

# Song of Songs in the Eyes of Rashi and Nicholas of Lyra: Comparing Jewish and Christian Exegesis

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Between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, a new emphasis on “literal” interpretation of the biblical text developed within both Jewish and Christian communities. Two medieval scholars, Rashi and Nicholas of Lyra set out to apply literal interpretation to the Song of Songs. This paper examines their methodology and conclusions, as well as Nicholas’ engagement with Rashi’s commentary. The comparative study highlights the intersection between Jewish and Christian exegesis and application.

In Jewish and Christian traditions, allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs dominated until modern times.<sup>1</sup> In Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have argued for an original literal sense of the Song portraying romantic and sexual love between human beings (Weston W. Fields, “Early and Medieval Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs” in *Grace Theological Journal* 1.2 [Fall, 1980]: 221–231). However, a lack of commentary on the Song prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of our era makes dogmatic assertions problematic. Others have proposed that symbolism is inherent to the text itself, and the book may have been written as a positive complement to the allegorical biblical images of Israel as adulterous bride (e.g. Hosea; David Stern, “Ancient Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs in a Comparative Context,” 87–107 in Natalie B. Dohrmann and David Stern,

tradition, the Song symbolizes the relationship between God and Israel, and in Christian tradition, the Song refers to the relationship between God and the Church or God and the individual soul. However, efforts to provide a “literal” meaning of the Song are also evident pre-Enlightenment. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Saadya Gaon (CE 882–942) was influential in promoting *peshat* (plain meaning) as a superior hermeneutic to *derash* (applied meaning).<sup>2</sup> Gaon argued that the literal meaning of the text must always be accepted unless it goes against the senses, reason, contradicts another biblical verse, or opposes tradition.<sup>3</sup> *Peshat* was intended to correct wayward allegorical exegesis or “reading in” to a text in such a way as to supplant the plain meaning.<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter, Rashi (CE 1040–1105) attempted a literal reading of the Song and Nicholas of Lyra (CE 1270–1349) followed suit. Rashi’s and Nicholas’ interpretations differ from modern literal conclusions.

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eds., *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange: Comparative Exegesis in Context* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008], 91). In any case, by the second century, rabbinic debate over the Song suggests concern over a literal reading of sexual imagery with Rabbi Akiva settling the matter in favor of the figurative (Mishnah *Yadain* 3:5; see also Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 101a; Tosefta *Sanhedrin* 12.10; Stern, “Ancient Jewish Interpretation,” 96). In Christian tradition, allegory was employed by at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries as evident from the works of Hippolytus and Origen.

<sup>2</sup> David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 79–80.

<sup>4</sup> Halivni states that Christians tended to allegorize the biblical text when a new meaning was desired, while Jews (who also allegorized) often “read in” to the text an entirely different meaning. Allegory in some respects maintains the surface meaning but stretches it, but reading in displaces the surface meaning all together (Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 6).

However, their concern for the literal sense highlights diverse concepts of the “literal” and the impact on exegesis.

### *RASHI AND NICHOLAS IN THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG*

David Stern notes three trends in early Jewish exegesis of the Song: 1) sporadic and varied tannaitic and amoraic midrash, including *Song of Songs Rabbah*; 2) historical allegorization as found in the Aramaic Targum; and 3) esoteric and anthropomorphic *Shiur Komah* interpretation.<sup>5</sup> The category of historical allegorization is important for understanding Rashi’s exegesis. Rabbis commonly historicized the non-historical books of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Rashi’s commentary centers on the love between God and Israel as seen through the lens of Israelite historical events. However, he saw his work on the Song as distinct from what came before him and rooted in the literal sense. He was not opposed to allegory, but believed interpretation should be first anchored in *peshat*.<sup>7</sup> Rashi does not seem to conceptualize his interpretation of the Song as allegorical interpretation, as much as he believed he was elucidating the author’s intended meaning found in the figurative language. His understanding of *peshat* included symbolic language if that was the original literary intent.<sup>8</sup>

Rashi seems to understand *peshat*, in part, as comprehensive and orderly interpretation. Rabbinic commentary on the Song was scattered and polyvalent. Thus, he set out to provide a holistic and coherent reading. In his introduction to the book, he notes, “And I

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<sup>5</sup> Stern, “Ancient Jewish Interpretation,” 87, 95.

<sup>6</sup> Stern, “Ancient Jewish Interpretation,” 92.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), 36–37.

<sup>8</sup> Hailperin, *Rashi*, 32.

saw many Aggadic *midrashim*. Some arrange this entire book in one homily, and in others, we find isolated verses scattered in many Aggadic interpretations ... as for the Midrashic interpretations of our Rabbis, I shall set each one in its place.”<sup>9</sup> Rashi believed the Aggadic interpretations of the Song were “not reconcilable with the language of Scripture or the sequence of the verses” and so he sought to “adopt the apparent meaning of the verses, to reconcile their interpretations according to their sequence.”

Rashi’s approach had an impact on Nicholas of Lyra who quoted him directly and similarly interpreted the Song through the lens of historical events.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Nicholas’ commentary finds roots in Jewish tradition as well as Christian exegesis. From the Christian tradition Nicholas leans on the well-established allegorical understanding (the love between God and the Church or the individual soul), a view that persisted throughout church history with only a few deviations (e.g., Theodore of Mopsuestia and Julian of Eclanum).<sup>11</sup> Prior to Nicholas, various theologians conceptualized this love relationship as a polemic against false teachers, the triumphant church overcoming persecution, or the mystical union with God.<sup>12</sup> By the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Song was

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<sup>9</sup> A. J. Rosenberg, ed., “Introduction to the Song of Songs,” vii-xxiii in A. J. Rosenberg, ed. and trans., *The Five Megilloth: A New English Translation, Translation of Text, Rashi, and Other Commentaries* Vol. 1 (New York: Judaica Press, 1992), viii.

<sup>10</sup> Ann E. Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: Song of Songs in Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 60–75. Nicholas is not the first Christian to see history in the Song. Honorius Augustodunensis described four stages of salvation history culminating in the tribulation. Nevertheless, Nicholas seems to lean on Rashi’s approach.

<sup>11</sup> Matter, *Voice*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Matter, *Voice*, 89, 92–94.

increasingly viewed as representing the relationship between God and the soul.<sup>13</sup> The book became a guide for the individual spiritual life, particularly within the monastic setting as a means of overcoming earthly desires.<sup>14</sup> Nicholas demonstrates some affinity to the 12<sup>th</sup> century tropological concerns for purity. But, he rejects an overemphasis on the individual spiritual life. He also criticized the traditional Jewish and Christian allegorical interpretations, complaining that Jews focused too narrowly on Israel and Christians too much on the New Testament church. Nicholas viewed the Church as evident in the Old Testament and inclusive of both Jew and Gentile.<sup>15</sup> This view seems to bear affinity with Origen's understanding of the Church as pre-existent and visible in the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup>

Like Rashi, Nicholas was interested in the literal interpretation of the text. He writes, "It is the literal sense which I intend to present, to the best of my ability. And the literal sense is this, not that which is signified by the words, but that which is signified by the things signified by the words...."<sup>17</sup> Thus, like Thomas Aquinas, his understanding of the literal takes into account figurative language. Rashi and Nicholas both sought to go against the dominant trend of allegorical or dispersed Aggadic interpretation that struck them as unmoored from a literal foundation. However, despite all their intentions, their end-result interpretations bear similarities to allegorical interpretations of past

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<sup>13</sup> Matter, *Voice*, 111.

<sup>14</sup> Matter, *Voice*, 38–39, 95–97, 106–108, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *The Postilla of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs* (ed. and transl. by George Kiecker; Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 31.

<sup>16</sup> Matter, *Voice*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 32.

exegetes. For example, the eighth-century monk, St. Bede, said there is no literal meaning in the Song whatsoever, but he proposed a strikingly similar interpretation of the Bride in Song of Songs as did Nicholas (4:1–5).<sup>18</sup> Both view her as representing a collection of spiritually strong leaders who edify and build up the Church—except that Bede refers to Christian leaders while Nicholas describes Old Testament leaders.

Rashi and Nicholas are perhaps a blend of old and new ways of interpreting. A mixture of *peshat* and *derash*. Nevertheless, the desire to uncover the literal sense is clearly evident in Rashi's and Nicholas' exegesis. For example, both give physical descriptions of the bodily features of the Bride and Groom before providing a second reading that is figurative. Nicholas writes of the Bride's two breasts:

[T]hey are the same size, not too large, but well-proportioned, insofar as they show the female sex. All the above-mentioned things clearly contribute to a woman's bodily beauty. However, by means of this parable, one should see the spiritual beauty of the bride, that is, the spiritual beauty of Israel during the Old Testament.<sup>19</sup>

In this quote, Nicholas seems to acknowledge that one could read the text as purely a physical description, but he corrects any wooden interpretation by explaining that the text is a parable and so a literal reading must attend to the figurative language. Nicholas also attends to the literal in his use of the Hebrew to correct the Vulgate and by providing vernacular equivalents for Latin nouns.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> St. Bede, *The Venerable Bede On the Song of Songs and Selected Writings* (ed. and trans. by Arthur Holder; New York: Paulist, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas, *Postilla*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Dove, "Literal Senses in the Song of Songs," 129–46 in Philip

Rashi also provides the vernacular on occasion. And he briefly mentions Solomon as a prophetic writer and historical figure named in the Song, albeit, for Rashi, Solomon plays no role in the Song's narrative itself.

One of the important characteristics of literal interpretation for Rashi and Nicholas is their concern for proper sequencing. Rashi complains that previous exegesis of the Song was scattered. He desires to put everything in its proper place and to give a holistic and coherent account of the book. Similarly, Nicholas is meticulous in his ordering of the salvation history that he understands the Song to portray. He begins with Israelite slavery in Egypt and follows that through early church history. Even though some of his conclusions are similar to those of the monk Bede, the presentation is quite different. Bede, in typical earlier monastic fashion, provides a commentary of meandering themes. Nicholas has a clear, linear direction. So for both Rashi and Nicholas a "literal" meaning of the text is properly ordered and established. Rashi and Nicholas also seem to have a more sophisticated understanding of literary genre. St. Bede did not conceptualize his figurative interpretation as potentially also a literal one. But Nicholas understood that parable or metaphor can be the intended literal meaning. Thus, Nicholas provides the literal meaning of the Song, which happens to be, for him, a parable. Rashi seems to have a similar perspective.

#### OVERVIEW OF RASHI'S AND NICHOLAS' COMMENTARIES ON THE SONG

Rashi begins by placing the Song in the context of the Exile. Mary Dove suggests Rashi begins with the Exodus, but it is clear

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D. W. Krey and Lesley Smith, eds., *Nicholas of Lyra: the Senses of Scripture* (Boston: Brill Academic, 2000), 134.

that Rashi is first concerned with exile and does not address the Exodus until 1:8.<sup>21</sup> This distinction is important for understanding Rashi's overall message. Commenting on verse 2, Rashi says "She recites this song with her mouth in her exile and in her widowhood: 'If only King Solomon [God] would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth as of old.'"<sup>22</sup> The Babylonian exile provides the historical backdrop, but Rashi implies the lament is applicable to all Jews in exile who long for the eternal temple on Mt. Moriah (5:1b).

Rashi's commentary proceeds to describe events in Israel's history as though the exiles are remembering the past. They recall their sin, the patriarchs' obedience, God's love and forgiveness, and the beauty of Torah. These memories are intended to inspire righteous living and longing for restoration. Rashi's historical recollection is generally linear, but includes interruptions to reprise events already mentioned, as well as interject various speeches (between the Bride and Groom and the nations and the exiles), or to describe the characteristics of the Bride and Groom. His progression recounts the Exodus from Egypt, Sinai and the wilderness wandering, and entry into the Promised Land (1:8–11; 2:8–3:11), as well as exile and return (4:7–6:11). The commentary ends with Israel's speech to the nations asserting God's faithfulness (8:4–7), God's speech recognizing Israel's faithfulness in exile (8:8–13), and Israel's urgent plea to her Beloved to hasten his redemption (8:14).

Like Rashi, Nicholas interprets the Song through the lens of salvation history, covering many of the same important Israelite

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<sup>21</sup> Dove, "Literal Senses," 135.

<sup>22</sup> Rashi, "The Song of Songs," 1–103 in A. J. Rosenberg, ed. and trans., *The Five Megilloth: A New English Translation, Translation of Text, Rashi, and Other Commentaries*, Vol. 1 (New York: Judaica, 1992), 5.



events.<sup>23</sup> He divides the book into two primary sections, Old Testament (1:1–7:1) and New Testament (7:2–8:14). Within his description of Old Testament events, he has three primary categories: mutual love of the Bride and Groom (1:1–11), journey through the desert (1:12–3:3), and the Jews' arrival in the Promised Land (4:6–7:1). These are, in turn, divided into numerous other headings. The New Testament is divided into three topics: the rise of the Church (7:2–7:11), the spread of Christian faith (7:12–13) and the peaceful ending (8:1–14).

Nicholas' historically linear account covers much of the same biblical territory as Rashi. But, instead of beginning with the Exile, Nicholas starts with the Exodus from Egypt. He interprets "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" as a request for God to demonstrate his love through "signs and gestures" and then proceeds to discuss "wonders which God did for the Israelites in Egypt and in crossing the Red Sea."<sup>24</sup> At first glance, Nicholas seems to record the events from a distance with no singular historical group reciting the Song. While the voices of Rashi's exiles are clear and compelling; it is not immediately clear who is speaking in Nicholas' narrative. However, the evidence indicates he refers to Christians pressing toward devotion to Christ amid encumbering circumstances. For example, the Hebrews under Egyptian slavery (whom he considers to have been part of the Church) were not fully free to worship God and were constantly pressured to abandon faith. Nicholas ends his commentary by referring to the persecution of Christians by unbelievers and the Bride's request that the Groom place a seal upon her heart to protect her during her time on earth before she is finally taken up

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<sup>23</sup> The verse citations in this paper for Nicholas follow the Hebrew Bible and not the Latin numeration that Kiecker provides in his translation.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 36–37. Comments on Song 1:2–3.

into Heaven. Throughout, Nicholas urges piety in the face of encumbering circumstances, referring to the devout mind, undivided attention to God, outward decency, and penance.<sup>25</sup>

The historical event that each commentator begins with sets the tone. Rashi's theme of exile leads to a Song that inspires the reader to mourn sin and its effects while longing for restoration. In contrast, by starting with the Exodus, prior to the giving and violating of Torah, Nicholas highlights the preservation of the faithful. The Bride is innocent and desires to "be preserved from [the] sinful deviation" of Egyptian idolatry.<sup>26</sup> Whereas Rashi interprets the phrase "I am black" (1:5) as indicative of the Israelites' guilt, Nicholas minimizes culpability by suggesting the elect are tested by 400 years of slavery in order to purge them and increase their merit. The Bride is only considered "filthy ... in the estimation of ignorant people."<sup>27</sup> Her dark skin is merely the result of the hot sun or, figuratively, the "heat of tribulation in Egypt." Ultimately, Nicholas' Bride succumbs to sin while in the fat of the Promised Land and needs forgiveness, too. But, whereas Rashi's commentary allows one to hear and feel the repentant lament and hope of those pining for their Beloved while in exile, Nicholas' interpretation exhorts the faithful believer to persevere in devotion and service to God, trusting that the Beloved will empower them to do so.

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 35, 37, 53, 79. Comments on Song 1:1–2, 2:10, 5:5.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 41. Comments on Song 1:7.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 37–39. Comments on Song 1:4–5.

*THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM,  
THE BRIDE, AND THE GROOM*

In order to further compare and contrast how Rashi and Nicholas pursue their didactic and homiletic objectives three examples are provided below examining their interpretations of the same texts. These samples were chosen because they highlight the identity, thoughts, and speech of the central characters in the Song: “Daughters of Jerusalem,” the Bride, and the Groom.

*Example 1: Daughters of  
Jerusalem (4:1–5)*

The phrase “daughters of Jerusalem” occurs seven times in the Song (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 8:4). Twice the phrase occurs in the refrain, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you will not arouse or awaken love until she pleases” (2:7; 3:5). A very similar refrain also appears in 8:4. Rashi interprets every instance of “daughters of Jerusalem” as non-Israelites with the exception of 3:10. He explains: “[The author] calls the nations the daughters of Jerusalem because she is destined to become the metropolis for them all.”<sup>28</sup> Rashi provides intertextual evidence to back up this interpretation from Ezekiel 16:61 and Joshua 15:45. In Ezekiel, God tells the Israelites that even though they have sinned more than the nations, God will remember his covenant; thus, two sisters, the elder Samaria and the younger Sodom, will be given to Israel as daughters. The second citation in Joshua refers to “Ekron with its towns and its villages,” the land in a long list of territories given to the tribe of Judah as an inheritance in the Promised Land.

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<sup>28</sup> Rashi, “Song,” 9.

Throughout his exegesis, Rashi interjects the Bride's speech to the daughters of Jerusalem (the nations), heightening the drama of her experience in exile. During the first speech (1:5), the Bride tells the nations that she may be black with sin, but she is still beautiful on account of the righteous deeds of her ancestors. The Bride also insists that she has done some good and that despite her guilt, she can gain merit by practicing Torah. The next two speeches include the admonition not to arouse or awaken love (2:7; 3:5). Rashi interprets this as the Bride telling the nations not to stir up and entice her to follow them in their idolatrous ways on penalty that they will be devoured like a gazelle.

Rashi does not comment on the phrase "daughters of Jerusalem" in 5:16. Here the Bride describes to the "daughters" (presumably still the nations) the appearance of her Beloved and, thus, why she has become sick with longing for him. For the reference in 3:10, Rashi departs from his usual interpretation. Here the "daughters of Jerusalem" are the righteous Israelites who follow God wholeheartedly.

Nicholas was influenced by Rashi's interpretations on the "daughters of Jerusalem" even as he differed from him. Similarities include commentary on 5:16 is omitted and Rashi's disjunctive interpretation in 3:10 is followed. Similarly, the "daughters of Jerusalem" are identified negatively. However, for Nicholas the daughters are not the idolatrous nations, but rather Israelites who are weak in faith and prone to sin. Nicholas explains they are "imperfect ones ... who are called 'daughters' to emphasize their weak, feminine-like nature."<sup>29</sup> Nicholas seems intent on avoiding the strong division between Jew and Gentile that Rashi makes. For Nicholas there is one Church across time that

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 39.

includes both Jew and Gentile. Thus, the daughters of Jerusalem are not unbelievers, but rather weak believers.<sup>30</sup>

*Example 2: The Bride (4:1–5)*

In Song of Songs 4:1–5 the Groom praises the beauty of his Bride. In Rashi's narrative, the Bride, Israel, has just been given the Law at Sinai when she is praised. The Bride's white teeth represent her purity. Her lips are beautiful because she keeps promises, including the spies who kept their promise to Rahab. Her neck, the tower of David, represents strength and sound instruction goes out from it; Torah is a fortress and shield for Israel. The Bride's breasts are Moses and Aaron or the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. The two fawns ("your breasts are like two fawns") are the Ten Commandments. Since Rashi's overall narrative places the Bride in exile, the portrait of the pure Bride serves as a fond memory of the Groom's past praise, spurring her desire for Torah and a relationship with her Beloved like that of the early days of their love.

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<sup>30</sup> Deena Copeland Klepper erroneously states that Nicholas alternates between Jews and the Church (*The Insight of Unbelievers Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007], 34). Actually, he alternates between those who are strong in faith and those who are weak. Even when he gets to the New Testament, Jews are not viewed separately by virtue of being Jews, but rather if one does not recognize Jesus—either Jew or Gentile—one is weak in faith. The righteous and the unrighteous, together, are found in the Church from Old Testament times through the present (Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 33).

## Interpretations of the Bride

Rashi	Nicholas
<p>1. Praised because sacrifices pleased God. <i>Dove</i> = cleaves to its mate. So also, the Bride took on God's yoke and feared him. All the congregation of Israel is as dear as Jacob and sons <i>coming down from Mt. Gilead</i>. Or <i>goats coming down</i> = those who fought against Midian.</p>	<p>1. <i>Head</i> = Jacob (the text does not use the word "head"; Nicholas refers to the general image of a head). <i>Hairs</i> = twelve patriarchs. <i>Eyes</i> = Moses and Aaron "who led the people."</p>
<p>2. <i>Teeth</i> = white like perfect ewes taken from the flock and delivered to a "clever and worthy shepherd" who watches over to ensure the wool is not soiled and washes them day by day. <i>Lost</i> = no blemish or bereavement; symbolic of Israelite warriors against Midian who did not steal or engage in immoral acts.</p>	<p>2. <i>Teeth</i> = Israelites warriors like Caleb who fought against enemies.</p>
<p>3. <i>Lips</i> = beautiful because they make and keep promises, including the Spies who kept their promise to Rahab. <i>Scarlet</i> = scarlet thread Rahab used (Joshua 2:18). Mouth = speech of God-fearers. <i>Cheeks</i> = even the "worthless ones are full of <i>mitzvot</i>."</p>	<p>3. <i>Lips</i> = Levites who sang praises to God. <i>Red cheeks</i> = Levites offering up burnt offerings continually.</p>
<p>4. <i>Neck</i> = strength and fortification; instruction goes forth from here and fortifies Israel because Torah is a shield. <i>Quivers</i> = disciples.</p>	<p>4. <i>Neck</i> = scholars of the Law "as Rabbi Solomon says." These scholars defend the faith against error because of study of God's Law.</p>

Rashi	Nicholas
<p>5. <i>Breasts</i> = Moses and Aaron or the two Tablets. <i>Two fawns</i> = Ten commandments, five on each side. <i>Graze</i> = on peaceful and level paths.</p>	<p>5. <i>Breasts</i> = two Tablets of the Law from whence come “sacred knowledge and devotion.”</p>

Nicholas follows Rashi’s context for the Groom’s praise of the Bride. The Bride has just received the Mosaic Law at Sinai. However, Nicholas does not focus on the purity of the Bride. He interprets the text such that the Bride is a spiritually strong leader. The Bride’s head is Jacob and her hair the twelve patriarchs. Her eyes are Moses and Aaron who led the people and her teeth are Israelite warriors such as Caleb. The Bride’s lips and cheeks are the Levites who sing praises and offer sacrifices. Nicholas understands the Bride’s neck as scholars of the Law who defend the faith and specifically mentions that he borrows this interpretation from Rashi. Also like Rashi, the breasts are the two tablets of the Law of Moses that nurture sacred knowledge and devotion. Nicholas’ Bride fits his understanding of Song of Songs as an exhortation of the spiritually strong to the spiritually weak. Unlike Rashi’s Bride that has already succumbed to sin and is recalling fonder days, Nicholas’ Bride is praised by her Groom for leading, preaching, singing, and studying to *prevent* herself and the “daughters of Jerusalem” from faltering in their faith.

### *Example 3: The Groom (5:10–16)*

According to Rashi, the Bride’s praise of the Groom (5:10–16) comes after the Groom has punished her unfaithfulness by means of Babylonian captivity. However, after going into exile the Bride repented and returned to Torah. She adjures

Nebuchadnezzar's men and "all the prophets of the heathens" to stand as witnesses on judgment day, testifying that she fulfilled Torah amid Babylonian persecution. The nations respond to this by saying, "What is your beloved more than another beloved" that they should testify on her behalf (5:9). She responds by portraying her Beloved. Rashi's Groom looks a lot like Torah. Torah is a prevalent theme in rabbinic midrash on the Song; the *Song of Songs Rabbah* explicitly frames the Groom as Torah. Stern suggests this may be a divinization of Torah or a synecdoche for God.<sup>31</sup> Rashi does not go quite as far as *Song of Songs Rabbah*. He begins by describing God: God cleanses iniquity, appeared at Sinai, teaches, judges, rewards the righteous and condemns the guilty. He is Israel's God and thus has sovereignty over her and authority to issue decrees. But, Rashi doesn't get past the head before he starts describing Torah. God's locks of hair are points on the letters of Torah. His eyes look upon synagogues and study halls—or his eyes are like Torah scholars who illuminate God's commandments. God's cheeks are the Ten Commandments (because he smiled fondly while giving them) and his lips are commandments given at the Tent of Meeting (presumably because God spoke them). God's hands are the Ten Commandments which refer also to the 613 commandments overall. And his abdomen is Leviticus, the middle book of the Torah. God's mouth is full of sweetness because of what he utters, including that the faithful shall have reward and the wicked who repent shall live.

Clearly, God's self-revelation at Sinai is Torah. God is known by what he commands. In gushing over her Beloved, the Bride simultaneously gushes over Torah. Love of Torah is love of God, bringing reconciliation between the lovers. Babylonian rabbinic commentary asserts that one has access to God through

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<sup>31</sup> Stern, "Ancient Jewish Interpretation," 100–101.



Torah study; in fact, God himself is even depicted as studying Torah.<sup>32</sup> Rashi was likely influenced by Babylonian trends through immigrants who had come from Babylon to Northern France; thus, his God-Torah composite may reflect these ideas. After this portrait, Rashi begins to discuss the exiles' memories of Israel's return to the Promised Land and the rebuilding of the Temple.

Nicholas' portrayal of the Groom also comes after the Bride has been punished, but his description differs considerably from Rashi's. In Nicholas' narrative, the Bride has not yet gone into exile. The punishment comes through the events depicted in Judges and I Kings, including harassment from the Philistines, Moabites, and other nations bordering Israel's territory. This chastisement causes the Bride to repent and she thanks the spiritually strong "daughters of Jerusalem" for their prayers, asking them to intercede for her by telling the Groom she is sick with love and desiring reconciliation (3:10; the disjunctive use of "daughters of Jerusalem"). The devout Israelites reply, "What is your beloved more than another beloved?" meaning "Oh, that you would attend to God who is good." The Bride turns her attention to the Groom and answers the question by describing him. This becomes her confession of faith.

For Nicholas God and Torah are not a composite. The Bride is not reconciled to God through Torah observance but by her confession of faith. The only similarity with Rashi is in the first line of the portrait where Nicholas borrows Rashi's interpretation of the Groom's whiteness and ruddiness as God's divergent responses to the righteous and the wicked. Nicholas also describes

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<sup>32</sup> Marc Hirshman, "Torah in Rabbinic Thought: The Theology of Learning," 899–924 in Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism: the Late Roman Rabbinic Period*, Vol. 4 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 920.

armies (of angels) that surround God. From there, the Bride confesses that her beloved is the King of kings, wise and good, and the one who sees and comprehends all things. She confesses God's attractive love that renews and his divine secrets, including words that preserve from sin. And, she confesses God's divine works and unsearchable judgments. His judgments cause her to fear, deterring her from further sin. The Bride ends her confession by affirming that God sustains everything and is infinitely good. By portraying the Bride as one making a confession of faith, Nicholas provides a model of proper piety. Her confession solidifies her repentance from sin and intention to serve God with undivided attention.

*Interpretations of the Groom*

<b>Rashi</b>	<b>Nicholas</b>
<p>10. <i>Dazzling white</i> = God whitens iniquities. Or God's garments and hair are white (Dan 7:9) and appeared so at Mt. Sinai teaching and judging. <i>Ruddy</i> = God exacts retribution. <i>Myriads</i> = armies encompass him.</p>	<p>10. <i>Dazzling white</i> = God is kind to the righteous. <i>Ruddy</i> = angry toward the guilty. <i>Displayed</i>: chosen out of thousands or army of angels.</p>
<p>11. <i>Head</i> = the beginning of his words; his first words, "I am the Lord your God" signifying his sovereignty over Israel and right to issue decrees. <i>Locks</i> = every point of the letters of Torah. <i>Black</i> = young men mighty in battle.</p>	<p>11. <i>Head is gold</i>: royal dignity; King of kings. <i>Locks</i>: divine attributes, including wisdom and goodness. <i>Clusters</i>: many attributes. <i>Black</i>: attributes do not weaken with age.</p>

Rashi	Nicholas
<p>12. <i>Eyes</i> = God's eyes are on the synagogue and study halls <i>or</i> God makes the Torah scholars like eyes to illuminate the world <i>or</i> sections of Torah. <i>Bathing</i>: God's eyes judge, justifying the just and condemning the guilty <i>or</i> scholars cleanse themselves with Torah. <i>Sitting at the bank</i>: appropriately resolving matters.</p>	<p>12. <i>Eyes</i>: God sees all things. <i>Bathing</i>: comprehends all things.</p>
<p>13. <i>Cheeks</i> = Ten Commandments (God smiled on Israel while giving them). <i>Lips</i>: commandments pertaining to various offerings—sin, guilt, meal, burnt, and peace—at Tent of Meeting.</p>	<p>13. <i>Cheeks</i>: God powerfully draws people to himself through faith and love (takes us in like food in the cheek). <i>Perfumes</i>: God's love draws and renews. <i>Lips</i>: reveals secrets to saints and prophets. <i>Lilies</i>: God's words are pure and preserve from sin.</p>
<p>14. <i>Hands</i> = two Tablets. <i>Gold</i>= commandments are to be desired more than gold. <i>Filled with jewels</i>: 613 commandments. <i>Abdomen</i>: Leviticus, the center of Torah.</p>	<p>14. <i>Hands</i>: God's divine works. <i>Abdomen</i>: Unsearchable judgments. <i>Ivory</i>: as ivory is cold, so pondering God's judgment causes a cold fear that keeps one from sin.</p>
<p>15: <i>Pillars</i>: sections on the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. <i>Lebanon</i> = whoever meditates on Torah finds new explanations.</p>	<p>15. <i>Legs</i>: God sustains everything.</p>
<p>16. <i>Mouth</i> = how sweet are God's words that say he is faithful to reward and the wicked who repent shall live.</p>	<p>16. <i>Mouth</i>: God is infinitely good. <i>This is my Love</i>: confession of faith akin to Romans 10:10.</p>

### CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Rashi and Nicholas follow a tradition of historical allegory, but they don't view their work as allegory. They understand the Song in terms of metaphor or parable and seek to explain the figurative in figurative terms thereby keeping with the literal meaning of the text. The result is essentially homiletical and likely addressed the pastoral concerns of their time. Rashi creates space for lamentation, both the mourning of sin's consequences and also the pain of waiting for redemption. He encourages his audience to persist in love of God/Torah because God is always faithful to forgive and redeem. God's past salvific acts are assurance that even if the Jewish community is in physical or spiritual exile, God has not abandoned them. The exile he envisions seems to be especially related to the general spiritual life of the community and not concerned with physical exile *per se*. This is evident in his understanding of an eschatological restoration, a "return" to the everlasting Mt. Moriah.

Nicholas also exhorts his audience to pursue God, but instead of exilic lament, his commentary elicits a confession of faith. He encourages the spiritually strong to stay strong through meditation, prayer, and right living. In this way, the strong are able to minister to the spiritually weak. Nicholas also emphasizes God's continual presence. Even when the Bride sins, she is not separated from God; she has only to ask for prayer and confess her sin. The outward expressions of piety are not her redemption, but rather are tools to help her persevere in full devotion to Christ.

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*APPENDIX A:  
RASHI'S OUTLINE OF  
THE SONG OF SONGS*

- I. Introduction: Purpose of Song of Songs (1:1)
- II. Remembering God's love while in exile (1:1–4)
- III. Speeches: Defining the problem and solution (1:5–16a)
  - A. Bride Speaks (1:5–7)
    - 1. Talks to the nations regarding her sin (1:5–6)
    - 2. Asks the Groom where He feeds his flock (1:7)
  - B. Groom's Response (1:8–11)
    - 1. Follow the tracks and ponder your ancestors (1:8)
    - 2. Remember I delivered you from Egypt (1:9–11)
  - C. Bride's Reply
    - 1. Ponders her sin (1:12–14)
    - 2. Confesses to Beloved (1:12)
    - 3. Remembers God's forgiveness in the desert (1:13–14)
  - D. Groom's Reassurance and Bride's reply (1:15–16a)
- IV. Description of the "Bed" (Tabernacle: 1:16b–17)
- V. Declarations of love and longing (2:1–6)
- VI. Bride's speech to the nations (2:7)
- VII. Reprise: Recalling the Exodus from Egypt (2:8–3:11)
  - A. Memories of the Exodus (2:8–17a)
  - B. Memories of the desert (2:17b–3:11)
    - 1. Sin of Calf and wilderness wandering (2:17b–3:3)
    - 2. Prelude: Entry into Promised Land (3:4)
    - 3. Reprise of 2:7: Bride's speech to the nation (3:5)
    - 4. God in pillar of fire and cloud (3:6)
    - 5. Description of Tent of Meeting and Ark (3:7–11a)
    - 6. Groom is crowned King and Tabernacle dedicated (3:11b)
- VIII. Description of the Bride (4:1–6)
  - A. Bride's beauty (4:1–5)
  - B. Bride's beauty marred (4:6)

- IX. Exile and return (4:7–6:11)
  - A. Groom is with his Bride in exile and will return her (4:7–8)
  - B. Groom recalls Bride's faithfulness (4:9–15)
  - C. Discussion of Temples (5:1–7)
    - 1. Dedication of the second Temple (5:1a)
    - 2. Everlasting Temple/Tent of Meeting (5:1b)
    - 3. Recollection of the first Temple period (5:2a–7)
      - a) First temple (5:2a)
      - b) Recollection of prophets' warnings and exile (5:2b–7)
    - 4. Reprise: Bride's speech to the nations (5:8–16)
      - a) Bride's speech (5:8)
      - b) Nations' question (5:9)
      - c) Bride's response: Description of the Groom (5:10–16)
    - 5. Return and rebuilding the Temple (6:1–11)
- X. Bride sins again: Hasmoneans and Romans (6:12)
- XI. Positive attributes of the Bride (7:1–13)
  - A. Praise of the Bride by the nations (7:1–8)
  - B. Praise and encouragement of the Bride by the Groom (7:9–10a)
  - C. Bride shows the Groom her positive qualities (7:10b–13)
- XII. Speeches (8:1–14)
  - A. Bride's speech to the Groom (8:1–3)
  - B. Bride's speech to the nations: God has not forgotten (8:4–7)
  - C. Groom's speech: I see the Bride's faithfulness in exile (8:8–13)
  - D. Bride's response to Groom: Hurry to redeem! (8:14)

**APPENDIX B:  
NICHOLAS OF LYRA'S OUTLINE  
OF THE SONG OF SONGS**

- I. Old Testament (1:1–7:1)
  - A. Mutual love of Bride and Bridegroom (1:1–11)
    - 1. Request of bride for love (1:1–7)
      - a. Removal of error (1:4–7)
    - 2. Response of the Groom (1:8–11)
  - B. Journey through the desert (1:12–3:3)
    - 1. That which promotes love (1:12–2:14)
      - a. Blessing of being with God (1:12–13)
        - 1) Word of blessing (1:12–13)
        - 2) Conversation between bride and groom (1:14–2:3a)
      - b. Pillar of cloud and manna (2:3b–2:7)
      - c. Giving of the law (2:8–14)
    - 2. That which hinders love (2:15–3:3)
      - a. Worship of the calf (2:15–17)
      - b. Disheartening tests (3:1–3)
  - C. Reprise: Groom's and bride's declarations of love (3:4–4:6a)<sup>33</sup>
    - 1. Change in love (3:4–5)
    - 2. Groom's praise of bride (3:6–4:6a)
      - a. Parable of a virtuous woman (3:6–11)
        - 1) Praise (3:6–10)
          - a) Sacrifices praised (3:6)
          - b) Layout of camp praised (3:7–8)
          - c) Construction of tabernacle (3:9–10)
        - 2) Conclusion (3:11)
      - b. Parable of a beautiful woman and explanation (4:1–6a)

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<sup>33</sup> Nicholas associates these declarations of love with those "mentioned earlier" (*Postilla*, 59). He seems to be expanding on details of the conversation between the Bride and Groom that occurs in 1:14–2:3a.

- D. Jews' arrival in the promised land (4:6b–7:1)
    - 1. Entry into the Holy Land (4:6b–16)
      - a. Love increases (4:6b–11)
      - b. Fertility of the land (4:12–16)
    - 2. How the Holy Land was captured (5:1–7:1)
      - a. Time of Joshua and Judges (5:1–6:1)
        - 1) Prosperity (5:1)
        - 2) Adversity (5:2–6:1)
          - a) Guilt (5:2–3)
          - b) Punishment (5:4)
          - c) Penance (5:5)
            - (i) Bride seeks reconciliation with Groom (5:5–8)
            - (ii) Description of Groom and response (5:9–6:1)
      - b. Time of David to Christ (6:2–7:1)
        - 1) David (6:2–10)
          - a) Bride's thanks (6:2–3)
          - b) Praise for the bride (6:4–10)
        - 2) Solomon (6:11)
        - 3) Kings to the exile (6:12)
        - 4) Return to Christ (7:1)
- II. New Testament (7:2–8:14)
  - A. Beginning of the time period (7:2–7:11)
    - 1. Bride, general; rise of the Church (7:2–8)
    - 2. Bride, specific; the saints (7:9–11)
  - B. Middle period; spread of the Christian faith (7:12–13)
  - C. Peaceful ending (8:1–14)
    - 1. Desire for it (8:1–7)
      - a. Desire (8:1–5a)
      - b. Reason (8:5b–8:7)
    - 2. What complements the peace (8:8–14)
      - a. Bestowal of peace (8:8–10)
      - b. Growth of the Church (8:11–12)
      - c. Conclusion (8:13–14)





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