



**Ilana Pardes.** *The Song of Songs: A Biography.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 296 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14606-5.

**Reviewed by** Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch (Eastern University)

**Published on** H-Judaic (August, 2020)

**Commissioned by** Barbara Krawcowicz (Jagiellonian University)

Princeton University's Lives of Great Religious Books series brings the subject of reception history to life for general readers by sampling the interpretive history of religious texts such as the Talmud, the *I Ching*, and the book of Revelation. Ilana Pardes's recent contribution to this series, *The Song of Songs: A Biography*, takes as its subject a biblical text that has titillated, embarrassed, and inspired readers for millennia. So controversial is this collection of erotically charged love poems that it did not find a secure place within the biblical canon until the renowned Rabbi Akiba declared that "the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (p. 12).

Rabbi Akiva could not have anticipated the circuitous route of the Song's reception history. His own reading of the biblical poem, like most Jewish interpreters of late antiquity, was as an allegory that stitched the Song together with episodes from Israel's salvation history. Ancient rabbinic scholars viewed the text as a canticle to divine love celebrating the relationship between God and Israel. However, other readers throughout the book's interpretive history have focused primarily on its "plain sense" meaning as a secular ode to erotic human love. Pardes does not adhere to the oversimplified historical narrative that the Song began

as a collection of literal love poems and was then subjected to allegorical readings by well-meaning (but misled) Jewish and Christian interpreters until intrepid nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars recovered its (original) literal meaning from beneath layers of sacred accretions. Instead, she demonstrates that the line demarcating literal and allegorical readings of the Song has always been ambiguous.

Pardes notes in the introduction to her volume that the Song itself, replete as it is with metaphors and double entendres that require reading between the lines, constantly blurs any neat distinction between the figurative and the literal. She draws her readers' attention to the poem's dreamlike qualities such as rapid shifts in setting, unidentified voices emerging from nowhere, and the baffling flirtatious hide-and-seek performed by the lovers. It should be no surprise that these features have generated multiple meanings down through the ages. Yet, Pardes argues, the allegorical and the literal remain inextricably intertwined.

In the first of five chapters, Pardes explores the Song of Songs' fate in the hands of Jewish and Christian interpreters of late antiquity. She examines the *Song of Songs Rabba*, the Jewish mystical text *Shi'ur Koma* (literally, "the measure of the body"), and Origen's *Commentary*. Taking their cue from the Song's own exhilarating metaphori-

cal play, these allegorists sought unexpected comparisons between earthly and divine loves. In the *Song of Songs Rabba*, conflicting rabbinic interpretations appear side by side with the tacit understanding that there is always more than one possible elucidation of a biblical text. Early Jewish mystics allegorically conflated the Shulamite's descriptions of her lover's body with Ezekiel's vision of the divine body. Origen read the Song as a spiritual drama about a young woman (Israel) who once could not interact with her beloved (God/Christ) without the intercession of an intermediary (Moses) but, having attained her majority (the church), now has unobstructed access to the kisses of his mouth. Pardes notes that early Christian interpreters of the Song lived alongside Jewish exegetes. Although their works rarely contain an explicit acknowledgement of dialogue between the two communities, she maintains that some cross-cultural borrowing or back-and-forth is "highly plausible" (p. 43). Both Jews and Christians in the first three centuries CE used the Song as a tool with which to define their respective communities.

Pardes's second chapter considers the interpretive moves of Hebrew poets and kabbalists in medieval Spain. Secular poets attended to the Song's literal meaning while Jewish liturgists explored its allegorical potentialities. In these guises, the biblical poem inspired both homoerotic, gender-fluid courtly poems and theological explorations of exile. Pardes questions whether these literal love poems flourished in Jewish circles without critique, pointing out the poet HaNagid's possibly tongue-in-cheek defense that his own erotic verse could also be read allegorically.

Pardes also explores in this chapter the Song's pivotal role in Jewish mysticism, where the Shulamite is identified with the Shekinah (divine presence). For the kabbalists, this divine emanation was the consort of God and the agent of the Holy One's love for the human world. She speculates that this development might have been a Jewish re-

sponse to the growing popularity of the Mary cult in southern France and northern Spain.

Chapter 3 turns to medieval monasteries. Pardes notes that it was ironically their renunciation of worldly pleasures and immersion in spiritual pursuits that uniquely fitted these celibates to interpret the Song. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, encouraged his fellow monks to assume the role of the bride in pursuit of the bridegroom (*Logos*). Pardes also explores commentary on the Song by Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Fray Louis de Léon. Here too she finds provocative blending of the literal and the figurative, especially in Teresa's descriptions of the erotic bond between the soul and God.

In chapter 4, Pardes introduces modern scholarly approaches to the Song beginning with J. G. Herder's German translation and commentary, *Lieder der Liebe* (1778). Early proponents of the scholarly turn insist upon contextualized, literal interpretations of the Song, aided first by orientalist ethnography and later by ancient Near Eastern texts. Later scholars applied literary and feminist criticism. Literary critics like Robert Alter delighted in the literary world of the Song, while feminist critics like Phyllis Tribble foregrounded the Song's nontraditional representation of gender roles. Pardes points out that Tribble found in the Song both a literal celebration of egalitarian sexuality and an allegorical return to Eden where the Shulamite redeems the "fall" narrative as a "second Eve" (p. 165).

Chapter 5 is by far the most interesting episode in this biography of the Song. Here Pardes surveys American literary works that appropriate the biblical poem: Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855), Herman Melville's lesser-known novel *Clarel* (1876), and Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987). These are literal readings of the Song that sacralize transgressive forms of love and encourage readers to rethink foundational moments in American history. Positioning himself as America's national bard, Whit-

man uses imagery from the Song to celebrate America, its folk, and its democratic heritage. Melville's Song-inspired novel focuses on the evasiveness of love as its tormented protagonist's homoerotic desires remain unconsummated.

Pardes devotes the majority of her attention in this chapter to the works of Toni Morrison and the emergence of what she terms the "African American Song" (p. 195). Pardes notes that the Song does not figure largely in the spirituals or narratives of the (formerly) enslaved. However, from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, African American commentators focused repeatedly on Song 1:5-6 and its affirmation of Black comeliness. Pardes links these writings to sermons and prayers written by activists in the Black Lives Matter movement upholding the beauty and dignity of Black people. Likewise, Morrison's larger-than-life Shulamite characters (Pilate, Hagar, Beloved) affirm the sacred worth of racially marginalized Americans. In both of Morrison's novels, Pardes identifies both the heart-wrenching stories of particular individuals and allegorical mythology that collectively embodies experiences of the Black community.

Overall, this volume successfully reflects the widespread cultural impact of the Song of Songs even though such a slim volume clearly cannot exhaust its reception history. One might wish for more attention to the Song's artistic reception, but Pardes confines herself to eight illustrations upon which she does not comment. Nevertheless, the volume does raise important issues of reception history, including the situatedness of all interpretation and the interconnected webs of reception.

*Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch is a professor of biblical studies at Eastern University.*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch. Review of Pardes, Ilana. *The Song of Songs: A Biography*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54699>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.