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Eros as Interpretation:

Isaac ibn Sahula's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and the Invention of a Kabbalistic  
Hermeneutics

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RELG 402: Senior Capstone Colloquium

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### **Abstract**

Isaac ibn Sahula was a marginal figure in the Castile community of medieval Spanish kabbalists, which included those mystics who would come to compose the groundbreaking book of *Zohar* toward the end of the thirteenth century. While Ibn Sahula is best known for his anthology of animal fables, this essay casts his more obscure *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (ca. 1283) as a key document in tracing the genealogy of the Song's interpretation in classical Kabbalah. Through the translation and analysis of two exemplary sections of the *Commentary*, this essay will discuss its uniquely kabbalistic reading of the Song as a love story between the secrets of Torah and their interpreter and ultimately advance a thesis locating Ibn Sahula's "erotics of reading" in its broader medieval context.

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This Song is the song that contains all of the Torah. ... Why? Because all of its words are in love and in the joy of everything.

— Zohar 2:143b<sup>1</sup>

Here is love's tension, love's politics. Here is form. The reader loves without knowing.

— Lisa Robertson, "Time in the Codex"

## I. INTRODUCTION

Few books native to the Hebrew bible enjoy as privileged an exegetical reception as *Shir ha-shirim*—the Song of Songs. Commentaries on the Song are so well represented in the history of Western letters as to constitute in themselves something of a literary subgenre. These interpretations are distinguished by the depth of their delight in the text and richness of their insights, as scholars have long recognized; "the commentaries on the Song are, as Polonius might have said, the best in the world," note Chana and Ariel Bloch.<sup>2</sup> The influence of Song exegesis on Jewish and Christian theology is consequently difficult to exaggerate, particularly in the most contemplative and esoteric iterations of these traditions. More so than any other biblical text, perhaps, the history of the Song's reception has proven inextricable from the development of Western mysticism, thus earning the verses their designation as "the mystical text par excellence."<sup>3</sup> If we are to begin, then, with Rabbi Akiva's well-known description of the Song of Songs as the biblical "holy of holies,"<sup>4</sup> we must apply this praise likewise to the Song's

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Elliot Wolfson. See Wolfson, "Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Ariel A. Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>3</sup> Following the description of Bernard McGinn. See McGinn, "The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 217.

<sup>4</sup> M. Yadayim 3:5.

reception: to the extent that interpretation itself is understood by rabbinic Judaism to be a holy activity, the interpretation of the Song is, indeed, the hermeneutical holy of holies.

One such interpretation has only recently begun to receive its due scholarly attention. Isaac ibn Sahula's (b. 1244) *Commentary on the Song of Songs* was produced in or around 1283 in the Kingdom of Castile, northern Iberia, and is one of only two extant Song commentaries produced in the classical period of Spanish Kabbalah.<sup>5</sup>

Quite little is known about Ibn Sahula's life, as is typical of Jewish personalities from this century. His comments on the Song are often difficult and specialized, and consequently found little popular appeal. Ibn Sahula is instead remembered for his celebrated anthology of animal fables titled *Meshal ha-kadmoni* (ca. 1281), the *Fable of the Ancients*, often described as medieval Hebrew literature's answer to Aesop.<sup>6</sup> This is a document which until very recently was considered to be purely philosophical (and by implication decidedly non-kabbalistic) in content.<sup>7</sup> As research into the *Commentary* deepens, however, insights into its author's broader activity among the Spanish mystics have proven fruitful. Ibn Sahula is now regarded as a relatively active member of the Castilian school of kabbalists, a group best known for having composed the book of *Zohar*: the preeminent anthology of classical Kabbalah, universally regarded as the apotheosis of this genre and the "jewel in the crown of Jewish mystical literature."<sup>8</sup>

His involvement in the redaction of the *Zohar* would have placed Ibn Sahula in close contact with the major figures of Spanish Kabbalah, including the *Zohar*'s primary architect

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<sup>5</sup> The other being that of Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona. See Arthur Green, "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic symbol in its historical context." *ajs Review* 26, no. 1 (2002): 16, n. 69. For the dating of the *Commentary* see Hartley Lachter, "Spreading Secrets: Kabbalah and Esotericism in Isaac Ibn Sahula's Meshal Ha-Kadmoni," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 1 (2010): 112.

<sup>6</sup> See Loewe, Raphael, ed. *Meshal Haqadmoni: Fables from the Distant past: A Parallel Hebrew-English Text*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), xci.

<sup>7</sup> Lachter, "Spreading Secrets," 111.

<sup>8</sup> Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows From Eden*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1. For Ibn Sahula's involvement in the Castile circle see Lachter, "Spreading Secrets," 112, 125.

Moses de Leon (1240-1305) and Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1305). Both Gikatilla and Ibn Sahula exercised a degree of influence on de Leon's composition verging on collaboration, as indicated by the inclusion of a section from the early Zohar verbatim in *Meshal ha-kadmoni*.<sup>9</sup> The only surviving details regarding Isaac ibn Sahula's own intellectual biography are recorded by Ibn Sahula himself, who describes his debt to a kabbalist named Moses de Burgos with whom he apparently studied as a young man.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the two texts already named, Ibn Sahula authored just one other surviving manuscript: a commentary on the book of Psalms, the content of which has also only entered scholarly discourse in the present generation.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, and despite finding provenance at a critical moment in the history of Jewish mysticism, Ibn Sahula's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* has historically failed to receive nearly the same degree of scholarly attention as contemporaneous treatments on the Song, including those produced by Ezra ben Solomon and by Moses de Leon throughout the zoharic anthology. The reason for this disparity should in no small part be attributed to the circumstances of Ibn Sahula's commentary never having enjoyed the publication history of the two texts mentioned, both of which were printed and distributed at length beginning in the eighteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Ibn Sahula's commentary only existed in

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<sup>9</sup> Lachter, "Spreading Secrets," 112.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See Saverio Campanini, "Transmission and Reception of Isaac Ibn Sahula's Kabbalistic Commentary on Two Psalms", *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 16, 1 (2021): 28-53

<sup>12</sup> Ben Solomon's commentary was first published, with errors, in Altona in 1764 (Seth Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, Commentary on the Song of Songs and Other Kabbalistic Commentaries*. Medieval Institute Publications, 1999: 9). The Zohar was first published in two separate cities between 1558 and 1560. See Jan Doktor and Magdalena Bendowska, "Sefer Ha-Zohar—The Battle For Editio Princeps," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 2 (2012). For more on the Zohar's early publication history refer to Boaz Huss and Yudith Nave, "The Formation of the Zoharic Canon," in *The Zohar: Reception and Impact*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 67-111.

manuscript form until 1987, when it was transcribed and published by Arthur Green (who had taken an interest in the text earlier that year).<sup>13</sup>

The inaccessibility of Ibn Sahula's work may have been by design; as mentioned above, the *Commentary* appears to have been intended only for the author's elite circle of initiates. Regardless, the present availability of this text has meant that Ibn Sahula's work has figured into a number of recent scholarly inquiries into this period of the Song's reception, much of which has focused on Ibn Sahula's presumed ties to Moses de Leon.<sup>14</sup> When the content of Ibn Sahula's writing is reviewed in its own right it is evaluated favorably, with critics praising the vibrant frankness of his prose—"vivid and lithe," remarks Peter Cole.<sup>15</sup> And yet historians of the Song's interpretation have trouble agreeing on exactly what makes Ibn Sahula's *Commentary* distinct from earlier (generally rabbinic and Maimonidean) Jewish attitudes toward the Song.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence notably little scholarship has taken as its object the difficult task of articulating the novelty of Ibn Sahula's reading, and thus of locating the element of the Song's interpretation that was uniquely meaningful for the Castile community of medieval kabbalists.

Through my translation and analysis of two key passages from the *Commentary*, I contend in the present essay that the novelty of Ibn Sahula's reading lies in its movement away from the normative reading of the Song from rabbinic late antiquity as a love story between (i)

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur Green, "Rabbi Isaac Ibn Sahula's Commentary on the Song of Songs / יצחק אבן סהולה / פירוש שיר השירים לר' יצחק אבן סהולה" *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought / מחקרי ירושלים במחשבת ישראל* / ע-ל-פי כתב יד יחידי בספריית אוקספורד עם מבוא והערות ג/ד (1987): 491–393. Green offers a brief treatment of the commentary in his essay "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," *Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 57.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Sharon Koren, "Kabbalistic physiology: Isaac the Blind, Nahmanides, and Moses de Leon on menstruation." *ajs Review* 28, no. 2 (2004): 317-339; Hartley Lachter, "Charity and Kabbalah in Medieval Spain: Possible Evidence from Isaac Ibn Sahula's Meshal ha-Kadmoni." *Iberia Judaica* 6: 119-126.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 244.

<sup>16</sup> For a recent example see Jason Kalman, "The Beautiful Men of the Song of Songs?: Replacing and Erasing the Female Beloved in Ancient and Medieval Jewish Interpretation," in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 238.



the community of Israel and (ii) the Israelite God and toward a reading which instead cast the central erotic dynamic as one between (i) the kabbalist-exegete and (ii) the concealed meaning of Torah. Revising what had henceforth been a national allegory of the female beloved as the Jewish people writ large, Ibn Sahula successfully revised rabbinic interpretations to suit the subjective, elite orientation of the Castile circle.<sup>17</sup>

This novel interpretation of the Song ultimately served the development of a hermeneutical mythology uniquely suited to the Spanish kabbalists' understanding of their own project.<sup>18</sup> I find in Ibn Sahula's *Commentary* an example of Song exegesis that not only utilizes a distinctly kabbalistic, "sefirotic" exegetical vocabulary (like that of, for instance, Ezra ben Solomon) but exceeds this orientation, establishing the metatextual basis for a new interpretive community by reading the Song as *a concealed expression of the kabbalistic-hermeneutical experience*. In doing so, Ibn Sahula casts the activity of interpretation itself in distinctly erotic terms, rehabilitating an aspect of the Song's metaphorical vocabulary that had been sanitized by preceding commentators.<sup>19</sup> Eros and interpretation are unified in Ibn Sahula's mythic vision of exegesis, providing therein a valuable early precedent for the developing interpretive vocabulary of classical Kabbalah and the burgeoning mythos of Zohar.

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<sup>17</sup> I here borrow from Moshe Idel's description of the kabbalists as a "secondary elite," a notion which I elaborate on below. See Idel, "Kabbalah and elites in Thirteenth-century Spain." *Mediterranean Historical Review* 9, no. 1 (1994): 6.

<sup>18</sup> In my description of ibn Sahula's "hermeneutical mythology" I here revise the theory of Quentin Skinner, who in his critique of the history of ideas wrote of the "mythologies" (rather than "histories" or "methodologies") of interpretation. See Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 7.

<sup>19</sup> On the question of the Song's sanitization or "de-erotization" see Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, 35.

## II. THE FORMATION OF IBN SAHULA'S COMMENTARY

Certain key hermeneutical paradigms developed in the middle ages as distinct from their ancient Jewish precedents, and understanding these paradigms provides a useful entry point for discussing the development of the Song's interpretation in the present work. The section below will sketch an introduction to the three distinct phases of the Song's Jewish reception from antiquity to the early thirteenth century, specifically oriented toward how the representative exegetes cited served to lay the interpretative groundwork for the methods of reading that would ultimately crystalize in Ibn Sahula's *Commentary*. These phases are: the rabbinic interpretation; the Maimonidean interpretation (as represented principally by Moses ibn Tibbon); and, finally, the kabbalistic interpretation.

I begin this exposition with rabbinic readings of the Song from late antiquity, exemplified by the seminal *Shir haShirim Rabbah* and *Shir haShirim Zuta*. These glosses were uniformly allegorical, typically casting the female lover as the people Israel and her beloved as alternatively God and His Torah. As I discuss in the introduction to my translation of the comments on Song 2:4 below, this reading generally posited the gestures of intimacy exchanged between the couple as a poetic analogy to the theophany at Sinai—a moment understood as the incipient instant of national intimacy with God.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the Song's earliest exegesis was always-already allegorical, reading the Song as necessarily transcendent of its the literal meaning. Scholars of the Jewish middle ages have thus been eager to point out that it was not until generations later, in the mid eleventh century, that a plain-text (*peshat*) reading of the poem "emerged."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> References in the Song to *pihu* ("your mouth") in particular are generally read by the rabbis as an allusion to the Sinaitic revelation. See SongsR. 1:2: "Rabbi Yohanan said: It was stated in Sinai, as it is stated: 'Let him kiss me from the kisses of his mouth.' This is where the Holy One blessed be He spoke to the Israelite with His mouth." (trans. Sefaria Midrash Rabbah, 2022)

<sup>21</sup> See Barry Dov Walfish, "Song of Songs: The Emergence of Peshat Interpretation." Thetorah.com, 2018.

Claims of this nature are complicated, especially given the manner with which even Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitchaki, 1040-1105), who is known universally as the preeminent theorist and generator of plain-text exegesis, qualified his comments on the Song as representing an enmeshment of literal and allegorical readings. Simultaneously embracing Midrashic and plain-text interpretations of the Song, its meaning is thus revealed by Rashi as two-fold: an expression of both (i) the celestial drama of God's proximity with Israel and (ii) a terrestrial love story of a husband and his wife.<sup>22</sup>

This synthesis of hermeneutical forms gave way a century later to the distinctly philosophical interpretation inaugurated by Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1138-1204) and his students. A testament to the Aristotelian renaissance of this period, the Maimonidean reading of the Song understood the text to be symbolic of the individual soul's relationship to God. References to erotic intimacy were in this manner read according to the logic of the classical (arguably Neoplatonic) structure of "contemplation," an approach exemplified by the Tibbonide exegetical tradition.<sup>23</sup>

Moses ibn Tibbon's (active 1240-1283) *Commentary on Song of Songs* was apparently written as a continuation of the work of his father, Samuel, to whom some of the comments therein are accordingly attributed. The Tibbonides were a celebrated and staunchly Maimonidean family of rabbinic exegetes and translators based in Marseilles who were influential in popularizing the philosophy of Maimonides and defending him against his French critics.<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to Devorah Schoenfeld, "One Song or Many: The Unity of the Song of Songs in Jewish and Christian Exegesis." *Hebrew Studies* 61 (2020): 130. Schoenfeld here astutely demonstrates Rashi's ability to read the Song as a "unified narrative" which "operates on two levels and tells two different stories."

<sup>23</sup> Refer to Alfred Ivry's chapter in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (SUNY, 1992) for insights into this connection.

<sup>24</sup> For the most complete English treatment of the Tibbonide legacy refer to Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalālat al-Hā'irīn into the Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2007. Hebrew) and James T. Robinson "Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and the

younger Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary* thus excels as an example of the application of Aristotelian-Maimonidean thought to Jewish scripture; in the spirit of a Plotinian description of the soul's contemplative ascent to divinity, ibn Tibbon thus reads the Song as an allegory of "the conjunction of the human material (passive) intellect with the Active Intellect by mediation of the acquired intellect."<sup>25</sup> This follows directly from Maimonides' famously Aristotelian description "of which it is said that He comprehends is the intellect itself, which is likewise His essence, God is therefore always the intellectus, the intelligens, and the intelligibile," an approach which affirms human cognitive capacity as the site of the soul's comprehension of divinity.<sup>26</sup>

Ibn Tibbon's insight, then, is to frame the Song not merely in the narrative terms of the people Israel's romance with God but specifically as an allegory of the individual religious subject's encounter with divine essence —an encounter which takes place at the site of the personal intellect rather than at the site of communal revelation. Despite his apparent rationalism, then, Ibn Tibbon's commentary in this sense exemplifies a distinctly thirteenth-century Jewish exegetical interest in a category of subjective religious experience that may be described as "mystical."<sup>27</sup> The gestures of individuation inaugurated by the Maimonideans would prove influential to the later kabbalistic approach to the Song.

More immediately, however, the Tibbonide reading of the Song served as precedent for similarly "philosophical" commentaries emerging largely from French communities well into the fourteenth century. Gersonides (Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, 1288-1344), a notable heir in this

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construction of a Jewish tradition of philosophy" in *Maimonides after 800 Years* ed. Jay Harris (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 291-306.

<sup>25</sup> Howard Kreisel, "Moses Ibn Tibbon: Translator and Philosophical Exegete." in *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence*. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 91.

<sup>26</sup> Guide I.68, trans. Michael Friedlander, *The Guide for the Perplexed by Moses Maimonides* (London: Routledge, 1904).

<sup>27</sup> On the place of mysticism in Maimonides and his successors and difficulty in distinguishing "mysticism" and "philosophy" therein see David R. Blumenthal, "MAIMONIDES' PHILOSOPHIC MYSTICISM." *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah / יהודית וקבלה*, no. 64/66 (2009): V-XXV.

tradition, took an even more extreme approach in his erasure of the Song's corporeal elements in deference to an allegory wholly interested in the intellect. Authored in 1326, Gersonides' comments to the Song arguably represent the apotheosis of Jewish philosophy's abstraction from the carnal distractions of the body. Far removed from a narrative of national intimacy with God, the Song becomes instead a description of intellectual ascent and *unio mystica* in Gersonides' hands, offering encrypted instructions to the individual believer on "overcoming ... impediments to cognition" and in discerning "the division of the sciences."<sup>28</sup> Despite the richness of its corporeal similes, then, the Song emerges for the philosophers not as a song of the body but instead a song of the mind.

This disinvestment in the body has been the object of critique. In an essay on the Song's reception, Arthur Green argues that the intellectual and individual nature of the philosophical commentaries is in fact not unique, born instead out of a medieval Christian approach to the Song that had proven influential to Jewish thought. He problematizes the philosophical commentaries instead on the grounds of their neglect of the text itself, with all of the corporeal allusions implied therein; "all of these texts are attempts to interpret the Song of Songs as a love poem between the individual and the divine," he writes,

... But they do so in highly intellectualized ways; it is the individual *mind* and the Active Intellect that are wooing one another in the Canticle, and they do so in strictly Aristotelian terms. In fact these commentaries may be characterized as rather stilted attempts to fit the bold passion of the Song of Songs into the formal categories of Aristotelian metaphysics, in which the commentary seems like more of an excuse for philosophical disquisition than it does a true coming-to-terms with the meaning of the Scriptural text.<sup>29</sup>

In part echoing the complaints of the kabbalists, then, Green attributes the ultimate failure of the "philosophical" reading of the Song not merely to an overemphasis on the intellect but, instead,

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<sup>28</sup> Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides on the Song of Songs and the Nature of Science." *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (1995): 3.

<sup>29</sup> Green, Arthur. "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary," 12.

to a radical disinvestment in corporeality and the erotic capabilities implied therein. The symbolic vocabulary of Eros for the mystic is, as we will see, fundamental; to forget this for the sake of philosophy is to forget the essence of the Song itself.

In reviewing the medieval transition of philosophical to kabbalistic hermeneutical paradigms we are thus reminded of Gershom Scholem, who in an essay describes Kabbalah as "the vengeance of myth against its conquerors." Here the conquering agents in question are the *halakhists*, upholders of "the strict monotheism of the Law."<sup>30</sup> For our purposes, however, it is worth expanding this category to the influence of Maimonides writ large, both in terms of legal scholarship and the effects of rationalism generally. Thus where Maimonides would read the angels of Jewish theology as incorporeal symbols of divine potency, the kabbalists instead sees winged messengers of God in the most vivid and mythic sense. Scholem's vengeance is represented well in microcosm by the contrast of philosophical and kabbalistic modes of Song exegesis in the thirteenth century—as we will see, the kabbalistic vengeance of myth in the context of the Song's reception is also the vengeance of Eros.

While there had been scattered remarks made about the Song in early (proto-)Kabbalistic sources, most notably the book Bahir, the first comprehensive commentary on the Song of a decidedly Kabbalistic characteristic emerged in the early thirteenth century as a product of the cumulative efforts of Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona (d. ca. 1245).<sup>31</sup> Established in contrast to the sterile rationalism of the Ibn Tibbon, ben Solomon's comments are strikingly vibrant and particular. He seems in his exegesis particularly interested in the precise poetic motifs used in the

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<sup>30</sup> Scholem, Gershom G. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 98-99.

<sup>31</sup> For the sake of brevity I will only treat these remarks to the extent that they are immediately relevant to the text in question. For more on the Song in the book Bahir see chapter six of Schäfer, Peter. *Mirror of His Beauty*. Princeton University Press, 2018. Notable sections include Bahir 141-43, and 203; see also n. 43 in McAuliffe, Jane Dammen, Barry D. Walfish, Joseph Ward Goering, and Joseph W. Goering, eds. *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Song ("wine," "spice," "Lebanon," and so on) and the sensual dimensions of experiences implied therein. Ben Solomon thus develops a loose system ascribing each of these images to a specific *sefirah*; the three words already mentioned are said to be symbols of God's *Hokhmah*, his "wisdom."<sup>32</sup> This reinvestment in the physical motifs of the text itself is a testament to the kabbalistic proclivity toward particular poetic motifs writ large and a departure from the abstraction of the Maimonideans.<sup>33</sup>

Aside from this distinction, ben Solomon's comments to the Song differed from preceding philosophical approaches likewise on the grounds of his reading of divine embrace. Graduating from symbols of cognitive union, ben Solomon offers a distinctly kabbalistic account of the Song's relationship by framing nearly all erotic longing in the *sefirotic* language of intradivine matrimony. Rather than reading an allegory of the soul's ascent, then, ben Solomon offers instead an encoded description of the yearning of *Shekhina*, the divine feminine, for her celestial husband (usually symbolized in the sefirah *Tiferet*).<sup>34</sup> The movement from individual ascent to intradivine romance is an essential quality of the kabbalists' distance from the philosophers.<sup>35</sup> This is implied by ben Solomon when he writes in the introduction to his commentary that "concerning the Song of Songs there are three classes of individuals with three distinct sets of opinions." The second group, who "view it as an allegory of the love of the Creator ... for the splendor of Israel," can include both the rabbis of antiquity and the philosophers of the middle period; the third group, by contrast, represents "those who receive *shekhinah*, who possess a portion in God's Torah ... who have revealed its secrets and hidden

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<sup>32</sup> Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> On the intimate relationship of Kabbalah and poetry, see Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 48.

<sup>34</sup> Themes of intradivine exile and reunion are exemplified in ben Gerona's comments to Song 5:2-7. See Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona*, 93-97.

<sup>35</sup> I here again borrow the description of Arthur Green. See Arthur Green, "Intradivine Romance: The Song of Songs in the Zohar," *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 214-227.

mysteries"—these are the kabbalists.<sup>36</sup> The first group, who read it merely as the account of a carnal love affair, are scarcely worth discussing.

Compared to Ibn Sahula, as we will see, ben Solomon's comments are thus much more explicitly "sefirotic" and in that sense arguably more kabbalistic in the classical, Spanish sense. Regardless, Ezra ben Solomon's *Commentary* ultimately provides the most temporally and geographically proximate precedent for the theses that would coalesce in the work of Ibn Sahula. With this sketch of a background established, then, I will transition in my prelude to Ibn Sahula's *Commentary* to noting a few important points about the methodology and theoretical framework that I will apply to the text in question over the following pages.

### III. THEORY AND METHOD

My approach to the selections of Ibn Sahula's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* translated in the following section will largely be concerned with locating the text's place in a broader Jewish tradition of Song of Songs reception and specifically, as aforementioned, with identifying aspects of the *Commentary* which contribute a new dimension to the Song's meaning in this period particularly as a primary source-text for a developing, distinctly kabbalistic strategy of biblical hermeneutics. Far from being a purely philological exposition, then, the intention of my analysis will be to offer a theoretical perspective to Ibn Sahula's theory of interpretation informed by existing approaches to what may be called an "erotics of reading."<sup>37</sup>

As will be elaborated, this describes a certain hermeneutical attitude whereby the text is posited as the object of erotic desire, and the activity of textual interpretation as the

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<sup>36</sup> See Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona*, 25-26.

<sup>37</sup> Here I borrow a phrase used frequently in critical responses to Roland Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text*, notably Richard Howard's introduction to the 1975 English edition of the essay. See Roland Barthes and Richard Howard, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), viii.



consummation of said desire. Following Plato's *Symposium* and anticipating Alexander Nehamas, one may argue that this integration of Eros and hermeneutics serves in some sense as the implicit basis to the Western exegetical tradition. The theorists and theologians on whom I rely in the following section have sought to "unveil" this basis, thus making the guiding mechanisms of this hermeneutical method explicit and clarifying the unity of Eros in interpretation.

I begin, then, with a discussion of the relationship between these two terms as considered by the contemporary philosopher Alexander Nehamas. In his 2010 monograph on aesthetics *Only the Promise of Happiness*, Nehamas identifies in Susan Sontag's well-known appeal ("in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art") a critical error.<sup>38</sup> Opposing the distinction of these two attitudes of readings—"Eros" against "hermeneutics"—Nehamas argues via Hans-Georg Gadamer that interpretation is always in itself an essentially erotic activity.<sup>39</sup> Citing *Symposium* 203c ("Eros from the beginning has been attendant and minister to Aphrodite, since he was begotten on the day of her birth"), Nehamas writes:

Hermeneutics and erotics do not exclude one another. ... For Plato, the only reaction appropriate to beauty is eros—love, the desire to possess. Moreover, all beautiful things draw us beyond themselves, leading us to recognize and love other, more precious beauties, culminating in the love of the beauty of virtue itself.<sup>40</sup>

Nehamas' approach to beauty is ultimately one concerned with the movement beyond self-referral, positing oneself in relation to alterity. For certain critics Nehamas' retrieval of Plato is ultimately one concerned with a conservative defense of beauty against contemporary art's indifference to aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> I would offer as a counter to such a reading that Nehamas'

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<sup>38</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 10.

<sup>39</sup> See Dominika Czakon, "Is the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art Erotic? A Reader of Gadamer Responds to Sontag's Challenge," *Estetyka i Krytyka* 43, no. 4 (2016): 45–64.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Only a promise of happiness: The place of beauty in a world of art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Tate: "Nehamas and Gadamer provide powerful testimony to the possibility of renewing the Platonic correlation of love and beauty in a hermeneutic account that affirms the relevance of beauty in a world of

reformulation of the Platonic insight is in fact inviting us into a much more radical approach to the ordinary conditions of Eros and interpretation alike.

The condition of hermeneutics per my reading of Nehamas is as follows: a text (shorthand for “object of interpretation”) is that which, in its opacity, provokes desire. This is the erotic logic of the veil and its lifting; the reader is thus one who amorously seeks something hidden in the text and is provoked therein toward its disclosure.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the erotic condition is an essentially hermeneutical one; the lover is constantly interpreting, reading the phenomenal reality around them as a hint into the secret of their desire (or: the secret treasure—*agalma*—of their beloved).<sup>43</sup> For one afflicted by Eros the world is saturated with meaning; specifically, the meaning of the beloved’s presence or absence. Love, like religious sentiment, has the strange ability to imbue physical objects (a flower, a letter) with supernal significance. The lover in the world is in this sense constantly interpreting, searching for traces of and insights into the nature of their beloved in the phenomena at hand.

The erotic condition per Nehamas is thus ultimately an epistemological one, wherein the lover's desire for their beloved is reduced to a desire for hidden knowledge, and for access to a concealed meaning. This notion finds precedence in the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) who identified the object of desire hidden within the beloved specifically as the fact of the beloved's returned desire. This cycle is one wherein desire encouraging an interpretation of the other's desire produces (to borrow again from Gadamer) a "hermeneutical circle" of Eros; Lacan summarizes this notion in stating that "desire full stop is always the desire of the Other.

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art." Daniel L. Tate, “Erotics or Hermeneutics? Nehamas and Gadamer on Beauty and Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 2, no. 1 (2015): 28.

<sup>42</sup> For more on "veiling" see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 225.

<sup>43</sup> For a contextualization of Plato's *agalma* in the contemporary philosophy of desire see Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 83-86.

Which basically means that we are always asking the Other what he desires."<sup>44</sup> Barthes identifies this cycles of desire begetting desire as likewise inherent to the conditions of interpretation when he writes of "the text" as "a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*. The text chooses me."<sup>45</sup> Hermeneutics for these thinkers is thus reframed as a dynamic of uncovering that secret thing concealed within the beloved (in this case: the text), which is in fact the secret of their desire. Anne Carson, finally, states the matter well when she writes that "what the reader wants from reading and what the lover wants from love are experiences of very similar design. It is a necessarily triangular design, and it embodies a reach for the *unknown*."<sup>46</sup> The association of Eros with esotericism or esoteric readers finds precedent, as we will see in the following section, in the hermeneutical theory of Ibn Sahula and the kabbalists.

Later theorists working in this continental tradition—namely, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion—are notable in their eagerness to highlight the "amorous" nature of language specifically in the activity of erotic invocation; that is: in the calling out for the beloved, and in the naming of the "beloved as beloved."<sup>47</sup> The motif of invocation is intrinsic to the Song of Songs, wherein new similes and poetic associations are often introduced by one's calling out for the *dodi* (my beloved) or the *achoti-kallah* (my sister, my bride). The reader of this "amorous rhetoric," illustrated by Derrida as the receiver of the love letter, thus finds themselves as the interpreter of the lover's inscription and subject of his erotic invocation. Received through this lens the Song may be framed as an extended or elevated love letter: a system of invocations intended to mediate

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<sup>44</sup> Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching* (New York: Verso Books, 2008), 38.

<sup>45</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the bittersweet* (Princeton University Press, 2014), p.109. Emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> A paraphrase of Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 8.

erotic contact (whether between the terrestrial couple or, allegorically, between God and man) through the dynamic of inscription and interpretation.

The condition of the hermeneutic lover again finds precedent in the Song, a poem whose text and interpretation has served Western literature as the preeminent case study of ideal desire. Typical of ancient love poetry, the Song is heavy with simile-rich descriptions of the beloved's body. What makes it distinct in my reading is the mutual correspondence of metaphor with the phenomenal (specifically "natural") world—as the body is compared to landscape, so the landscape is compared to the body; the lover's encounter with the world is preceded and informed by her encounter with the beloved, giving way to an experience of reality mediated entirely through desire.

By way of example we might look to Song 1:6 ("they made me keeper of the vineyards, my own vineyard I have not kept"), wherein there is confusion as to where one's body ends and the horticultural domain begins. This is exacerbated in reference to the body of the beloved: Brian Gault notes well the manner with which the female speaker "reads" the shade of the apple tree as a symbol of her beloved's protection.<sup>48</sup> One likewise finds it hard to discern when the male speaker invokes the image of the garden poetically—that is, as a euphemism for his beloved—or merely descriptively (especially in the case of Song 5:1). Features of organic reality thus become in the lover's eyes a commentary on the body of the beloved. The erotic condition (that of the Song's lovers) is an outward-looking mania of reference, a hermeneutics of alterity, and one that is ultimately remanifest in the tradition of Song exegesis.

Indeed, we have in the fact of the Song's popularity among medieval commentators perhaps the best evidence of a kind of cosmic harmony between Eros and hermeneutics. I have

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<sup>48</sup> Brian P. Gault, *Body as landscape, love as intoxication: conceptual metaphors in the Song of songs* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 89–90.

already gestured at the multiplicity of such interpretations, and yet the precise reason for why this poem proved so interesting for exegetes in the middle ages (Jewish and Christian alike) is a problem about which scholars can only hypothesize. There is no doubt that the Song is beautiful, and distinct in the biblical canon for number of reasons. But there were a number of songs produced in antiquity that resembled this one—why choose this text, then, as the song above all others, "*the Song of Songs*?"<sup>49</sup>

Denys Turner suggest that the answer lie in a consideration of "a greek tradition of *eros*" in the West "which flows ultimately from Plato's symposium through the erotic mysticism of pagan neo-platonism into Origen and the pseudo-Denys."<sup>50</sup> While I could hardly deny that Jewish mystics and philosophers alike in the middle ages shared their due of neo-platonic influence it's apparent that Turner's explanation is better suited to a Christian monastic tradition. If I were to offer a more universal thesis it would be one that related the content of the Song specifically to the task of reading itself. As I have contended above, the Song implicitly posits the erotic condition of its protagonists as one defined by the activity of interpretation. To be in love, for the Song, is to be an exegete; for a reader like Ibn Sahula the gardens and wine-houses of its lines become the sites wherein he can set his allegories of reading. This song is thus the Song of Songs precisely because it is the love song of interpretation. Within its verses the exegetes read a myth of their own activity.

Taking this re-inclusion of terms as its invitation ("Eros" together with "hermeneutics") the present analysis is ultimately concerned with what had been described as an "erotics of reading"—that is again to say that the analysis here concerns a hermeneutical mode, exemplified

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<sup>49</sup> I here paraphrase Denys Turner, *Eros and allegory: Medieval exegesis of the Song of Songs*. (Cistercian Publications, 1995), 42.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

by the *Commentary* in both form and content, wherein the activity of interpretation itself is understood to be an essentially and spiritually erotic activity. For Ibn Sahula, as we will read, the drama of Eros contained in the Song is to be understood as an expression of yearning for the secrets of the Text to be obtained through the work of interpretation on the part of the kabbalist. Love itself—and specifically, in loyalty to the Song's content, erotic love—is cast as an essential emotional dimension of one's relationship with scripture; one must be in love with Torah, and further: the kabbalist-exegete must yearn for the depths of its mysteries.

The erotic dimension of esoteric interpretation is hinted at by the German aesthete Friedrich Schlegel when he wrote (by means of a somewhat misogynistic set of symbols) that "mysteries are female; they like to veil themselves but still want to be seen and discovered."<sup>51</sup> It is this dynamic of veiling and unveiling which, as I have already alluded to, is at the heart of any erotics of interpretation. I mean this in the sense that the fact of the object of interpretation's (for the kabbalist: the secrets of Torah) concealment in the apparent meaning of the text does not discourage desire for this object but, in fact, generates it.

This is the paradoxical logic of the veil, following from the theory of Elliot Wolfson; concealment, revealing as much as hides, provokes interpretive desire: "not-showing is intrinsic to the showing."<sup>52</sup> Following motifs of veiling/unveiling in both Sufi and kabbalistic sources Wolfson writes that "the veil—distinctly it seems—manifest qualities typically engendered as feminine and associated with an esoteric hermeneutic, allusive, concealing, masking ... tempting one to imagine the face yet to be seen."<sup>53</sup> Compare this approach to that of Chana and Ariel Bloch, who bemoan in the introduction to their 1998 translation of the Song of Songs the fact of

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<sup>51</sup> Friedrich von Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* (U of Minnesota Press, 1991), 106.

<sup>52</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

Shulamite having been given a "veil" in certain versions of Song 5:7—a mistranslation of her *redidi*, "shawl." ("Veil" is also used as a rendering of the ambiguous *tsammah* (4:1, 6:7), a word which to Jewish readers often meant "locks of hair."<sup>54</sup>) For the Blochs the impulse to hide the female lover's face is the mark of a prudish, patriarchal exegetical tradition which sought to sanitize the poem's carnal essence. The enlightened translator must, accordingly, remove it:

that incongruous veil, like the fig leaf of renaissance painting and sculpture, is a sign of the discomfort of the exegetes. When we lift the veil from her face, the Shulamite is revealed as a passionate young woman, as spirited and assertive as Juliet.<sup>55</sup>

Considered on symbolic level through the lens of Wolfson, however, the Song is interesting and ripe for interpretation precisely by virtue of its veiledness. For a reader like Ibn Sahula the instinct to "unveil the bride" (as it were) is thus a misdirected one. The kabbalist-exegete seeks instead to preserve the erotic dynamic within the text precisely by maintaining and revering its "veil"; that is: its symbolic, apparent level of meaning. Hermeneutics, especially the hermeneutic of the kabbalist, becomes an erotics precisely through the paradoxical logic of the veil and its lifting.

For Ibn Sahula the task of interpretation is as mythic and holy an activity as the welcoming of the sabbath bride, and nearly as saturated with erotic meaning. The work of his comments thus is ultimately to arrange the symbols of the Song in a threefold ring of association (hermeneutics—esotericism—Eros) and thus introduce the symbolic vocabulary of eroticism as the structural form of esotericism in Spanish Kabbalah.<sup>56</sup> It will be the object of the following pages to articulate precisely how these themes are made manifest in the *Commentary*.

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<sup>54</sup> See Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*, 38.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Steven Katz makes a direct analogy between the use of "structural archetctonic" and "sexual-anthropomorphic" imagery in the Zohar's reception of the Song; see Steven Katz, 'The "Conservative" Character of Mysticism' in Katz, Steven, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 9-10. See also Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 585, n. 144.

## IV. TEXT AND ANALYSIS

The following pages comprise of my translation of two key sections from Isaac ibn Sahula's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* treating verses 1:2 and 2:4 of the Song respectively. These comments, like the verses in question, are linked by symbolic commonalities that will become obvious. Taken as a whole, the two sections offer an effective representation of Ibn Sahula's theory of interpretation and the relevance of eros implied therein. Each section is preceded by an introduction outlining traditional rabbinic and, when appropriate, plain-text and philosophical (Maimonidean) interpretations of the present verse. My translations are followed by an analysis detailing certain key features of Ibn Sahula's comments with a particular focus on his theory of interpretation. Often this analysis will also provide comparison to zoharic citations of the same verse.

*Song 1:2*, יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ כִּי־טוֹבִים דְּדִיךְ מִיַּיִן  
 "Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth,  
 for your love is better than wine."<sup>57</sup>

By way of introducing the rabbinic reception of this verse I will outline a few general notes on form. Grammatically, this opening verse is a plea on behalf of the female lover ambiguously addressed to her male beloved.<sup>58</sup> Its two parts are distinguished on the level of tone. In the first, a mood of urgent desire is introduced as the principal tense of this poem. The prefix of "kiss me" (*yishakeni*) implies a volitive urgency, as in: "he *will* give me the kisses of his

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<sup>57</sup> English translations of the Song will follow my rendering based on the 2015 Jewish Publication Society version.

<sup>58</sup> This verse may alternatively be understood as an expression of desire addressed by the bride to her companions, and may thus be read as "let *him* kiss me with the kisses of *his* mouth" (as written in the King James Version). This ambiguity derives from disparate readings of the *yud* prefix of *yishakeni*, which indicates that that the woman's request is directed at a male subject but not whether this request is stated in the second- or third-person. The uncertainty of the beloved's presence (or: the fluid dynamic of absent beloved and present beloved) is a poetic means of expressing one of the poem's central motifs through grammar.



mouth!" We learn, immediately, that the Song is a song about wanting. In the second, the female lover justifies the intensity of her desire by praising her bridegroom's love (or else his status as "beloved," *dodechah*) as even more intoxicating than wine. This introduces the reader to the Song's habit of comparing aspects of the beloved's person to luxurious objects, a formal motif that finds precedence in other ancient cultures of love poetry.<sup>59</sup>

Rabbinic readings of this initial simile since the midrash *Shir haShirim Rabbah* (ca. 650) have cast the "love" in question as the words of Torah's interpretation, and "wine" (*yayin*) as the words of Torah themselves, indicating that the fruit of exegesis can be even more affecting than its object.<sup>60</sup> Alternatively, the sages of antiquity understood the implied plural *dodechah*, "loves"—in grammatical parallel to *neshikot*, "kisses"—as a symbolic reference to the two received expressions of God's love: written and oral Torah.<sup>61</sup>

Likewise, the bride's desire for kisses is understood almost universally in rabbinic exegesis as an allegory for Israel's desire for the revelation of Torah at Sinai, a moment of incomparable intimacy between God and his people. The soul of every worshipper crying out for God's presence is thus read back into the bride's desire for the beloved's kisses, a dynamic of religious desire that set the tone of the Song's reception for much of the middle ages.<sup>62</sup>

We now turn to Ibn Sahula's comments on the verse:<sup>63</sup>

**ישקני מנשיקות פיהו** כבר העירונו רז"ל על מעלת הנשיקה במאמר וימת שם משה עבד יי' על פי יי' ואמ' מלמד שמת בנשיקה. ומאחר שהוא כן ידענו כי הנשיקה נאמרת על מעלה גדולה אחר שנזכר בה משה רבי' ע"ה כאשר עבר מן החיים ההיום והנפסדים אל החיים הקימים והתמידים כאשר באה הקבלה באמרם משה לא מת אלא עלה ומשמש בחרום. ודמיון נשיקה עליונה

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed analysis of this motif see Michael Fox. *The Song of Songs and the ancient Egyptian love songs*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

<sup>60</sup> SongsR I.ii.2-3.

<sup>61</sup> Expressed elsewhere in SongsR I.ii.2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, and SongsR I.ii.5. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 11th c.) also notes in his comments on this verse that "wine" is symbolic of the best of all earthly pleasure, thus indicating that the spiritual delight of Torah is more pleasant than any physical satisfaction.

<sup>63</sup> The text in both sections follows Arthur Green's 1987 transcription. Green, "Rabbi Isaac Ibn Sahula's Commentary on the Song of Songs," 409-410. The cited biblical verses in my translations generally follow the Jewish Publication Society version with slight variations.

זו אצילות הרוח ממקום מוצאו. ובאמת תחלת הפסוק הזה הוא תחלת השיר הידוע שהב"ה אומר בכל יום. מזה נוכל להבין אפי' על הדרך הנגלה כי הנשיקה תחלת המחשבה וסוף המעשה. והעיר עליה החכם בתחלת ספרו כדי שיתעורר אדם וישתוקק למעלה עליונה זו. ואם יאמר שהוא נמנע בחקיניו אנחנו להגיע אליה עם כל זה בגדר האדם השלם להשיג השגה על השגה. ולהוסיף מעלה על מעלה. ולא בא החכם זולתי להעיר נפש המשכיל כדי שלא יתראשל בבקשת החכמה כפי יכלתו עד שיתדמה בדרכי אדוננו הנביא שהוא ע"ה כאשר אמר במקום אחר כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה. ופתרון הפסוק כאלו הוא בקשת האדם השלם להיותו זוכה למעלה זו החמודה. בסוד ישרים ועדה. ומלת ישקני ר"ל שיתן לו עזר וסיוע להדבק בו במשל החושקים אשר מרוב חיבתם דבקים איש באחיהו. ומנשק זה את זה מנשיקות פיהו ושמעתי שבמלת פיהו סוד נורא. מטה עוז מקל תפארה. ומי יודע אם פיהו ולבו שוים. לעודד עניים.

**כייטובים דדיך מייך** כמו כי טוב חסדך מחיים. ופ' דודיך כמו ידידותיך מגזרת לכה נרות דודים עד הבקר. ומן הידוע כי אין אדם אוהב זולתי למי שהוא יודע ומכיר. ואחר שידענו ידיעה אמיתית נוכל להתפאר ולומר כי אהבת ידידותו הרבה. כל מטמונים לא ישוו בה. וידיעה זו עליונה מכל חכמה חמודה וטובה. ורחבה ונסבה. כי היא עקר כל עקר. ויסוד כל יסוד. והוד כל הוד. וזה כלל כל מכלל ותכלית כל שבה וכל מהלל. כענין שנ' כה אמר יי' אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידוע אותי והיין בפסוק זה כנוי אל החכמות ואל המעלות הרמות. ונסמכתי בזה על דעת חכם אחד מחכמי תורתנו אשר הוא יודע בחכמת הקבלה שאמ' דע שכל מלת יין הנזכר בשיר השירים. וכן כל מלת בשם ובשמים קבלנו כי היא משל על החכמה. ומלת תפוח ותפוחים משל לכבוד השכינה. ועל הדרך הזה אני עתיד לפרש אלה המלות ב"ה. ואל יקשה בעיניך ענין הפסוק שמדבר קצתו לנסתר וקצתו לנוכח כי כן באו הרבה פסוקים ואולי בא כן לענין נסתר.

*Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth:* The sages have already commented on the virtue of this "kiss," saying that Moses, servant of God, died "by God's mouth" (cf. Deut. 34:5), and that this teaches that he died with a kiss. As such we know that the "kissing" was a great virtue merited by Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, as he moved from the transient, present-day life and into enduring and everlasting life, as the tradition [*kabbalah*] comes to say: Moses did not die but only ascended, and now serves in heaven. The image of this heavenly kiss is an emanation of the spirit from the place it is found. In truth, the beginning of this verse is the beginning of the well-known Song which God says every day. From this we can understand even according to the verse's revealed meaning that the kiss starts in thought and ends in action. The wise one [King Solomon] invokes it at the beginning of his book so that one will become aroused and desire this sublime level. One may say it is impossible for us to reach this, but it is the character of a perfected person to grasp idea following idea, and virtue following virtue. But the sage [Solomon] sought only to arouse the intellectual soul, so that one not be lazy in seeking wisdom according to one's ability, until one becomes likened to the paths of our master, the prophet [Moses] peace be upon him. As he [Solomon] said in another place "all that is possible for you to do, do it with your full strength!" (Eccl. 9:10). This verse is thus interpreted as the request of perfected person to merit this beloved level, [and to be] "in the assembled congregation of the upright" (Ps. 111:1). The word "let him kiss me" means "may He grant help and assistance to cleave to Him," as in the parable of beloveds who, because of the greatness of their yearning, cleave to one another and kiss each other with "kisses of your mouth." I have heard that there is a tremendous secret in the word "of your mouth"; "the strong staff, the beautiful rod" (Jer. 48:17). But who knows if the equation of one's mouth and heart [i.e., saying directly what one means] can really give strength to the impoverished?

*for your love is better than wine:* This is like "your kindness is better than life" (Ps. 63:4). The meaning of "your love" is like that "love" of "let us drink our love until morning" (Proverbs 7:18). From this we know that no man loves except he who knows and is familiar, and only once we reach this true knowing we can say with pride that the love of the beloved is plentiful. All the hidden storehouses do not compare to it; this knowledge is higher than all wisdom—[be it] sweet and good, broad, and encompassing. For she is the essence of all essence, the

foundation of all foundations, and splendor of all splendors; and it is the totality of totalities, the whole of all wholes, and the purpose of all thanksgiving and praise. As it is said, "Thus says the Lord: Let not the man glory in his wisdom [...] But only in this should one glory: in his knowledge of me" (Jer. 9:22-23). The wine in this verse refers to these "wisdoms" and not to high levels. For this I relied on the opinion of one of the sages of our Torah who knows by the wisdom of Kabbalah: "every instance of the word 'wine' in the Song of Songs and every instance of the name of 'spice' and 'spices' is received as a deep metaphor for wisdom, and every instance of the word 'apple' and 'apples' is a metaphor for the *Shekhinah*." It is in this manner that I will interpret these words in verse five. You should not see it as difficult that the verse is partially hidden and partially expressed, because there are many verses like that—but perhaps the essence of the verse is in hiding.

Three motifs from this verse are essential to Ibn Sahula's interpretation: "kisses" (*neshikot*), "love" (*dodechah*), and "wine" (*yayin*), all of which are linked to his conception of the mystic's hermeneutical encounter with God. This associative ring of desire strikingly resembles the spatial vocabulary developed in the Zohar's diffuse reception of this verse. See by way of example an early passage in Zohar wherein Rabbi Yeisa kisses a young student—a common kabbalistic gesture of praise<sup>64</sup>—upon hearing the latter deliver an especially eloquent discourse on the subject of Noah's altar. Inspired by this kiss, Yeia's colleague Rabbi Hizkiyah offers an interpretation of the Song's opening words:

["Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth."] This is supernal desire, for passion issues from the mouth, not from the nose, as does fire. For look, when a mouth merges by kissing, fire issues passionately, in radiant faces, total joy, blissful cleaving. So, ["for your love is more delightful than wine"] ... Entirely as below, love arouses above. Two lamps, the light of the upper one extinguished: by the smoke ascending from the one below, the one above is rekindled.<sup>65</sup>

The "love" described in this verse is for Zohar and Ibn Sahula alike a mutual endeavor, a movement of passion from earth to heaven and vice versa symbolized by the reciprocal nature of the "kiss." Daniel Matt here astutely connects the "rekindling of the upper lamp" to the power of

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<sup>64</sup> See Joel Hecker, "Kissing Kabbalists: Hierarchy, Reciprocity, and Equality." *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 18 (2008).

<sup>65</sup> Zohar 1:70b, trans. Daniel Matt and supplemented with my rendering of Song 1:2. Daniel Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition. Vol. 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 413.

human arousal to positively influence heaven, a cosmic explanation for the custom of conjugal intimacy on the sabbath night described elsewhere in Zohar.<sup>66</sup>

For our purposes, however, it is most useful to read the Zohar's comments to the verse specifically as they relate to the imagined kabbalist's "cleaving" to God. This is the "supernal desire" which I would posit (alongside Ibn Sahula's "heavenly kiss") to be the primary subject of these respective interpretations. One should be wary here not to gloss over the context of Hizkiyah's interpretation: Yeisa's kiss, on the mouth which produced words of Torah, is in itself an embodied reference to this verse. The Zohar in tandem with Ibn Sahula thus idealizes the gesture of "kissing" as an intensely spiritual connection—be it the kiss of God or one's companion acting as a mouthpiece of God.<sup>67</sup>

The quite literally "spiritual" nature of kissing is reified in Rabbi Yitzchak's reading of Song 1:2 later in Zohar, wherein kisses are described as a "cleaving of spirit to spirit" given the mouth as the source of *rucha* (equivalent to the Hebrew *ruach*, meaning both "spirit" and "breath").<sup>68</sup> As we see in the comments to the second part of this verse the ecstasy implied in the moment of kissing relates to a proximity with God that transcends even the study of Torah, symbolized in the Song by the imbibement of wine. Rabbi Hizkiyah's inquiry into the meaning of this symbol is answered explicitly by another companion in an echo of Ibn Sahula: "[*For your love is more delightful than wine*] ... why here wine?' Rabbi Hiyya said, 'Than the wine of Torah.'"

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, n. 539.

<sup>67</sup> Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, in particular, is described in Zohar as having the "the mouth of Shekhinah," and in kissing him his companions consider themselves to be effectively kissing God. See Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 35. Compare to BT Eruvin 5:1, 22b: "Whoever receives the face of his teacher, it is as if he has received the face of the Shekhinah...One of receives the face of his friend, it is as if he has received the face of the Shekhinah." As cited in Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 238 n. 125.

<sup>68</sup> Zohar 2:124b.

One notes also that the elite nature of this form of divine hermeneutical communion hinted at in the Zohar is stated much more brazenly in Ibn Sahula's reading of Song 1:2b. For Ibn Sahula, divine "love" is equated with (supra-*halakhic*, perhaps even supraverebal) divine "knowing," a "true knowing" to which "all the hidden storehouses" of terrestrial wisdom cannot compare—we are interested then in the secrets of Torah beyond the concealed secrets of this world, "the secret of the secret."<sup>69</sup> Ibn Sahula's exclusive orientation is exercised in practice at the conclusion of both comments, wherein he first refuses to disclose the "secret in the word *pihu*, your mouth" (citing the limits of the idiom "his mouth and his heart") and then coyly indicates that the true essence of this verse is "in hiding," beyond the scope of what he is comfortable to disclose. Strikingly, then, Ibn Sahula here appears more interested in using the Song to discuss the nature of esoteric interpretation than in actually revealing the hidden meaning in question.

This loveliness of hidden knowing is a pleasure, Ibn Sahula assures us, reserved only for the "perfected person," referring to the kabbalist-exegete who merits this divine "kiss"—a degree of proximity he compares to God's kissing of Moses per the midrashic account of the latter's death.<sup>70</sup> The female lover's "yearning for kisses" is thus read as the member of the religious elite's yearning for sacred exegetical wisdom, the "kisses" being the means by which he clings to this wisdom.<sup>71</sup> Ibn Sahula is here introducing a narrative rereading of the Song which, as we will see in his comments to the next section, will be elaborated throughout the *Commentary*.

Song 2:4, הַבִּיאֲנִי אֶל־בַּיִת הַיֵּינָן וְדַגְלוּ עָלַי אַהֲבָה

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<sup>69</sup> Here I borrow Elliot Wolfson's language following his translation of the Zoharic concept of "*raza de-razin*". See Wolfson, *Open Secret*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 161, and throughout.

<sup>70</sup> See Devarim Rabbah 11:10, wherein God "took his [Moses'] soul while kissing his mouth."

<sup>71</sup> On the complicated subject of thirteenth century Kabbalah's "aristocratic" exclusivity, refer to Harvey J. Hames, "Exotericism and Esotericism in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah." *Esoterica* 6 (2004): 104.

"He brought me to the house of wine,  
and his banner of love was over me."

The most striking formal feature of verse 2:4 is found in its tense. In contrast to Song 1:2, which takes on a tone of urgent anticipation, the bride now reminisces to her companions about a specific encounter with the beloved.<sup>72</sup> The verse features two interesting paired phrases which illustrate the memory in question. The first is *beit hayayin*, rendered often as "banquet room" or "banquet hall" but literally meaning "house of wine" or, less exactly, a "wine cellar."<sup>73</sup> Understood symbolically as a physical site linked with intoxication, the "house of wine" in this verse was presumed by rabbinic and early medieval commenters to denote proximity with God and his Torah, thus "drunkenness" as a euphemism for an ecstatic state of consciousness believed in the classical Jewish imaginary to be symptomatic of both love and Torah study.<sup>74</sup>

Here Ibn Sahula inherits a midrashic tradition locating the *beit hayayin* at Sinai, and the sinaitic theophany as God "bringing" (*hebiani*, literally "he came") himself close to Israel in the moment of revelation. See for instance *Shir haShirim Rabbah*, which records Rabbi Yehuda's comparison of Sinai to a wine cellar containing the "special elixir" of Torah.<sup>75</sup> This reading is likely informed by the commentary to the *Targum Onkelos*, which revises the verse as follows: "the Lord brought me to the House of the Seat of Learning for Israel on Sinai, that I might receive instruction in the Law by the mouth of Moses (cf. Song 4:3, 5:16)," following an ancient

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<sup>72</sup> On the elusive character of the female companions see Phyllis Trible's comments on Song 1:13 and 6:9b: "other witnesses celebrate the happiness and beauty of the lovers ... Moreover, the woman herself exults that other women, as well as men, adore her mate. In their attraction to him, she finds joy, not jealousy." She continues, "throughout the Song, Eros is inclusive; the love between two welcomes the love and companionship of many. Only at the end does exclusion close this circle of intimacy." See Trible, "Love Lyrics Redeemed" in *Feminist companion to the Song of Songs Vol. 1*. ed. Athalya Brenner (A&C Black, 1993), 116-117.

<sup>73</sup> The Douay-Rheims version notably opts for "cellar of wine," from the Vulgate's *cellar vinariam*.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. SongsR 2.iv.1.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, as cited and paraphrased in Fishbane, Michael. *JPS Bible Commentary: Song of Songs*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 60. There is some quarrelling earlier in this chapter about which of the Song's locations corresponds with Mount Sinai and which correspond with the Temple. This debate is recorded in SongsR 2.3.IV, the conclusion of which might be rendered as follows: "Until 'I brought him to my mother's house' (Song 3:4), it [the location of the Song's action] is Sinai." As explained above, this tradition is not inherited by Rashi.

convention of casting the voice of the bride as that of the people Israel. Rashi departs from this exegetical tradition by instead reading the "banquet hall" as *mishkan*, the portable tabernacle in and through which the people of Israel worshipped God during their forty-year period of wandering.<sup>76</sup> These various readings tend to ignore the use of the word wine itself beyond their allusions to drunkenness; on the contrary, as we will see, the nature of this substance is critical to Ibn Sahula's comments on the verse.

The second paired word is "his banner of love" (*diglo ahava*), a strange turn of phrase associated with the use of held war standards in ancient military heraldry. Even many who were native to traditional societies where this practice was common seem to have been perplexed by this image.<sup>77</sup> An interpretation favored by recent scholarship highlights the upright, "conquering" nature of this type of war standard as a euphemistic reference to the male lover's erotic potency.<sup>78</sup> Traditional commentators read the verticality of this image through a theological lens, understanding *diglo* instead as a symbol of divine transcendence. God's "banner" here represents His Torah, a point of connection between earth and heaven. The fact of its qualification with the noun "love" serves as a lesson in the manner with which one must study and live the *halakhot* of Torah: religious law is a war standard pointing the people of Israel toward heaven, but it is one that must be approached with only the most intense adoration.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Rashi's justifies this revision by noting that the *mishkan* was the location wherein "the details and explanations of Torah were given." A later (and distinctly exilic) tradition inaugurated by Obadiah ben Yaakov Sforno understands the banquet hall as signifying the land of Israel.

<sup>77</sup> See Jennifer L. Andruska, "The Strange Use of דגל in Song of Songs 5: 10." *Vetus Testamentum* 68.1 (2018): 1-7.

<sup>78</sup> For a review of the scholarly controversy surrounding the meaning of *dagel/diglo* refer to T. Ly Tran, "Expressions of the particular terms of love in the Song of Songs." *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 25 (2011), 237.

<sup>79</sup> See SongsR 2.iv.i. Rashi, as an aside, reads דגל quite charmingly through its Old French translation *atreit*, a conjugation of the verb *atreire* meaning "to attract" (from the Latin *attrahō*, "to pull oneself toward").

These parallel symbols of "wine" and the "banner of love" both figure enigmatically into

Ibn Sahula's interpretation:

**הבואני אל בית היין** אולי היין הזה הוא המשמח אלהים ואנשים והוא היין המשומר בענביו הגנוז לצדיקים אשר עליו נאמר סוד יי' ליראיו.

**ודגלו עלי אהבה** מלשון דגול מרובה. ופתרון הפסוק על דרך הנגלה הביאני אל העולם ונתן לי שכל להבין החכמות אבל אהבתי ומאויי נפשי לדעת סוד החכמה הנוראה. למען אלמד ליראה ואתחכם בסוד אהבתו ודגלו. לחזות בנועם יי' ולבקר בהיכלו. ואכיר גדלו ונוראותיו ועוזו ונפלאותיו. ואופן מרכבותיו. הבונה בשמים מעליותיו וכן הוא אומ' שאו שערים ראשיכם מרום עיניכם וראו מי ברא אלה.

*He brought me to the house of wine:* Perhaps this is the wine "which gladdens God and men" (Judg. 9:13), the wine "preserved in its grapes" (BT Brachot 34b), stored away for the righteous; about this it is said: "the secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him" (Ps. 24:14).

*and his banner of love was over me:* [Banner, *degel*], like in the phrase "conspicuous [*dagul*] among ten thousand" (Song 5:10) The resolution of this verse following the revealed meaning is: he brought me into the world and gave me intellect to understand "the wisdoms," but I love and yearn in my soul to know the secret, the enlightening wisdom. To this end I will learn to cultivate fear and become wise in the secret of His love, [which is how we should read] "his banner." "To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to frequent his temple" (Ps. 27:4). And I will know His greatness and His awesomeness. His might, and His wonders, and the "wheels of His chariot" (Exod. 14:25). He who "builds in the lofts of heaven" (Amos 9:6) is also He who says to lift the gates: "lift your eyes and see, who created these?" (Is. 40:26).

It is important note immediately the symbolic connection implied by Ibn Sahula between wine and secrecy, an association gestured at already in his treatment of Song 1:2. This link reflects an equivalency on the level of *gematria*, a system of Hebrew numerology according to which the value of *yayin* (יין, "wine") and *sod* (סוד, "secret") both amount to the number seventy. A

Talmudic account elaborates on this equation:

anyone who remains settled of mind after drinking wine has the mindset of seventy elders, [because] "wine" was given in seventy letters. "Secret" was [also] given in seventy letters; thus, when wine enters the body, a secret emerges.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>80</sup> BT Eruvin 65a:18-21, trans. Adin Steinsaltz (Koren, 2012). This saying is also recorded in Sanhedrin 38a.



The symbolic proximity of wine and secrecy alluded to in this passage transcends mere drunken admissions of hidden information and applies more significantly to the revelation of concealed, esoteric aspects of Torah which *sod*, as aforementioned, generally designates. This anticipates a tendency in classical Kabbalah to praise the spiritual utility of wine, as we read in in the Zohar: "holiness cannot exist without wine."<sup>81</sup> Elsewhere in Zohar wine is understood to be symbolically coterminous with Torah, with the provided mystical proof being that *kos* ("cup," as in the sabbath *kiddush* cup) boasts a value in gematria equivalent to the divine name "Elohim."<sup>82</sup> The sabbath wine is also understood in later zoharic literature to be "the food of the *shekhinah*," God's feminine immanence.<sup>83</sup> The esoteric nature of this substance is developed later in a Hasidic metaphor for exegesis which creatively links bread with the exoteric meaning of Torah and wine with Torah's internal, esoteric dimension.<sup>84</sup>

Ibn Sahula appears to have been well acquainted with both the rabbinic and contemporary zoharic mysteries of wine, and uses the mention of wine in this verse as a means of reflecting on the nature of esotericism. Drawing on the classical understanding of wine illustrated above, Ibn Sahula here connects the wine of the Song to the "new wine" alluded to Judges 9:13 which "gladdens God and men." This verse provides precedent for the notion that the wine-secret extracted by the exegete provides delight to God, positioning the mystic's hermeneutical activity as a type of divine service. Elaborating on the association of wine with secrecy, Ibn Sahula cites a Talmudic reading of Isaiah 64:3 ("no eye has seen it, God, aside from

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<sup>81</sup> Zohar 3:95a, trans. Matt. Hecker speculates on the connection between the Zoharic love of wine and contemporaneous Andalusian wine parties. See Hecker, *Mystical Bodies*, 215.

<sup>82</sup> Zohar 2.14.

<sup>83</sup> Zohar Hadash 87c, cited in Hecker: 166. This is reflected in the Hasidic tradition that the Shekhinah speaks through the man reciting *kiddush* before the sabbath meal. See Batsheva Goldman-Ida, "Hasidic Wine Cup." in *Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 81-117.

<sup>84</sup> A teaching conveyed by the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe on January 19, 1984 in the name of Dovber Schneuri, his distant predecessor. See *Torat Menachem: Hitva'aduyos 5744*, 2:91-922, as well as Schneuri's *Imrei Binah*, part I 52b-54a. Cited in Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 39.

You") which records the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua that the concealed secret reserved for divine knowledge in this verse is, in fact, the mythic wine "preserved in its grapes since the six days of creation" (BT Brachot 34b).

Ibn Sahula here poetically imagines the extraction of secrets from the revealed Torah to be analogous to the extraction of wine from grapes, positing wine itself as the "secret" of the grape. This reading finds precedent in the wine symbolism of contemporaneous kabbalists, as in the manuscript of an anonymous Ashkenazi author: "Torah is compared to water and wine—i.e., the Torah in its literal sense is compared to water and the hidden sense to wine."<sup>85</sup> In a revision of earlier traditions anticipating the Zohar, then, the "house of wine" in Ibn Sahula's reading is not merely the site of proximity with Torah but specifically that of proximity to Torah's secrets. The "righteous" mentioned in these comments is presumably the "perfected person" referred to in the comments to Song 1:2; namely, the kabbalistic master-exegete. It is the unique privilege of this individual to enter the house of wine described in this verse and drink from the esoteric interpretations stored therein.

This symbolic connection helps to elucidate why Ibn Sahula chooses to conclude his comments to this verse with a string of Biblical citations apparently intended to provide (judicial?) precedence for the desire to inquire of God's mysteries. To enter God's "house of wine" is thus symbolically linked to the Psalmist's description of "gazing upon His beauty" or Isaiah's contemplation of the heavens: all images which rely on spatial-visual metaphors for describing modes of seeing wherein the occulted aspects of divinity are revealed.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> MS Oxford 352, fol. 189b, as cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: *Peshat* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermeneutics," in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 166.

<sup>86</sup> For a deeper analysis of themes of divine vision in the Hebrew Bible refer to Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a speculum that shines: Vision and imagination in medieval Jewish mysticism*. (Princeton University Press, 2020), 13-51.

It is notable that the better part of Ibn Sahula's comment on the second half of this verse is framed in a tone of justification, as if answering the charge of undue curiosity. Such a charge would not be without textual basis; recall, for instance, the famous Mishnaic verse prohibiting excesses of metaphysical speculation:

Whoever looks at four matters, it would have been better for him had he never entered the world: [Anyone who reflects upon] what is above, what is below, what was before, and what is after. And anyone who has no concern for the honor of his Maker [who inquires into and deals with matters not permitted to him,] deserves to have never come to the world.<sup>87</sup>

Ibn Sahula begins his comments on this section by affirming the Mishnah's distinction between the wisdom that is accessible to all educated Jews and the "secret," speculative wisdom which one is typically forbidden to pursue.

In a gesture unique to Kabbalah in its audacity, Ibn Sahula here voices his desire to transcend intellectual "wisdom"—which we might associate with a Maimonidean emphasis on human reason—and instead pursue the concealed secrets of Torah, thus exceeding the revealed law.<sup>88</sup> This "excessive" desire to know is fundamentally linked with the symbolism of "love," suggesting a classical affinity of erotic and intellectual desire.<sup>89</sup> Ibn Sahula tells us that what is meant by "God's banner of love" is precisely the invitation into these mysteries, and the kabbalist's capacity for understanding therein.

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<sup>87</sup> M. Chagigah 2.1, translation and notes by Adin Steinsaltz.

<sup>88</sup> Moshe Idel elaborates on this idea in his characterization of the Kabbalists as a "secondary elite" in book *Absorbing Perfections* (Yale University Press, 2002). Melila Hellner-Eshed describes Idel's notion of the secondary elite as those "whose leadership was characterized by the freedom to choose an innovative path without seeking the approval of the halakhic and spiritual authorities of the time." See Hellner-Eshed, *A river flows from Eden*, 27. Elliot Wolfson likewise treats the question of Kabbalah's relationship to formal orthodoxy at length in his book *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>89</sup> Anne Carson comments eloquently on this affinity in the context of Aristotle's "All men reach out to know" (Metaph. A. 1.980a21), writing: "As you perceive the edge of yourself at the moment of desire, as you perceive the edges of words from moment to moment in reading (or writing), you are stirred to reach beyond perceptible edges—toward something else, something not yet grasped. The unplucked apple, the beloved just out of touch, the meaning not quite attained, are desirable objects of knowledge. It is the enterprise of eros to keep them so." Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 109.

The esoteric meaning of Torah in this verse is thus symbolized in two forms: wine ("preserved in its grapes, stored away for the righteous") and eros ("the secret of his love"). The narrative of erotic experience, characterized as such first by intoxication and then being overcome by the "banner of love," is in the end retold as a drama of the mystic's encounter with the secrets of scripture. The eroticism of the female lover's encounter in her beloved's wine hall is, for Ibn Sahula, the eroticism of mystical interpretation.

#### V. CONCLUSION: IBN SAHULA AND ZOHAR

As I have demonstrated in the preceding pages, Ibn Sahula's merit as an exegete and the novelty of his *Commentary* should not necessarily be understood as contingent on his proximity to the author or authors of Zohar. Keeping this in mind, it is nonetheless worth qualifying our reading of the above sections from the *Commentary* by placing them in the broader context of late thirteenth-century Kabbalah. The ultimate contention of such an orientation must be that Ibn Sahula's proposed "erotics of reading"—that is, again, his mythic revision of the Song as an erotic encounter between the exegete and the secrets of Torah—reflects a similar sentiment regarding the nature of hermeneutics in the thought of his contemporaries in Castile, as reflected in the zoharic approach to exegesis. I hold that this is the case, and will outline the evidence for this shared disposition in these concluding remarks.

It perhaps goes without saying that eroticism as a symbolic vocabulary forms the core of the zoharic literary structure. Yehuda Liebes in his groundbreaking essay on the subject goes nearly as far as to equate the two concepts, and even to propose "eros" as an English translation of the Hebrew word *zohar*. As he writes: "the external idea most proximate to *zohar* is 'eros,'

Although this too, like *zohar*, is an elusive thing that cannot be defined."<sup>90</sup> Per Gil Anidjar, commenting on Liebes, "the 'force' of love governs the Zohar as much as it dominates Plato's *Symposium*."<sup>91</sup> Green phrases the matter most poetically in describing the Zohar as "a lush garden of eros."<sup>92</sup>

The logic and mechanisms of desire—expressed, as Green notes, between master and student, kabbalist and God, and God and God's self—are indeed the primary thrust of the Zohar's literary and theological project. Further, and in a manner similar to that which has been explored in the comments of Ibn Sahula, the activity of textual exegesis is intimately linked with eroticism at every level of the zoharic imagination. We witnessed this above, in the sharing of kisses among the Zohar's companions as an expression of praise for particularly brilliant interpretations of Torah. We find it also in the mythologies of interpretation offered in the context of the festival of Shavuot, wherein "words of Torah" are said to represent adornments of the Bride, personification of God's feminine indwelling presence, in preparation for her meeting with the divine bridegroom on their wedding night. In the received words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai,

we have learned: all those Companions initiated into the bridal palace need—on that night when the Bride is destined the next day to be under the canopy with Her Husband—to be with Her all night, delighting with her in Her adornments in which She is arrayed, engaging in Torah, ... midrashic renderings of verses and mysteries of wisdom: these are Her adornments and finery.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar and Eros." *Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 68. See Nathaniel Berman's reading of this quote: N. A. Berman, "'מעלות תאומיות שאינן מתאימות'" Improper twins: the ambivalent 'Other Side' in the Zohar and kabbalistic tradition." PhD diss., UCL (University College London 2014), 19.

<sup>91</sup> Gil Anidjar, *Our place in al-Andalus": Kabbalah, philosophy, literature in Arab Jewish letters*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 78.

<sup>92</sup> Green, "Intradivine Romance: The Song of Songs in the Zohar," 214.

<sup>93</sup> Zohar 1:8a. Trans. Matt, *Zohar: Vol. 1*, 51-52.

The cosmic significance of Torah interpretation is thus a task in preparing the divine Bride to appear aesthetically and sexually desirable, facilitating a consummation of the intra-divine marriage. The Zohar's hermeneutical imperative is imagined as also an erotic one.

More explicitly, a later zoharic passage personifies the Torah as a woman standing before the kabbalist-exegete. The concealment of Torah's hidden matters is here symbolized by the concealment of the woman's body, and the exegetical revelation of secrets is likened to the removal of her clothes.<sup>94</sup> This description is followed by a similar scene involving two lovers—Torah again represented as a woman and its interpreter as her beloved. The woman gradually discloses herself in four stages representing the four levels of classical rabbinic exegesis, culminating in a revelation of Torah's "secret" as likened to the intimacy of coitus: exegete united with his object of interpretation.<sup>95</sup>

Read retrospectively through this zoharic lens one is able to conceive of Ibn Sahula's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* as a key foray into Kabbalah's mythology of exegesis. We find in Ibn Sahula's comments an early set of rhetorical gestures whereby the activity of interpretation itself is presented in distinctly mystical and erotic terms. As illustrated in the translations above, Ibn Sahula revises the Song's allegorical meaning from a love story between God and the people of Israel to one between God and the kabbalist-exegete. Here, the interpreter's exegetical quest is portrayed through an erotic idiom wherein the concealed meaning of the text is expressed as the object of desire.

Proposing a uniquely kabbalistic approach to exegesis, Ibn Sahula thus portrays the kabbalist's relationship to God as one mediated through the erotic dynamic of linguistic concealment and disclosure, veiling and unveiling. One is reminded of the earliest students of

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<sup>94</sup> Zohar 2:93b. See also Elliot Wolfson's analysis in Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden without Eyes," 169-170.

<sup>95</sup> Zohar 2:99b.

Torah, to whom the logic of veiling has been described in terms of that which "generates the desire for *dibbur*, for language."<sup>96</sup> The veil of Moses was symbolic, in this reading, of the excitement for interpretation caused by the coyly encrypted nature of the text. In the comments of Ibn Sahula we have likewise borne witness to a mode of reading saturated in the lush, sun-stricken desire of the Song's protagonists. One relates to the essence of Torah, per Ibn Sahula's hermeneutics, as a woman relates to her beloved. His exegetical contribution in this sense is as simple as it is mystical: in order to read deeply—and to read the mysteries well—one must first learn to be in love.

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<sup>96</sup> Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (Yale University Press, 2016), 78.

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