

BOOK REVIEW

The JPS Bible Commentary – Song of Songs, Michael Fishbane, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 338 pp. Reviewed by Simcha Rosenberg.

The Song of Songs is a very challenging book to translate and interpret. It does not mention God, Israel, commandments or religious obligations. The plain sense of the text is that of a series of love poems that a maiden uses to express herself to her beloved and her friends, reciprocated by her youthful lover. It is not exactly clear how this work even came to be included in the Bible. There is a famous discussion in the Mishna (*Yadayim* 3:5) where Rabbi Akiva has to defend the sacred status of the Song of Songs, proclaiming, "all the Writings are sacred but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies."

Rabbinic tradition "saved" this book by interpreting the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love relationship between God and Israel. And this is what makes a translation and commentary to the Song of Songs a complicated endeavor. When writing a translation and commentary, should the focus be on the plain sense of the text, the traditional allegorical interpretation, or some combination of the two? Famously (or infamously) ArtScroll Mesorah did not provide a literal translation of this book in the body of their Tanach translation, stating that "in the interest of accuracy (!), our translation of the Song is different from that of any other ArtScroll translation of Scripture...we translate the Song according to Rashi's allegorical translation" (*ArtScroll Tanach*, p. 1681). ArtScroll instead leaves the literal translation for its running commentary at the bottom of each page of the main (allegorical) translation.

On the other hand, the running commentary in the *Da'at Mikra* series focuses on the plain, romantic, meaning of the text, and references the allegorical interpretation in its summaries at the end of each literary unit of the book.

In this book, Prof. Fishbane, acclaimed author of *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, uses a multi-faceted approach to interpreting the Song of Songs. This accounts for the high page count of this book, relative to other megillot in this series. The book begins with a comprehensive introduction followed by a literal translation with no commentary at all. After this, for more than 200 pages, the text and translation is repeated, but this time with

Rabbi Dr. Simcha Rosenberg teaches Tanakh in Jerusalem at a variety of yeshivot and seminars.

four distinct commentaries on each verse. The traditional four categories of Scriptural commentary are *peshat* (the plain meaning), *derash* (the exegetical interpretation), *remez* (metaphorical meaning) and *sod* (the hidden/mystical interpretation). The author uses these four divisions, but in his own way. His *peshat* commentary focuses on the romantic plain meaning, while the *derash* interpretation follows the rabbinic interpretation where God and Israel are represented by the beloved and the maiden in the text. So far this has all been done before. The real innovation is the *remez* and *sod* commentaries. *Remez* is presented as the "philosophical interpretation" (p. xlii), where "the 'Song's dialogues thus become various attempts by God or Torah to encourage and support a person's spiritual or intellectual development" (p. xliii). This commentary is based on the philosophical commentaries written in the 12th and 13th centuries. The *sod* commentary focuses on the supernal realms and mystical matters. The author states that he incorporates "themes and concerns from the entire legacy of the past to use as a foundation of a modern, multi-faceted reformulation" (p. xxxviii).

For example, take the well known verse *Oh, give me of the kisses of your mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine* (1:2). The *peshat* commentary here focuses on the verb form of *yishaqeni* as an expression of volition or desire, articulating "the speaker's intense longing for a kiss", and discusses whether the maiden is speaking here to her beloved, her companions, or to herself using "the private language of fantasy" (p. 26). The *derash* understands the kiss to refer to the word of God revealed at Sinai, and provides the additional view that it is the Oral Torah which is considered "sweeter than wine", "better than the Torah itself", based on *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:2:2 (p. 27). *Remez* sees the verse as describing the passionate longing between the personal self and God, the kisses "boldly express the intensity of the longing for contact with God" (p. 27). Finally, based on the Zohar, *sod* discusses "the desire to transcend individuality for a Higher Unity" (p. 28).

This is a remarkable work, and more than any other volume in the JPS Commentary series so far, provides a text to be studied, pored over, and analyzed, in the manner of classical commentaries throughout history. It would be ideal for a Bible study group or individual learning. The sources for the ideas found in each of the four running commentaries are always provided,

with extensive notes and a long excursus on the "History of Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs", enabling further in depth study.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style
can be found on our Internet website:

<http://www.jewishbible.org>

