*Shiur Qoma*h Speculations, and Rabbinic Interpretations of

the Body of God in *Song of Songs*: A Re-examination

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# Introduction

The dating of the esoteric work known as *Shiur Qoma* is the subject of debate among scholars. At the center of this work are a mystic’s visions of God as a man of enormous proportions. At its climax, verses that describe the beloved from Song 5:1–16 are integrated into the description of God. Several scholars have argued that *Shiur Qoma* was originally an early midrash on these verses from the Tannaic period. Later, various objections arose to this claim. The question of the dating of *Shiur Qoma*h relates to broader questions about the existence of a corporeal conception of divinity in Jewish mysticism, the antiquity of such a conception and its relationship to Christianity, and the degree and direction of influence between the two traditions on this topic. In this article, I will re-examine these questions by comparing Tannaic midrashim about the physical description of the beloved[[1]](#footnote-1) in the *Song of Songs* with the interpretations in Amoraic midrashim.

# Descriptions of the Beloved’s Body in *Song of Songs*

*Song of Songs* describes the yearning of two lovers for one another, as they come together and are separated. In three places, the male lover, the beloved, lists the virtues of the young woman he loves, describing her beautiful body in detail.[[2]](#footnote-2) The young woman also describes her handsome beloved to the daughters of Jerusalem using rich imagery and metaphor:

(10) My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. (11) His head is finest gold, his locks are curled, and as black as a raven. (12) His eyes are like doves by watercourses, bathing in milk, and fitly set. (13) His cheeks are like beds of spices, producing sweet perfumes; his lips are lilies, breathing the finest myrrh. (14) His hands are as rods of gold, studded with topaz pink; his body is polished ivory, inlaid with sapphires. (15) His legs are like marble pillars, set on bases of fine gold; his form is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. (16) His mouth is delicious, and all of him is delightful. Such is my beloved, and such is my lover, O maidens of Jerusalem.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is the only detailed description of the male beloved in *Song of Songs*. The description goes from his head to his legs, pausing over particular body parts. The imagery relating to the beloved’s head and face is taken from the animal and plant kingdoms, attributing delicacy and vitality to these features. The imagery used to describe his body is different, using hard substances like metals, precious stones, and wood, expressing the beloved’s power and strength. These detailed descriptions are set in a frame with opening and closing general descriptions of the beloved, whose beauty is not limited to the particulars but evident in the general impression he makes with his height and attractiveness.

This focus on physical appearance and detailed description of it are unusual in the Bible.[[4]](#footnote-4) The role of these descriptions is to praise the object of the narrator’s love but even more so to testify to the lovers’ intimate connection, which allows them to gaze at one another and linger over every detail. This intimacy is revealed in the conclusion of the young woman’s description to the daughters of Jerusalem ‘His mouth is delicious, and all of him is delightful.’

# Shiur Qoma and Song of Songs

Several scholars have pointed out the connection between the detailed description of the beloved in *Song of Songs* and the esoteric work *Shiur Qoma* (literally, ‘the measurement of the body’). *Shiur Qoma* is written in Hebrew and the date of its composition is unknown. At its center are a mystic’s visions of God that he describes anthropomorphically as a man of enormous size. The work contains detailed information about God’s body, the dimensions of His limbs, and the mystical names of the divine body.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The relationship between *Shiur Qoma* and *Song of Songs* is founded on the allegorical interpretation of the latter where the beloved is identified as God and whose lover is Israel. Accordingly, the description of the beloved’s body in Song 5:10-16 is a description of God. This understanding finds expression in *Shiur Qoma* where the verses from *Song of Songs* are cited as part of the description of the divine dimensions. There are other connections between the two works associated with the description of the physical body. Here is a passage from *Shiur Qoma*:

The angel, the interior minister, whose name is Metatron said to me… Rabbi Yishmael says: What is the measurement of the body of the Holy One, blessed be He, who lives eternally forever – may His name be blessed and his appellation exalted? The soles of his feet fill the entire world, as it is said ‘the heavens are my throne and the earth my footstool’ (Isa 61:1). The height of his feet is three thousand ten thousands parasangs, Parmsiyeh is its name. From his feet to his ankles, nine thousand ten thousands parasangs…of the right [side]… of left [side]…from his ankles to his knees, twelve thousand ten thousands parasangs. His calves… from his knees… to his thighs… his right knee… and of the left…right thigh…and left…from his thighs to his neck, twenty-four thousand ten thousands parasangs. And the hips of his hips… and on his heart – seventy names…blessed and praised be the name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity. His neck is thirteen thousand ten thousands parasangs, the length of his neck… his beard… the appearance of the face and the appearance of the jaws in the image of spirit and the form of soul…and no creature can conceive him… His torso…the width of His forehead…and on His forehead seventy letters are written….[[6]](#footnote-6)

Like in *Song of Songs*, the description here is detailed and lists body parts and physiognomic features. However, the description here begins at the bottom and proceeds upwards, in ascending order of status. At the highest point of the description, the verses from *Song of Songs* are cited:

[…] The crown on His head is five hundred thousand by five hundred thousand, Israel is its name. And the precious stone between its horns has Israel my people – Israel my people engraved upon it.

‘My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is finest gold, …His eyes are like doves by watercourses, etc.’ (Song 5:10-11)

{Addition in Genizah fragment Oxford ms Hebr. C. 65:

‘…bathing in milk, and fitly set. His cheeks are like beds of spices, producing …breathing the finest myrrh. … rods of gold, studded with topaz pink; his body is polished ivory, inlaid with sapphires. … bases of fine gold; his form is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth is delicious, and all of him is delightful. Such is my beloved, and such is…’ (Song 5:12-16)}

[…] Rabbi Ishmael said: when I said this matter before Rabbi Akiva, he said to me: Anyone who knows this measure of his creator and the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He is assured in this world and the world to come. He will live long in this world and live long and it will be good for him in the life of the world to come. He prospers in this world and prospers in the world to come.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The verses from *Song of Songs* that describe God guide the reader’s perceptual imagination, this time from top to bottom. The conception that God has limbs like a human, with specific proportions and mystical names is unique to *Shiur Qoma* among the works of the *Heikhalot* and *Merkava* literature.[[8]](#footnote-8) According to Gershom Scholem, these descriptions served to emphasize the perfect harmony of divine proportions and express His sublime beauty: ‘Your eyes will see the king in his beauty’ (Isa 33:17).[[9]](#footnote-9) Farber-Ginat has pointed out that the prominence of aesthetic beauty and perfection of form in this description of God matches the statement in *Heikhalot Zutarti* 25-26: ‘As it were, He is like us and He is more beautiful than anyone.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Ithamar Gruenwald argues that the measurements aim to convey the notion of ideal proportions, apparently shared by God and man alike.[[11]](#footnote-11) The integration of verses from *Song of Songs* that relate to the beauty and harmony of the different parts of the beloved’s body fits this idea.

According to Halbertal, the visual imagery found in mystical literature expresses a type of spiritual intimacy that is limited to a select few. He claims that the reason for the limitations on studying the divine chariot found in rabbinic literature is not fear of error but rather hesitation to reveal such visual imagery. Not everyone is worthy of glimpsing the face of the king and all the more so gazing upon His face. The Sages believed that an extended gaze that became pleasurable or satisfying would be a desecration. Halbertal points out that the contrasting attitude found in the *Heikhalot* literature undermines the boundaries of the mystery set by the Sages. The mystical approach found in *Heikhalot* is dominated by the drive to perceive God. That is the purpose of the heavenly journey that climaxes when God appears before the mystic in all His glory. In this way, *Merkava* literature overcomes the last vestige of the mystery of the intimate gaze and undermines the mystery that it set for itself.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Several scholars have found external evidence for the connection between *Song of Songs* and esoteric literature in the writings of Origen, a church father who lived in the third century CE Caesarea.[[13]](#footnote-13) He wrote a ten-volume commentary on *Song of Songs* and also delivered homiletics to audiences assembled by his students in Caesarea.[[14]](#footnote-14) Origen had contact with Jewish sages, and his writings are fundamental to early Christian mysticism. In the introduction to his commentary on *Song of Songs* he writes:

It is said that with the custom of the Jews is that no one who has not reached full maturity is permitted to hold this book [*Song of Songs*] in his hands. And not only this, but although their rabbis and teachers are wont to teach all the scriptures and their oral traditions [*Mishnayot*] to the young boys, they defer to the last the following texts: The beginnings of Genesis, where the creation of the world is described; the beginning of the prophecy of Ezekiel, where the doctrine of the angels is expounded; and the end [of the same book] which contains the building of the Temple; and this book of the *Song of Songs*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Origen lists *Song of Songs* along with three other esoteric biblical passages: the description of Creation, the account of the chariot in Ezekiel, and the description of the future Temple in Ezekiel.[[16]](#footnote-16) This statement testifies to the existence of an esoteric understanding of *Song of Songs*.

In his book, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkaba Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition,* Gershom Scholem writes that Origen’s inclusion of *Song of Songs* in this list testifies that he was aware of the existence of an esoteric reading of *Song of Songs*, as makes sense, given its central role in *Shiur Qoma*. According to Scholem, Origen’s statement and *Shiur Qoma* explain one another. He concludes that this connection can aid in dating *Shiur Qoma* as early as the late second or early third centuries CE. Scholem argues based on this claim that the corporeal conception of God was an early element of Jewish mysticism that was adopted later by Christian Gnostic circles rather than the direction of influence being the other way around.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Talmudic scholar Saul Lieberman wrote an appendix to Gershom Scholem’s book wherein he adds evidence to the claim that there was an early mystical interpretation of *Song of Songs* that was connected to *Shiur Qoma*. Lieberman points out Tannaic sources that interpret *Song of Songs* esoterically. He claims that the Tannaim understood *Song of Songs* as a description of the revelation of God as He appeared in His chariot at the Red Sea and Mount Sinai. *Song of Songs* praises this image of God and explains the chariot. According to Lieberman, Rabbi Akiva’s statement that *Song of Songs* is ‘holy of holies’ is based on this interpretation and he possibly held that God Himself said it when it was given at Sinai.[[18]](#footnote-18) Lieberman writes:

I now accept Scholem’s claim that *Shiur Qoma* is an early midrash to *Song of Songs* chapter 5:10-16 that was part of an ancient midrash on *Song of Songs*. *Shiur Qoma* is a work of praise and adoration of the Holy One, blessed be He in a form that is beyond us… the midrash on *Song of Songs* is the account of the chariot which is *Shiur Qoma*.[[19]](#footnote-19)

# The Responses to Scholem and Lieberman’s Approach

Scholem and Lieberman’s opinion regarding the early date of *Shiur Qoma* and its relationship to *Song of Songs* inspired a variety of responses. Some scholars of Jewish mysticism questioned the connection to the mystical interpretation of *Song of Songs*. According to Arthur Green, the identification of *Shiur Qoma* and Midrash Shir ha-Shirim is overstated. *Song of Songs* is a setting in which *Shiur Qoma* found a home. This is perhaps as close as we can come to an appropriate formulation of the still-mysterious relationship between the two in the early centuries of the Common Era.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Assi Farber-Ginat has written that while there is a relationship between the *Shiur Qoma* literature, the mystical practice of *aliya* (literally ‘ascent’), and the interpretation of *Song of Songs*, it is not necessary to assume that the source of these is a mystical interpretation of the image of the beloved in *Song of Songs*.[[21]](#footnote-21) Joseph Dan has argued contra Scholem that Origen does not help establish *Shiur Qoma*’s date of composition. Origen does relate to mystical matters but does not give any indication of their nature. Moreover, Origen’s commentary on *Song of Songs* contains no indications of familiarity with *Shiur Qoma*. For these reasons, the question raised by Scholem whether the Jewish mystical interpretation of *Song of Songs* predated Origen remains unanswered. Dan believes that there is great significance to the fact that *Song of Songs* is a foundational text of both Jewish and Christian mysticism but there remain great differences between how the two religions relate to this source.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Scholars of midrash, among them his students, have criticized Lieberman’s interpretation of the Tannaic sources in support of his claim. Boyarin reassesses his teacher’s argument in a section of an article entitled ‘Rabbi Akiva’s midrash on *Song of Songs* – is it Really *Shiur Qomah*?’ Boyarin’s criticism contains the comment: ‘The article is overflowing with novel interpretations that can subvert or support some of the understandings of the term midrash.’ Boyarin claims that Lieberman did not establish that *Shiur Qoma* is related in any particular way to Rabbi Akiva and his circle; there is no need to give esoteric meanings to the midrashim Rabbi Akiva cites. The Tannaim, as is their way, use verses from *Song of Songs* as a hermeneutic key to interpreting difficult verses in the Torah. Alongside his criticism, Boyarin does not reject the possibility of there having been an esoteric interpretation of *Song of Songs* in the Tannaic period that may have been related to *Shiur Qoma*.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Menahem Hirshman argues that Rabbi Akiva’s declaration that *Song of Songs* is the holy of holies is meant to emphasize the religious importance of love and does necessarily reflect a mystical reading. Hirshman points out that the fact that Origen mentions *Song of Songs* in his list of biblical passages is not necessarily because of its esoteric status but rather out of concern for its eroticism, which Origen in fact mentions in the introduction to his commentary. At the same time, Origen’s commentary on *Song of Songs* presents it as a mystical journey and this can support Scholem and Lieberman’s thesis that a mystical interpretation of *Song of Songs* existed at that time.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Alon Goshen-Gottstein questions Lieberman’s claim that the Tannaim had consistent theses regarding the interpretation of *Song of Songs*. One cannot assume that they interpreted Song 5:10-16 as a description of the revelation at the Red Sea or Mount Sinai. Under the circumstances, Goshen-Gottstein believes that there is no basis for the claim that the Sages had a systematic mystical interpretation of *Song of Songs*, i.e., *Shiur Qoma*.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Below, we will attempt to shed new light on the contested topic of whether a corporeal conception of God was an early element in Jewish mysticism by comparing the Tannaic interpretations of body descriptions in the relevant verses with those that appear in Amoraic literature. Even though these interpretations are allegorical, it is possible to find significant differences between the sources.

# A Comparison of Descriptions of the Body of the Beloved in Tannaic Midrash to those in Amoraic Midrash

## His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven (Song 5:10-16).

We will begin our discussion with the analysis of the Tannaic interpretation of Song 5:10-16 that appears in the *Sifrei*. The *Sifrei* is a halakhic midrash on Deuteronomy; it contains Tannaic statements from the first centuries CE and was redacted circa the middle of the third century CE.[[26]](#footnote-26) The midrash below is a homily on the verse ‘With him were myriads of holy ones’ (Deut 33:2) that deals with the appearance of God when He first revealed Himself to Israel at the Red Sea.[[27]](#footnote-27)

And when He revealed Himself at the Sea, they [Israel] immediately recognized Him, as it is said, ‘This is my God and I will glorify Him; the God of my father, and I will exalt Him’ (Exod 15:2). Similarly, the nations of the world would ask Israel, ‘How is your beloved better than another’ (Song 5:9), that you are killed for His sake, as it is said, ‘Therefore do maidens (‘alamot\*) [= unto death do they] love you’ (Song 1:3)? And it also says, ‘It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long’ (Ps 44:23). You are all beautiful, you are all heroic. Come and mingle with us,’. And Israel replied, ‘Let us tell you only a part of His praise and you will recognize Him: ‘My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy. .. His head is finest gold. .. His eyes are like doves by watercourses. .. His cheeks are like beds of spices. .. His hands are as rods of gold. .. His legs are like marble pillars. .. His mouth is delicious, and all of him is delightful’ (Song 5:10-16).’ When the nations of the world heard of the beauty and the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, they said to Israel, ‘‘Let us come with you, as it is said, ‘Wither has your beloved gone, O fairest of women? Whither hath thy beloved turned? Let us seek him with you’ (Song 6:1).’ What does Israel reply? That they [the nations] have no part of Him: ‘I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; He browses among the lilies’ (Song 6:3)[[28]](#footnote-28)

The midrash describes a dialogue between the nations of the world and Israel. The nations express their wonder and the depth of Israel’s love for God and ask to join them. Israel’s response is to praise God, citing the verses in Song 5:10-16. The descriptions of the divine body in this Tannaic midrash express the intimacy with God that no other nation can achieve. The midrash connects this experience of intimacy with martyrdom: ‘“How is your beloved better than another” (Song 5:9), that you are killed for His sake, as it is said, “Therefore do maidens (‘alamot\*) [= unto death do they] love you” (Song 1:3)? And it also says, “It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long” (Ps 44:23).[[29]](#footnote-29) In parallel versions of the text that appear in the *Mekhiltot*, this midrash is attributed to Rabbi Akiva who is associated with martyrdom.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In the dialogue between Israel and the nations, the praise of God has overtones of the mystical – ‘only some of His virtues have been disclosed to you.’ Israel announces at the beginning of the dialogue that their revelations will be only partial. They establish a clear hierarchy – Israel and God have the intimate knowledge of the lovers, while the nations are excluded.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The verses quoted by the *Sifrei* that detail the beauty of the beloved are descriptions of God Himself. The ability to render this description depends upon the visual experience of God at the Red Sea. The opening line of the midrash, ‘And when He revealed Himself at the Sea, they [Israel] immediately recognized Him, as it is said, “This is my God and I will glorify Him; the God of my father, and I will exalt Him” (Exod. 15:2) emphasizes the power of this experience. The words ‘This is my God and I will glorify Him’ were understood by the author of the midrash as an accolade in the Roman style. Scholars have shown the Jews learned the formulations of accolades and the physical gestures associated with them from the non-Jewish society around them.[[32]](#footnote-32) One such gesture involved pointing at the object of the accolade while crying ‘There he is!’ According to the *Sifrei*, the divine revelation at the Red Sea was so tangible that it was possible to point at God and declare ‘There is my God’ and to describe His physical appearance in detail, per the description in *Song of Songs*.[[33]](#footnote-33)

In ‘Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim,’ Lieberman cites the *Sifrei* as evidence of the existence of an esoteric interpretation of *Song of Songs* in the Tannaic period. He points out that much is obscure in this midrash. The author quotes just the beginnings of the verses because he did not want to reveal the essence of Israel’s praise of God. It is clear, claims Lieberman, that the verses contain the ultimate praise. He believes that *Shiur Qoma*, an ancient midrash to Song 5:10-16 that included a description of God’s image along with praise and accolade of it, was left out of this text for esoteric reasons.[[34]](#footnote-34) According to Lieberman, this text was concealed not only from non-Jewish elements, but also text from internal elements in the Jewish community. This concealment reflects the esoteric nature of *Shiur Qoma* which was always meant to be reserved for an elite minority.

We will now compare the Tannaic midrash’s description of the beloved’s body with that which appears in the Amoraic *Song of Songs* *Rabba*. *Song of Songs* *Rabba* is the largest and earliest rabbinic work we have on *Song of Songs*. It contains collections of homilies on every verse of *Song of Songs*, following the order of the verses. The material collected in it reflects the interpretations of Tannaim and Amoraim from the first through fifth century CE. *Song of Songs* *Rabba* was compiled in the Land of Israel circa the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century.[[35]](#footnote-35)

It can be stated almost unequivocally that *Song of Songs* *Rabba* is based on the allegorical interpretation of *Song of Songs* according to which the verses do not relate to the love between a man and a woman but to the love between God and Israel. At the same time, the allegorical interpretation is not one-dimensional and contains a variety of perspectives as we will see below.[[36]](#footnote-36) The following passage is a midrash on the same verses discussed above. It understands them to be an allegory about the Torah and the scholars who study it.

HIS HEAD IS AS THE MOST FINE GOLD (Song 5:11). HIS HEAD is the Torah, as it says, ‘The Lord made me as the beginning of His way’ (Prov 8:22).

MOST FINE GOLD: this refers to the words of the Torah, of which it says, ‘More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold’ (Ps 19:11).

R. Hunia said in the name of Resh Lakish: The Torah preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years. How do we know? Because it says, ‘Then I was by Him as a nursling; and I was daily (lit. ‘day, day’) all delight’ (Ps 19:30); and the day of the Almighty is a thousand years, as it says, ‘For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past (Ps 90:4).

HIS LOCKS ARE CURLED. This refers to the ruled lines [in the Scroll]. AND BLACK AS A RAVEN: this refers to the letters…

With whom are they preserved? BLACK AS A RAVEN (OREB): with one who is at them early and late (ma'arib)...

R. Judah applied the verse to the students of the Torah. LOCKS BLACK LIKE A RAVEN: these are the scholars; they look repulsive and black in this world, but in the time to come, ‘The appearance of them will be like torches, they [will] run to and fro like the lightnings’ (Nah. 2:5)…

R. Simeon b. Lakish said: The scroll which God gave to Moses was of white fire and its writing of black fire. It was itself fire and it was hewn out of fire and completely formed of fire and given in fire, as it says, ‘At His right hand was a fiery law unto them’ (Deut. 33:2).[[37]](#footnote-37)

The midrash interprets the image of the beloved as a description of the Torah. ‘Head’ (*rosh*) in the verse is read as *reishit* (first, beginning), identifying the Torah as God’s plaything that existed before Creation. ‘Most find gold’ represents the value of the Torah. The beloved’s black locks represent the black letters of the Torah written on parchment. They are ‘curled’ to represent how that parchment is pricked or ruled with straight lines, known as *sirgul*.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The midrash then presents a different allegory, in which the descriptions of the beloved represent Torah scholars. The contrasting colors of gold and black symbolize the practice of studying during both the day and the night. Using the same allegory, Rav Yehuda suggests a different reading with the black representing the state of Torah scholars in their impoverished present and the gold the reward they will receive in the future when they will shine like burning torches.

This midrash is a good example of the change in the way *Song of Songs* was interpreted between the Tannaic and Amoraic periods. Both use allegory but in Amoraic midrash, the allegory is not a representation of God Himself but of the Torah or the scholars who study it.

Stern argues that this shift was deliberate. The later Sages consciously changed the corporeal descriptions of God into descriptions of the Torah and Torah scholars to discourage engagement with the calculation of divine dimensions. In this way, they tried to prevent the public from engaging with the esoteric meaning of *Song of Songs*. Stern suggests that some continued to engage in esoteric matters but it was limited to an elite group.[[39]](#footnote-39)

It should be noted that the perspective reflected in these homilies does not appear to be anti-esoteric. The Torah becomes a physical representation of God and thus a medium by which anyone can contact the transcendent. Torah study is not limited to a small, select group but is accessible to all.

The second homily goes further, with the Torah scholars representing the Torah and hence representing God Himself. The verse ‘The appearance of them will be like torches, they [will] run to and fro like the lightnings’ (Nah 2:5) recalls descriptions of angels in the *Heikhalot* literature. In *Song of Songs* *Rabba*, the Torah scholars will look like angels in the eschatological future.

Another thing worth noting is that the allegorical descriptions in the midrash appear between two statements of Reish Laqish about the Torah. The passage begins with Reish Laqish’s mythic description of the Torah as a spiritual entity that existed before Creation and served as God’s plaything. It concludes with his depiction of a Torah scroll as black fire written on white fire, like the Torah given at Sinai that was made of fire. Reish Laquish’s depictions of the Torah have mystical overtones, only about the Torah rather than God.

Shraga Bar-On has argued that the claim that the Torah is made of fire is equivalent to saying that it is derived from the divine body that is itself made of fire; God and the Torah are one. The study of Torah is thus the study of God and replaces direct experience of the divine. Mysticism, within this conception, is less about direct contact with God and His angels; the Torah becomes the medium by which its scholars have mystical experiences and contact with the transcendent.[[40]](#footnote-40)

## His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me (Song 2:6)

In *Song of Songs* 2:4-6 the young woman describes an intimate moment she had with her beloved:

He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. O that his left hand were under my head and that his right hand embraced me!

The last verse expresses the fulfillment of the young woman’s desire, with her and her beloved embracing one another. The beloved is represented as physically embracing her in his arms.

*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, a Tannaic midrash to Exodus that was redacted in the third century CE, interprets this verse in the context of the revelation at Sinai:

‘And when the people saw it they trembled.’ ‘Trembling’ everywhere means only reeling to and fro, as it is said: ‘The earth reeleth to and fro…’ (Isa 24:20).

‘And stood afar off.’ Beyond twelve miles. This tells that the Israelites were startled and moved backward twelve miles and then again, returning, moved forward twelve miles – twenty-four miles at each commandment, thus covering two hundred and forty miles on that day. Then God said to the ministering angles: Go down and assist your brothers, as it is said: ‘The angels of Zebaot lead, they lead’ (Ps 68:13) – they lead them when going, they lead them when returning. And not only the ministering angles assisted Israel, but the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself also, as it is said ‘His left hand is under my head and His right hand embraces me’ (Song 2:6).[[41]](#footnote-41)

The midrash addresses Israel’s ambivalence at Sinai, their attraction and hesitation at the prospect of God’s revelation and hearing His voice. The author of the midrash derives from the word *va-yanu‘u,* ‘and stood afar,’ that the children of Israel moved back and forth at every divine utterance. This idea is highlighted by adding the calculation of the total distance they traveled that day. God responds by sending His angels, telling them ‘Go down and assist your brothers,’ referring to Israel as the brothers of the angels. Ultimately, God did not rely only on the angels and engaged with Israel Himself,[[42]](#footnote-42) quoting *Song of Songs*: ‘His left hand is under my head and His right hand embraces me’ (Song 2:6). The physical description is of the beloved who embraces Israel at Sinai, at the giving of the Torah, to express intimacy and love. Sinai is a high point of the relationship, in which the two sides make a covenant binding both.[[43]](#footnote-43) The verses from *Song of Songs* are cited to represent this moment as physical intimacy between two lovers.

Let us compare *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*’s allegorical reading with the reading of the same verses according to *Song of Songs* *Rabba*:

LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the first tablets. AND HIS RIGHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the second tablets.

Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the fringes. AND HIS RIGHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the phylacteries.

Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the recital of the shema. AND HIS RIGHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the [amida] prayer.

Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the sukkah. AND HIS R1GHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the lulav.

Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the seven clouds of glory that surrounded Israel in the desert. AND HIS R1GHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the cloud of the divine presence in the time to come, as it says, ‘The sun shall be no more thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee’ (Isa 60:19). What then shall give light to see? ‘The Lord shall be thine everlasting light’ (ibid. 20).

Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the mezuzah; for R. Simeon b. Yochai taught: ‘And you shall write them upon the door-posts of your house [beitecha]’ (Deut 6:9): that is, of thy coming [beatcha] into your house from the street.

R. Johanan said: It is written: ‘And you shall set the table without the veil and the candlestick... toward the south (Ex 26:35). Is not this the natural way? Does not one put the lamp on the left so that it shall not hinder the right hand? Does not one put the left hand under the head and embrace with the right? R. Aha said: R. Johanan derives the rule from this verse: ‘To love the Lord your God... and to cleave to Him’ (Deut 11: 22). How is cleaving effected? With HIS LEFT HAND UNDER MY HEAD.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The Amoraic midrash interprets the beloved’s arms with a string of allegories, but in contrast to the Tannaic source above, none of them involve a physical description of God. The author of the midrash emphasized the fact that one needs both arms to perform certain actions. The midrash therefore cites various pairs of things that complete one another or are connected in some other way. Some of them relate to practical mitzvot: Ritual fringes (*tsitsit*) and phylacteries, the recital of the *shema* and the *amida*, and *sukka* and *lulav*. Other pairs relate to historical events: the first and second tablets at Sinai, the clouds of glory and the cloud of the divine presence that accompanied Israel in the desert, and the construction of the Tabernacle in which the menorah and the shewbread table were placed.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The pair that stands out in this list and is also closest to the description of God in the *Mekhilta* is that of the left hand representing seven clouds of glory and the right hand the cloud of the divine presence. However, this similarity actually accentuates the difference, since the cloud of the divine presence refers to the divine presence in the eschatological future. Isaiah 60:19 states that Israel will then have no need for the light of the sun during the day or the light of the moon at night since God will accompany them Himself.

The homily by the Amora Rav Aha that concludes the series expresses the mutuality of the love between God and His people. God revealed His love in a variety of historical events where He embraced them with, so to speak, His right and left hands with the tablets, the clouds of glory, and the Tabernacle and its contents. A person who wishes to show his love of God must act similarly – he must surround himself every day with practical mitzvot. This is the reason the list begins with the first and second tablets, representing the Torah that contains the mitzvot that will be mentioned afterward.

The comparison between the interpretations of the descriptions of the body of the beloved in the Tannaic midrashim and those in *Song of Songs* *Rabba* brings out the significant differences between them. Both interpret the verses allegorically but in the Tannaic sources, the descriptions of the body of the beloved are an allegory for the body of God while in the Amoraic sources they relate to other topics.[[46]](#footnote-46) The pair at the beginning of the list in *Song of Songs* *Rabba* is a particularly good example of the difference between that work and the Tannaic midrash. Both sources relate to the Sinai revelation but the Mekhilta has God surrounding and embracing Israel in His arms while *Song of Songs* *Rabba* focuses on the tablets God gave Israel.[[47]](#footnote-47) Even after Moses broke the first tablets, God’s love for Israel remained as expressed by His giving the second tablets.

## Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm (Song 8:6).

Another example of the phenomenon we have found relates to the verse in Song 8:6: ‘Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.’ The young woman uses the image of a seal, a personal object that was usually tied on a string and worn around one’s neck or right arm. She implores her beloved that she should remain close to his heart or attached to his arm.

This verse is cited in the *Tosefta* as an example of a verse that contains ‘mixed utterances,’ i.e., the words in the verse are said by different speakers:

In similar fashion, one says, ‘Under the apple tree I awakened you’ (Song 8:5) – thus said the Holy Spirit. ‘Set me as a seal upon your heart’ (Song 8:6) – said the congregation of Israel. ‘For love is fierce as death’ (ibid.) – said the nations of the world. Three utterances [*devarim*] alongside one another.[[48]](#footnote-48)

In this passage, the verses from *Song of Songs* are read as a conversation with three participants: The Holy Spirit, the congregation of Israel, and the nations of the world. The beloved and the young woman express their love through direct speech – ‘I awakened you,’ ‘Set me,’ directed to one another. The last sentence, ‘For love is fierce as death,’ is a comment made by the nations of the world observing from the side. The love and longing of the two lovers for one another can be heard in their words, while the nations’ comment contains a hint of jealousy, that can be seen from the continuation of the verse, ‘jealousy, hard as the grave’ (Song 8:6). Dividing the verse among different speakers highlights the dialogue between God and His people that the nations can only witness. This Tannaic midrash does not explicate the descriptions of the beloved’s body in the verse – ‘set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm’ but the heart and head refer allegorically to God’s heart and head and in this way express the unmediated intimacy of God and Israel.

The allegorical meaning of the description of the beloved in *Song of Songs* *Rabba* contrasts sharply:

SET ME AS A SEAL. R. Berekiah said: This refers to the recital of the shema’, as it says, ‘And these words... shall be upon thy heart’ (Deut.6:6). AS A SEAL UPON THINE ARM: this refers to the phylacteries, as it says, ‘And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand’ (ib. 8).[[49]](#footnote-49)

This midrash changes the speaker from the young woman to the beloved. In the allegory, the physical description is of Israel, who set a seal upon their arms so that they are aware of God throughout the day. The recital of *shema* morning and evening represents the seal upon their heart, as the verse says, ‘And these words... shall be upon thy heart.’ The seal on the arm is the phylacteries that are wrapped around the arm as the verse says, ‘And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand.’

# Conclusion

A comparison of the Tannaic sources, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* and the *Tosefta*, with the Amoraic midrash, *Song of Songs* *Rabba,* reveals a significant difference in their treatment of descriptions of the beloved. The Tannaic sources treat the beloved’s descriptions as descriptions of God Himself. The verses in Song 5:10-16 are understood as a description of God’s revelation to Israel by the Red Sea. The *Mekhilta* regards the description of God’s hands to refer to God’s tangible embrace of Israel at Sinai seeking to draw a frightened Israel closer to Him. The young woman’s request to be a seal on her beloved’s heart and arm is a direct request of God Himself.

The interpretations found in the Amoraic midrashim, by contrast, do not allegorize the beloved’s body as the divine body. The beloved’s body represents the Torah or Torah scholars, his hands are a collection of practical mitzvot that surround man or reflect significant historical moments. Reversing the usual reading of the verse, the seal represents actions (reciting the *shema* and wearing phylacteries) that the young woman (Israel) performs in order not to forget her beloved.

The Tannaic approach to the verses from *Song of Songs* describing the beloved’s body is similar to the physical conception of God in *Shiur Qoma*. One cannot necessarily conclude from this that the Tannaim engaged in the mystical practices of *Shiur Qoma*, but even so, there is something in common. This commonality supports the position of Lieberman and Scholem that *Shiur Qoma* is a midrash on *Song of Songs* from the end of the Tanaic period. The Tannaim’s interpretation of the description of the beloved in *Song of Songs* is characterized by a corporeal conception of God, which could also have been a component of early Jewish mysticism.

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1. In this article I will not address the question of how the Tannaim and Amoraim understood corporeal expressions ascribed to God in general. My argument here is focused on the rabbinic interpretation of *Song of Songs*. The Rabbis’ understanding of divine attributes that appear in other biblical books requires its own treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Song 4:1-7 her head and body are described. 6:4-10 includes a description of her head and face. Song 7:1-7 describes the young woman dancing, from her feet to the crown of her head.

   תיאור מלא מצוי בשה’ש ו, ד-י המסודר מלמעלה למטה. פלג גופה העליון של הרעיה מתואר בשה’ש ד, א-ז. בתיאור הנערה הרוקדת, בשה’ש ז, א-ז, מתחיל התיאור ברגליה של המחוללת ועולה מעלה [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Song 5:10-16. English translation by Paltiel Birnbaum with some adaptations. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Physical descriptions of the human body (or a statue of a human body) can be found in the Bible in the description of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Dan 2:31-33 and in the description of the man clothed in linen in Dan 10:5-6. This literary genre apparently began in ancient Mesopotamian literature, where these descriptions focused on the bodies of the goddesses. See Pope, *Song of Songs*, 54-85. Ancient Egyptian love songs contain descriptions of different parts of a beloved woman’s body, but these are very limited. See Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* 269-271 and songs 31, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On *Shiur Qoma* and its vast influence on Hasidei Ashkenaz, medieval Kabbalistic literature, and the Kabbala of the Ar’i, see Bar-Levav and Idel, *An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism,* vol 1, 79-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cohen, The Shi’ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions, Sefer Haqqomah, 136-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Shi*’*ur Qomah*, Sefer Haqqomah, 149-152 and Appendix 1, Oxford ms Hebr. C. 65, 184. See other recensions in the same book: Shi’ur Qomah in Merkavah Rabbah, 72-73; Shi’ur Qomha in Sefer Razi'el, 97; Seder Rabbah Debereshit, 46-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism, Ancient Times*, 891-892. According to Dan, *Shiur Qoma* derives from a different set of traditions than the other Merkbaava literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Scholem, *Major Trends,* 64; Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism, Ancient Times*, 891-892. In contrast to Scholem, Dan believes that the purpose of the description is to emphasize the greatness of God and in doing so to inspire a numinous attitude to Him. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Farber-Ginat, Asi. ‘Studies in the book of *Shiur Qoma*,’ 361-394. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gruenwald, Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Halbertal, ‘Concealment and Revelation,’ 15-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. McGinn, The Presence of God, 117-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Only three (or four) volumes of the commentary have survived in a Latin translation by Rufinus in the fifth century CE. A number of passages in Greek have been preserved in Procopius of Gaza’s catena. Only two homiletics on *Song of Songs* have survived, both in Latin translation by Hieronymous in Rome, circa 383 CE. These sources cover only the first two chapters of *Song of Songs*. For a comparison of the character of the these works and their Latin translations, see Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Based on the translation by Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism,*, 38, with some adaptations. Compare: *Origen,* *The Song of Songs Commentary*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The mishna constrains the study of the first two in mHag 2:1: ‘One may not expound upon forbidden relations in the presence of three, nor the act of Creation in the presence of two, nor [account of] the chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge.’ Study of the future Temple is perhaps alluded to at the end of the same Mishna: ‘Anyone who looks into four things is worthy of not having come into the world: what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism,* 36-42. Scholem is responding to an earlier article by Lieberman that had explained Origen’s statement based on later sources. See Lieberman, *Shkiin &Yemenite Midrashim*, 16-17. Later, Lieberman relied on Tannaic sources. See below. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lieberman, Saul. ‘Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim.’ In Urbach, ‘The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages,’ 249-251, originally published in Hebrew in 1961, E.E. Urbach draws a connection between Rabbi Akiva’s declaration that *Song of Songs* is holy of holies and the mystical interpretation of *Song of Songs*. He cites other Rabbinic interpretations of *Song of Songs* that are esoteric but does not make a connection to *Shiur Qoma*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lieberman, Saul. ‘Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim,’ 123, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*, 78-79 n3. On the connection between *Song of Songs* and early Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, see Green, ‘The *Song of Songs* in Early Jewish Mysticism,’ 49-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Farber Ginat, Studies in the Book of *Shiur Qoma*, 364 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism,* vol891-898. For example, Origen’s mystical commentary on *Song of Songs* has an erotic character that is entirely missing from *Shiur Qoma*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Boyarin, ‘Two Introductions to the Midrash on the *Song of Songs*.’ See Green’s critique of Boyarin in Green, *Keter*, 78-79 n3. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius*, 83-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Goshen-Gottstein, ‘Did the Tannaim Interpret the *Song of Songs* Systematically?’ 260–271. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 270-273; Kahana, ‘The Halakhic Midrashim,’ 95-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. According to Lieberman, the interpretation of the *Song of Songs* passage as referring to God at the Red Sea is consistently that of the Tanna Rabbi Eliezer. See Lieberman, ‘Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim,’ 12. For analysis of the midrashic unit and its context in the Sifrei, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 42-44. Fraade argues that the interpretation of the phrase ‘this is my God, and I will praise him’ (Exodus 15:2) that is part of the Song of the Sea should be distinguished from the dialogue between Israel and the nations of the world, that is about the giving of the Torah. In my interepretation below, I will relate to the whole passage as one unit, as it is understood in parallel texts. See also, about this passage Kaplan, *My Perfect One*, 139-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. SifDeut *Ve-zot ha-berakha*, 343, Finkelstein edition, 398-399. The translation is taken from Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Boyarin, Daniel. ‘Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism,’ 577-627. Boyarin is discussing a parallel version in MekRY (601-605). He claims that Rabbi Akiva became the prototypical martyr and that is why the midrash is attributed to him. Dan (*History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism*, vol 2, 759-761) believes that the conception of *Song of Songs* as a mystical work developed in the same circle that ascribed to it a martyrologial-erotic meaning wherein the love described in *Song of Songs* is identified as the love between God and his saints. This love reaches its climax in the context of martyrdom, with the book serving as a guide to the martyr who seeks to sanctify the divine name. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. MekRY Beshalah shira 3 (Horovitz-Rabin p127, Lauterbach pp185-186); MekRSbY 15:2 (Epstein-Melamed p79). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 42-44; Stern, ‘Ancient Jewish Interpretation of the *Song of Songs*,’ 54-77; Kaplan, *My Perfect One*, 26-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lieberman, ‘Keles Kilusin,’ 433–439; Leiter, ‘Worthiness, Acclamation, and Appointment,’ 138-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Lieberman, ‘Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim,’ 121. See the other examples he cites there. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Lieberman, ibid., 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. On CantR, see Kadari, ‘Early Rabbinic Literature: *Song of Songs* Rabbah’; Lachs, ‘Prolegomena to Canticles Rabba,’ 235-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. On the multiple facets of the allegorical interpretations in *Song of Songs* *Rabba*, see Kadari, ‘Friends Hearken to your Voice,’ 183-209. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. CantR 5.11:1-6 (Simon edition pp239-244). Textual variants can be found in the synoptic edition at https://schechter.ac.il/midrash/shir-hashirim-raba/. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The pricking was an inseparable part of the ruling, see Beit-Arié, *Hebrew Codicology*, 370-376. CantR 11.1 ‘Another matter: ‘“We will make you ornaments of gold” – that is the writing. “Studded with silver” – that his the ruling.’ See yMeg 1:8 (p71c): ‘It is a halakha from Moses at Sinai that they write on parchment and write with ink and rule with a reed.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Stern, ‘Ancient Jewish Interpretation,’ 54-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Bar-On, ‘The Wonders of the Torah,’43-44. Bar-On’s discussion is about ySota 8:3 (Academy of the Hebrew Language Edition, p940). The text there reads: ‘The Torah is given from fire,’ i.e., it was given from God, Who is fire. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. MekRY, yitro, ha-hodesh 9 (Horovitz-Rabin p236). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. This idea of direct divine engagement as opposed to by means of angels recurs in several places in Tannaic literature. See, for example, MidrTann Deut 26:8: ‘And the Lord took us out of Egypt not by an angel, and not by a seraph, and not by an agent, but the Holy one, blessed be He, himself.’ Regarding the giving of the Torah, see CantR 1.2:2. Scholars have suggested that that passage reflects a Jewish-Christian polemic from the Amoriac period. See Lieberman, ‘Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim,’ 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Lieberman claims that the interpretation of *Song of Songs* as a historical allegory about Sinai is consistently that of the Tanna Rabbi Akiva. See Lieberman, ‘Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim,’ 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Song of Songs* *Rabbah* 2:1, 1 (Simon, 111-112) with adjustments. This passage is corrupted in the manuscripts and has been repaired based on Geniza fragments. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. These opinions fit the the historical allegory of Sinai, the Tabernacle and the journey through the desert. See Kadari, *Friends Hearken to your Voice*, 202-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Compare Kaplan, *My Perfect One*, 135-157. In a chapter devoted to ‘Israel's Ideal Man,’ he concludes that the Tannaim use the descriptive language of the male beloved in order to highlight the uniqueness and exemplarity of Israel's God, by using two interpretive strategies: first, in contradistinction to the nations’ gods and second, in correspondance to the features of an ideal Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See also CantR 5, 1 (Simon, p245): ‘His hands are as rods of gold’ – these are the tablets of the covenant, as it is said, ‘and the tablets are the work of God.’ For another comparison of the Torah with a person’s arms, see the story about Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon in bSanhedrin 68a: ‘He took his two arms an put them on his heart; he said: Woe to you my two arms that are like two rolled Torah scrolls.’ In this case, the arms are compared to rolled scrolls made of parchment. Another passage that relates to the notion that that which was engraved on the tablets surrounded Israel on both sides is CantR 1,2:2 (Simon p230): ‘Teaching that the statement was issued from the Holy one, blessed be He’s right to Israel’s left hand and the returned and went around Israel’s encampment…and returned and surrounds them from Israel’s right to the Holy one, blessed be He’s left. The Holy one, blessed be He would receive it in His right and engrave it on the tablet.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. tSota 9.8 (Lieberman p213). Translation by??? [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. CantR 8, 6:2 (Simon p306). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)