The Song of Songs in the Teachings of Jesus and the Development of the Exposition on the Song

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Picking up on the revived interest in the Song of Songs in biblical scholarship, the article focuses on the significance of the Song in the tradition of Jesus' teachings. After a survey of rabbinic midrash on the Song, five examples show that Jesus as remembered in the gospel tradition expresses an unusual interest in the Song with a discreet mystical emphasis. The nuptial Christology that subsequently surfaces in Revelation and in Hippolytus and Origen suggests a continuous development as from the Jesus tradition. This continuity may explain the remarkable parallels between the interest of the Church Fathers in the Song and that of the Rabbis.

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In recent decades, the Song of Songs has received renewed attention from scholars, not least due to the broadening of perspective introduced by feminist colleagues. Debate on perennial questions about eros and allegory has been revived, study of foreign influences on ancient Hebrew poetry reinvigorated, and discussion on the significance of the Song in the Jewish and Christian canon reopened. Important studies have been published on the exposition of the Song by the ancient Rabbis and by the Church Fathers, noting both the similarities and the rivalry between them. Also, the vestiges of the Song in the various parts of the New Testament have been explored.

The present study proposes to go a step further and study the allusions to the Song that can specifically be identified in the tradition of the teachings of Jesus. We shall study five examples in which the Song appears to figure significantly in sayings attributed to Jesus. We shall also consider the possible ramifications for the history of the exposition of the Song. For a proper assessment, the exercise [430] must be done in the broader perspective of the development of Jewish and Christian expositions of the Song.[1]

1. Origen, Akiva and the Christian Interest in the Song

At the beginning of his first, introductory homily on the Song of Songs, Origen explains its extraordinary character as follows:

[1] The following incorporates materials and insights assembled during the Master course, 'The Song of Songs in Rabbis and Church Fathers', in the Faculty of Protestant Theology of Brussels, 2005–13, with thanks to our students and colleagues. I dedicate this publication in particular to my former colleague, Dorothea Erbele Küster, in recognition of her professionalism and creativity as a scholar and teacher. Furthermore, I wish to thank Tamar Kadari, Markus Bockmuehl and Joseph Verheyden, and the Editor of this journal, for their advice and constructive criticism. Any remaining misjudgements and errors are my own.

> As we have learned from Moses that some places are not merely holy, but 'Holy of holies', and that certain days are not Sabbaths simply, but are 'Sabbaths of Sabbaths', so now we are taught further by the pen of Solomon that there are songs which are not merely songs, but 'Songs of songs'.[2]

Anyone acquainted with rabbinic literature cannot miss the similarity with the famous apostrophe of Rabbi Akiva stating the Song's unique place in Scripture:

> R. Akiva said: No Israelite disputed that the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean (being Holy Scripture), for the whole world is not worth the day that the Song was given to Israel. For all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is Holy of Holies![3]

[431] Just as the Holy of Holies (קודש קדשים, *Sanctus sanctorum*) outdoes the holy, so the 'Song of Songs' transcends all song, Origen and Akiva explain, implying a mystical dimension to the Song. Origen goes on to expand on the ascent of 'Songs' in the Bible which runs from the Song of Moses and Miriam in Exod 15 to the Song of Songs, reminding us of similar traditions in the rabbinic midrash and Targum.[4] All of this suggests the use of closely similar traditions by both teachers or, rather, the adoption by Origen of rabbinic interpretative traditions concerning the Song.[5]

Origen's work on the Song also comprises an early tractate, an elaborate commentary, and many scattered references. It gained a towering influence among the Church Fathers.[6]

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[2] *Hom. in Cant.* 1.1, MPG 13.37, see O. Rousseau, ed., *Origène, Homélies sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (*SC* 37bis; Paris: Cerf, 1966) 64–7; trans. R. P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs*, *Commentary and Homilies* (Ancient Christian Writers 26; Mahwah: Paulist, 1957) 266.

[3] m.Yadayim 3.5. Translations of rabbinic literature are my own. Abbreviations used in this study:
- m., t., y. b., followed by the respective tractate, indicate, respectively, Mishna, Tosefta, Yerushalmi and Bavli, with chapter and paragraph number, plus (for Yerushalmi and Bavli) page or folio;
- LevR: *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah* (ed. M. Margulies (1953–60), repr. of 5 parts in 3 vols., Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1972) with chapter, paragraph and page number;
- MekRY: *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ismael* (ed. H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin (1931), repr. Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1970) with names of the *piskaot*, paragraph and page number;
- MekRS: *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Šim`on b. Jochai* (ed. J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1955) with chapter and verse and page number;
- PesRK : *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* (ed. B. Mandelbaum, with comm. and introd., 2 vols.; New York: JTS, 1962) with paragraph and page number;
- SifDeut: *Siphre ad Deuteronomium* (ed. L. Finkelstein (1939), repr. New York: JTS, 1969) with paragraph and page number;
- SifNum: *Siphre d'Be Rab*, (ed. H.S. Horovitz (1917), repr. Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1966) with paragraph and page number.

[4] *Hom. in Cant.* 1.1, Rousseau, *Origène, Homélies*, 66–9 (cf. 29–37); more elaborately, Comm. in Cant., prologue, 4.4–16, see L. Brésard and H. Crouzel, in collaboration with M. Borret, *Origène, Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, vol. I (*SC* 375; Paris: Cerf, 1991) 148–59. For the extant Jewish tradition of an ascent of ten songs, see MekRY shira / beshallah 1 (pp. 116–17); MekRS 15.1 (pp. 71–2); Tanhuma beshallah 10 (86b); Midrash Zuta 1.1; Targum Song, beginning.

[5] More superficially, Hippolytus, *In Cant*. 1.16 compares αἶσμα αἰσμάτων with φίλος φίλων and ἄνθρωπος ἀνθρώπων (ed. M. Richard, 'Une paraphrase grecque résumée du commentaire d'Hippolyte sur le Cantique des Cantiques', *Muséon* 77 (1964) 140–54).

[6] On Origen, see J. C. King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); A.-M. Pelletier, *Lectures du Cantique des cantiques: de l'énigme du sens aux figures du lecteur* (Analecta Biblica 121; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989) 227–80; W. Riedel, *Die Auslegung des Hohenliedes in der jüdischen Gemeinde und der griechischen Kirche* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1898) 52–66. Cf. also E. A. Clark, 'Origen, the Jews, and the Song of Songs: Allegory and Polemic in Christian Antiquity', *Perspectives on the Song of Songs / Perspektiven der Hoheliedauslegung* (BZAW 346; ed. A. C. Hagedorn; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2005) 274–93, at 278–9. On Origen's influence, see M. W. Elliott,

Origen flourished in the second quarter of the third century, roughly a century after Akiva, when the attitude of the apostolic Church was already galvanised into anti-Judaism. Paul Blowers has shown how he could entertain friendly scholarly exchanges with Rabbis, while staunchly maintaining his Church's supersessionist position over against the Jews. Citing Salo Baron, Blowers writes that the interpretation of the Song 'had become a veritable battleground for Jewish and Christian claims to divine election'.[7] This helps [432] us understand how in a similar situation both sides could use the same materials and methods, but it does not answer the question how Origen could acquire such a keen interest in the Song in the first place.

Here, we are facing a riddle. Between the New Testament and Origen, the only trace of Christian engagement with the Song is the commentary of Hippolytus of Rome, who flourished a generation before Origen.[8] The preserved fragments interpret Christ as the bridegroom with the Church as his bride. A competitive attitude towards the Synagogue, involving the 'law' and the 'gospel' as two complementary 'testaments', suggests a Judaeo-Christian background.[9] In addition, some of Hippolytus' interpretations suggest greater affinity to the Jesus tradition.[10] This makes the question more intriguing: whence this Christian eagerness to emulate the Jewish exposition of the Song?

It seems unlikely that these Christian exegetes took their primary inspiration from the Jewish contemporaries they were combating. More likely, they have taken it from their own tradition. This is the intuition guiding the present study. We shall argue that the Song has a firm position in the New Testament, in particular in the tradition of Jesus' teachings. The fact that this has hitherto received little attention may be due to the obscurity of the Song during previous generations, especially among the Protestant pioneers of modern exegesis.[11]

In the following, Jesus is viewed as an historical person whose words have been preserved in a limited way – we shall be using phrases like 'Jesus as remembered' and 'the tradition of his teachings' – and can to that extent be compared to the words of others. If in Christian theology a similar approach of Jesus is less common, it follows naturally when he is

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The Song of Songs and Christology in the Early Church 381–451 (STAC 7; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 3–10; Brésard and Crouzel, *Origène, Commentaire*, 54–68.

[7] P. Blowers, 'Origen, the Rabbis, and the Bible', *Origen of Alexandria: His World and his Legacy* (ed. C. Kannengiesser and W. L. Petersen; Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 1; Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988) 97–116, at 111; cf. Clark, 'Origen, the Jews, and the Song', esp. 286–8. See also T. Kadari, 'Rabbinic and Christian Models of Interaction on the Song of Songs', *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature* (JCP 17; ed. M. Poorthuis, J. Schwartz, J. Turner; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 65–82; R. Kimelman, 'R. Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third Century Jewish-Christian Disputation', *HTR* 73 (1980) 567–95. The discussion was opened by E. E. Urbach, 'The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation', *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971) 247–75 (in Hebrew, 1961).

[8] Eusebius, *HE* 6.22.1.

[9] *Hippolytus Werke,* vol. I, *Exegetische und homiletische Schriften* (GCS 1; ed. G. N. Bonwetsch and H. Achelis; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1897) 341–74, at 344 (Slavonic fragment); cf. the Greek paraphrase (ed. Richard, 'Une paraphrase grecque') 2.2–3. Instead of 'Law and Gospel', Origen has 'Law and Prophets' (In Cant.it.??? 3.1, *SC* 375, p. 208–9). On Hippolytus, see Riedel, *Die Auslegung des Hohenliedes*, 47–52; Pelletier, *Lectures du Cantique*, 217–27.

[10] The Slavonic fragment (Bonwetsch, GCS 1, 346) argues that 'someone from the circumcision who believes in Christ is a flower (?) that can produce both old and new' (cf. below,, example in 3.2); the Armenian fragment interprets the 'fragrance' of Song 1.12 as Mary's 'good deed' (see below, example in 3.5).

[11] Catholic exegetes have been more attentive, e.g. M. A. Feuillet, 'Le Cantique des cantiques et l'Apocalypse', *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 49 (1961) 321–53; M. Cambe, 'L'influence du Cantique des cantiques sur le Nouveau Testament', *Revue Thomiste* 62 (1962) 5–26. For more recent studies see below, nn. 29, 36, 54.

perceived in the context of Jewish [433] history and literature. This observation has important theoretical ramifications, which, however, must remain implicit for now.

2. Midrashim on the Song

A survey of early Jewish interpretations of the Song is in place. Our earliest sources date from the first century BCE. Four Hebrew fragments found at Qumran show that in Essene circles, the Song was being copied at least from the early Herodian period onwards. Two larger texts show curious lacunae that point to the simple omission of passages apparently deemed superfluous or embarrassing.[12] Otherwise, we are ignorant as to how the Qumran sectarians interpreted the Song.

A different attitude to the Hebrew text of the Song is displayed by the Greek translation preserved in the Septuagint, which scholars date to the same period. It is found to be 'completely faithful to its Hebrew source', representing each grammatical unit with an equivalent in Greek, and thus it reads as 'a study aid to a text in another language'.[13] This testifies to great respect for the received Hebrew text. It also suggests that the users of this translation had their way of handling the 'difficult' passages that some of their contemporaries preferred to skip – only we do not know how.

We now jump to the latest source in our survey. *Canticles Rabba* or *Shir haShirim Rabba* – we shall call it *Song Rabba* – is a Palestinian midrash collection whose redaction scholars date to the sixth or seventh century CE. Redaction-critical analysis reveals it to be much more than the mere compilation of midrashim earlier scholars took it for.[14] Arranging, adapting and supplementing a range of earlier materials, it offers a continuous midrash to the verses of the Song, with a carefully constructed opening and ending. The work proposes the readers to interpret the Song as an historical allegory of God's delivery of the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt and subsequent occupations, one of its emphases being on Tora and commandments. We do not find here the mystical reading of the Song as this would be implied by Akiva and Origen when calling the book [434] 'Holy of holies'.[15] The aggadic nature of the midrashim involved suggests a wide audience familiar with the Song.

Going back in time again, we turn to one of the sources of *Song Rabba*, the *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* dated to the fifth century. The extant work reflects no single final redaction. It is a compilation of condensed homilies intended for Sabbaths and festivals that normally take their clause from a verse in the Prophets or Writings and end on the first verse in the Tora portion to be read.[16] The Song is clearly among the books from which such clauses are

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[12] P. W. Flint, 'The Book of Canticles (Song of Songs) in the Dead Sea Scrolls', in Hagedorn, ed., *Perspectives on the Song of Songs,* 96–104.

[13] J. C. Treat, 'Song of Songs', *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (ed. A. Pietersma and B. G. Wright; Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), available online at: http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/27-song-nets.pdf, accessed 30-07-2014.

[14] T. Kadari, 'On the Redaction of Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabbah' (PhD thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2004, in Hebrew). See also B. Rapp, 'Rabbinische Liebe: Untersuchungen zur Deutung der Liebe des Hohenliedes auf das Studium der Tora in Midrasch Shir haShirim Rabba' (doctoral dissertation, Katholieke Theologische Universiteit, Utrecht; Enschede: Ipskamp, 2003). Thanks to both authors for making their work available.

[15] Thus Kadari, 'Rabbinic and Christian Models of Interaction'.

[16] G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1992[8]) 287–91; Mandelbaum, ed., *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, II.x–xxi.

chosen, most conspicuously so in the middle section of the fifth unit pertaining to Exod 12.2, 'This month is the beginning of months.'[17] In this section, the successive homiletic units start from Song 5.2 and continue at Song 2.8–14. The inverse order is curious and indicates that some time during the extended redactional process, both Song passages were found particularly significant. The later redactor of *Song Rabba*, when adapting this material, changed the order, moving the unit on Song 5.2 to its appropriate place in chapter 5. Let us quote the Song passages along with some of their expositions from the *Pesikta*:

> *'I am asleep, but my heart is awake. The voice of my beloved, knocking: Open to me, my sister, my love'* (Song 5.2). 'I am asleep, but my heart is awake' – The congregation of Israel said …: Lord of the universe, I am asleep in view of the Temple, but my heart is awake in view of the synagogues and study houses, … I am asleep in view of the end time, but my heart is awake in view of the redemption …
> *'The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains … My beloved speaks and says to me: Arise, my love … for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom …'* (Song 2.8–13). 'The winter is past' – said R. Azarya: this is the present empire of evil that deceives the people …; 'the rain is over and gone' – this is the enslavement … 'The fig tree puts forth its figs' – R. Hiya bar Abba said, shortly before the Days of the Messiah a great event will happen in which the godless will perish; 'and the vines are in blossom' – these are the remaining ones …[18]

Interestingly, the section closes on an apocalyptic passage beginning with the events during 'the seven-year period in which the Son of David comes'. This [435] non-midrashic 'rabbinic apocalypse' appears also elsewhere,[19] and is copied wholesale by the redactor of Song Rabba along with the section on 2.8-14.

If we take *Song Rabba* as the end of a development and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* as a prior stage, we can also distinguish still earlier stages. Chief spokesmen in the cited *Pesikta* section are fourth century sages such as R. Berekhya. Earlier sages are also cited, among them the noted Tannaim R. Eliezer and R. Yoshua (*ca.* 100 CE). In the edited framework of *Song Rabba*, Berekhya expresses the sense of continuity with earlier generations by citing Eliezer and Yoshua as 'the two mountains of the world', a set phrase for illustrious predecessors.[20]

Indeed, similar expositions of the Song are scattered over Tannaitic literature. One of the earliest attributions is to the aforementioned R. Eliezer, who uses Song 2.8 to interpret the eating of Passover 'with loins girded' and 'in haste' in Exod 12.11:[21]

> This is the haste of the Shekhina. Although there is no proof in Scripture, there is a hint: 'The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.'

There are more popular verses among the Tannaim, though the harvest is not overwhelming and the instances found are briefly formulated. Throughout, it concerns an allegorical reading in the context of Passover and deliverance from exile and suffering.

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[17] *PesRK* 5.6–9 (pp. 87–98). Another example is 1.1–3, (pp. 1–6. Here and in the following, translations of the Bible follow the New Revised Standard Version with adaptations where necessary.
[18] *PesRK* 5.6; 5.9 (pp. 86, 96–7).
[19] See *b.Sanhedrin 97a* and other sources indicated by Mandelbaum, *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 97.
[20] כך דרשו שני הרי עולם, *Song Rabba* 7.3. Cf. the expression in *y.Nazir* 6.1 (54d); *y.Kiddushin* 3.9 (64b).
[21] *MekRY* bo / pisha 7 (p. 22). Cf. also the midrashim of R. Yashia, *MekRY* bo / pisha 7 (p. 25) and R. Shimon ben Elazar, *SifNum* 115 (p. 125).

Seen in this light, the traditions about Akiva's involvement with the Song seem to reflect a special emphasis. We already quoted his pronouncement on the Song as 'Holy of holies'. In another attributed saying he maintains: 'He who sings the Song of Songs with a trilling voice at a (marriage) feast and makes it into a popular song, has no part in the world to come.'[22] Again, a mystic-allegorical reading is implied. This is remarkable in view of the simple historical allegory common in Tannaitic midrash. Similarly, in a series of midrashim on Exod 12.41 along with Song 4.8, Akiva seems to propose a mystical interpretation, as distinct from his colleagues.[23]

[436] This calls to mind the rabbinic reports that attribute to leading Tannaim a mystic-apocalyptic tradition whose contents are not transmitted in the classic rabbinic writings, and which involves a chain of transmission with Akiva figuring as the greatest mystic of all.[24] A similar discreetness seems to surround the mystical reading of the Song, again championed by Akiva. While the Tannaim agreed that the Song is Holy Scripture, different opinions persisted. Akiva pleaded for its sublime holiness in accordance with its mystical reading, but others still disputed its canonicity.[25] The compromise found seems to be that the mystical reading remained reserved for the few initiate, while in public the Song was interpreted as an allegory of the Exodus story. This configuration is also embodied in *Song Rabba* and the Targum on the Song, which both address the community at large.

Interestingly, Origen developed an analogous approach.[26] His homilies interpret the Song as a narrative allegory targeting a large audience, while his commentary develops the triple sense of Scripture including the mystical one intended for the initiate. Moreover he reports that this practice was adopted from the Jews who included the Song among the reserved subjects, roughly analogous to a rule cited in the *Mishna*.[27] These data also put Origen and Akiva on a par as to their special interest in the exposition of the Song.[28]

3. The Song in the Jesus Tradition

Coming now to the New Testament material, we must make a number of methodological assumptions. Firstly, this concerns the history of the gospel tradition. The teachings of Jesus were supposedly preserved in an oral tradition, in which they can only with difficulty be distinguished from the words of those we may presume were his teachers and his disciples. A process of transmission and adaptation followed, until the extant Gospels were written

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[22] *t.Sanhedrin* 12.10.

[23] *MekRY* bo / pisha 14 (pp. 51–2), with God saying: '"With Me from the Lebanon, my bride" – it is as though I and you ascend the Lebanon.' Cf. other versions in *SifNum* 104 (pp. 82–3, R. Akiva); ibid. 161 (pp. 222–3, R. Nathan); *MekRY* beshallah / vayehi (p. 115, R. Nehemia); *MekRS* 14.31 (p. 70, R. Nehemia). Rich information in M. I. Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers: An Annotated Edition* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2011, in Hebrew), I.210–11; III.586–7.

[24] *t.Hagiga* 2.1–7. For a description and implications for the New Testament, see C. Rowland and C. R. A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God, Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament* (CRINT 12; Leiden: Brill, 2009). See also Urbach, 'Homiletical Interpretations', 249–52.

[25] For the range of opinions, see *m.Yadayim* 3.5; *t. Yadayim* 2.14.

[26] Cf. Kadari, 'Rabbinic and Christian Models'.

[27] Origen, *Comm. in Cant.*, prologue 1.7 (Brésard and Crouzel, *Origène*, *Commentaire,* I.84–5); *m.Hagiga* 2.1 with *t.Hagiga* 2.1. The Mishna mentions 'the *Arayot*' (Lev 18 and 20) instead of the Song. *y.Hagiga* 2.1 (77a) reports a disagreement of Tannaim on this point. This requires further study.

[28] *Pace* D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington/Indianopolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 108.

down and edited in successive stages. The redactional process is basically analogous to that of rabbinic literature. A form- and redaction-critical approach is advised, distinguishing between tradition units and redactional frameworks. Insofar as we will [437] presumably be approaching the early stages of the gospel tradition, we should not be surprised if we come up against elements shared by the synoptic and Johannine traditions; nor can we rule out the alternate possibility that seemingly authentic tradition elements are preserved in only one Gospel.

Secondly, we presume that in Jesus' surroundings, they read the Hebrew Bible and discussed it in Hebrew or Aramaic. Also, their interpretations related to those of their Jewish contemporaries, i.e. we may expect the rudiments of midrash. However, as the Gospels were written in Greek, we operate on the linguistic interface with Hebrew and Aramaic, and this concerns biblical versions in the first place. Given the fluid state of the biblical text in antiquity, we must be open to allusions both to the known standard versions and to others.

Thirdly, we must consider the possibility that the extended development of the gospel text and its readership involved transitions from surroundings where familiarity with the methods of midrash was a given, to those where this was not the case. The development of the community of Jesus' disciples, first into a community of mixed Jewish and Gentile composition and subsequently into the Gentile church, strongly suggests as much. We should not be surprised if a patristic commentator, or even an evangelist, appears not to capture the point of a particular allusion to the Song embedded in the Jesus tradition.

Finally, we must consider how to establish that an intentional allusion to the Song is actually out there, rather than a mere speculation in the reader's mind.[29] The point is that the New Testament never makes a formal quotation of the Song, only informal allusions. Also, prophetic passages with nuptial motifs may interfere with possible Song allusions. A sound criterion seems to be that we need at least two connected verbal elements, two words or their equivalents from a passage in the Song, to identify an intentional allusion.[30] Thus, for example, in order to identify an actual allusion to Song 5.2, a mere 'door' would not be sufficient, as doors are found everywhere; the 'knocking' would be needed in addition, and safer still, also the 'beloved' and his 'voice'. If applied too rigidly, this standard would eliminate some of our own examples. However, we are zooming in on the tradition of Jesus' teachings that underlies the extant Gospel texts and that is sometimes traceable in several versions. In cases [438] where the same tradition unit seems convincingly preserved in different Gospels, we may cautiously combine the evidence. Thus equipped, let us now address our five examples.

3.1 *'The Lesson from the Fig Tree'*

In the context of the so-called 'synoptic apocalypse', Jesus cites the 'lesson of the fig tree' which his hearers are presumed to know already. We turn to Mark since the primordial version of this Gospel plausibly served as model text both for Luke and Matthew.

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[29] Cf. the 'tumult of reverberations' announced by exegetes as noted by J. MacWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God: Marriage in the Fourth Gospel* (SNTS MonSer 138; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 4–10.

[30] MacWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 10–20 adopts Richard Hays' criteria (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). On p. 82 she registers 'two exact verbal parallels' between Song 1.12 and John 12.3 but does not make this a systematic criterion. Similarly, without making his method explicit, Feuillet, 'Le Cantique des Cantiques', 327 registers an allusion based on 'la présence de quatre éléments communs' between Rev 3.20 and Song 5.2 (see below). The criterion here proposed was developed in work on identifying Scriptural allusions in midrash.

> From the fig tree (συκή) learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that this is near, at the very gates. (Mark 13.28–9)

The question about this 'lesson' or parable (παραβολή) is: why the fig tree, why not any other tree that puts forth leaves in spring? Precisely that seems to have been at the back of Luke's mind when editing his Gospel using Mark: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees …' (Luke 21.29). Like many later readers, apparently, he has missed the allusion to the Song hidden in the parable: 'Arise, my love … for the winter is past … the fig tree (συκή) puts forth its early figs …' (Song 2.10-13). Our criterion applies, however, for we have two or three consecutive elements from a single passage, only in disguised, allusive form: not just a 'fig tree', but also the arrival of 'summer', equivalent to the passing of 'winter', and the 'leaves' being put forth which can be read as a remote equivalent of the 'early figs'.

If we suppose a Semitic background, the word 'summer' (θέρος) is interesting, since the Hebrew equivalent קיץ is easily associated with קץ, 'endtime'.[31] The apocalyptic perspective in which the 'lesson' was probably transmitted makes this association more plausible. Indeed, the surrounding apocalyptic scenario which includes 'wars' and 'famines' (Mark 13.3–36) reminds us of the apocalyptic passage concluding the exposition on Song 2.8–14 in the *Pesikta* and *Song Rabba* where similar tribulations such as famines, wars and depravity are announced. And there it is: in its brevity, the synoptic fig tree parable in its apocalyptic context reads like a primitive version of the extended Song midrash that appears in these works centuries later. We shall return to this conclusion after reviewing further evidence.

3.2 *'From the Treasure, New and Old'*

The next example concerns a saying found only in Matthew, although it concludes a chapter of Kingdom parables adapted from Mark 4 (cf. Luke 8). [439] Such additions to the Markan model are always under suspicion of being a redactional creation, though they could derive from previous tradition.[32]

> He said to them, therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (καινὰ καὶ παλαιά). (Matt 13.52)

The order is unusual. Normally, would a master not bring 'old and new' from his cellar? The inverse order betrays an allusion to the Song in a slightly different Greek version: 'New as well as old (νέα πρὸς παλαιά) I have stored up for you, O my beloved' (Song 7.14).[33] The two words in their peculiar order meet our criterion, but more reflection is useful. The 'treasure', θησαυρός, from which 'new and old' is brought, also seems to allude to the phrase 'I stored up' (צפנתי) in the Song verse. In terms of the saying in Matthew, this would suppose the corresponding verb θησαυρίζω in the Song. The Septuagint translation has ἐτήρησα, which is as good a translation for the Hebrew as ἐθησαύρισα. By consequence we seem to be dealing with an allusion to the Song via another Greek or Semitic translation. Comparison with the Targum, where גנז is used,[34] makes an Aramaic version likely. Hebrew צפן and אוצר

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[31] Similarly W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: Clark, 1988–97) III.465–6, without reference to the Song.

[32] U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (EKK; 4 vols., re-ed. and repr., Zürich/Neukirchen: Benzinger/Neukirchener, 1985–2002) II.262–3 recognises the redactor's pen while sensing a traditional kernel.

[33] Noted in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, II.447, referring to *b.Eruvin* 29b; *t.Yoma* 4.6; 2.14.

[34] *Targum Song*: קום קבל מלכותא די גנזית לך.

('store' and 'treasure') do not make a word play, but Aramaic גנז and גנזא ('store' and 'storage') do. This makes it more likely that the saying stems from the Jesus tradition rather than from the evangelist. It remains to point out that the rabbinic midrash interprets 'new and old' variously as referring to recent and more ancient biblical persons and to new and old teachings.[35] As we shall see in a moment, the 'new' is a conspicuous category in the teachings of Jesus.

3.3 *'While the Bridegroom is with Them'*[36]

In another pericope in Mark, Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom:

> … People came and said to him, Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus said to them, The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? … The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then [440] they will fast, on that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak … And no one puts new wine into old wineskins … (Mark 2.18–22)

The term 'wedding guests', υἱοὶ τοῦ νυμφώνος, is a glaring Semiticism: cf. בני החופה, a phrase common in rabbinic literature. There is more to it. A discussion in the Tosefta turns on a halakhic question analogous to the one seemingly underlying Jesus' pronouncement:[37]

> The best man and all other wedding guests (השושבינין וכל בני חופה) are exempt from the daily prayer and from *tefillin* all seven days (of the wedding feast), but obliged to saying *Shema*; R. Shilo says, The bridegroom is exempt, but all wedding guests are obliged. (t.Berakhot 2.10)

The Jewish terminology of the bridegroom and his wedding guests and the underlying halakhic question give us a keen sense of the ambience of the Song in Mark. However, we do not have the two key terms required to identify an allusion. We only have the word 'bridegroom' and, strictly speaking, this does not figure in the Song (νυμφίος, חתן).

Here, we must broaden our scope and bring in a closely related passage from the Gospel of John. There too, it concerns a discussion with the disciples of John the Baptist, mentioned in the New Testament only in this connection,[38] and it is about a ritual commandment: purity in this case, fasting in Mark. In both passages, a question is asked about Jesus' position as compared with the Pharisees and the Baptist's disciples. In the Gospel of John, it is the Baptist who answers:[39]

> I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly (χαρᾷ χαίρει) at the bridegroom's voice (τὴν φωνὴν τοῦ νυμφίου) … He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3.28–30)

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[35] *b.Eruvin* 29b (cf. Strack-Billerbeck, I.677); *LevR* 2.11 (vol. I, p. 52 – insert from *Seder Eliyahu Rabba*); *Song Rabba* 7.14. Cf. above, n. 10 on Hippolytus.

[36] M. Blickenstaff, *While the Bridegroom is with Them: Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew* (London/New York: Clark, 2005) discusses bridegroom imagery in Matthew without touching on the midrash background and links with the Song.

[37] Cf. lavish material in Strack-Billerbeck I.500–17; add *t.Berakhot* 2.10.

[38] Also in the synoptic parallels to Mark 2, i.e. Matt 9.14 and Luke 5.33.

[39] In line with the testifying role of the Baptist in John 1. On the complex links between John and Jesus, see C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 282–3, 331, and cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966) I.155–6.

While these verses are almost certain to have been edited by successive evangelists, the middle part (3.29) contains the 'bridegroom's voice' that makes for an allusion to Song 2.8 and/or 5.2.[40] As in Mark, to be sure, it involves the 'bridegroom', not the 'beloved', ἀδελφιδός, the singular Septuagint rendering of דודי.[41] We could think of interference from Jer 33.11, the 'voice of the bridegroom'. In either case, we may be dealing with some alternative version of the Song, one [441] that is less particular about vocabulary than the Septuagint translator. A Hebrew or Aramaic version is more likely in view of the 'cognate dative', χαρᾷ χαίρει. In the same vein, the 'friend of the bridegroom' (φίλος τοῦ νυμφίου) must be a rendering of the שושבין, the 'best man'. On these and other grounds, C. H. Dodd has established that this passage in John contains a traditional element that is closely related to the synoptic tradition.[42] In other words, we are dealing with a unit of tradition that, variously preserved in John and Mark, alludes to the Song.

The implication is that the image of Jesus as bridegroom in Mark 2 and John 3 derives from the basic gospel tradition and involves exposition of the Song. In this tradition, Jesus is seen as the 'bridegroom', and the Baptist, his former teacher, as his 'best man', who, along with the 'wedding guests', recognises his 'voice'. In contrast, Jesus represents a 'newness' that occasions exemption from certain ritual commandments – temporarily, that is, for 'then they will fast, on that day'.[43] Discreetly implied is a mystical-allegorical reading of the Song in which Jesus is the 'bridegroom' who woos his 'bride', i.e. Israel or the community of the elect.

The ambience of nuptial mysticism is illustrated by a rare apocalyptic story in the Palestinian Talmud that belongs to the esoteric tradition of the early Rabbis we have mentioned. When Elazar ben Arakh 'performed' an interpretation of the *merkava* (Ezek 1) before his master Yohanan ben Zakkai, 'fire descended from heaven and encircled them, and the servant angels were rejoicing before them as wedding guests before the bridegroom (כבני חופה שמיחין לפני חתן)'.[44]

3.4 *'At Midnight there was a Shout'*

In our survey of rabbinic midrash we have observed that two Song passages drew special attention: 5.2 and 2.8–14. We have found an allusion to this second passage in the lesson of the fig tree. Now we turn to the parable of the ten maidens where the first passage plays a role. Again, the pericope is found only in Matthew, and the editor's idiom is recognisable in the format of the context and the opening phrase. But again, this does not annul the possibility that he had received the parable from tradition.[45]

> Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout (μέσης δὲ νυκτὸς κραυγὴ γέγονεν), Look!

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[40] Cambe, 'L'influence du Cantique', 13–15 thinks also of Song 8.13.

[41] Treat, 'Song of Songs', 660.

[42] Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, 282–3, 386, for φίλος τοῦ νυμφίου referring to m.Sanhedrin 3.5, האוהב זה שושבינו. See Blickenstaff, *While the Bridegroom is with Them*, 126–7 for philology on בני חופה and שושבין. For the Semiticism χαρᾷ χαίρει, cf. BDR 198.6.

[43] Fasting was standard practice in early Christianity: Matt 6.16–18; Did 8.1.

[44] *y.Hagiga* 2.1 (77a); cf. *t.Hagiga* 2.1.

[45] See discussion in Luz, *Matthäus* III.465–92; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III.392–3.

> Here is the bridegroom! Come out to [442] meet him … Those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, Lord, lord, open to us. But he replied, Truly I tell you, I do not know you. Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matt 25.1–13)

Some commentators have had difficulty in finding out how 'ancient Palestinian marriage customs' might explain the bizarre scenario of a bridegroom coming to pick up his bride at midnight,[46] while others have recognised similarities with rabbinic parables.[47] As more often, the solution is found in intertextual allusions. In a well-documented article, August Strobel has demonstrated the multiple links of the parable with the Exodus story and its liturgical setting, Passover.[48] Several elements now fall in place. The redeemer's arrival 'at midnight' is a key element from the Exodus story (Exod 11.4; 12.29), an item well known also to the Church Fathers,[49] and the 'great shout' echoes the shout over Egypt's firstborn who were found dead. Strobel also sees the 'closed door' in this light, recalling the 'knocking' on the door in Rev 3.20 (see below), but he cannot accommodate the falling asleep of the maidens. This difficulty disappears when in addition we recognise the link with the Song.

The reading of the Song in association with Exodus and Passover has become clear to us when reviewing the midrash. For an early example, we saw that R. Eliezer interpreted the eating of the Passover 'with loins girded' and 'in haste' as God's haste to deliver Israel, which he saw reflected in Song 2.8. Significantly, these connections are also echoed in early Christian texts, revealing the tradition context of the parable of the maidens:

> Have your loins girded and your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds awake when he comes … (Luke 12.35–6)[50]

The 'girded loins' are an Exodus motif, but the 'knocking on the door' and the 'being awake' lead us to the Song.[51] We must hear Song 5.2 again:

> [443] I am asleep, but my heart is awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking: Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.

Several key words from the parable are found here: the maidens 'sleep' and 'wake up', the 'door' is asked to be 'opened', and the bridegroom arrives in the 'night'. Upon consideration, the Song verse even seems to set the parable in motion. It governs the difference between the wise and the foolish: all maidens 'are asleep', but as to the wise, 'their heart is awake', which is signified by the oil supply they keep ready. Furthermore, the arrival of the beloved

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[46] E.g. J. Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970[8]) 171–5; discussion in Luz, *Matthäus*, III.468, 472; information on the cultural context in Blickenstaff, *While the Bridegroom is with Them*.

[47] Strack-Billerbeck I.969, 878 (*b.Shabbat* 153a, R. Eliezer; *Eccl. Rabba* 9.8, R. Yohanan ben Zakkai); Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III.392. But cf. Luz, *Matthäus*, III.472.

[48] A. F. Strobel, 'Zum Verständnis von Mt 25,1–13', *NovT* 2 (1958) 199–227. Luz, *Matthäus*, III.471 n. 30 finds a 'singular allegorical interpretation' in view of Passover, based on 'isolated motives'.

[49] Strobel, 'Zum Verständnis', 203–4 (add: Origen, *Scholia in Matt.*, MPG 17.304). Also noted in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, III.398.

[50] Cf. also Eph 6.14; 1 Pet 1.13; Did 16.1.

[51] Blickenstaff, *While the Bridegroom is with Them*, 105 notes the 'door' on which the bridegroom 'knocks' in Song 5.2 and Rev 3.20.

with his 'locks wet with the drops of night' seems pivotal in the intertextual link with the Exodus story: he is recognised as the redeemer who comes at midnight, and a shout goes up.

We are obviously in the same ambience as the midrash we have quoted from the *Pesikta*: the congregation of Israel is asleep in view of the end time, i.e. the hour of arrival of the redeemer, but her heart (or at least that of the 'wise') is awake in view of the redemption. Once again, the allusion to the Song implied in Jesus' parable appears to reflect an early version of the midrash that appears centuries later in rabbinic literature.

3.5 *'In the Whole World … in Remembrance of Her'*

The third example above involved a primitive tradition element that seemed variously preserved in Mark and John. This is even more clearly the case in our last example, the anointment story in Bethany.[52] The two versions contain some near-identical clauses and have a parallel structure. Modern exegetes take different views, but Dodd seems to have the strongest case in arguing that it concerns different versions of the same story from the basic gospel tradition.[53] The allusions to the Song are more obvious here, but also more diffuse.

> ... A woman came with an alabaster jar of costly perfume made of pure nard, and she broke open the jar and poured it on his head. But some … said … But Jesus said, Let her alone … she has done a good deed to me. For you always have the poor with you … but you will not always have me … She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her. (Mark 14.3–9)
>
> Mary took a pound of expensive perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot said … Jesus said, Leave her alone. She [444] bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. (John 12.3–8)

Both versions contain an exceptional string of four consecutive words: a 'costly perfume made of pure nard' (μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτελοῦς/πολυτίμου). Both also have the clauses about the 'poor' and Jesus' 'burial'. There are also differences. In Mark a nameless woman anoints Jesus' head while anonymous disciples protest; in John, Mary of Bethany anoints his feet and the protest is voiced by Judas Iscariot. Also in John, the mention of the 'good deed' and the concluding praise of the woman are lacking; instead, there is the more subdued phrase in the middle about the perfume that fills the house. The evangelist's hand seems heavier in John, enhancing Jesus' prominence in particular.

Two words in the remarkable clause about the costly perfume are found in the Song, 'perfume' and 'nard'. 'Nard' is very rare: in the Old Testament it is found only in the Song and in the New Testament, only in our two passages. Consequently, echoes of the Song have been heard since the Church Fathers, involving two verses in particular:

> Your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you. (Song 1.3)

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[52] We shall ignore Matt 26.6–13, which mainly rehearses Mark 14.3–9, and Luke 7.36–50, which contains unique elements but does not seem to carry visible allusions to the Song.

[53] Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, 162–73. Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (2 vols.; AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981) 684–8; Luz, *Matthäus* IV.57 n. 2; Brown, *John*, I.449–52.

> While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance (νάρδος μου ἔδωκεν ὀσμὴν αὐτοῦ). (Song 1.12)

Among modern interpreters, Jocelyn MacWhirter, fulfilling our criterion,[54] has identified two 'verbal parallels' in John 12 with Song 1.12, the 'fragrance' (ὀσμή) of Mary's 'nard' (νάρδος) that filled the house. Origen, in his Christocentric, 'Johannine' reading, curiously insists that Mary's ointment spread Christ's fragrance; he seems to read Song 1.12 from 1.3.[55] A link with Song 1.3 is made by Hippolytus, who states that when the Word no longer resided 'in the bosom of the Father' but was 'emptied' (ἐκκενωθείς) into the world, his 'fragrance … filled everything'.[56] The association is not only with John 12.3 ('filled everything') but also with 1.18 ('bosom of the Father'). Elsewhere, speaking about 'righteous deeds', Hippolytus has a different take on the anointment story: 'The virgin Mary anointed the Lord with the ointment of [445] nard, and her hands gave off a sweet odour, and the people saw these good deeds of their brethren [*sic*] and praised the Lord in heaven.'[57] The latter allusion is to Matt 5.16, typical of Hippolytus' Gospel harmonising.[58] More importantly, his emphasis is that the 'fragrance' is Mary's, thanks to her 'good deed'. It is the emphasis made in Mark.

In Mark we seem in fact to have an allusion to Song 1.3, 'perfume poured out'. In the Hebrew this is שמן תורק, from the verb ריק, 'to empty'. The Septuagint translator, true to character, rendered this literally and artificially, μύρον ἐκκενωθέν, 'perfume emptied' (the form cited by Hippolytus). A less particular translator would rather have used a compound of χέω, which is what we find in Mark: κατέχεεν. Thus it seems that in Mark the 'name' of the 'perfume poured out' aims at the woman,[59] and this is expressed in Jesus' concluding pronouncement.

If so, the final clause of Song 1.3 becomes interesting, 'therefore the maidens love you', על כן עלמות אהבוך. In the unvocalised script used in Antiquity, עלמות can be read differently, a usual ploy in midrash. In our case: read not *alamot*, 'maidens', but *olamot*, 'worlds'. Indeed this is one of the readings in the midrash and targum on the verse, yielding 'the nations of the world' or 'the whole earth'.[60] The same reading seems to underlie the concluding praise in Mark, adding depth to an otherwise bleak saying.[61] In paraphrase: 'Her name is perfume poured out, the whole world will love her.' As Hippolytus sensed, Jesus as remembered in Mark exalts the woman's 'good deed' by way of alluding to the Song.

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[54] MacWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 79–85 (following Cambe, 'L'influence du Cantique', 15–17), see above n. 30. Less cogently, A. Roberts Winsor, *The King is Bound in his Tresses: Allusions to the Song of Songs in the Fourth Gospel* (Studies in Biblical Literature 6; New York: Lang, 1999) 25–6 sees allusions to Song 1.3 and 1.12.

[55] *In Cant*. 9 (*SC* 375 p. 436–43) = *Scholia in Cant*. MPG 17.260. Cf. 'note complémentaire' 12 in Brésard and Crouzel, *Origène, Commentaire,* vol. II.765–6.

[56] Hippolytus, *In Cant*. 2.5 (ed. Richard, 'Une paraphrase grecque').

[57] Armenian Fragment, Bonwetsch, GCS 1, 361.

[58] Noted by MacWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah*, 2 n. 6.

[59] The transferral of this feature of the king (1.3) to the bride (1.12) can be seen as a 'midrashic liberty'. Cf. R. Eliezer's much bolder transferral from Israel's haste to God's, above, n. 21.

[60] עלמות is read either as על מות or אומות העולם: MekRY beshallah shira 3 (p. 127, R. Akiva; see below, n. 64); MekRS 15.2 (p. 79, same); SifDeut 343 (p. 399, anonymous). Cf. Song Rabba 1.22 (R. Yohanan); LevR 3.7 (vol. I, p. 73, from Seder Eliyahu Rabba). Targum Song 1.3: ושמך קדישא אשתמע בכל ארעא.

[61] Cf. Luz, *Matthäus*, IV.62, commenting on Matthew's near-identical version.

4. The Development of the Exposition of the Song

Let us now look back and draw together the various lines of development we have noted. We have explored what appear to be successive stages running from Qumran and the Septuagint via Jesus and his contemporaries, before splitting into one branch that went via Akiva and on to the edited midrash of *Song Rabba*, and another through Hippolytus and Origen. Our impression was that Akiva's and Origen's involvement with the Song was somehow exceptional, stressing the mystical dimension in contrast to their colleagues.

Seen in this light, Jesus as remembered in the sources also had an unusual interest in the Song. In particular, he is attributed with a mystical emphasis. [446] After the manner of scriptural saviour figures, he personally identifies with the 'bridegroom' who woos his 'bride', i.e. Israel or the community of elect. The implication is that this 'wooing' is done by proclaiming the Kingdom of God and appealing to 'repent and believe this gospel', as programmatically summarised in Mark 1.15. The identification with the bridegroom who comes to save his people also seems to imply the sense of 'newness' vis-à-vis John the Baptist, his 'best man'. In company with friends and disciples, the mystical awareness even occasions a festive, temporary exemption from certain ritual commandments.

To the extent that the attribution of this mystical reading to Jesus is historical, a transition to the so-called 'nuptial Christology' of his later followers is well imaginable. A convincing illustration is found in the letter John of Patmos wrote to the church of Laodicea, *ca.* 100 CE, purportedly in the name of the Risen Christ: 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Rev 3.20). The allusions to Song 5.2 ('knocking', 'voice', 'door') cannot be missed.[62]

From here, we can hypothesise a straight development to Origen's Christological reading of the Song. However, to judge from the 'Markan' interpretation of the anointment story by Hippolytus, emphasising the woman's good deed, non-Christological readings were still around during the second century CE. His possible Judaeo-Christian affiliation points to a kind of overlap between the rabbinic and the early Christian interpretation. Thus the riddle begins to dissolve. We begin to suspect a continuous development from the Jesus tradition, via John of Patmos, on to Hippolytus and Origen. This helps understand the original Christian interest in the Song, as also Origen's eagerness to borrow Jewish interpretive elements that suited this interest.

As to the canonical status of the Song, it is remarkable that we find only discreet allusions in the New Testament, never a formal quotation. This is exceptional, given the formal citation of other 'disputed' Writings such as Proverbs (Jas 4.6) and Ecclesiastes (Rom 3.10), or even the 'apocryphal' Enoch (Jude 14–15). It seems to correspond to the ambiguous status of the Song that we found intimated in rabbinic literature.[63] It also makes the interest in the Song taken by Jesus as remembered the more remarkable.

While reviewing the midrash on the Song, we found two focuses of attention for the Rabbis in interpreting the Exodus chapters on Passover. They are passages that appear in inverse order in the sequence of homilies in the *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, Song 5.2 before 2.8–14, while the subsequent editor of *Song Rabba*, reusing this material, restored the 'correct' order. Surprisingly, we have found the two focuses reflected also in rudimentary form in the Jesus tradition. The parables of the fig tree and of the ten maidens, alluding to Song 2.8–13

[62] Feuillet, 'Le Cantique des Cantiques', 324–34; Cambe, 'L'influence du Cantique', 5–9.

[63] Cf. the semi-formal quotation formula of R. Eliezer, a 'conservative' early Tanna, above, n. 21.

and 5.2, can be [447] seen as early expressions of the midrash tradition that appears in full development centuries later in the *Pesikta* and *Song Rabba*.

As to contents, the perspective of redemption expressed in those two parables fully accords with the rabbinic midrash. The same cluster of passages and motifs is at play: Exodus, Passover and the Song, the bride and her beloved who arrives in the night, the winter that is past and the fig tree putting forth leaves or early figs, and the lusty sense of spring that carries it all. The 'synoptic apocalypse' that precedes the fig tree saying presages cataclysmic events towards the 'end time'; so does the 'rabbinic apocalypse' that concludes the homilies on Song 2.8–14 in the *Pesikta* and *Song Rabba*. Evidently, we are dealing with the same tradition.

The exposition of the Song ran in parallel among ancient Jews and Christians even while the rupture between them occurred. The polemics of Origen towards the mid third century relate to this process. A corresponding attitude is attributed to Akiva. In an extended exposition on Song verses he rebuffs the budding interest of the 'nations of the world' in Israel's God, quoting them as asking, 'What is your beloved more than another beloved?' (cf. Song 5.9), whereupon Israel say to them, 'You have no part in Him, for, My beloved is mine and I am his' (cf. Song 2.16).[64] Speaking of a battleground … Akiva must have died at the end of the Bar Kokhba war, *ca.* 135 CE, so his polemic roughly coincided with the novel phenomenon of Christian apologies presented before the emperor.[65] Another text from this period is the Epistle of Barnabas, which fiercely combats the Jewish understanding of the commandments and claims, 'the covenant is ours'.[66]

Scholars have debated which metaphor most adequately describes the relationship of the two communities in antiquity: mother and daughter, sibling sisters, or estranged brothers.[67] It seems another image should be taken into consideration: rival lovers.

[64] MekRY beshallah shira 3 (p. 127), reading both עולמות and על מות (see above, n. 60). Cf. Urbach, 'Homiletical Interpretations', 250–1.

[65] Eusebius, *HE* 4.3: Quadratus and Aristides.

[66] Barn 13.1. See P. J. Tomson, 'The Didache, Matthew, and Barnabas as Sources for Early Second Century Jewish and Christian History', *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History*, (CRINT 13; ed. P. J. Tomson and J. Schwartz; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 348–82, at 357–62.

[67] Cf. A. Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 3–7.