

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Grace Theological Journal* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_grace-theological-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-theological-journal.php)

# EARLY AND MEDIEVAL JEWISH INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG OF SONGS

WESTON W. FIELDS

*The Song of Songs provides an excellent background for discussing various hermeneutical approaches to the Old Testament. This grows out of the large number of different interpretations attached through the ages to this enigmatic book. If one is to understand Christian interpretation, especially the roots of allegorization, he must first understand Jewish interpretation of the book before Christianity and afterward. Thus, in this article interpretation of the Song is traced from the period of the Septuagint translation through the Mishnah and Talmud to the medieval period in order to show when and with what effect allegorization came to be the standard method of interpreting the book.*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

**I**F the language of the Song of Songs is enigmatic, and the canonicity sometimes disputed, its interpretation is both of these combined. As one surveys the vast array of differing interpretations of this song over the centuries, he can certainly sympathize with the rather secular perception of one interpreter who says that "it is one of the pranks of history that a poem so obviously about hungry passion has caused so much perplexity and has provoked such a plethora of bizarre interpretations."<sup>1</sup>

But it is the very obviousness of the sexual love of the Song that is the root of this variety; for, to the Western Christian Mind explicit statements about sexual love and detailed descriptions of the anatomy of the human body, all discussed under a number of unmistakable and rather graphic similes and metaphors, are most embarrassing to read in a book of the Bible. Even later Jewish writers,

<sup>1</sup>William E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs," *JAAR* 42 (1974) 15.

apparently influenced by their Christian counterparts, found the sexual descriptions of the Song rather too lucid.<sup>2</sup>

The history of the interpretation of the Song is thus largely the history of Jewish and Christian interpreters' methods of dealing with this embarrassment, and their commentaries are more often commentaries on themselves and their times than on the Song.

If one accepts the hermeneutical principle that the primary goal of the interpreter is to discover the original meaning and intention of the author of a biblical book, he must try as much as is possible to let himself be controlled in his interpretations by the same cultural norms which controlled the writers. In the case of the Song of Solomon, the interpreter must be especially careful that he does not judge the book on the basis of his Western culture, question its canonicity, and allegorize its historical meaning away so completely that its original intention, meaning, and use are entirely obscured. If a great many of the interpreters over the centuries have been unable to do that, let judgment not fall too harshly upon them: one must first judge himself.

An important piece in the hermeneutical puzzle is the contribution of early Jewish scholars. The song is, after all, Jewish in origin and use. And while ancient indications about its early interpretation are neither authoritative nor binding, they are often instructive—even essential—for understanding interpretations that came later, especially during medieval, reformation, and modern times.

This article, therefore, explores Jewish interpretation of the Song of Solomon from the earliest records of such endeavors through the medieval period in order to demonstrate that (1) there is no record of allegorization in the earliest period and (2) allegorization became the predominant method of interpretation in the later periods. A subsequent study may trace Christian interpretation from the apostolic era up until the Reformation in order to show similarities and contrasts between the two groups in general.

Such a survey of past interpretations is useful not only because it is never wise to ignore the work of those who have previously struggled with these same questions, but also because seen in the more distinct perspective of time, some interpretations condemn themselves and others commend themselves, and the field of possibilities becomes at once smaller and more comprehensible.

<sup>2</sup>On the subject of Jewish attitudes toward sex and related matters, including adultery and divorce, see Louis M. Epstein, *Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1967).

## THE SEPTUAGINT

One might have expected to put the interpretation found in the Targumim first in the line of Jewish interpretations, but for reasons explained below, it is probably best to consider them later than some other interpretations.

Since all translations in some sense reflect the views of the translators, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the LXX in some ways reflects the views of the Jews who made it,<sup>3</sup> however unorthodox these Alexandrian Jews are supposed to have been. If the Letter of Aristeas is accepted substantially as it stands (as it was at least up to and especially by Augustine, who placed it almost on the level of the original text), then the translation of the LXX would be dated about the middle of the third century B.C., during the reign of Ptolemy II.<sup>4</sup> Scholars are not generally disposed to accept it as entirely genuine, however, and so usually date the translation later, a position most recently defended again by Würthwein.<sup>5</sup> But whatever the decision on that matter, even Jellicoe suggests a *terminus ante quem* of 170 B.C.<sup>6</sup>

It has been thought by some that an allegorical interpretation is already evident in the LXX translation of the Song of Songs. The main passage adduced to prove this alleged allegorism is 4:8, where the LXX renders אֲמֵנָה מֵרֹאשׁ by ἀπὸ ἀρχῆς πίστεως, "from the top of faith," for the Hebrew "from the top of Amana." But the weakness of this argument is obvious to anyone familiar with the inconsistent, sometimes almost capricious way that the LXX, Josephus, and others transliterate and translate Hebrew proper names. It is further disproved by the rendering of תִּרְצָה, "Tirzah," by εὐδοκία, "delight," (6:4), and of בֵּת־נָדָב, "noble daughter," by θυγάτηρ Ναδάβ "daughter of Nadab," (7:2), "whence it is evident that the Septuagint frequently

<sup>3</sup>Orlinsky cautions, however, that just because the LXX translators often rendered the text literally word-for-word does not mean that they understood it that way (Harry M. Orlinsky, "The Septuagint As Holy Writ and the Philosophy of the Translators," *HUCA* 46 [1975] 106).

<sup>4</sup>Augustine, *The City of God*, 18:42, 43; Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 47. Cf. also the very excellent "History of the Septuagint Text" in Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta*, Vol. I (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1935) xxii-xxxii; and Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 49-68.

<sup>5</sup>Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 51-53. Cf. H. B. Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1902) 1-28; and Paul Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959) 209-15. For an introduction to and the full text of the letter, see Herbert Andrews, "The Letter of Aristeas" in *APOT*, 2. 83-122.

<sup>6</sup>Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study*, 49.

mistook *proper names* for appellatives and adjectives, and vice versa."<sup>7</sup> There does not seem to be any indication otherwise that the early Jews allegorized the Song, though such a practice would not have been particularly surprising even in this early period.

#### BEN SIRA

Dated about the end of the fourth century B.C. to the upper half of the third century B.C.,<sup>8</sup> Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus, Sirach, Ben Sirach) is possibly older than the LXX translation.<sup>9</sup> The author often approaches an artistic level of Hebrew comparable to that of the OT, so steeped was he in the classical tradition.<sup>10</sup>

The first of the passages which have been used to prove that Ben Sira reflects allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon is 47:17. Speaking in an apostrophe to Solomon, 47:17 says: ἐν ᾠδαῖς καὶ παροιμίαις καὶ παραβολαῖς καὶ ἐν ἔρμηνείαις ἀπεθαύμασάν σε χῶραι, "by your songs, proverbs,<sup>11</sup> parables, and interpretations<sup>12</sup> you caused the people astonishment." This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew words שִׁיר, מְשָׁל, דִּבְרֵי and מְלִיצָה.<sup>13</sup> Ben Sira was referring to all the works generally accorded him by the OT (Prov. 1:6 and 1 Kgs 4:32).<sup>14</sup> By this reference to Solomon's παραβολαῖς αἰωιγνάτων, "riddles, dark sayings," in 47:15, some have concluded that he was referring to hidden allegories in the Song of Solomon.<sup>15</sup> It seems, however, that since Solomon's songs are mentioned separately, Ben Sira is not referring to inherent allegories in the Song of Solomon.

<sup>7</sup>Christian David Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (New York: Ktav, reprinted, 1970) 21.

<sup>8</sup>G. H. Box and W. O. E. Oesterley, "Sirach," *APOT*, 1. 294. For a short introduction and more up-to-date bibliography, see Leonhard Rost, *Judaism Outside the Hebrew Canon*, trans. David E. Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) 64-69.

<sup>9</sup>Box and Oesterley, "Sirach," 294.

<sup>10</sup>Tadeuz Penar, *Northwest Semitic Philology and the Hebrew Fragments of Ben Sira* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1975) 2.

<sup>11</sup>*LSJ*, 1342.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 690.

<sup>13</sup>For the usage of these and other words in Sirach, see D. Barthelémy and O. Rickenbacher, eds., *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Sirach* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973). For further comparison between the Hebrew text and the LXX, see Elmar Camilo Dos Santos, *An Expanded Hebrew Index for the Harch-Redpath Concordance to the Septuagint* (Jerusalem: Dugith, n.d.). See also Yigael Yadin, *The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1965).

<sup>14</sup>Box and Oesterley translate from the Hebrew: "By thy songs, parables, dark speeches, and satires thou didst cause astonishment to the peoples ("Sirach," 498).

<sup>15</sup>There is a textual variant here where the Hebrew text is mutilated. Box and Oesterley translate "And didst gather parables like the sea," following another variant (*ibid.*, 497).

## THE BOOK OF WISDOM

The apocryphal book of Wisdom (of Solomon) has also been supposed to support the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon. Dating from about the middle of the second century B.C.,<sup>16</sup> the book states in 8:2, representing Solomon as speaking to Wisdom: Ταύτην ἐφίλησα καὶ ἐξεζήτησα ἐκ νεότητός μου καὶ ἐζήτησα νόμφην ἀγαγέσθαι ἐμαυτῷ καὶ ἐραστής ἐγενόμην τοῦ κάλλους αὐτῆς, "Her I loved and sought since my youth to bring her (home) for my own bride, and I became an admirer of her beauty." Because Solomon is here made to speak of Wisdom as his bride, it has been supposed that this is an explanation of the Song of Songs, as though the brides were the same. But only a perusal of the two books will convince the reader that there is no intentional resemblance whatever.<sup>17</sup>

## JOSEPHUS

Josephus (A.D. 37-95) is supposed to have understood the Song in an allegorical sense, but it is never quoted by him. The ground of this contention is his arrangement of the books of the OT. Of the twenty-two books he mentions as canonical (τὰ δικαίως [θεῖα] πεπιστεύμενα),<sup>18</sup> he describes five as Mosaic, ascribes thirteen to "the prophets," and αἱ δὲ λοιπαὶ τέσσαρες ὕμνους εἰς τὸν θεὸν καὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ὑποθήκας τοῦ βίου περιέχουσιν, "the remaining four are hymns to God and rules for the life of men" (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes).<sup>19</sup> Thus, he would have placed the Song among the prophets, and would have interpreted it allegorically.<sup>20</sup> But since Josephus also puts such historical books as Esther and Ruth among the prophets, it cannot follow that all "prophetical" writings were interpreted allegorically automatically, though it is true that both of them were sometimes interpreted allegorically as well.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Leiman makes a good case for putting the Song in the last classification.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Samuel Holmes, "Wisdom of Solomon," *APOT*, 1. 520; cf. Rost, *Judaism outside the Hebrew Canon*, 56-60.

<sup>17</sup>A conclusion reached as far back as Ginsburg (*Song of Songs and Coheleth*, p. 23).

<sup>18</sup>Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1:8:39 (in the *Loeb Classical Library* edition).

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:8:40.

<sup>20</sup>See Johann Friedrich Kleuker, *Sammlung der Gedichte Salomons sonst der Hohelied oder Lied der Lieder* (Hamburg: ben Philipp Heinrich Perrenon, 1780) 54; and W. E. Henstenberg, *Das Hohelied Salomonis* (Berlin: Verlag von Ludwig Dehmigfe, 1853) 255.

<sup>21</sup>Ginsburg prefers to place the book among the last four mentioned, though he does not explain how the five are then added up by Josephus as four (Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 23).

<sup>22</sup>Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture*, vol. 47 of *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1976) 32-33.

## 4 EZRA

The book of 4 Ezra, also dating from about the middle of the second century B.C., is sometimes claimed as one of the earliest indications of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon by Jews.<sup>23</sup> Concerning this Audet states: "En premier lieu, il est inexact d'affirmer que 'les Juifs ont toujours entendu le Cantique au sens allégorique.'"<sup>24</sup> He contends that "le plus ancien témoignage connu d'une telle interprétation est celui de IV Esdras, V, 24-26; VII, 26, et encore est-il loin d'être décisif."<sup>25</sup> It would appear that the passage is less than decisive indeed, but following are the verses that have been used: "And I said: O Lord my Lord, out of all the woods of the earth and all the trees thereof thou hast chosen thee one vine; out of all the lands of the world thou hast chosen thee one planting ground; out of all the flowers of the world thou hast chosen thee one lily; out of all the depths of the sea thou hast replenished for thyself one river; out of all the cities that have been built thou hast sanctified Sion unto thyself" (4 Ezra 5:23-26a).<sup>26</sup>

The figures allegedly taken from the Song of Solomon and interpreted allegorically are the lily (Cant 2:2); the dove (Cant 2:14); and the stream (Cant 4:15). Box accepts this as an indication that the allegorical interpretation was in vogue,<sup>27</sup> but the hesitancy of Audet to draw this conclusion is commendable. Even if this would prove an allegorical interpretation by the writer of 4 Ezra, it would not prove such was normative for all Jews at that time.

## THE TALMUD

The work known as the Talmud (completed ca. 5th-6th centuries A.D.) consists primarily of two parts: the Mishnah, which constitutes the text, and the Gemara, which constitutes the commentary by the Amoraim or public lecturers on the Mishnah. The study of the Mishnah was pursued in two main geographical locations: Babylon and Tiberias. The Gemara from Babylon is called the Babylonian

---

Leiman puts Job among the prophetic books so that the last section of Josephus contains Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. See also Leiman, ed., *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1974).

<sup>23</sup>G. H. Box, "4 Ezra," *APOT*, 2. 552-53; Rost, *Judaism outside the Hebrew Canon*, 120-25.

<sup>24</sup>"In the first place, it is inaccurate to conclude that 'the Jews always interpreted the Song allegorically' " (Jean-Paul Audet, "Le Sens du Cantique des Cantiques," *RB* 62 [1955] 200).

<sup>25</sup>"The most ancient testimony known of such an interpretation is that of 4 Ezra 5:24-26; 7:26, and yet it is far from being decisive" (*ibid.*).

<sup>26</sup>Box, "4 Ezra," 571.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, n. on v 23.

Talmud, and that from Tiberias is called the Jerusalem Talmud, and both of these together with the Mishnah are called the Talmud, though the distinction is generally made between the Babylonian and Jerusalem or Palestinian.<sup>28</sup>

In the Mishnah, Yadaim 3:5, there are some interesting statements about the Song of Songs. One is the assertion, quoted more fully above, of its canonicity: "All the Holy Scriptures render the hands unclean. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render the hands unclean."<sup>29</sup> It is further stated that Rabbi Akiba said: "God forbid!—no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs (that he should say) that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."<sup>30</sup> This is to some an indication that Rabbi Akiba interpreted the Song allegorically. It is true that it is difficult to understand his hyperbolic language if he did not.

It is quite evident that by the time the Talmud was complete the allegorical interpretation of the Song was accepted. From a gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin comes this fascinating application of Cant 7:3 to the Sanhedrin itself:

Gemara: Whence is this [i.e., the seating of the Sanhedrin] deduced? Said R. Aha b. Hanina: From (Solomon's Song, vii.3): "Thy navel is like a round goblet which lacketh not the mixed wine." By "navel" is meant the Sanhedrin. And why were they named navel? Because they used to sit in the middle of the world (according to the Talmud, Jerusalem was the middle of the world and the Temple was in the centre of Jerusalem), and also protected the whole world. And why were they named a "round goblet"? Because the Sanhedrin sat in a circle: "Which lacketh not the mixed wine"—i.e., if one wished to

<sup>28</sup>Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1931) 5-6; cf. Curt Leviant, ed., *Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1969) 97-98; R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (reprinted; New York: Ktav, 1975); Alan Corr e, *Understanding the Talmud* (New York: Ktav, 1975); Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 159; Irving A. Agus, review of Abraham I. Katsh, *Ginze Talmud Babli*, *JQR* 68 (1977) 121-26; and David Weiss Halivni, *Contemporary Methods of the Study of Talmud*, *JJS* 30 (1979) 192-201.

<sup>29</sup>Herbert Danby, ed. and trans., *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University, reprinted, 1974) 781. As background for the Mishnah, see Jacob Neusner, *The Modern Study of the Mishnah* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) and J. Weingreen, *From Bible to Mishnah* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976). On the relationship between Christian hermeneutics and Rabbinics, see Raymond F. Surburg, "Rabbinical Writings of the Early Christian Centuries and New Testament Interpretation," *CTM* 43 (1979) 273-85.

<sup>30</sup>Danby, *The Mishnah*, 782. For the connection of the Song with the dances performed on the 15th of Ab, as related in the Mishnah, cf. M. H. Segal, "The Song of Songs," *VT* 12 (1962) 485-87.



leave, it must be seen that besides him twenty-three remained, and if there were less, he must not.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, it is during the Christian era that one first encounters indubitably allegorical interpretations of the Song of Solomon at the hands of the Jews.

#### MIDRASH

The Midrashim are biblical expositions coming from the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. They consist of Halakah,<sup>32</sup> statements about law, and Haggada, statements of a non-halakic character, principally something devotional, or something which "transcends the first impression conveyed by the scriptural expression."<sup>33</sup> Most of the Midrashic statements on the Song would be Haggada.

A specimen of such allegory is found in Mekilta (Exodus), *Shirata*, Beshallah, § 3:

R. Akiba said: I will speak of the beauty and praise of God before all the nations. They ask Israel and say, 'What is your beloved more than another beloved that "thou dost so charge us" (Cant. V, 9), 'that you die for Him, and that you are slain for Him' as it says, 'Therefore till death do they love Thee' (a pun on Cant. I, 3), and 'For thy sake are we slain all the day' (Ps. XLIV, 22). 'Behold,' they say, 'You are beautiful, you are mighty, come and mingle with us.' But the Israelites reply, 'Do you know Him: We will tell you a portion of His renown; my beloved is white and ruddy; the chiefest among ten thousand' (Cant. V, 10). When they hear Israel praise Him thus, they say to the Israelites, 'We will go with you,' as it is said, 'Whither has your beloved turned him that we may seek him with you?' (Cant. VI, 1). But the Israelites say, 'You have no part or lot in Him,' as it is said, 'My beloved is mine, and I am His' (Cant. II, 16).<sup>34</sup>

There are other midrashim of another sort, such as the one which reports that "On the day on which Solomon married Necha, Pharaoh's daughter, the foundation of Rome—Israel's persecutor and oppressor—was laid by the angel Michael."<sup>35</sup> The Midrash on I:5, "I am black but comely," states: "So says the house of Israel: I am, to my knowlege, black, yet my God considers me comely."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Michael L. Rodkinson, ed. and trans., *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, vols. 7, 8: section Jurisprudence (Damages), Tract Sanhedrin, 110.

<sup>32</sup>On which see Ze'ev W. Falk, *Introduction to the Jewish Law of the Second Commonwealth*, 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

<sup>33</sup>Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 6-7.

<sup>34</sup>Cited in C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1938) 101-2, §263.

<sup>35</sup>Samuel Rapaport, *A Treasury of the Midrash* (New York: Ktav, 1968) 172.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 167.

But even within the framework of midrashic interpretation, the use of the book was limited. "It was prohibited to use a text of Canticles from which one would develop a homily having a shameful or odious implication."<sup>37</sup> As noted above, Akiba, for example warns that "any one who would dare treat this book as a secular love poem forfeits his share in the World to Come."<sup>38</sup> Another passage carried the consequence even further: "the penalty would not be restricted to the individual but would jeopardize the welfare of all mankind."<sup>39</sup>

There is a considerable difference between the Commentaries and Midrashim on the "Song of Songs" and those on the other books of T'nach. The principle (Shabbath 63a) *אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו*, that no verse of the Torah may be divorced from its plain meaning, does not apply to *שיר השירים* [the Song of Songs]. On the contrary, our sages explain (Sanhedrin 101a) "Those who recite a verse of *שיר השירים* as they would a common song, or who read its verses in inappropriate circumstances, bring evil to the world, because the Torah wraps itself in sackcloth, and standing before the Holy One, blessed be He, complains: "Master of the World, Your children have made me a harp on which mockers play. . . ."<sup>40</sup>

One final sample will suffice to demonstrate midrashic interpretation. On Cant 1:2, "For your love is better than wine," the midrash says:

Here the words of the Torah are compared to wine. Just as wine makes the heart of man rejoice, as written in Psalms 104:15 *ויין ישמח לבב* "and wine makes glad the heart of man," so does the Torah, Psalms 19:9 *כל פקודי הי ישירים משמחי* "the ordinances of the Lord are right, making the heart rejoice."—Just as wine brings joy to the body, so do the words of the Lord comfort the soul: Ps. 94:19 *נפשי ישעשעו תנחומיך ישעשעו* "Thy comforts delight my soul."—Furthermore, the older the wine, the better it becomes, and with the *דברי תורה* the words of the Torah, the longer they are instilled in man the more effective they become.<sup>41</sup>

#### TARGUM

Because the legends in it seem to be rather late, and because it makes mention of the Gemara (the last part of the Talmud, completed ca. A.D. 450-500), the Targum on the Song of Solomon is

<sup>37</sup>Samuel Tobias Lachs, "Prolegomena to Canticles Rabba," *JQR* 55 (1965) 237, citing *Cant. R.* 1:12 (2:4).

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, citing *Tosef. Sanh.* 12, 10.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, citing *Sanh.* 101a.

<sup>40</sup>Yitzhak I. Broch, *The "Song of Songs" As Echoed in Its Midrash* (New York: Philipp Feldheim, n.d.) 8-9.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 12. A further instance of such midrashic interpretation of the Song may be seen in Menahem M. Kasher, ed., *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, 9 (reprinted; New York: Ktav, 1979), the comments on Exod 19:10, p. 74.

usually dated considerably later than much of the other targumic material. Ginsburg argues for a date about the middle of the sixth century, when the Talmuds would have been already complete,<sup>42</sup> but Loewe would date it even later yet.<sup>43</sup>

As an aid to the interpretation of the Song the Targum is almost useless, because it allegorizes it beyond recognition.<sup>44</sup> It is, in fact, considered by some to be primarily an anti-Christian (pro-Jewish) apologetic.<sup>45</sup> But as a hermeneutical warning, the Targum is priceless: it shows where the unbridled allegorization of the Song may lead.

A few examples from this Targum will suffice to demonstrate its character. On 1:2, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine," the Targum says: "Solomon, the prophet said: Blessed be the Name of the Lord, who hath given us the Law by the hand of Moses, the great Scribe—a Law inscribed upon the two tablets of stone, and hath given us the six orders of the Mishnah and the Gemarah by oral tradition, and communed with us face to face, as a man that kisses his fellow out of the abundance of his affection, loving us, as He does, more than the seventy nations."<sup>46</sup>

On 2:1, "I am the narcissus of Sharon, the rose of the valleys," the Targum comments: "The Assembly of Israel speaketh: As long as the Sovereign of the Universe suffers His Divine Presence to dwell in my midst, I am like the narcissus fresh from the Garden of Eden, my actions are comely as the rose in the plain of the flower-garden of Eden."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 28.

<sup>43</sup>Raphael Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," in *Biblical Motifs*, ed. by Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966) 163-69. For the hermeneutics of the targumim, see Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (SBLDS 22; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975) 55-81, and for a bibliography of literature up to 1966, see R. Le Déaut, *Introduction à la Littérature Targumique* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1966); and up to 1972 in Bernard Grossfeld, *A Bibliography of Targum Literature* (2 vols.; New York: Ktav, 1972).

<sup>44</sup>Still, John Gill considered it valuable enough to append to his commentary, possibly because he, too, allegorized the Song (John Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon's Song, Commonly Called Canticles* [London: Aaron Ward, 1728]).

<sup>45</sup>Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," 173-84.

<sup>46</sup>Herman Gollancz, trans., "The Targum to 'The Song of Songs,'" in *The Targum to the Five Megilloth*, edited by Bernard Grossfeld (New York: Hermon Press, 1973) 180.

<sup>47</sup>For the text of the Targum, cf. *מקראות גדולות*, 1, *ad loc.* Texts with Babylonian pointing can be found in Alexander Sperber, *כתבי הקדש בארמית*, א-ד כרך 7 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968); and Raphael Hai Melamed, "The Targum to Canticles According to Six Yemen MSS, compared with the 'Textus Receptus' (ed. De Lagarde)," *JQR* 10 (1920) 377-410 and 12 (1921) 57-117. He notes (10, p. 380) that an official Targum to the Hagiographa never existed, but that all the books except Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel had Targumim, of which this one is a part. For a further interesting description of this Targum, and a comparison of the midrash with the

The Targum, as Joüon notes,<sup>48</sup> apparently developed its allegorical interpretation from the kinds of statements found in the Midrash. It takes the Song to be a representation of the history of Israel beginning with the Exodus through the building of the third temple, and the coming of the Messiah, of which there are two mentioned: Messiah ben David and Messiah ben Ephraim.<sup>49</sup>

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The article set out to demonstrate that (1) there is no record of allegorization in the earliest period of Jewish history; and (2) that allegorization became the predominant method of interpretation among the Jews in the later periods. It was shown that no allegorization can be discovered in the LXX (Hebrew canon), Ben Sira, the book of Wisdom (of Solomon), Josephus, or 4 Ezra. But beginning with the Talmud, and continuing with the Midrashim and Targumim, allegorization took over as the accepted method for interpreting the Song.

Though the history given here is only partial, and needs to be complemented by a study of concurrent Christian interpretation, as well as an investigation of both Christian and Jewish interpretation in subsequent centuries, it does serve to point out that once one has loosed himself from the moorings of literal interpretation (in the best and widest sense of that term) he has precluded any assurance that the composer of the Song has communicated to him what he intended to communicate. Through allegorization the reader of the Song will no doubt receive some kind of communication; but it is highly doubtful that it will be what the author intended to say. And here is the problem: if the Song can say anything, then it says nothing. And that is why it is important to establish that as far as the evidence now available is concerned, the allegorization of the Song of Songs was not the original or even the earliest method of interpretation; it was a later development. There is, therefore, no compelling historical reason from early Jewish and early medieval interpretation for continuing allegorization of the Song today.

---

Targum, cf. Leon J. Liebreich, "The Benedictory Formula in the Targum to the Song of Songs," *HUCA* 18 (1944) 177-97.

<sup>48</sup>P. Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne & Cie, 1909) 28.

<sup>49</sup>Bernard Grossfeld, "Introduction," in *The Targum to the Five Megilloth*, ed. by Grossfeld, viii.