources available to the author with no apparent return to the profound secret concealed and locked in it, clearly heralded by him in his general introduction.

YOSEF IBN AKNIH's24 (1160-1226) commentary in Judeo-Arabic is probably the longest extant exposition on the Song of Songs. It is structured along three tracks, parallel to the three forces found in a person. The first literal track deals with

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21 See Richard A. Block. Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Song of Songs, Vocalized Text, Translation and Annotations. Rabbinic Thesis. Hebrew Union College, 1982, p. 94, where Ibn Ezra feels obligated to clarify the כוֹס or metaphor, before embarking upon the כוֹס or allegory, with the following statement: "לככי אפרתי..." See Block, p. 94.

matters of language and plain meaning, with a plot reminiscent of what happened to Joseph in the Qur'an story, as the town's women monitor the unfolding of this peculiar love story. Ibn Aknin's second homiletical track always starts with uli al rabbana ala rahvata according to what our rabbis inferred, followed by a rabbinic type homiletical treatment of the text. Finally, in his third secret track, Ibn Aknin is very proud of his input in theosophy which he introduces with the words uli al rabbana nitsa atzal a the rational soul explains why it yearns to enter into a discourse with the Active Intellect, and all the difficulties involved in this laborious process due to corporeal forces standing in the way.

EZRA OF GERONA's (1160-1238) commentary on the Song of Songs has been mistakenly attributed to Nahmanides. Even the 1964 edition of Nahmanides' works issued by the Mosad ha-Rav Kook, under the editorship of Hayyim D. Chavel, still confuses Nahmanides with Ezra of Gerona!

Ezra of Gerona's work—also not to be confused with his colleague, Azriel of Gerona—is mentioned here in order to include an early Kabbalistic commentary in this survey. It is beyond the competence of this writer to evaluate any theosophic writing, especially in an area where his teacher, the late Georges Vajda, wandered around and came out with pockets full of red flags, warning against adventures by the uninitiate. But from Vajda's translation and notes, it is clear that this is the first fully Kabbalistic commentary on the Song of Songs which endeared the book to Jewish mystics once more and gave them an incentive to return to it with a vengeance, so to speak. Ezra has utter contempt for earlier commentators who have written on the literal meaning of the Song of Songs. In his view, their understanding is naught. He is also rather cool towards traditional commentators who work with their midrashic tools, implying that their conclusions are simply unexciting. Only those who are מקפליא-ディסיניא with the Shekhina can discover the secrets of this book. Here is a key passage from his introduction which explains Ezra's real motivation:

For many years, I kept things quietly to myself until I reached my fifty-first birthday and saw myself on the other side, with old age getting closer to me. That is why I devoted

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myself to write a commentary to one of the Twenty-Four Books, which contains precious words about mysteries and secrets whose recollection the commentators had allowed to go to waste, as well as its standing and beauty, i.e. the Book of Song of Songs. I have written my commentary in keeping with my strength and according to the tradition I received from our teachers. I have based it on the reasons for the misvoth, building it on the secrets of the Work of Creation. Thus, I observed that there were three groups of commentators with three approaches to it: The first group understood nothing and got nothing out of it; "and many are those she struck dead (Proverbs 7:26), when they stated that the book's theme is about an enchanting love affair of little use. May their mouths be shut up and their eyes not away, because if they were right, this book would not have been recorded in Holy Scriptures, nor included in them.

The other group compares the love which the Creator, God of all the earth, has towards Israel—whom He calls His treasured possession and His own allotment—to the erotic love felt for a beloved woman, i.e. to a man for his beloved companion! Thus, they directed their words and built their commentary around this parable.

The third group is that of those who are with the Shekhina, who have a share and a portion in the Law of God, that is the Sages of Israel who have uncovered the mysteries and the secrets of this book and have brought out for themselves its hidden things by way of wisdom and from the aspect of ideas. They have interpreted the entire book with a simple rule stated in Tractate Shavuoth 35b:

"Every mention of Solomon in the Song of Songs applies to the One to Whom Peace Belongs, except for one place You may have the thousand, O Solomon (8:12)".

And in Sanhedrin 101a, they say: "Anyone who recites even a verse from the Song of Songs as a secular song brings evil to the world".

And in Tractate Yadayim, Rabbi Akiba said: "All eternity is not equal to the day when the Song of Songs was given to Israel, because all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is most holy".

Therefore, I have made an effort to put it into my heart and mind to disclose this book's commentary symbolically and by using the true, general rule handed down by our teachers of blessed memory, so that I based it on the pillars of their words and established it on the foundations of the Midrash. And so, let the knowledgeable understand! (Daniel 12:10).

Ezra's Commentary to the Song of Songs must have been devoured by later Kabbalists: it became the real conduit for the Zoharic predilection for the Song of Songs and the inspiration behind the Midrash ha-Ne'elam on the Song of Songs.28

The published edition of MOSES IBN TIBBON's (flourished around 1240/1283) commentary29 is supposed to have been originally a "pure" philosophic exposition which, in Solomon Schechter's view, was tempered by midrashic materials from Bereshith Rabba. Schechter reports that the Oxford manuscript of this commentary omits all those passages.30 Ibn Tibbon's commentary is based on

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28 See Midrash ha-Ne'elam on the Song of Songs, included in ספרותワークאסיל '&הטטסואטשא תרהו מילאש עקושנה תוקס תכר. 1953.
29 See 1874, ספרותワークאסיל '&הטטסואטשא תרהו מילאש עקושנה, תכפוק ב사업יאת.
Maimonides' ideas on the *Song of Songs* which are incorporated in the *Guide* and his other writings. As far as I could determine, Ibn Tibbon's commentary is still waiting for a thorough analysis or even a simple translation.

**Immanuel of Rome** (1270-1330) makes fun of those who interpret the book along traditional midrashic lines as a summary of Israel's history in which an expression of its yearning for redemption and return to the Promised Land can be found. To him the reading of these is a waste of time! He has two clear models: in matters of language, he follows Ibn Ezra, at times copying him verbatim; but on philosophy, his avowed master is Moses Ibn Tibbon, whom he does not hesitate to copy either.

Like Ibn Ezra's commentary, Immanuel's work is arranged on a three track basis:

- First, a track dealing with matters of vocabulary and grammar.
- Second, a track with a full literal account of the love affair between the Shepherd and the Shepherdess. As Dante's friend, Immanuel had the idea of looking for and therefore detecting movements in the biblical text of the *Song of Songs*, similar to what modern Biblical commentators have done.
- His third track is mostly philosophical.

Unfortunately, Eschwege's\(^{31}\) edition of Immanuel's commentary contains only the first two tracks! Furthermore, Eschwege complains that his manuscripts were quite corrupt, even though most of his conjectural readings turned out to be correct when compared with the text of another manuscript of this work found at the Hebrew Union College library.\(^{32}\) Also, Eschwege's promise to return to the third philosophical track at a later date was apparently never fulfilled!

Immanuel's second literal commentary, in turn, contains three parts, each one pertaining to a different stage in man's life in the world, as follows:

- Part One, from 1:1 to 2:17, describes man in paradise, before he sinned. It is further divided into two parts:
  - Part One, from 1:1 to 2:7, describes the God-fearing type who avoids evil because of tradition, but lacks wisdom.
  - Part Two, from 2:8 to 2:17, describes someone who has studied the

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32 Immanuel of Rome. *Commentary on Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Canticles* (1401). Hebrew Union College Library *MS. Acc. #167*. 

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mathematical and natural sciences.

- Part Two, from 3:1 to 5:1, describes one who has found a woman of valor. It is further divided into two parts complementing each other, as follows:
  - Part One, from 3:1 to 3:5
  - Part Two, from 3:6 to 5:1.
  The man finds his bride, they enjoy the legitimate fruits of love, while כהריו והمرافق והסכלות his corporeal and rational forces cooperate in watching over his welfare.

- Part Three, from 5:2 to the end, describes one who has a sinful woman. It is further divided into two parts complementing each other, as follows:
  - Part One, from 5:2 to 8:4
  - Part Two, from 8:5 to the end.
  The man has an assertive wife, a sinner who leads him into sin. Later, she is repentant: in his absence, she endures suffering, then returns to her spouse. But when they find each other, it is like a second marriage lacking the luster of the first. Because of her arrogant nature, he flees from her again.

**ISAAC ARAMA** (1420-1494) was a talmudist and a philosopher. His commentary, called עיבוד דברי, reflects a combination of these two interests. As an Aristotelian, he starts with a review of the four categories: המדר, עיבוד form, עיבוד agent and עיבוד purpose.

From this, one may think that Arama is positioning himself to use the category המדר matter to justify his literal explanation of the book. But as a rabbinic authority, his midrashic interests take precedence. That is why, at least in his Introduction, matter in this scroll means "the story of the Community of Israel enamored with her God, her sins, her going into exile, her return, etc.". In the course of his commentary, however, Arama proceeds with a full literal exposition of the plain meaning of the book which, in a way, represents the actual matter.

The המדר form goes beyond the type of poetics used. What is at stake here is an analysis of prophecy and its relationship to הרוח הקדושה spirit of holiness which underlies the composition of the Song of Songs, as well as that of the other

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33 In his Introduction to his Me'am Lo'ez to the Song of Songs in Ladino, Haribbi Isaac Shaky follows Arama's example in discussing the same four categories which he borrowed from Arama and whom he mentions by name. See Rosette Baron Haim, *Haim Yizhak Shaki's Me'am Lo'ez to the Song of Songs, a Transliteration and Annotated Translation*. Rabbinic Thesis. Hebrew Union College, 1988.
four Scrolls. As a student of Maimonides, Arama reminds us of the eleven stages of prophecy mentioned by the Master in his Guide, II:45, agreeing with him that its composition, as well as that of other Writings, should be ascribed to the second degree.

The agent/author is in accordance with the Talmudic view mentioned in Baba Bathra 15a that Hezekiah and his assistants wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Koheleth.

The purpose tells us that through our repentance, God can bring about the end of exile and the rebuilding of the Temple.

What follows after this Introduction is a set of two separate commentaries. One, retracing the story of the Shepherd and the Shepherdess in the literal sense of the drama; and another, a midrashic commentary which is interspersed with philosophical, and at times, kabbalistic digressions.

MOSHE ALMOSNINO's (1510-1580) extensive commentary, entitled ידיעות, is similar to the previous ones in its overall twofold interest in a midrashic—metisーメ— and philosophical approach—to the text. But in each verse, Haribbi Almosnino does not always adhere to these clear-cut captions.

This commentary is also different in that Haribbi Almosnino wishes to pursue specific topics which overarch his midrashic and philosophical approach to the book. Instead of dealing with the text on a verse by verse basis, he targets his comments to groups of two, three or more verses. Thus, he starts his Introduction with a list of seventeen rubrics, mostly philosophical in nature, under which he plans to present his commentary. Here are the headings of Almosnino's eisegesis:

1. 1:1-1:8 All knowledge is in the Tora. Man has free will, but needs God's help.
2. 1:9-1:14 Divine Providence protects Israel, but exile cleanses and atones for sins.
3. 1:15-2:7 The essence of soul and matter. Attaining happiness through Tora.
4. 2:8-2:13 Prosperity of the chosen people when the Last Temple will be rebuilt.
5. 2:14-2:17 Reasons which brought about exile and those needed for redemption.
6. 3:1-3:5 Starting with matter, ways for the human mind to achieve rationality.
7. 3:6-3:11 Ways of repentance.

35 Immanuel of Rome has a similar approach in directing his comments to a few verses at a time.
36 Almosnino uses the term עם instead of עם people. But English usage requires the use of chosen people, instead of chosen nation.
INTRODUCTION

8. 4:1-4:7 Ingathering of the exiles through the perfection of the chosen people.
9. 4:8-5:1 Love of God as the basis for the perfection of thought, speech and deed.
10. 5:2-5:8 Despite matter's constant obstacle, yearning of the soul for perfection.
11. 5:9-6:3 God's love for the Jewish nation; linkage from First Cause to last being.
12. 6:4-6:9 Perfection of the chosen people to guide itself; its adherence to God.
13. 6:10-7:1 Ways of attaining perfection little by little; level of adherence to God.
14. 7:2-7:11 Perfection in attributes and commandments; concatenation of beings.
15. 7:12-8:4 Perfection of the Jewish nation over others; its difference from them.
16. 8:5-8:10 Role of the Tora in the perfection of the chosen people.
17. 8:11-8:14 Providence more helpful to the Jewish nation when living on its land.

THE SONG OF SONGS: EROTIC POETRY OR EPITHALAMIUM?

The choice of all these heavy Greek designations may be unfortunate, but they epitomize the dilemma which Western civilization has had in its search for a comfortable label to characterize the contents of this splendid legacy of the Hebrew mind. The bottom line has always been: is the Song of Songs good or bad?

When Father Andrew Greeley is asked about how he squares his clerical standing with his novels about passionate love, his answer is usually: "The Book of Song of Songs is worse than what I write, and yet it is in the Bible"! Ergo, if it is in the Bible, it cannot be bad. And if his writings are not as bad as the Song of Songs, then they must be OK!

But, the central question is still: How bad is the Song of Songs?

ORIGEN (b.185-254) bishop of Caesarea, a "student of the rabbis", thinks that the Song of Songs is—at least in the words of Rufinus who translated his works into Latin, since the original was lost—an

epithalamium or marriage-song written by King Solomon in the form of a drama and sung under the figure of the Bride, about to wed, and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God. And deeply indeed did she love Him, whether we take her as the soul made in His image, or as the Church.38

With this "green light" of sorts to himself, Origen wrote a ten-volume commentary, of which only three volumes survived in a Latin translation. He also wrote two homilies covering 1:1-2:14.

However, there were some "red flags", too! Changing the appearance of carnal passion into acceptable discarnate spirituality is never absolute. Young men, lacking the chaste ears of the mature, spiritual man, will twist the meaning to the outward and the carnal.

For this reason, I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it.

In this, Origen, "the Eunuch", as William E. Phipps has called him, is passing along to his readers what is supposed to have been common Jewish practice in his time:

For they say that with the Hebrews also, care is taken to allow no one even to hold this book in his hands who has not reached a full and ripe age.

Theodore (d. 428), bishop of Mopsuestia, near Adana in Asia Minor, and the intellectual father of the Nestorian doctrine, found himself at the other end of the spectrum. Reflecting the views of the literalist School of Antioch, he could in no way find any role for the Song of Songs, which he attacked as expressing conscriptionem impudicitiae, a synthesis of lewdness. Therefore, he thinks, it is necessary odisse, nec collaudare codicem, sicut habentem prophetiam dictationem bonorum Ecclesiae, to loathe the book, instead of praising it, as if it contained some

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41 Phipps. The Plight, p. 87.
42 One can't help but wonder if this is not due to a misunderstanding on Origen's part of the rabbinic principle of נטושה hands, which render a book holy. There is, however, some truth in what he says that "there is another practice too that we have received from them—namely, that all the Scriptures should be delivered to boys by teachers and wise men, while at the same time the four that they call deuterose—that is to say, the beginning of Genesis, in which the creation of the world is described; the first chapters of Ezekiel, which tell about the cherubim; the end of the same, which contains the building of the Temple; and this book of the Song of Songs—should be reserved for study till the last", which are clear references to the Work of Creation and the Work of the Chariot.
prophetic statement on the blessings of the Church. *Si enim prophetam gratiam meruisset, mentionem alicubi Dei fecisset, for, if the book deserved prophetic esteem, it would have mentioned God somewhere, (in nulla enim prophetica scriptura Deus non memoratur, for there is no prophetic writing where God is not mentioned!)

Coupled with his other views on Scripture based on his Antiochene theology, Theodore's commentary on the Song of Songs was attacked posthumously at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. The bishops at that Council described their ordeal in having to review his writings which had proved so blasphemous in the past. Nevertheless, they felt obligated to finish their task to confound those "who gloried in such blasphemies". Despite the reluctance of Pope Vigilius to censure the person of this great Antiochene, who after all had died in communion with the orthodox church, all of Theodore's writings were condemned: 115 years after his death, Theodore was finally excommunicated on May 12/13, 553.44

**ISO'DAD OF MERV** in Khorasan was the scholarly bishop of Hedhatha on the Tigris, during the Caliphate of Mutawakkil around 852. Had it not been for the intrigues of a competing candidate, he would have been Syrian Catholicos.45 His commentary on the Song of Songs is part of his descriptor Book of Sessions. A faithful follower of the doctrines expounded by Theodore of Mopsuestia whom he calls the Interpreter, he is very cautious in positioning himself on neutral ground in order not to offend his predecessors, such as Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom who followed Origen's πνευματική spiritual interpretation.

For Iso'dad, the Songs of Songs lacks any inspirational value, having been composed by Solomon to placate his unattractive Egyptian bride, whom he had to cajole to have the kind of peace he needed with Pharaoh, in order to finish the Temple project started by King David, his father. In line with Theodore of Mopsuestia's position, his commentary is extremely brief and limited to the explanation of plant names, metal ornaments, spices, etc. mentioned in the book. In his Introduction, given in toto in the Addendum, pp. 460-466, he tells it like it is:

Furthermore, they ask: Did Solomon compose this song to honor and praise her, or to blame and reproach her? If some say that it was to praise her, then there are a few unflattering statements in it! The watchmen who make the rounds of the city found me. They hit me, they

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45 The Heads of the Syrian and Armenian Churches bear the title of Catholicos. The Syrian Catholicos resides now in Damascus, while the Armenian Catholicos lives in Echmiazin, Armenia.
 bruised me, they removed my veil from my face! And I said: "I shall climb the palm tree and grab its branches, etc". Hence, was she a whore that walked in the streets and broad places, or a crazy woman who climbed up palm trees?

He is also aware that the Jews understand and interpret this book as the expression of God’s love for Israel. Thus, he summarizes the three venues he knows,\(^{46}\) with a definite ax to grind against the verbose Greek Fathers whose loquaciousness he utterly dislikes:

Since these three positions [the Nestorian, the Greek and the Jewish] were expounded by orthodox teachers, I shall leave the proper interpretation of this book to their sophisticated criteria, in order that I may not be viewed as someone who is tearing down the spiritual fathers, because its text can be chewed with their iron molars, and expounded with their Attic tongues! As for me, I shall just explain some of the difficult words I found in it.

Yes, the Greek Fathers, with their iron molars and Attic tongues, can chew up this stuff and make a mountain out of a mole hill! As for Iṣo’dad, his wish is to make no big waves, he will just explain some of the difficult words he found in the book! And that is precisely what he did, with no enthusiasm or conviction, because he really wished that this embarrassing book had never been written!

What Theodore of Mopsuestia and Iṣo’dad of Merv could not stand became the most frequently expounded theological bedrock-text in medieval Europe’s monasteries. The few individuals named below reflect the depth of the enormous impact the Song of Songs had in fostering a dialogue of commitment in a variety of settings from Bernard de Clairvaux’s monastic circle, to the three descendants of Conversos in Spain, and to Dr. John Gill in XVIIIth century London.

**Bernard de Clairvaux** (1090-1153), the promoter of the Crusades, called the faithful to arms against the enemy of the Church, along with the conversion of the Jews. He also declared war against the pleasures of the flesh before attaining perfect spirituality. In that, he was a *Song of Songs* devotee,\(^{47}\) and with Origen as his model, he managed to preach 86 sermons on the *Song of Songs* over a period of eighteen years.

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46 These are: 1. Theodore’s and Iṣo’dad’s position that the book is about Pharaoh’s daughter. 2. The Church’s position that it expresses the love of Christ for the Church. 3. The Jewish position that it is God’s love for Israel.

ST. TERESA OF AVILA (1515-1582).

Of *converso* stock, St. Teresa's major literary contribution is reflected in her three works entitled:48

1. *VIDA de Santa Teresa* or LIFE of St. Teresa.
2. *CAMINO de Perfeccion* or PATH to Perfection, and
3. *CASTILLO Interior (Moradas)* or the interior CASTLE.

Her extensive correspondence is of some import; her poetry is incidental.

For the purpose of this study, another work of hers, stillborn, yet residually available in discordant fragments, is her *Sobre los Cantares*, a commentary on the *Song of Songs* which after seeing the light of day, was sacrificed—under pressure—on the altar of humility and obedience!

By her own admission, St. Teresa was no biblical scholar. Women in her time were discouraged from walking on that dangerous path. By today's standards, St. Teresa was quite blunt on that subject:49

*Ay dificultad en entender el sentido de las divinas letras, principalmente de los Cantares: las mugeres, o los que no fueron letrados no han de trabajar a declaralle....* Algunas palabras de los Cantares de Salomon (aunque parecen baxas, humildes, y ajenas de la boca purissima de Dios y de su esposa) contienen santissimos misterios y altissimos conceptos.

There is a problem in understanding divine scripture, especially the *Song of Songs*: women and uneducated people should not try to interpret them....Some words in Solomon's *Song of Songs* (even though they are apparently base, unseemly and foreign, coming from the most pure mouth of God and his spouse), contain most holy mysteries and very high concepts [liable to be misconstrued].

As a matter of fact, when things become perplexing for women, her advice to her fellow nuns is unequivocal: it does not pay to dissect religious propositions in the hope of achieving clarity:50

*Y asi os encomiendo mucho, que quando leyeredes algun libro, o oyeredes algun sermon, o pensaredes en los misterios de nuestra sagrada fe, que lo que buenamente no pudieres entender, no os canséis, ni gasteis el entendimiento en adelgazarlo: no es para mugeres (ni aun para hombres) muchas vezes.*

And so, I really advise you that when you read a book or hear a sermon or when you think about the mysteries of our sacred faith, whatever you cannot readily understand, do not waste any

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48 I am grateful to Father Tomás Alvarez of Burgos for so graciously making available to me a copy of the facsimile edition of Santa Teresa's *Conceptos del Amor de Dios*, 1611, which he published in 1979 and for which he wrote a clear introduction shedding light on the centuries old saga of the remnant of her book *Sobre los Cantares*, renamed after her death *Conceptos del Amor de Dios*.
effort, nor squander any energy trying to oversimplify it: it just is not for women (not even for men) most of the time.

Unlike Fray Luis, she had no Hebrew training; Greek, or even Latin, were off limits to her. She is frank in admitting her difficulty in understanding some Psalms even in Romance [Spanish]! She is puzzled by the multiple interpretations given to certain verses in the Bible; yet she attributes that to God’s mysterious ways:51

Si estuviera en Latin, o en Hebraico, o Griego, no era maravilla, mas en nuestro Romáce, que de cosas ay en los Psalmos de David, que quando nos declará el Romance solo, tan obscuro se nos queda como el Latin!

If it were in Latin, Hebrew or Greek, it would not be so unusual [not to understand them]. But when it is in our Romáce [Spanish], there are still so many things in the Psalms of David which, though they explain them to us in Romance [Spanish], remain for us as obscure as if they were in Latin!

Yet, the religious culture of her day was suffused with enough Kabbala—both Jewish and Christian—as well as with Muslim Sufi ideas, for her to contemplate writing a commentary on the Song of Songs, based solely on the Spanish version of this book which she had not fully understood!

Among her critics was the Dominican Domingo de Yanguas, professor of theology at the Santa Cruz College in Segovia, who told it straight to her face:52

"No era decente que una mujer...declarase los Cantares. No sé, madre, para qué se cansa en esto." Y la Madre, sin replicar, arrojó al fuego sus cuadernos autógrafos.

"It was inappropriate for a woman...to expound the Song of Songs. I don’t know, mother, why you are spending yourself on this project."
Whereupon the Mother, without answering, threw her handwritten notebooks into the fire.

Her confessor, Father Gracían’s version of this incident was much more dramatic. It described it as an order issued by Yanguas to St. Teresa, as follows:53

Entre los libros que escribió (la Santa), era uno de divinos conceptos y altísimos pensamientos del amor de Dios......en que se declaraban muchas palabras de los Cantares de Salomón, el qual libro (como pareciesse a un confessor cosa nueva y peligrosa que una mujer escribiese sobre los Cantares) se le mandó quemar, movido con zelo de que (como dize San Pablo) "callen las mugeres en la Iglesia de Dios"....

Among the books which she wrote was one of divine concepts and sublime thoughts about the love of God......in which many words of Solomon’s Song of Songs were expounded. (As anyone

51 Ibid., p. 4.
52 Ibid., p. vi.
53 Ibid., p. viii.
would admit, it was a novel and dangerous matter for a woman to write about the Song of Songs. She was ordered to burn this book [by Yanguas] who was moved by the same zeal which led St. Paul to say: "Let women keep quiet in the Church of God."

The original work by St. Teresa, entitled Sobre los Cantares, extended over the entire book of Song of Songs, but it had gone up in flames! Now, for the bits and pieces which survived, Gracian devised a new "Inquisition-friendly" title, Conceptos del Amor de Dios, which he published in Brussels by collating the few available verses of Chapter One, to which he added his own "annotations".

On October 4, 1582, St. Teresa died in the Carmelite monastery of Alba. Verses from the Song of Songs were her last utterances.

FRAY LUIS DE LEON (1527-1591).

The scholarly Fray Luis de Leon—a descendant of conversos who had been condemned by the Inquisition—was a professor of Hebrew at the university of Salamanca. Already in 1554, his friend, Benito Arias Montano, had written—but not published—a Spanish commentary on the Song of Songs entitled Exposición sobre el Cantar de los Cantares de Salomón which he sent to Fray Luis for his private use.

Yet at that time, there was a ban promulgated by the Council of Trent on April 8, 1546 on all vernacular translations of Scripture which also declared the Vulgate infallible in matters of faith and morality. Nevertheless, at the request of his cousin, the nun Isabel Osorio at the Holy Spirit convent in Salamanca, who did not know Latin, Fray Luis decided in 1561 to write his own Spanish translation and commentary on the Song of Songs to satisfy her spiritual needs.

Soon, "stolen" copies of this commentary circulated in Spain, Portugal, and even across the Atlantic, in Peru. Defending himself against the accusations of Fray Vicente Hernandez, Fray Luis severely castigated this Dominican who, in his words:

could see little difference between the Spanish translation of the Song of Songs and the amatory poems of Ovid!

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54 I Corinthians 14:34.
57 Ibid., p. 42, similarly entitled, Exposición del Cantar de los Cantares de Salomon. In this volume, Garcia includes two other verse compositions attributed to Fray Luis and entitled: 1. Los Cantares del Rey Salomon en Versos Liricos, on p. 1705 and 2. El Cantar de Cantares en Octava Rima, on p. 1723.

xxiv
Pursuing his attack, Fray Luis also retorted that:

this 'most spiritual' witness could never have read or understood the Song of Songs in Latin; and now he is scandalized by Spanish words which meant nothing to him in the original (el oir besos y abrazos y pechos y ojos ilarios...le escandalizó)!

The Inquisition brought Fray Luis to trial with eight different counts of accusation. The sixth related specifically to the Song of Songs, charging him with translating this book into Spanish and also interpreting this poem in a literal sense. The sentence was harsh: a four and a half year prison term from March 1572 to December 30, 1576!

In 1580, the incorrigible Fray Luis went back to the drawing board and wrote a new threefold commentary in Latin, entitled In Canticum Canticorum Triplex Expositio, modeled after that of Ibn Ezra whose methodology he must have admired. His three levels were:

1) Prima verborum interpretationes continet, Part One containing the explanation of words [a linguistic-literal commentary].

2) Altera Deum amantis animae progressus in amore complectitur, Part Two containing the progress of the lover's soul in loving God [a mystic commentary].

3) Tertia comprehendit Ecclesiae Militantis, a mundi initio usque ad finem saeculi, amoris cursus atque rationem, Part Three containing the love journey and plan of the Militant Church from the beginning of the world to the end of time [a spiritual commentary].

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542-1591).

The youngest of this trio, was also the most poetic among them. His converso ancestry may account for his extraordinary attachment to the Jewish Bible—his favorite reading—whence he drew most of his poetic imagery and symbolism. His studies at the university of Salamanca prepared him as a disciplined thinker, as well as an accomplished man of letters.

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59 Ibid., p. 147.
60 Luis de León. Obras, p. 148. With reference to 5:15, [which is 5:14 in Ibn Ezra], Fray Luis quotes Ibn Ezra by name: La piedra tarsis que se llama así de la provincia adonde se halla, es un poco como entre rosa y blanca, según la pinta un hebreo antiguo llamado Aben Ezra.
Early in his career, he came into contact with St. Teresa. With her help, he reformed the Carmelites, eventually becoming the founder of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. Yet, in 1577, he fell victim to internal jealousies. Before Jerónimo Tostado, the Visitator of Spain, he faced charges of disobedience. Determined not to let Tostado break his will, he preferred spending nine months in prison—incommunicado—to capitulation, even after Tostado changed his tactics and tried to buy him off with irresistible offers.\textsuperscript{63}

In prison, his cell was a six by ten latrine where they had placed a few boards on the floor with two worn-out blankets for him to sleep on. It had no windows, but a tiny hole in the ceiling, just to let in a few rays of daylight. This is where he was thrown, without cowl or scapular, as punishment for his insubordination. The bitter cold winters of Toledo cracked the skin of his toes; its suffocating summers turned his cell into an inferno where he had to put up with heat, hunger and lice. He was not allowed to change or wash his old tunic; it kept rotting on his body and falling apart. Daily, he was subjected to insults and recriminations. To make him repent, every Friday the monks would take turns in beating his naked back until he would bleed.

During those terrible nine months of isolation, he was allowed no books, except his breviary. But St. John knew the \textit{Song of Songs} by heart, and much more. It became his haven. In that abject prison, he composed those thirty-one\textsuperscript{64} stanzas of hope entitled \textit{Cántico Espiritual}, featuring a dialogue between the bride—the \textit{esposa}—and the bridegroom—the \textit{esposo}—exactly as in the \textit{Song of Songs}: same vocabulary, same symbolism. His loneliness and suffering were now bearable because he was engaged in an uninterrupted dialogue with God, his Friend. Stanza one asks:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Adónde te escondiste,} \\
\textit{Amado, y me dejaste con gemido?} \\
\textit{Como el ciervo huiste,} \\
\textit{habiéndome herido;} \\
\textit{salí tras ti clamando, y eras ido!}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Where did you hide, \\
Beloved, and left me moaning? \\
As a hart You fled \\
After you wounded me; \\
I went calling after you, but you were gone?
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid}, pp. 180-201.

\textsuperscript{64} Nine new stanzas were added later on, for a total of forty.
Gauging St. John's mental process as he wrote his own version of the *Song of Songs* is an unreal task. Yet, cast in my classical Hebrew style, his words are very moving and also authentically Jewish. A Hebrew version of his first stanza might be:

אלהים נשקתיו רוח
השעון יבשאמה.
התרם חרבך כלב
אמרה פורא אחדריה העלב.

After St. John's escape from prison, the fame of his *Cántico Espiritual* spread among monks and nuns who wished to know more about it and really experience the power of St. John's words. He responded to their request with a question of his own:65

Quién podrá escribir lo que a las almas amorosas, donde el mora, hace entender?

Who can write about what He makes known to the souls of lovers in whom He lives?

But in spite of this strong *caveat*, he decided to have his own special *triplex* formula of exposition. Later on, he applied it to most of his other writings. These innovative three levels were:

1. The actual text of each stanza as originally composed in prison.
2. A *declaracion* or exposition he wrote on the meaning of that stanza from *his own* point of view.
3. An invitation to his readers not to stop there, but to pursue the matter on *their own* for a personal level of understanding, bound to be different from what St. John himself may have intended to say.

"Y así, aun que en alguna manera se declaran, no hay para qué atarse a la declaracion".

"Thus, even though they are expounded in a certain way, it is not necessary to be bound by that particular exposition!"

St. John died at the age of 49. On his death bed, as his prior began to read to him the prayers for the dying, St. John interrupted:66

"Dígame, padre, de los Cantares, que eso no es menester."

Y cuando le están leyendo los versículos del Cantar de los Cantares, comenta ilusionado: "Oh, qué preciosas margaritas!"

"Recite for me, Father, verses from the Song of Songs, as this is unnecessary."
And when they were reading to him verses from the Song of Songs, he commented in fascination:
"Oh, what precious daisies."

**DR. JOHN GILL** (1697-1771), a Baptist minister at Horleydown, near London, holds the world record on sermons based on the Song of Songs: 122 sermons in all! 67 Apparently, he is also the first person to have translated the entire Targum of the Song of Songs into English which was published with his sermons in the second edition of his book, but was dropped from the third edition, because his readers had lost interest in the Targum.

In 1823, **ADAM CLARKE** picked up Dr. Gill’s English translation of the Targum and reprinted it along with the Gitagovinda or Songs of Jayadeva to show that this poem was supposed to have a near resemblance to the Book of Canticles. 68 What is fascinating about Adam Clarke is his unprecedented ambivalence regarding the Song of Songs:

- **As a literalist**, he rejects the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs as "wasted labor at this thriftless craft"! Here is what he has to say: 69

> It is curious to see the manner in which many preachers and commentators attempt to expound this Book. They first assume that the book refers to Christ and His Church; His union with human nature: His adoption of the Gentiles; and His everlasting love to elect souls, gathered out of both peoples: then take the words bride, bridegroom, spouse, love, watchmen, shepherds, tents, door, lock, &c. &c. and finding some words either similar or parallel, in other parts of the Sacred Writings, which have there an allegorical meaning, contend that those here are to be similarly understood; and what is spoken of these apply to these; and thus, in fact, are explaining other passages of Scripture their own way, while professing to explain the Canticles! 

For him, this "flirting" with the Song of Songs is a waste of time and energy which should be devoted to traditional preaching, so direct in conveying the traditional evangelical message. 70

What eminent talents, precious time, great pains and industry, have been wasted in this way! One eminent scholar preaches to his congregation one hundred and twenty-two sermons upon the Song of Solomon; while all this time the evangelists and the apostles have been comparatively forgotten, but as far as they may be referred to in illustration of the particular creed which such

67 John Gill. *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon's Song Commonly called Cananites...To Which is Added The Targum or Chaldee Paraphrase upon the Whole Book, Faithfully Translated out of the Original Chaldee, together with some Explanatory Notes upon it.* London: John Ward, (Second Edition) 1751.
69 Ibid., p. viii.
70 Ibid., p. viii.
writers and preachers found on this Book. How can they account to God for so much time spent on a tract, which requires all their ingenuity and skill to make edifying, even on their own plan; a text of which they are not permitted to allege in controversy, to prove the truth of any disputed doctrine!

In other words, no one would take a preacher or a theologian seriously who in a "doctrinal disputation" quotes from the *Song of Songs* instead of the hard-core books of the Bible which alone carry weight. The *Song of Songs* is all over the place—so to speak—and it is impossible to pin down any single interpretation as its core message. Here are some of the diverse opinions expressed, with powerful supporters and good reasons to back them up:

- It is a plain *epithalamium* on the marriage of Solomon with the daughter of Pharaoh.
- It is an allegory about the conduct of God towards the Hebrews from exodus on.
- It represents the *incarnation* of Jesus Christ, of His marriage with human nature.
- It represents Christ's love for the church, or elected souls, and their love for Him.
- It is an *allegorical poem* on the glories of *Jesus Christ* and the *Virgin Mary*.
- It is a collection of sacred idyls, the spiritual meaning of which is not agreed on.

Who, then, are we to follow in the interpretation of this very singular book?

The *Targumist* who applies it to God and the *Hebrews*, in their journeys from Egypt to the Promised Land?

*Origen*, who made it a Christian allegory?

*Apponius*, who spiritualized it?

*Gregory the Great*, who in the main copied them?

The *good man* who in 1717, at Paris, so illustrated it as "to induce men to devote themselves to Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary?"

*Mr. Durham*, Mr. *Robotham*, Mr. *Ainsworth*, Mr. *Romaine* and Dr. *Gill* who endeavour to prove that it concerns *Christ and the elect*?

Or *Mr. Harner* and others, who acknowledge it to be an inimitable composition, and to be understood only of Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter?

Or, finally, *Dr. Mason Good*, who considers it a collection of Sacred idyls, the spiritual interpretation of which is not agreed on?

If such methodological diversity were possible elsewhere in the Bible, theological chaos would ensue.

Were this mode of interpretation to be applied to the Scriptures in general, (and why not, if legitimate here), in what a state would religion soon be? Who could see anything certain, determinate, and fixed, in the meaning of the Divine Oracles, when fancy and imagination must be the standard of interpreters? God has not left His word to man's will in this way.

The reason why this is nothing but *fancy* is simply because:

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Did Voltaire know Hebrew? It seems that he knew some, based on his Lettre de M. Eratou—a fictitious name made up of all the letters of AROUET, his real name—where he even gives a transcription of the Hebrew of verse 1:2:

Si les amours respectables de l’époux et de l’épouse commencent par ces mots: "Isaguni minsichot pihoh kytobem dodeka me yayin; Qu’il me baise d’un baiser de sa bouche, car sa gorge est meilleure que du vin", c’est que l’auteur de ce cantique n’était pas né à Paris; c’est que ni notre galanterie, ni notre esprit critique, ni notre insolence pédantesque, n’étaient pas connus a Hershalaim, vulgairement nommée Jerusalem.

If the respectable love between the two spouses begins with these words: 'Isaguni minsichot pihoh kytobem dodeka me yayin: Let him kiss me with a kiss from his mouth, for his throat is better than wine", it is because the author of this Canticle was not born in Paris [as he was], and because neither our gallantry, nor our critical mind, nor our pedantic insolence were known in Hershalaim, popularly known as Jerusalem.

Yet, in a footnote, Voltaire expresses his surprise at the second half of this verse where the bride praises his breasts! He tells us that he discussed this matter of a man’s breasts with plusieurs grands personnages, many important people, but felt compelled to turn the image around and to attribute them to the bride.

Voltaire was partially right. The problem was with the Septuagint/Vulgate reading, where μοστιο σου/ubera tua for your breasts! Assuming that the grands personnages did not consult their Hebrew Bibles, was it because they did not know Hebrew well enough to do so, or was it because Voltaire’s Hebrew was totally absent, even though he pretended to have some rudiments of the holy tongue by quoting in it?

Be that as it may, Voltaire’s obvious interest was not in translating the words of this poème le plus tendre, et même le seul de ce genre, qui nous soit resté de ces temps reculés, "this most tender poem, and even the only one of its kind, which has come down to us from those remote ages", but in penetrating the beautiful metaphors it conveys. This, he does with gusto. Verse 1:2 flows from his pen as:

Que les baisers ravissants
De ta bouche demi-close
Ont enviré tous mes sens!

YEHUDA LEV BEN-ZEEV (1764-1811). Sharing the opposite side of the spectrum with Theodore of Mopsuestia who was posthumously excommunicated 115 years after his death "for the sin" of the Song of Songs, is Yehuda Lev Ben-Zeev who was posthumously published 170 years after his death "for the same sin" of Song of
Not that his tiny literary escapade of 126 short verses was totally boycotted by the Hebrew reading intelligentsia of the time. On the contrary, from Meassefim to students in the Yeshivot, anyone who could read Hebrew loved to lay his eyes on this sensuous poem as long as it was available in some hastily copied manuscript form. But no one would dare print it, because this tour de force on the Hebrew language—designed to prove that the holy tongue would not normalize itself unless its newly acquired versatility applied to lustful themes—would also spell its ultimate desecration!

Finally, in 1977, G. Kressel took an enormous leap and a hefty risk in returning the Song of Songs to the land of its birth by publishing a limited, three-hundred copy edition and associating his name to that of Yehuda Lev Ben-Zeev, the man whom the historian Graetz summarily dismisses from his history book with the statement:79

Two Poles residing in Berlin, Isaac Satanow and Ben-Zeeb, most accomplished masters of Hebrew style, also belonged to the Meassefim, but their studies in German culture had an injurious effect upon their moral character.

"Injurious effect upon their moral character" was apparently a coded reference to Ben-Zeev's gaff inside the Song of Songs fence! Kressel writes that J. Klausner told him that Ahad Haam told him that "he had read this poem in manuscript form and was shocked by its extreme pornographic nature". Apparently Klausner was more understanding of Ben-Zeev when he wrote that it was an attempt to show people and poets the beauty of good old Hebrew, as it was now possible to write in it every kind of new topic.

Kressel ends his preface by saying:

Is it really "impossible to print it"? Finally, we are going to print it this time from two manuscripts and put an end to the wanderings of this poem from hand to hand and in manuscript form for the past one hundred and sixty/seventy years.

Obviously, it is not possible to quote here even a token illustration from Ben-Zeev's poem. Anything "mild" would defeat its purpose, you understand.

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78 ברואך שזרה על איר עלنشر. Thái' לשביעים. הלא' יבשש: החורף האמס, ט 11, כרמל חסיד, 1847.
INTRODUCTION

MODERN SCHOLARLY APPROACH VERSUS ONEIRIC REALITY?

I may have belabored the polarity of views between Dr. Gill and those of his posthumous admirer/critic, Dr. Clarke, simply because until modern scholarship came into its own in the past century or so, theories on biblical interpretation were the exclusive domain of rabbis and clergymen as traditional commentators of Scripture. The bewildering diversity described by Dr. Clarke is only echoed and even magnified in the writings of modern biblical scholars who have worked on this subject. It is not my intention here even to attempt a brief summary of their views. Suffice to say that from a fertility cult composition to an anthology of wedding songs, from Tamil influence to Egyptian parallels, everything has been tried with enlightening results, but no satisfactory breakthrough.\(^{80}\) Hints here and there, yes; convincing evidence, no. It is almost safe to assume that some Eskimo parallel may pop up one of these days to explain the "cooling off" interludes in this love relationship between the Shepherd and the Shepherdess!

Saadia Gaon said it very well when he compared this book to a lock whose keys had been lost!\(^{81}\) No other book in world literature is responsible for so much fundamental controversy. No other set of writings has stirred up such voluminous response of approval or dissent. Was Rabbi Akiba too lenient in failing to take seriously all the *erotica* this book portrays? This succinct survey has only touched but a corner of the tip of the iceberg, but watching the swings in mood caused by these 117 verses over a two thousand year period, with

- Akiba's embrace of the *Song of Songs* and his exaggerated preference for that single day when this book was given to Israel for all eternity;
- Theodore of Mopsuestia's posthumous excommunication 115 years after his death, at least partly, for his rejection of the *Song of Songs*;
- St. Teresa's burning of her manuscript of the *Song of Songs*, because if caught, she feared a possible prison sentence;
- Fray Luis' going to prison, because he got too involved with the *Song of Songs* in translating it into the vernacular;
- St. John's surviving the ordeal of prison, because he was unable not to get involved with the *Song of Songs*;


\(^{81}\)开展了, ויהי ויהי. הפסל והפסל. דיבירהנש הפסל והפסל. פיתת תופות. טמק, ב (1963), עמוד 36.
• Dr. John Gill’s hearty endorsement of the book with his phenomenal 122 sermons preached on it;
• Yehuda Lev Ben-Zeev’s poem posthumously published 170 years after his death for his innocuous, yet offending experimentation with the holy tongue, one cannot help but ask: Is this a tempest in a teacup? Why are there Song of Songs “addicts” like Ibn Aknin, Ezra of Gerona, Moshe Almosnino, Origen, St. Teresa, Fray Luis de Leon, St. John and Dr. Gill? And why do others, like Immanuel of Rome, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Dr. Clarke, either welcome the literal meaning as is, or reject it as embarrassing? Differently said, is the Song of Songs good or bad? Obviously, este libro hace y deshace, this book “does” and "undoes"; what a powerful tiny collection it must be!

As a Sephardic Jew who has been daily mumbling the Hebrew text of the Song of Songs for over half a century, I sense that its erotica are not its enticement. When its figures and similes—wave after wave—stroll before our consciousness, we are indeed intrigued, because they come from "another one", real or fictitious. Some react only to the survey of eyes, hair, teeth, etc.; and finding these unappetizing, they just cool off. For the aficionados, however, what is prominent is your eyes, your hair, your teeth, that is the beginning of a dialogue resting on this overflow of icons. The Song of Songs does rush to our support in celebrating the contemplative in us. It instantly befriends that layer in our character which we hunger to know. No lessons about duties here; just a treasure-house of warmth, with generous glimpses of our potential within our deeper selves, as well as with others.

It is in this sense that I am fascinated by the appeal of the oneiric or “dream” theory recently revived by our rabbi and teacher, Solomon B. Freehof,32 π’ ν., whose literary acumen easily matched his vast rabbinic scholarship. Its unique merit is that it does not purport to interpret the book in any specific fashion, which is where everybody encounters a wall on one side, and an exit on the other: Your wall may be my exit, just as my wall can become your exit! The merit of Freehof’s interpretation is that by paying attention to all the possible exits, he reaches the conclusion that:

Whether the specific interpretation given by tradition is correct or not, the approach of tradition, namely, to explain this sequence of dreams symbolically, is essentially sound.

Therefore, asking whether the *Song of Songs* is good or bad may be the wrong question. The real puzzle is that, even though the old allegory, which changed the entire book—the only book to have undergone such a complete change—into a symbol, has been disposed of in recent times as being fanciful, no generally accepted interpretation has been established after almost two centuries of search for the literal meaning.

Freehof, however, suggests a reasonable way out of this predicament by focusing on his key verse 5:2. It reads:

אַל יִשְׁיֶה בְּלַבְּשֵׂי וּרְאוֹ אִם אִ֥ם אָשֶׁ֣ר בַּלַּבְּשֵׂ֑י

*I am asleep, but my heart is awake.*

Since in the Biblical language, *heart* means *intelligence* or *mind*, what the verse implies is that her body is asleep, but that her mind is active, i.e. "she is dreaming". Thus, the female speaker is telling us: *I am asleep, but I am dreaming!*

This is followed by a series of situations which fit best the state of a dreamer:83

- The beloved knocks at the door.
- She is unable to get up and open the door.
- She is helpless because she has put off her coat, how can she put it on again?
- She has washed her feet, why should she defile them again?
- But finally she does arise from her bed and opens the door.
- Her lover who had just been so anxious to enter, has suddenly vanished!
- She, who was just now unable to open the door, chases after him through the streets.
- The watchmen find her, smite her and take away her mantle!

As a description of an actual occurrence—Freehof adds—this scene makes little sense, but as a dream it is typical, almost classic. She hears the knock of the longed-for beloved, and yet just when she would admit him, she feels her helplessness as a dreamer. The desire has come true; but the dreamer is unable to take advantage of it. The beloved mysteriously comes, and then, as mysteriously, vanishes. The dreamer then runs through the streets. Even the feeling of nakedness, so frequently found in dreams, is here clearly described.

This dream characteristic is not limited to this passage. Symbolic images such as *running through the city and over the fields, leaping upon mountains, skipping over hills, coming up from the wilderness* are but a few of the "sudden movements from place to place" which are typical of dream situations in a "characteristic succession of rapid separate scenes, from palace to home-dreaming, back to the summer pavilion, to the king's garden and his vineyard, etc.". Freehof may have hit the nail on the head when he says:84

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sequence which is perhaps beyond our waking explanation. The dreamer is suddenly transported from scene to scene, moving along almost magically from place to place.

He also observed that some of the descriptions in the book are overdrawn. That these unusual descriptions are attributable to Oriental exaggeration fails to satisfy our minds. Even in an overdrawn picture, there should be some underlying logic. For Freehof, the unreality or "wild improbability of these pictures jives with the strange exaggeration of dream pictures". And what of that thrice repeated plea המצות את אבה...asm quench out love...until it desireth, which could probably mean: "Don't wake me up. Let me continue to dream"! Freehof sums it all up by saying:85

Once the book is read thus, its very disorder makes sense. The book is not the story of two lovers seeking each other in actual places, but in imaginary ones. On my bed at night I sought my beloved (3:1). In other words, the book is a sequence of dreams.

The final linkage between the Targum and the bold dream sequence is thus described by Freehof:86

As in a dream, the beloved are parted, lost to each other, seeking each other; so God seeks Israel, but Israel seems lost from His presence. Then Israel, in repentance, seeks God and God seems far away. Finally, they find each other for many waters cannot quench out love, nor the floods overwhelm it. Israel is forever united with God. I am my beloved's and He is mine. No wonder this interpretation of a dream, God's communication to man, was described by Akiba as Holy of Holies.

Hence, asking whether the book of Song of Songs is good or bad is posing the wrong question. Maybe it is neither! Freehof's conclusion must be read in its entirety to shed, it is hoped, some new light on this very old problem:

It may well be that the modern interpretations are not realistic at all, and that it is a vain attempt to see a logical sequence from scene to scene. There is no logic in dreams except perhaps some deeper, hidden logic. Nor is it helpful to seek folkloristic origins for the contents, or Bedouin love-songs, etc. There is no folklore in dreams except that which may be imbedded deeply in the subconscious. A dream cannot be explained, either as to its contents or as to its methods by the categories of waking life. It must be interpreted according to its own strange laws. The dream is the outcome of longing and desire expressed in symbolic scenes and actions. Therefore, whether the specific interpretation given by tradition is correct or not, the approach of tradition, namely, to explain this sequence of dreams symbolically, is essentially sound.

And if my half-century of mumbling the Song of Songs makes me a dreamer, I am certainly comforted.

85 Ibid., p. 401.
86 Ibid. p. 402.
SEPHARDIC JEWS AND THE SONG OF SONGS

In the Mediterranean tradition of the Sephardic Jews, this glorious book is held in particular esteem. Its memorization from cover to cover has priority in the elementary education curriculum, not only in preparation for its formal chanting on Friday nights during the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuoth, but also as background material for the reading of its Targum in Ladino and the preaching on Pirké Avot which take place on those same Saturday afternoons before the Minha service. That is how this writer, too, was taught and already knew the entire book by heart by the time he reached his seventh birthday.

Apparently, the pressure on Sephardic rabbis was equally compelling. For a laity nurtured in the noble ideas and exquisite imagery of the Song of Songs, the demand for constantly enhancing that tradition was such that our hahamim had to respond with their own creativity. Thus, writing ever renewed commentaries on this book became fashionable for them—maybe like passing the "Boards" in today's medicine, or better yet like being admitted into some Hall of Fame—as if the fulfillment of one's aspirations depended on taking a stand on this delicate topic. And the Kabbalists in Safed did their share to ever invigorate this trend. In fact, a list of all available Jewish commentaries on the Song of Songs reads like a Who's Who of the medieval Sephardic rabbinate.

But, there was much more than popular pressure! The impact of tasawwuf—or Muslim mysticism, known also as Sufism—has been considerable in nurturing, if not in generating these themes, first in Spain, then in Egypt and finally within the borders of the Ottoman Empire.

In Spain, the strongest case of Jewish tasawwuf can be made about Bahya ibn Pakuda whose book, Duties of the Heart, is filled with Sufi doctrines. There is also plenty of Sufism in the works of Ibn Gabirol and Ibn Akinin, all of whom reflect, in their language and their thinking, the clear traits of their Judeo-Islamic milieu, as well as their cultural dependence on the Sufi views prevalent at that time. Paul

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Fenton, who has studied this matter in his book entitled *The Treatise of the Pool*, writes:  

The allegorical commentary on the *Song of Songs* composed in Arabic by Yosef ibn 'Aqin (XII-XIIIth century), reads very much like a Sufi treatise on the love of God. Indeed the definitions that he gives of love are culled from al-Qushayri's *Risala*, a basic Sufi text-book. Furthermore, in his *Therapy of the Souls* (طبّ الثقوب), ibn 'Aqin freely quotes the sayings of early mystics such as al-Djuna'yd (ob. 910) and Ibn Adham whom he calls respectively *Elder of the Community* (شامخ الطائفة), and *the Perfect Saint* (المرحومان الأوكل). These instances, of interest also for historians of Spanish Sufism, were nonetheless isolated and remained without literary successors on Spanish soil, where the history of Sufism was one of intolerance and persecution, scarred by the public burning before the Great Mosque of Cordova of the books both of Ibn Masarra in 961 and then of al-Gazzali in 1106.

EGYPT, however, was the place where the most fascinating development of this Sufi "connection" took place. That Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) lived the latter part of his life in Egypt is a universally known fact. Less known is the career of his son, Abraham Maimonides (1186-1237), also a leading political and religious figure in that country. Abraham had adhered to the Jewish Sufi movement in Egypt, whose leader at that time was a certain Rabbi Abraham *he-Hasid* (d. 1223) to whom Abraham Maimonides refers as "our Master in the Path of the Lord". The Cairo Geniza has yielded a theological treatise in which some of Rabbi Abraham *he-Hasid's* ideas concerning prophetical gnosis are set forth, as well as a mystical commentary on the *Song of Songs*, seen as an esoteric guide for the 'Lover' through the spiritual stations to God. Again to quote Fenton:

While both these works are thoroughly permeated with the Sufi terminology and tenets which typify the Pietist writings, they voice an original and specifically Jewish doctrine whose underlying inspiration was Yehudah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* and Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, tempered by Sufi ideology.

Thus, Abraham Maimonides' *magnum opus*, entitled *كتاب مالي ومال مؤمنين*, *The Compendium for the Servants of God*, was intended to be a comprehensive Pietist manual; and

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90 In 1205, at the age of nineteen, he had already become *Rais al-Yahud*, that is the Spiritual and Secular Head of the Jews of Egypt, in which capacity he led them until his death in 1237, at the age of fifty-one.
91 Obadyah Maimonides. *The Treatise*, p. 7. S. D. Goitein figures out that Abraham's book must have been three times the size of his father's *Guide*, adding: "This discrepancy in size finds its explanation in the fact that the *Kifaya* is, so to speak, a combination of the subject matter of both the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide for the Perplexed*". See his article: "Abraham Maimonides and his Circle". *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 147.
in Fenton’s words, the difference between Abraham Maimonides in Egypt and Bahya ibn Pakuda in Spain was striking. Whereas Bahya’s book was for individual guidance, Abraham Maimonides made a synthesis of Rabbinical and Sufi pietism as a collective code for the entire community. There was also another important difference:3

Unlike Bahya, who had endeavoured to conceal his debt to Sufi sources, Abraham Maimonides had no misgivings about his admiration for Sufism which he overtly expresses in this work. On one occasion, after having equated the discipline of the Islamic mystics with that of the old prophets of Israel, he makes the statement: "Do not regard as unseemly our comparison of that to the behavior of the Sufis, for the latter imitate the prophets (of Israel) and walk in their footsteps, not the prophets in theirs".

Abraham meant what he said and what he wrote. However, the old Jewish leading families were jealous of his leadership and so displeased with his Sufi views and innovations that they complained to the Ayyubid Sultan Malik al-Adil—brother of Saladin, the Kurd—who took the accusation of *illegal religious innovation* quite seriously. In turn, Abraham and his two hundred supporters, who signed a memorandum, defended themselves by claiming that their practices were limited to their private synagogue.4

With Obadyah Maimonides (1228-1265), son of Abraham Maimonides and grandson of Moses Maimonides, the Jewish *Sufi* movement in Egypt continued to show some strength.5 Obadyah’s book entitled *Treatise of the Pool* is a complete treatise on practices for the Jewish *Sufi*, such as ablution, prostration, kneeling, spreading of the hands, weeping, orientation, vigils and fasting, solitude, incubation, etc.

In the **OTTOMAN EMPIRE** Jewish *Sufis* are known to have existed in Aleppo, Damascus, Baghdad and Jerusalem.6 And even though the contribution of *Sufism* to Lurianic Kabbala needs further clarification,7 the use of the *Song of Songs*—with its נוכבד bride metaphor—as a major source of inspiration for the *mystical wedding* theme celebrated by the kabbalistic poets in Safed is very well known, especially in

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7 *Ibid.*, p. 23. According to Hemdat Israel, Izmir 1731, p. 101, Luria is supposed to have considered the mystic poet Israel Najjara to be a "spark of King David".
light of Shelomo Alkabes' לֶכְתָּ הַדִּ֥וֹד לֶאָ֖שֶׁר תֵּאֶ֑֖לֶת Lekha Dodi composition which gained entrance and universal acceptance into the Friday night service.\textsuperscript{98}

So, too, was the musical give-and-take with the Mevlevi groups throughout the Empire.\textsuperscript{99} Jews enjoyed and felt free to borrow the makams of Turkish Classical Music, such as rast, hüseyni, mähur, sabi, hicaz, beyātī, sāzinak, başelik, bestenigăr, etc.,\textsuperscript{100} for formal liturgical use in their synagogues, as well as for life-cycle events, such as circumcisions, engagements, weddings and funerals.\textsuperscript{101} But much more! Gifted Jewish composers contributed with their creative talents to the enrichment of that musical repertoire which both communities immensely enjoyed.\textsuperscript{102}

A rare "Western" admirer of that heavenly music of ours has been the famous modern Hebrew poet, Hayyim Nahman Bialik! During a visit to Istanbul in 1921, he got to know, and even admire, the musical group called maftirim\textsuperscript{103} which originated in Edirne (Andrinople), famous for its hazzanim or cantors, just as Salonika was the city of learning and rabbis, whereas Istanbul—the city of plentiful fish\textsuperscript{104} and dolce vita—was always a net importer of rabbinic talent from the provinces. Bialik must have been so thrilled by the experience of this "authentic" Hebrew musical tradition and talent, so different from his customary Ashkenazic tunes, that he wrote a letter of commendation to Binyamin Rafael ben Yosef, editor of a collection of poems used by the maftirim, entitled Shiré שירה רפאל ב' יוסף.

\begin{quote}
When you see my hearse, say not "Parting, parting!"
That time there will be for me union and encounter.
When you commit me to the grave, say not "Farewell, farewell!"
For the grave is a veil over the reunion of paradise.
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{98} In the Mevlevi tradition, the night of Mevlana's death is celebrated as a leyl al-'arus or "wedding night" when the soul achieves the ultimate union, as is clearly reflected in Rumi's own poetry:


\textsuperscript{100} See 1968, ובו נתן רמאב וב תשב, שרי ירחא שמיר; תמצית המקדים, או מאמר של תצוגה של תושבים. Also see Rabinowitz, מִזְמַנְרָת שֶׁדֶּמֶשׁ, where all these makams are listed as rubrics along with the compositions to which they apply.

\textsuperscript{101} Some of the kinot or funeral dirges were also sung according to an appropriate makam. The ceremony of washing of the face and the nostrils, etc.

\textsuperscript{102} Of the last stars of Jewish musicology who also worked in Classical Turkish Music was Hazzan Isaac Algazi (1889-1950). See: Edwin Seroussi. \textit{Mizmorat Qedem}. Jerusalem: "Renanot", the Institute for Jewish Music, 1989.

\textsuperscript{103} The use of the word maftir applied to a musical group is not as evident as one may think. Obviously, it has nothing to do with the maftir who reads the haftara! Possibly related to the use of the term fasıl or section/suite in Turkish music, it would be analogous to the use of the word peitha in this type of music, corresponding to the Turkish ışakım or overture.

\textsuperscript{104} Known in ancient sources as Βόσφορος Ίχθυοις, Bosphorus swarming with fish! I am told that pollution from the Black Sea has now dried up that traditional "pride" of the Fish Capital of the world!
Yisrael be-Eres ha-Kedem,\textsuperscript{105} in which he expresses the hope that these melodies may become a source for the future renaissance of "popular music" in Hebrew. As will be shown in the Addendum, p. 487, Bialik did not have a clue that these had primarily a religious 
\textit{sufi} content!

It is a shame that our people, beset by a feeling of inferiority, has not stood up and defended the beauty of their tradition which combined 
\textit{gšfте} text and \textit{beste} melody into an integrated musical experience, deeply felt by the average synagogue-going person. Probably, the breakthrough goes back to Dunash ibn Labrat who in the Xth century introduced Arabic poetic categories into Hebrew poetry, making henceforth the Ottoman type of blending of 
\textit{gšfте} and \textit{beste} with which I am familiar, a much more pervasive phenomenon.\textsuperscript{106} And with the synagogue at the center of daily life, of prayer, of celebrations, of \textit{meldados} or \textit{limmudim}—study sessions in memory of a deceased person—the forced dichotomy between \textit{ירח secular} and \textit{سوء sacred} in this type of poetry is obviously out of proportion with what went on in people’s minds.

Indeed, in light of this reality, one wonders about the merit of routinely distinguishing between \textit{ﺸﺮي} and \textit{ﺸﻬر} which prevails in any discussion of medieval Jewish poetry, as if a poet of religious themes had a double or split personality allowing him to switch at whim from one mode to another, and back! As with the \textit{Sufis}, when these people are talking about \textit{women}, \textit{wine}, \textit{gardens} and \textit{flowers}, they probably never lose sight of their primary references which almost always transcend any superficially stated mundane concern. Indeed, Mevlana Djelaleddin Rumi’s (1207-1273) poetry utilizes the whole panoply of erotic language and imagery to impart the depth and fullness of his encounter with the Divine.

The language and metaphors of these compositions were those of Biblical poetry, heavily dependent on themes borrowed from the \textit{Song of Songs}. Fenton’s evaluation on this score is justified, when he says:\textsuperscript{107}

\begin{quote}
Un des thèmes liturgiques le plus en honneur auprès de la nouvelle école de Safed était la conception de la relation Dieu-Israël par les noces mystiques. Colorés du vocabulaire du Cantique des Cantiques, souvent d’une crudité déconcertante, un nombre abondant de \textit{baqqašt} sont consacrées à l’amour de Dieu et d’Israël et rappellent par endroits certains hymnes gnostiques. Mais plus encore qu’à des chants gnostiques, on ne peut s’empêcher en écoutant ces paroles d’amour mystique,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{105} See בתים, אנשים ב תקף, צבי א. שטרלזר, מירון, ראובן א. אסאנסבל, צבי הווי, ידידים, 1926, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 109.
de songer aux séances de ḏjkr et du samā' des tekkiye-s du Proche-Orient, où les adeptes soufis se réunissaient pour chanter, en des termes similaires et sur des airs semblables, l'amour divin.

Here are a few two-verse samples selected at random to convey the general thrust of this versatile poetry used within the synagogue, as well as at functions outside the synagogue. This one was to be sung in the Rast Makam:

שכמיה ויהי נפשכם רגועה  שסחייתך נפשך ובח ובח קטנה
Rejoice and shout with joy, fresh narcissus,
Your lips are a honeycomb dripping honey!

The next one is from the pen of Israel Najjara, the famous XVI century poet from Damascus and author of יִהוּדָה, Ribbon Alum, who used specific Turkish makams and set his poetry to suit them:

ירוסמ דה אד mmc מלקניא
Let Your tongue distill the desert pastures.
אימיא, נפשלך קהל
O my awesome one, let me hear Your voice!

And this one by Shelomo Ravuna to be sung in the Isfahan Makam:

תובך יבשל חaginiיתך
Turn back, turn back, O maid of Shunem!
א魔法师和 אבכה מלאכתך
I love You forever!

Simple, yet lovely vignettes, imbedded in the minds and hearts of a people who delighted in experiencing the interface, so to speak, of a special festive occasion with their rich legacy rooted in the deeper meaning of the book of Song of Songs. And they could not help but think of the many striking parallels in the words of Classical Turkish Music: münteziirim, I am expecting You; not the maiden, but God. Or vuslatin, attaining You; again, not the maiden, but God. Or görsem seni, if I could see You; not so much the beloved, as The Beloved!

Rich models inspired by Islam, and therefore many telling parallels, but no evidence of pervasive ecstatic practices among the Jews, similar to the ones the Muslims became very fond of. The parable of the king in his palace, described by

110 Ibid., p. 95.
111 Abraham Abulafia's special brand of mysticism was based on an ecstatic experience absent from classic kabbalistic mysticism. See Moshe Idel's books The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia and Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah, both published in Albany: the State University of New York Press, 1988.
Moses Maimonides in the Guide for the Perplexed, III:51, was viewed as a concrete illustration of what the limits of that yearning for God should be. It was to be proximity to God, or being present in the ruler's council, but never unio mystica or identification with the Deity. For the Jews, the ultimate exclamation I am the Truth, I am God, which Hallaj and other mystics professed, was tantamount to blasphemy. Here is how S. D. Goitein describes this important distinction:

Despite the great dependence of medieval Jewish piety on Sufism, there was one point on which it parted company. Judaism never consented to blur the distinction between the Creator and the created. Love of God, emulation of God, nearness to Him, longing for Him—yes; but union or identification with Him, this idea meant to Jews—at least to Jews living inside the Muslim civilization—nothing but blasphemy and self-deification.

In conclusion, let it be said that, for almost two millennia now, there has been, in word and in song, a steady "love affair" between the Song of Songs and the Jewish people. These 117 verses, in their midrashic interpretation and targumic exposition, have equipped poets, rabbis, philosophers and mystics of every imaginable persuasion with a wealth of metaphors unsurpassed by any other book. Thus Rabbi Akiba was justified in stating that אל כל מבנה התורה שבר-השראות והיווה כללה את-השלמה had the Tora not been revealed, the Song of Songs would measure up to guide the world!

Even the great Maimonides—that accomplished rationalist—could not help but "flirt" surreptitiously with it. Personally, he wrote no separate commentary on the Song of Songs. Hence, his formal position on each of these 117 verses, as part of an integrated, full-fledged commentary, will forever remain unknown.

In his writings, however, there are plenty of comments on his favorite passages. And it is these comments which gave Ibn Aknín, Ibn Tibbon and Ibn Caspi—they all acknowledge it—the imprimitur of their Master to draw as much inspiration from his real thinking as necessary. Briefly stated, the position of Maimonides involved the following stages:

112 Maimonides talks about "concentric circles" [seven in all], consisting of those who are outside the city, then those who are within the city, then those who seek the ruler's habitation to enter, then those who come up to the habitation, but walk around it, then those who have entered the antechambers, then those who have entered in the ruler's palace and are with him in one habitation, and finally those who are present in the ruler's council!
• At an elementary level, the performance of the commandments usually rests on some fear, but also on the expectation of a reward at the end of the process. He calls this: *action because of fear.* That is where we all start.\(^{114}\)

• With study and maturity, comes self-motivation. Now, we *act out of love,* regardless of any reward, since the action itself is the reward. But clearly there is still a reward.\(^{115}\)

• Finally, uppermost in this ascension, are those who, *while acting,* constantly ask themselves, with *no* reward in mind: "Am I doing *enough?* What else can I do?"\(^{116}\) They are at the top of the ladder, for they worry themselves almost to death, in order to show the depth of their commitment!

In them, Maimonides saw clearly the reference to יִכְּרָת יִשְׁרָאֵל אֵלֶּה יִמְּרֹא שֶבֶטֶת הָאָדָם אֵלֶּה יִמְּרֹא שֶבֶטֶת הָאָדָם for I am lovesick, come alive again, as he solemnly proclaimed that the *entire book* of Song of Songs is a metaphor on this very matter!

\[כִּי אִלְּשֹׁר יִשְׁרָאֵל אֵלֶּה יִמְּרֹא שֶבֶטֶת הָאָדָם אֵלֶּה יִמְּרֹא שֶבֶטֶת הָאָדָם\]

(מצונה: חורש, אלחוט השבח)

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\(^{114}\)Maimonides, *Mishnē Tora,* Hilkoth Teshuva 10:1-2: "The fear which is in you, to the extent that you feel it, is a great matter!

\(^{115}\) The distinction made by Maimonides between *because of fear* and *out of love* has a solid talmudic foundation: "The great fear that is in them, to the extent that they feel it, is a great matter!"

\(^{116}\) For a similar attitude on Mevlana Djalaleddin Rumi’s part, see A. Reza Arasteh. *Rumi, the Persian, the Sufi.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 136, note 1, where Rumi is quoted as saying to Shirazi, the philosopher: *O seeker of religion, always be thus: in this state of what can I do?*