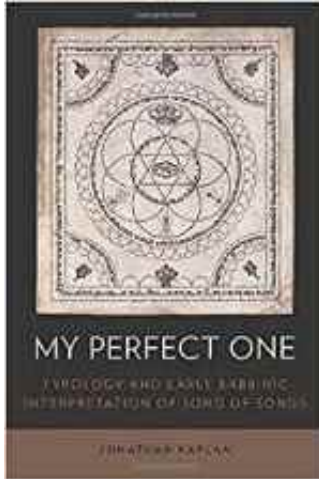




Song of Songs



Book review

Daniel Rosenberg | 31.05.2018

Jonathan Kaplan:

My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

xiv + 225 pp. \$78.00 (cloth)

In this book, especially of interest to those working on close readings of rabbinic literature, Jonathan Kaplan argues for an intentional theology expressed in tannaitic midrashic readings of Song of Songs. Although tannaitic readings on Song are scattered among different “halakhic” midrashim, Kaplan seeks to demonstrate that they are key to subsequent amoraic developments. The tannaitic theology evolves naturally from love-song poetry in biblical source material, and the tannaim develop the love between the Song’s protagonists into a description of the human-divine relationship. Kaplan shows that the tannaim prefer to intertextualize the Song verses with Pentateuchal-legal (rather than prophetic, marital relationship) biblical sources, and thereby lay the foundation for a theology based on demonstration of love through the interface of commandments. Kaplan compares his approach to Mishnah and Tosefta studies, “where scholars will frequently study a theme or a tractate in these works as the primary focus of their discussion” (p. 9). However, because Kaplan argues for a broader tannaitic reading based on materials selected out of different tannaitic works, he emphasizes his commitment to contextual settings and functions of the chosen texts.

In chapter 1, Kaplan examines the readings of Song of Songs found in tannaitic midrashim against their historical setting of antique Greco-Roman allegory, and of early Christian typological interpretation of Song of Songs. Whereas Philo and Origen’s reading practices correlated hidden meanings with universal ideals, rabbinic interpretation correlates the narratives in Song with “the specific, historical drama of Israel’s relationship with God” (p. 19). Kaplan problematizes Daniel Boyarin’s reading of this interpretation as parabolic—a simple text allowing analogic interpretation of a more complex text—and prefers David Stern’s reading of this interpretation as a midrashic allegorical form that connects with biblical-historical events, which offers a better paradigm of characterization. This connection with historical events leads Kaplan to suggest the term “typology,” allowing an entrée for comparison with general Christian figural interpretation of Old Testament

texts as offering antitypes or prefigurations of the figure of Jesus. Kaplan then demonstrates how rabbinic typological reading in Song describes an idealized relationship of covenantal love between Israel and God at key historical moments in post-Exodus history: crossing the sea, Sinai theophany, and wilderness wanderings. Since Song is not explicitly historical or mythical, and its characters are archetypically idealized, it required such a figurative reading for contemporary meaning making.

In chapter 2, Kaplan focuses on the correlation of early tannaitic reading of Song with historical events. He argues for a hermeneutical flexibility within his selected early tannaitic sample to see Song as “describing the paradigmatic events and institutions of Israel’s ideal national historical narrative” (p. 48). Here he must justify his narrow sampling in contrasting this reading to Saul Lieberman, Alan Goshen Gottstein, and Tamar Kadari, and within this selection he finds a consistent correlation between the female protagonist of Song and Israel, and between the male beloved and God. Other key figures from biblical narratives are correlated with characters in Song, which enriched both the tannaitic historicization of Song and their portrayal of the God-Israel relationship. This historicization is retrospective, to the biblical narrative, and proleptic, to the eschatological future, and reflects on events contemporary with the tannaim. Kaplan therefore understands the generic function of Song for tannaitic readers to be analogous to epic poetry, “disclosing the heroic and significant events of Israel’s history” (p. 81).

In chapter 3, Kaplan describes how tannaitic readings correlated the biblical female protagonist’s beauty with ideal rabbinic practice and piety. He identifies three descriptive sections of Song used by tannaim to prefigure and model the unique God-Israel relationship. This reimagination in a love relationship (with a feminized Jewish male) allowed the rabbinic readers to contrast their own voluntary subjugation in relation to God with the experienced relation of subjugation to the Roman Empire. This love model gave language for meaning making in the face of martyrdom. Instead of focusing on idealized divine relationships at biblical moments, the tannaitic reading of Song in this approach argues that rabbinic, commandment-focused practice “sustains Israel’s relationship with God” (p. 112). These readings deepen the affective offerings of religious life for those who followed the rabbinic path, channeling the erotic imagery of Song unabashedly into “intense and reciprocal devotion and affection” (p. 122).

Chapter 4 turns to the characterizations of God in the typological reading of the male protagonist in Song: God’s character is distinguished from those of other nations’ gods, and God’s attributes are correlated to the features of the ideal Israel. Only one section of Song (5:10-16) describes the male protagonist in the poetic form described for the female protagonist, and Kaplan offers close readings of tannaitic texts on these verses. The female protagonist’s delight at the exemplary traits of the male beloved gives language for the rabbinic longing for the gift of the Torah. This language of reciprocity and exclusivity allows for the development of rabbinic values of imitating God’s behavior and character traits.

In chapter 5, Kaplan discusses tannaitic application of Song’s absent lover imagery to give rabbinic readers tools for transforming the suffering of exile and subjugation into a renewed relationship, as it had been in the Sinaitic and wilderness period. The tannaim read the elusive presence of the male lover in narrow focus in Song 3:4 and 5:2 (“the night visions”) to reassure Israel of God’s continued accompaniment even in Egypt. The tannaim thus subverted the biblical model of exile as an expression of rupture in relationship with the divine (Deuteronomy 29-32 or Leviticus 26) as more like the accompanied exile of Ezekiel, and thereby offered exile as a time of covenantal renewal.

The key methodological question that Kaplan must face, and to which he returns regularly throughout the book, is the fraught nature of proposing a tannaitic hermeneutic when there is no tannaitic collection specifically focused on Song of Songs and not even a sustained treatment of the text within another rabbinic collection (like the collections on Esther in Babylonian Talmud [BT] Megillah, or on Chanukkah in BT Shabbat). Consequently, he must admit to have “created a ‘new corpus of rabbinic literature’” in offering a unified reading of texts selected from a variety of

tannaitic sources (p. 9): the *Mekhiltas* on Exodus, *Sifra* on Leviticus, *Sifre Bemidbar* and *Sifre Zuta* on Numbers, and *Sifre Devarim* and *Midrash Tannaim* on Deuteronomy. Kaplan pointedly excludes, for methodological reasons that he elaborates, rabbinic discussions of Song of Songs in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, in amoraic midrashic collections, and in *Shi'ur Qomah* literature.

On the whole, this is a fair and necessary compromise. To offer a reading of any literary phenomenon that otherwise appears episodic and isolated, defensible criteria for the sample selection need to be laid out. One may argue with the criteria, or with the subsequent synthetic reading, but Kaplan's work gives a start for that discussion. That the tannaim read and commented on Song of Songs is clear. The artificial composition of this "new corpus" gives a necessary foothold into the historical period for the comparative discussions that Kaplan lays out in the book as a whole. The exclusion of tannaitic material found in other collections is understandable but calls for further examination of those materials in the wake of this study.

Kaplan offers a close reading of his selected sample, and achieves his goal of drawing together the disparate tannaitic sources into a representation of early tannaitic reading of Song of Songs. His admittedly artificial construction of this corpus allows a characterization of a manageable set of rabbinic texts, arguing for a snapshot of early rabbinic reading of Song of Songs that focuses reflection on its social role within a more specific historical moment. It places tannaitic interpretation within its larger framework of late Second Temple apocalyptic literature to expand the broader picture of Second Temple Jewish interpretation of the biblical book, while also refraining from the impulse to correlate the tannaitic readings with specific historical events. He argues cohesively for a necessary window of discussion in the development of rabbinic interpretation of Song of Songs, which fits into a larger framework for readers of rabbinics to see the tannaitic period as innovative not only in the realm of law but also in theological development.

Editorial remarks

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