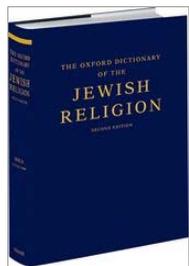


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SONG OF SONGS, BOOK OF

(Heb. *Shir ha-Shirim*), also known as *Canticles* and as the *Song of Solomon*; fourth book in the Writings section of the Bible, and first of the Five Scrolls. Its eight chapters consist of a series of lyric love songs and poetic dialogues and monologues. The two lovers give rapturous expression of their yearnings; their lavish praise of each other's physical beauty is expressed in language that is at times delicate and at other times frankly erotic. The beautifully simple descriptions of scenery are permeated with a love of nature and the land. From a literary standpoint the *Song of Songs* includes some of the most notable poetry in the Bible. The work has much in common with other ancient Near Eastern love poetry, especially compositions from Egypt. As a result of its manifest secular character, its canonization was opposed by some. Its acceptance into the canon was effected only in the second century CE (see *Yad*. 3.5) on the basis of the allegorical interpretation of R. 'Aqiva', who declared that "All the writings are holy, but the *Song of Songs* is the Holy of Holies" and who identified the protagonists not as human lovers but as God, the groom, and Israel, the bride. The love expressed between the two was thus viewed as symbolic of the covenant of God and Israel. The Targum and the Midrash Rabbah go further and create an expansive text that understands the *Song of Songs* as a complete record of Israel's history in biblical times (Exodus, Sinai, entrance into Canaan, etc.). The tradition of allegorical interpretation was inherited by Christian exegetes, for whom Jesus became the bridegroom, and the church, the bride. Gershom Scholem, supported by Saul Lieberman, has argued that the symbolic interpretation of the *Song of Songs* in terms of ancient Merkavah mysticism (see MA'ASEH MERKAVAH) goes back to the tannaitic period. In late medieval exegesis, both Jewish and Christian, the allegorical understanding gave way to an individual-mystical one; the bride and groom symbolized the human soul and its divine beloved respectively. Traditionally, Jews have understood the work to be of Solomonic authorship, but the superscription in *Song of Songs* 1.1 is subject to various interpretations (e.g., by Solomon, concerning Solomon, etc.). The Talmud (*B. B.* 15a) assigned it to King Hezekiah and his contemporaries. Most modern scholars assign it a postexilic date on linguistic grounds, based on the presence of one Persian loanword, *pardes* (garden), and many Aramaic ones, for example, *kotel* (wall), but scholars have not reached a consensus on whether it is a unified composition or a collection of individual love poems. The book, redolent of spring, is read on Pesah in the synagogue and at the end of the Pesah Seder among Sephardim. In addition, in some communities (mainly Sephardi) the *Song of Songs* is recited every Friday evening, based on the view that casts the Sabbath as the beloved bride.

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—GARY A. RENDSBURG

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