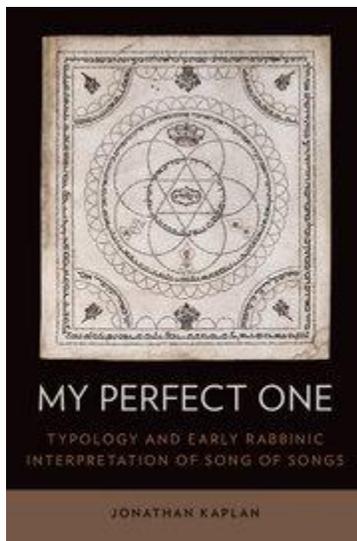




## *Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2017.11.10*

**Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of the Song of Songs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0199359332. Pp. 245. \$74.00 cloth/ebook.**

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Jonathan Kaplan's new monograph, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of the Song of Songs*, takes us back to the formative period of both Judaism and Christianity, the late second and early third centuries CE. This is the time when the early rabbinic scholars known as the Tannaim flourished in the Land of Israel, just as major Christian theologians and exegetes composed what would become foundational works. Kaplan focuses on the early rabbinic sages known as the Tannaim, whose major literary products include the Mishnah (the core of the Oral Torah, which would become the basis of the two Talmuds), the Tosefta (a body of traditions largely parallel to the Mishnah, though less authoritative), and the Tannaitic midrashim, which offer interpretations of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Although these early midrashic works are often referred to as halakhic (legal) midrashim, this label obscures the wealth of nonlegal material within them. That

said, there is no Tannaitic midrash on Genesis (although the existence of such a work, as a now-lost source for Genesis Rabbah, was proposed by Aharon Mirsky<sup>1</sup>), nor are there any such treatments of books beyond the Torah. In this ambitious monograph, Kaplan approaches Tannaitic midrashim from the perspective not of the lemma (i.e., the passages from Torah that are the putative subject of exegesis) but of the intertext (specifically, the passages from Song of Songs dispersed throughout these early midrashim). He does not do so with the intent of creating an artificial Tannaitic midrash on the Song but rather as a means of elucidating more precisely what the Song meant to the early Rabbis and how they read it.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, he clearly demonstrates that

<sup>1</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Midrash Tannaim Li-Vereshit* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Song of Songs and the Fashioning of Identity in Early Latin Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Karl Shuve offers a complementary study of similarly gleaned interpretations among early Christian writers in North Africa and Italy. Just as Kaplan argues against what he perceives as the privileging of Song of Songs

many elements of rabbinic interpretation of the Song usually assigned to the later Amoraic period (the third through fifth centuries CE, roughly) were in fact established much earlier.

Most of the most readily accessible and familiar early Jewish interpretations of the Song of Songs—notably Song of Songs Rabbah (the major midrash explicating the Song) and the Targum (Aramaic version) of the Song—significantly postdate the Tannaitic material studied by Kaplan. Song of Songs Rabbah is often dated to around the fifth century CE (although it surely contains earlier material) while the Targum is likely from the seventh century CE. In their received form, these works offer verse-by-verse commentaries on the Song, as do a number of late antique liturgical poems composed for use during Passover. The Tannaitic readings of the Song explored by Kaplan are, by contrast, episodic and occasional, and they cluster in the midrashic sources around specifically evocative sources from the Torah, such as the Song at the Sea (Exod 15). Kaplan’s analysis culls and organizes these deployments of the Song along thematic lines.

*My Perfect One* is divided into five chapters, which reflect a clear and logical development of Kaplan’s argument. The introduction offers a brief overview of scholarship in the field, with a particular orientation towards articulating the theological significance of a Tannaitic reading of the Song that expresses intimacy between God and Israel—a theological trope that most scholars regard as more developed in the Amoraic period. Chapter 1 analyzes different Greco-Roman modes of literary interpretation—the origins of allegory in Pythagorean explications of Homer as well as Philo’s exegesis of the Scriptures and early Christian readings of what became the Old Testament—in an attempt to distinguish the categories to which Tannaitic interpretations may be assigned: allegory, *mashal* (parable), typology, or figurative reading. Two specific issues are at the forefront: how biblical passages are decoupled from history and idealized, and, at the same time, how passages that seem ahistorical are historicized, linked to specific episodes in the past, present, or future. Chapter 2 addresses how the Tannaim read the Song in a historicizing manner in order to correlate the Song with narratives from Israel’s sacred history and present experience. The Song articulates an idealized relationship between God and Israel, particularly at the time of the Exodus, and Kaplan suggests that the rabbis understood the Song, in terms of its genre, as a kind of analogue to Greco-Roman epic. Chapter 3 and chapter 4 address the main characters of the Song as read by the Tannaim: Chapter 3 connects the woman’s body with the physical performance of Judaism, from embodied commandments (tallit, circumcision, etc.) to bodily sacrifice (martyrdom); chapter 4 links the man’s body as a descriptor of the divine to the idea of *imitatio dei*; he is a figure whose actions and character the Jewish people can imitate as they strive to bring about the harmony idealized in the Song. Chapter 5 delineates how the Tannaim subverted the narrative of absence in the Song to create a theology of divine presence in the wake of the traumas of the destruction of the Temple and the Bar Kokhba rebellion. The conclusion draws the strands together and argues that the Tannaitic interpretation of the Song served overlapping purposes: it constructs an exemplary portrayal of Jewish life in the present tense even as it firmly roots the present in an idealized national narrative of the past. These complex and indirectly expressed objectives shaped subsequent rabbinic modes of exegesis insofar as they are characterized by a theology reflecting emotional nuances of the Song: intense affection manifested in reciprocal and exclusive devotion.

Kaplan’s analysis is valuable for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it highlights the significance of the Song of Songs as an intertext in the earliest rabbinic writings, primarily

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Rabbah, Shuve’s analysis pushes back against the dominance of Origen’s reading of the Song in early Christian studies.

Tannaitic midrashim, but the Mishnah and Tosefta as well. Kaplan draws our attention to the significant influence that the metaphors, images, narrative conceits, and emotions of the Song played in shaping rabbinic theology at its formative stage. These ways of thinking find fuller and more nuanced articulation in later centuries, but the foundations were firmly established in the Tannaitic period. In addition, Kaplan's attentiveness to the nuances of figurative reading in antiquity—Greco-Roman, Christian, and Jewish—serves as a welcome caution against the casual use of “allegory” to describe how the Song of Songs was read by rabbis and church fathers. Despite the similarities, the different communities—or perhaps more precisely, the different texts and contexts—read the text in distinctive ways. Part and parcel of these two major elements, Kaplan's analysis brings forward minor yet significant issues. His explicit engagement with the idea of theology is particularly welcome, as is his recognition that gender plays an important role in rabbinic covenantal theology. As part of establishing his readings of the text, Kaplan draws on a wealth of primary and secondary sources—his footnotes are often quite rich—and he gestures toward important methods and subjects, including gender theory, literacy studies, and performance theory, the last of which remains relatively underutilized in the study of the Tannaitic midrashim. The writing is generally clear and its arguments easy to follow.

For all the strengths of this study, Kaplan's analysis raises as many questions as it answers. In part, this is because the volume attempts to provide both a history of interpretation (of the Song of Songs) and a cultural history (of Judaism at a pivotal moment in its history). Kaplan is far more at home in the former than the latter. While his readings of texts are creative and sound, he often treats issues of context—social, cultural, and historical—cursorily. For example, with regard to Jews in their larger societal context, Kaplan's references to contemporary Christian interpretations of the Song are welcome, particularly the Syriac material, which is overlooked relative to Origen (Hippolytus of Rome might also have been worthy of some attention); that said, he treats this material briefly, and with little attention to the deep cultural structures which make such intercultural commonalities revelatory. Kaplan's focus on certain areas means that he neglects important foundational issues, such as the creation of “Judaism” and “Christianity” in the early centuries CE (as discussed in the work of Seth Schwartz and Lee Levine, among others) or issues around education and literacy in the rabbinic world (as explored by Martin Jaffee and Catherine Heszer, as well as the work of classicists such as William Johnson). Much of the larger world in which early Rabbinic Judaism emerged and was embedded—the pivotal nature of the Tannaitic moment—is treated lightly, and Kaplan's emphasis on the traumas of the destruction of the Temple and the Bar Kokhba revolt, while theologically cogent and particularly relevant to topics such as martyrology, yields an overly simple historical picture that underestimates the cultural dynamism of the late second and early third centuries. Also neglected are those factors that helped shape the exegetical traditions of Judaism internally, notably non-rabbinic Jewish writings such as 4 Ezra, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the New Testament, as well as Jewish liturgical traditions and the lectionary. Kaplan displays familiarity with these works—they are cited in his notes and in his conclusions—but his analysis could more fully integrate the early midrashim into this larger literary context more completely and with more nuance. (Kaplan's reading of Mishnah *Taanit* 4:8, on pp. 68–67, takes the text as historically informative at face value in a way that is unexpectedly naïve.) A more fully contextual reading of the Song, one which explores it from the overlapping perspectives of classical society, the “parting of the ways,” and early Judaism, would introduce more uncertainty into the analysis but would also establish a larger frame in which both the Song of Songs and early rabbinic writings can be understood.

Of course, no monograph can treat every topic. Kaplan's work is valuable for what it does accomplish, in particular the collecting of Song of Songs quotations from a wide variety of Tannaitic sources and their systematic analysis along thematic lines. (He does not, it should be noted, exhaustively present every source but instead offers close readings of exemplary passages.) He constructs from these passages a relatively uniform and comprehensive Tannaitic interpretation of the Song as a whole (the readings by the Tannaim possess "a degree of consistency," Kaplan writes on p. 48), one which may at times be too consistent across so many bodies of writing. Kaplan particularly highlights the power and durability of the marital metaphor and the influence of *eros* on rabbinic theology (although he downplays the tension of *eros* which I would argue is significant—the Lover's absence is not entirely subverted, nor are threats to a "happily ever after" ending entirely eliminated). As a consequence of his intense focus on the Song of Songs, Kaplan downplays the significance of other texts that are integral to midrash, especially the Torah itself, but also other writings. Using the Song to interpret verses from Exodus transforms what *both* texts mean. Kaplan also minimizes the significance of other popular midrashic intertexts from the Writings, such as Proverbs and Psalms—understandable, given his focus—and to some extent overemphasizes what are arguably simply tropes of Tannaitic midrashic rhetoric. And in terms of intertextuality, Kaplan could have attended more closely to the rich intertextuality of the Song of Songs itself, which helps establish it as such a fruitful source of midrashic readings; the resonances of the Song with the creation story in Genesis are neglected (although Kaplan cites the dispute between LaCocque and Davis over whether the Song is a parody or deeply serious), and Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa 5) is unmentioned, although Kaplan does adduce Jeremiah and Hosea. Kaplan is clearly well-read in contemporary scholarship but could be a more careful reader of some important scholars (notably Fishbane and Boyarin). This secondary literature could have led Kaplan to more subtle and sophisticated readings of the Tannaitic midrash in their exegetical complexity; his overall interpretation would likely remain unchanged, but his argumentation would be deepened and strengthened by even more careful attention to what is in the *biblical* text, as well as what surrounds it.

In sum, Kaplan's book is a fine study of an important and engaging subject. It highlights a beautiful body of texts from a pivotal moment in not only Jewish history but the history of biblical exegesis broadly speaking. While it could have been a more ambitious work, it suggests a fruitful and important scholarly trajectory and the ample footnotes indicate solid progress in pursuing these leads. It is to be hoped that Kaplan, or those inspired by *My Perfect One*, will continue these efforts and amplify the promises made in this monograph.