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“Song of Songs.”

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A Reader's Guide to Judaism
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Song of Songs

Bloch, Ariel and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, New York: Random House, 1995

Brenner, Athalya (editor), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (Feminist Companion to the Bible, 1), Sheffield, South Yorkshire: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993

Falk, Marcia, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Bible and Literature Series, 4), Sheffield, South Yorkshire: Almond, 1982; revised as *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990

Fox, Michael V., *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985

Pope, Marvin H., *Song of Songs* (Anchor Bible, 7C), Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977

Perhaps no other book of the Bible has elicited as much comment as the Song of Songs. The variety of interpretation is not merely the product of recent times, for diverse interpretive strategies were present already in antiquity, as the debate over whether the poem should enter the canon of Scripture demonstrates. The discovery of ancient Near Eastern texts since the mid-19th century has opened new corridors of interpretation. Yet, despite the wealth of comparative material, no consensus has been reached with regard to the Song's overall meaning, purpose, history, or original context.

As the entries below will attest, scholars have studied the eight-chapter poem from a variety of perspectives and have brought a variety of theoretical frameworks to bear upon the Song. Most of the important analyses and discussions of the Song remain largely inaccessible to a lay public, scattered as they are in scholarly journals and technically erudite monographs. Even some of the entries below, which are exceptionally accessible to general readers, contain some technical linguistic and philological data. Nevertheless, these works are representative of the most important advances in current understanding of the Song of Songs.

The recent translation of the Song by BLOCH and BLOCH benefits from the expertise of a world-renowned Semitist and a first-class poet. The result is a sensuous account of sexual awakening. The Hebrew text accompanies both the English translation and the commentary at book's end, and the frequent use of transliterations helps make the Song completely accessible to nonscholars. No conjectures are offered as to authorship, although linguistic evidence is used to place the date of the Song in the third century B.C.E. The commentary discusses the Song's place in the canon of Scripture and the history of its interpretation. This translation uniquely represents the passionate love described in the poem not as unrequited, but as consummated. The sexual delights in the Song are presented as reciprocal, tender, and erotic. Eros fills the Israelite landscape, and the lovers celebrate it. Although not portrayed as a drama, the poem carries dramatic effect, and Bloch and Bloch treat it not as an anthology of poetic snippets, but as a unity.

BRENNER's inaugural volume of the Feminist Companion to the Bible series is a collection of essays that investigate the Song from a variety of feminist critical perspectives. Written by a diverse array of scholars, the selections are generally cohesive and accessible to nonscholars. The articles are grouped into six units: the history of feminist readings of the Song; female authorship and culture; intertextual connections and the critique of patriarchy; structure and discourse; genre interpretation; and a scholarly retrospective. Each of the 20 essays offers a unique and insightful contribution to current understanding of the poem. Topics addressed in the essays run the complete gamut of historical inquiry on the Song, including the poem's female voice, audience, sexual imagery, and eventual canonization. The essays represent the most recent advances in feminist scholarship on the Song and demonstrate a fruitful union between feminist approaches to text and other interpretive strategies.

FALK offers an English translation along with a discussion of the Song's context, genre, themes, and motifs. Her translation, while at times straying from the Hebrew original, nonetheless captures the rapturous beauty of the poem. Her approach is primarily literary, paying special attention to the poem's structure. Falk sees no reason to treat the poem as a single text, opting instead to view the book as a collection of 31 lyric poems. In the analytic section of the book, Falk challenges the notion that the Song contains "bizarre, comical, and puzzling" imagery in those units of the Song commonly called *wasfs*, poetic sections that elaborately describe the human body. Falk contends that "sexist interpretation of the *wasf* . . . and of the Song in general is a striking example of how the text can be distorted by culturally biased reading." She also argues, for a variety of reasons, that the composition was penned by a woman and concludes that the Song itself speaks to mutuality and balance between the sexes.

FOX offers the only major study of the poem's relationship to Egyptian love poetry. Based on his comparisons, Fox argues that the Song of Songs "though often considered a loose collection of short songs, is in fact an artistic unity." He replaces the popular allegorical interpretation of the text with one that understands the poem as simply exploring the subject of sexual love between human beings. In addition to an in-depth commentary, examination of the Song's social setting, and compositional analysis, Fox provides a comprehensive discussion of the Egyptian materials and appends hieroglyphic transcriptions of the Egyptian texts themselves. These features make Fox's study valuable to scholar and nonscholar alike.

POPE's hefty volume remains the most comprehensive study of the poem to date. Virtually every aspect of the poem is discussed, from the ancient translations and the date of the book, to prosody, generic classification, and the medieval commentaries. One of Pope's most important contributions is his discussion of the history of interpretation of the Song, which covers a great deal of territory, from the early allegorization of the poem and later dramatic and mystical interpretations, to more recent feminist and psychoanalytical approaches. Based on a wealth of comparative data, especially from Mesopotamia and Ugarit, Pope concludes that the Song originally served as a cultic hymn for use in non-Israelite fertility worship. While some of this work, especially the commentary

section, is philologically and linguistically oriented, the great majority is accessible to a general audience. It also provides a wealth of bibliographic information on the Song.

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South Africa

- Abrahams, Israel, *The Birth of a Community*, Cape Town: Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, 1955
- Hellig, Jocelyn, "The Jewish Community in South Africa," in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, edited by Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy, New York: St. Martin's Press, and London: Hurst, 1995
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- Shain, Milton, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa*, Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994
- Shimoni, Gideon, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience (1910-1967)*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980
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The study of the Jews of English-speaking countries has achieved a new prominence in the aftermath of the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust. Although the Jewish community in the United States is clearly the most studied English-speaking community, Jews in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Great Britain, Zimbabwe, and South Africa have also merited the attention of historians and sociologists. The number of Jews in South Africa peaked at 118,000; since the 1970s, many South African Jews have immigrated to Australia, the United States, and Israel, and the Jewish population in that nation is currently around 85,000. Because of the historical context of apartheid, the history of the Jews of South Africa has a character that is unique in modern Jewish history. In order to understand the full picture of how Jews have interacted with modernity in different social and political contexts, it is critical for the scholar to take into account the South African Jewish experience.

One of the classic books on the Jewish experience in South Africa is SHIMONI, a detailed account of the Jewish community in South Africa up to 1967 that places that community's history in the context of Zionism. The author covers most of the important political issues and particularly emphasizes the relationship between the Jews and the ruling groups in the country.

One of the best overviews for those seeking information about the Jewish community in South Africa in the 1990s is HELLIG, which was published as part of a collection of articles on all of the major religions in the country. Hellig adeptly gives a brief outline of the historical background of South African Jewry and presents a vivid picture of the different

aspects of Jewish life in contemporary South Africa. Particularly interesting is her account of the unobservant Orthodox Jews who constitute the majority of the South African Jewish community. Nevertheless, Hellig correctly points out that there has been a tremendous revival of Torah study, worship, and observance, particularly in Johannesburg. She describes the development of small, informal prayer groups evoking the Eastern European *shtiebl* that have gained popularity at the expense of large institutionalized synagogues.

One of the most interesting historical documents of South African Jewry is a memoir by HOFFMANN that was written in Yiddish and originally published in 1916. The author describes the origins of the community and evaluates relations between Jews and Afrikaners. He also presents a great deal of information about the lives of South African blacks, although he displays a prejudiced perspective characteristic of his time. This document can be read in conjunction with ABRAHAMS's history of the Jews in the Western Cape Province until the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902. Other classics of South African Jewish history include Louis Herrman's *A History of the Jews in South Africa* (1930), and Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz's *The Jews in South Africa: A History* (1955).

SHAIN is a masterpiece describing the history of anti-semitism in South Africa up to 1930. His work is particularly important because, although the history of racism in South Africa has long been recognized, historians before Shain typically suggested that antisemitism was a foreign phenomenon that was introduced into South Africa in the 1930s through Nazi propaganda. Shain shows, however, that antisemitism had deep roots in South African society that dated back to the late 19th century. Using not only the expected political sources but also plays, novels, caricatures, and jokes, Shain's book serves as a central source for the history of Jewish-Christian relations in South Africa.

Since the end of apartheid, there has been an increasing interest in the role that Jews did or did not play in the struggle to end institutionalized racism. SUTTNER presents a collection of interviews with South African Jewish activists; the book is named for a statement in the Talmud that insists "let justice cut through the mountain." The collection includes interviews with many of the most important antiapartheid activists, including Joe Slovo and Ronnie Kasrils, both of whom were important figures in the armed struggle of the African National Congress against the apartheid government. Also included are interviews with the Nobel Prize-winning author Nadine Gordimer, musician Johnny Clegg, politician Helen Suzman, and Rabbi Ben Isaacson. The book is a very rich source of material on Jewish activists and can form the basis for a great deal of future analysis.

DANA EVAN KAPLAN

Spain

- Aronsfeld, C.C., *The Ghosts of 1492: Jewish Aspects of the Struggle for Religious Freedom in Spain, 1848-1976* (Jewish Social Studies Monograph Series, no. 1), New York: Conference on Jewish Social Studies, 1979