



“The Ladder of the Seven Songs” in Origen: Reconfiguring the Midrash of the Ten Songs as a Mystagogical Device

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Abstract: This article examines the sequence of seven biblical songs enumerated by Origen in the *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs* and in the first *Homily on the Song of Songs*, in comparison with the rabbinic tradition of the “Ten Songs” attested, among other sources, in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*. While the rabbinic list represents a midrashic mode of enumeration structured by lexical and chronological criteria and oriented toward Israel’s historical and eschatological destiny, Origen reconfigures enumeration into a sequence culminating in the Song of Songs as the nuptial hymn of the Bridegroom and the Bride. Through close textual analysis and engagement with prior scholarship, the article shifts the focus from questions of direct dependence or influence to the internal hermeneutical function of enumeration. It argues that, in Origen’s *Prologue*, the ordered sequence of songs operates as a mystagogical device, articulating stages of spiritual ascent that lead the soul toward mystical union with the Word of God. The analysis concludes that Origen’s sevenfold schema does not preserve a rabbinic tradition nor simply diverge from it but represents a creative reconfiguration of a shared exegetical form, transformed to serve a distinctively Christian theology of spiritual pedagogy and ascent.

Keywords: Origen, commentary, Song of Songs, biblical enumeration, Midrash of the Ten Songs, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, allegorical interpretation

Among the rabbis of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, there was a broad consensus that the plain sense (טִפְשׁוֹ, *pašat*) of the Song of Songs was allegorical. The book could only be read as a depiction of the covenantal love between God and Israel, a view reflected in Rabbi Akiva’s well-known defense of its sanctity (Mishnah *Yadayim* 3:5; Muffs 1975, 21). Modern scholarship, however, remains divided over the origins of this allegorical mode: Did it precede the canonization of the book, or did it arise only afterward? (Kadari 2009, 74–75)

Origen, in turn, interpreted the Song of Songs as a mystical marriage between Christ and the Church, or between the Word of God and the individual soul.¹ His work was preceded by the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* by Hippolytus of

¹ Origen’s *Commentary* and two *Homilies on the Song of Songs* survive only partially, in Latin translations made respectively by Rufinus of Aquileia and Jerome. The *Commentary* breaks off at verse 2:15, at the beginning of Book 4. Critical editions include Olivier Rousseau (Origenes 1953); Luc Brésard, Henri Crouzel, and Marcel Borret (Origenes 1991–92); Alfons Fürst and Holger Strutwolf (Origenes 2016a, 2016b). For Hippolytus, see Georg Nathanael Bonwetsch and Hans Achelis (Hippolytus Romanus 1897).

Rome, preserved in Georgian translation with fragments in Greek, Old Slavonic, Armenian, and Syriac. Like Origen, Hippolytus read the Song of Songs allegorically as a dialogue between Christ as Bridegroom and the Church as Bride, while also developing a parallel dialogue between the Church and the Synagogue (Baraniak 2013, 33–34). In both writers, the allegorical figures of Bridegroom and Bride symbolize the relationship between Christ and the Church.

The enumeration of biblical songs occupies a distinctive place in rabbinic exegesis of the Song of Songs. Rabbinic literature preserves several versions of what is commonly known as the Midrash of the Ten Songs, a list of ten biblical songs (*shir-rot*). Among early Christian exegetes, a formally similar but numerically shorter list appears in Origen of Alexandria's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. An early extant version of the rabbinic midrash is preserved in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, where the songs are arranged as a sequence of decisive moments in Israel's sacred history, culminating in the eschatological Song of the World to Come. In early Christian interpretation, by contrast, Origen presents a list of seven songs in the *Prologue to the Commentary* and in the first *Homily on the Song of Songs*, a sequence that culminates not in a future historical event but in the Song of Songs itself.

The relationship between these two enumerative traditions has long attracted scholarly attention. While earlier scholarship has proposed various explanations for their similarities—ranging from direct dependence to shared exegetical milieus—such approaches, though valuable, remain insufficient. In most cases, earlier scholarship tends to approach the problem primarily in terms of sources, influence, or numerical symbolism. This article argues, by contrast, that Origen's modification of the rabbinic enumeration fundamentally reconfigures the *function* of enumeration itself. In Origen's view, enumeration shifts from a historiographical and eschatological ordering of collective experience to a mystagogical structure, whose purpose is to articulate the allegorical meaning of the text under interpretation and to guide the soul toward spiritual union, ultimately expressed in the Song of Songs. The term *mystagogical*² is employed here to denote a mode of spiritual pedagogy that structures Origen's exegetical practice according to an ascending order—letter, soul, and spirit—without presupposing its formalization as a technical category in his thought. The term is used descriptively to articulate the initiatory dynamic of Origen's exegesis.

The centrality of this transformation becomes particularly clear when Origen's *Prologue* is considered within the broader tradition of ancient commentary introductions. Origen's *Prologue* follows a relatively stable introductory pattern—commonly described as *schema isagogicum*—which later became standard in Neoplatonic

² The designation *mystagogical* recalls its later technical usage in early Christian catechesis, most notably in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Mystagogical Catecheses* (Κατηχήσεις μυσταγωγικαί), which provide postbaptismal instruction into the Christian mysteries (baptism, chrismation, Eucharist) within the context of the *disciplina arcana*. The term is employed here heuristically and not as a category native to Origen's own terminology.

commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, especially from the late 5th and early 6th centuries. As has been established in earlier scholarship, such introductory schemata can be traced back to the early 3rd century, and Origen was both familiar with them and actively employed them in his commentary prologues (Hadot 1987; Neuschäfer 1987; Heine 1995).

Although he develops these elements with considerable freedom, the section of the *Prologue* devoted to the ordered sequence of biblical songs—culminating in the Song of Songs—corresponds to an explanation of ὁ τρόπος τῆς συνουσίας, a concept that encompasses not merely the “mode” of a dialogical form, as articulated in the introductory tradition to Platonic dialogues, but also its allegorical and spiritual meaning (Origenes 2016b, 61, n. 12). While a full treatment of this conceptual framework lies beyond the scope of the present article, it suffices to note that the passage analyzed here occupies a structurally and theologically significant place within the *Prologue* as a whole.

By comparing the rabbinic Midrash of the Ten Songs with Origen’s ladder of seven songs, this article seeks to demonstrate that the two enumerations operate according to fundamentally different hermeneutical logics. In rabbinic tradition, enumeration organizes Israel’s past and future within a linear narrative of redemption. In Origen, by contrast, enumeration functions as a pedagogical and spiritual device in which earlier biblical songs serve as preparatory stages leading toward the mystical union articulated in the Song of Songs. This shift reflects differing theological concepts of Scripture’s role in shaping communal memory on the one hand and individual spiritual ascent on the other.

Situated within the context of modern scholarship—particularly the model proposed by Alon Goshen-Gottstein (2004)—this article offers a functional and hermeneutical reassessment of Origen’s list of songs. It argues that Origen’s sevenfold sequence should be understood neither as the preservation of an original Jewish tradition nor as an arbitrary Christian innovation, but as a creative adaptation of a Jewish exegetical pattern to a Christian theology of spiritual ascent. Building on Goshen-Gottstein’s methodological caution regarding influence, this article shifts the focus from questions of dependence to the internal hermeneutical function of enumeration, proposing that Origen’s sequence operates as a mystagogical device within his exegesis. In doing so, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Jewish–Christian exegetical interaction in late antiquity, emphasizing the transformation of interpretive structures rather than the simple transmission of content or direction of influence.

1. Material for Analysis: The Midrash of the Ten Songs and Origen's Ladder of Seven Songs

As already noted, the rabbinic enumeration is commonly referred to as the Midrash of the Ten Songs. Origen's list of seven songs, by contrast, has been described as a "ladder of seven songs" by Lorenzo Perrone (2006, 76) in his paper "The Bride at the Crossroads": Origen's Dramatic Interpretation of the Song of Songs.

The list of ten biblical songs (*shiroṭ*), known in Jewish tradition as the Midrash of the Ten Songs, appears in several sources, including the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (*Shirta* 1, 2–7) (Lauterbach 2004, 1:169–73), the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on b. Yoḥai* (Nelson 2006), the *Targum to Canticles* (1:1) (Alexander 2003, 75–78), as well as other traditions. The version preserved in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* enumerates the following songs: (1) the Song of the First Passover (Isa 30:29); (2) the Song at the Sea (Exod 15:1); (3) the Song at the Well (Num 21:17); (4) the Song of Moses (Deut 31:24); (5) the Song of Joshua (Josh 10:12); (6) the Song of Deborah and Barak (Judg 5:1); (7) the Song of David (2 Sam 22:1); (8) the Song of Solomon (Ps 30:1); (9) the Song of Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 20:21); and (10) the Song of the World to Come (Isa 42:10; Ps 149).

In turn, Origen's list preserved in the *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs* (CCt. Prol. 4.5–14) (Origenes 2016b) and in the first *Homily* on the *Song of Songs* (HCt I.1) (Origenes 2016a) includes only seven songs: (1) the Song at the Sea (Exod 15:1); (2) the Song at the Well (Num 21:17); (3) the Song of Moses (Deut 31:24); (4) the Song of Deborah and Barak (Judg 5:1); (5) the Song of David (2 Sam 22:1); (6) either the Song of Asaph (*Commentary*: 1 Chr 16:1; Ps 105) or, in the *Homily*, the Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1); and (7) the Song of Solomon, identified with the *Song of Songs*. The change introduced in the first *Homily* is noteworthy, although it remains uncertain whether the *Commentary* preceded the *Homilies* chronologically.³

2. Perspectives in Contemporary Scholarship

The similarities between the two lists are readily apparent. Scholars have long debated whether Origen was directly dependent on rabbinic models, whether both traditions draw upon a shared exegetical milieu, or whether the similarities are merely formal and coincidental. Much of the discussion has focused on questions of numerical symbolism, textual overlap, and possible lines of transmission between Jewish and

³ Nautin dates the *Homilies* earlier (238–248), whereas other scholars propose a different chronology (245–246); he places the *Commentary* around 245, while others suggest 240 (Perrone 2006, 72–74).

Christian exegetical communities in late antiquity. In what follows, I highlight those scholarly observations that are most relevant for the present comparative analysis.

Among early contributions, Wilhelm Riedel (1898, 116–18) in an excursus to his work, collated the lists preserved in the *Targum*, in Origen, and in the Ethiopian Psalter—the latter incorporating New Testament songs. Riedel noted the sequential arrangement of the songs, their culmination in the Song of Songs, and the connection between Origen’s enumeration and his preceding explanation of the book’s title, which he linked grammatically with comparable forms elsewhere in Scripture.⁴ Origen’s list has also been discussed in Olivier Rousseau’s critical edition and French translation of Origen’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Origenes 1953, 30–36), in the notes to R. P. Lawson’s English translation of Origen’s *Commentary* (Origenes 1957, 320–321, n. 90–103), and more recently in J. Christopher King’s *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture* (2005, 227f), and in the aforementioned article by Perrone (2006, 76).

These modern studies may be grouped under what could be termed *ordo-numerical approaches*, represented most clearly by Lawson (Origenes 1957, 321, n. 102) and Rousseau (1948, 20–29). These interpretations focus primarily on explaining Origen’s list by postulating an underlying liturgical or symbolic *ordo*. For Rousseau, in particular, the number seven is not accidental: The songs mark stages of spiritual ascent, and their number is typologically linked to the seven days of creation.

Along similar lines, Paul Ricoeur (1998, 281–82) explicitly interprets this fragment as a *typological hexaameron*, reading the sequence in terms of mystical ascent. Even King’s proposal, which at first appears to reject an *ordo-numerical* explanation, ultimately interprets the sequence as a “scale of songs,” in which each song represents a distinct tonal register within a heptatonic structure. In this reading, each text is approached superhistorically and spiritually, and the sequence is organized to guide the reader from corporeal to spiritual contexts, culminating in the Song of Songs.

King’s principal innovation lies in his rejection of direct dependence on Jewish tradition. He argues instead that Origen’s selection of songs is based on the occurrence of the Greek words ᾠδὴ (*ō[i]dē*) or ᾠσμα (*a[i]sma*), both meaning “song,” in the Septuagint, with reference to the songs preceding the Song of Songs in the biblical canon (King 2005, 227f).

A second group of studies adopts a revisionary and comparative approach, focusing on the question of influence and the methodological limits of reconstructing lines of dependence. From the perspective of rabbinic studies, similar questions have been addressed with reference to Origen’s list. Philip S. Alexander (2003, 206–9) discusses the issue in Appendix I of his English translation of *The Targum of Canticles*. Wayne Sibley Towner (1973, 234–37) devotes a section of *The Rabbinic “Enumeration*

⁴ Cct. Prol. 4.1, i.e., “Holy of Holies” (*sancta sanctorum*) (Exod 30:29), the “works of works” (*opera operum*) (Num 4:47), the “ages of ages” (*saecula saeculorum*) (Rom 16:27).

of *Scriptural Examples*” to the question of rabbinic sources for Origen’s enumeration. Examining numerical patterns in rabbinic tradition as well as their non-rabbinic applications, including Origen’s *Commentary*, Towner concludes that Origen drew upon this tradition while adapting it to his own interpretative framework, describing this process as a successful transmission of such patterns across cultural contexts (Towner 1973, 236).

The most substantial engagement with this problem is found in Goshen-Gottstein’s *Polemomania* (2004), which critically revisits and revises James L. Kugel’s earlier article “Is There but One Song?” (1982). Kugel’s hypothesis assumes that the Jewish tradition initially contained an original list of seven songs, “six-šîrôt-plus-one-šîr” (Kugel 1982, 346), based on the grammatical feminine form *šîrāh* (שִׁירָה) while the one future song is expressed with the masculine form *šîr* (שִׁיר)—the eschatological Song of the World to Come (Isa 42:10), on a common central core of songs, and on the comparison with Origen’s list, he argued that Jewish tradition originally contained a list of seven songs—“six-šîrôt-plus-one-šîr” (Kugel 1982, 346)—a hypothesis that Goshen-Gottstein subsequently subjects to sustained critique.

Moreover, Goshen-Gottstein questions whether the interpretation of the Song of Songs in Origen presupposes any genuine Jewish–Christian polemic, whether such polemic played a decisive role in Origen’s theology, or even whether a direct dispute between Origen and the rabbis ever took place (cf. Stern 2008, 103–4; Kadari 2009, 65–66). He argues that claims of Jewish influence on Origen should be approached with methodological caution and that superficial similarities alone cannot serve as reliable evidence of dependence.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the need for methodological caution in assessing claims of direct dependence between rabbinic and Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs, emphasizing the structural and theological differences between the two traditions (Goshen-Gottstein 2004; Stern 2008). Aligning with this restrained approach, the present article shifts the focus from questions of transmission and influence to the internal hermeneutical function of enumeration as a formative device within Origen’s exegesis.

At the same time, Goshen-Gottstein’s emphasis on the theological centrality of the Song of Songs as the culmination of a process of spiritual perfection—with the preceding songs functioning as preparatory stages (Goshen-Gottstein 2004, 184)—converges with the central thesis advanced here. Building on this insight, the present study examines how the internal hermeneutical function of enumeration enables Origen’s sequence of songs to operate as a mystagogical device, guiding the soul toward spiritual union.

3. Enumeration and Spiritual Ascent: Origen’s Seven-Song Sequence

The convergence in time and geographical context of both traditions constitutes a necessary starting point for their comparison. It makes it plausible that Origen was acquainted, directly or indirectly, with midrashic patterns of enumeration. At the same time, the differences between the two lists are sufficiently pronounced to call for a closer examination of their underlying logic.

It has often been observed that Origen’s list broadly corresponds to the schema preserved in the Mekhilta. The midrashic enumeration begins with the Song of the First Passover and proceeds through Israel’s history until the eschatological Song of the World to Come. The opening song (Isa 30:29) and the final song (Isa 42:10; Ps 149), which follows the Song of Solomon (Ps 30), appear in nearly all rabbinic versions of the list. Neither is included by Origen.

Goshen-Gottstein (2004, 184–85) has argued that Origen’s omissions appear to follow a discernible logic. The Song of the First Passover (Isa 30:29) is not a song in the strict biblical sense but a mention of tradition, announcing future singing. Similarly, Origen omits (5) the Song of Joshua, whose inclusion in rabbinic lists rests on a wordplay in Josh 10:13b: “Is this not written in the Book of Upright [or *hayyashar*] (הַיָּשָׁר הַיָּשָׁר),” confirming the song’s existence. As Towner explains, the *daršān* derives the word *hayyāšār* from the root *šîr* (שִׁיר) which means “to sing”, thereby qualifying the passage lexicographically for inclusion among the “ten songs” (Towner 1973, 165–66).

Further evidence for Origen’s familiarity with the midrashic schema may be found in the fact that, even while omitting the Song of Joshua, he alludes to Joshua’s military campaigns—“ut milites sub Iesu et terram sanctam hereditate possideas”—precisely in the first homily at the transition to the next song in the midrashic order, the Song of Deborah. This reference to Joshua occurs only in the *Homily* (HCt. I.1), though what Origen underlines in his explanation of the Song of Deborah in the *Commentary* is military victory (“Et canitur istud canticum post uictoriam”) (CCt. Prol. 4.9).

Origen’s enumeration, however, does not simply reproduce the midrashic sequence. He begins not with the Passover song but with (1) the Song at the Sea. From there, he largely follows the midrashic order: (2) the Song at the Well and (3) the Song of Moses are retained, the Song of Joshua is omitted, and the sequence proceeds directly to (4) the Song of Deborah and Barak and (5) the Song of David. At this point, however, a decisive divergence occurs.

In order to reach a total of seven songs culminating in the Song of Songs, Origen introduces an additional song in the sixth position. In the *Commentary*, this is (6) the Song of Asaph (1 Chr 16:1; Ps 105), a song unattested in any rabbinic enumeration; in the *Homilies*, the same position is occupied by (6) the Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1). Origen then concludes the sequence with (7) the Song of Solomon,

explicitly identified with the Song of Songs. This sixth song is the only element for which Origen offers an alternative version and fills the gap, strongly suggesting a deliberate reworking of a familiar enumerative pattern rather than the transmission of a fixed tradition.

Origen's awareness of the tension between competing criteria of enumeration becomes explicit in his discussion of whether the Song of Isaiah should be included: "Si quis vero etiam Esaiiae canticum cum caeteris numerandum putet." (CCt. Prol. 4.13) Although the song is omitted from the list in the *Commentary*, Origen immediately addresses the possibility that it might be counted, acknowledging that some might prefer to judge prophetic songs according to their content rather than their chronological position: "tamen si quis putet quod prophetica dicta non temporibus, sed ratione pensanda sunt." (CCt. Prol. 4.13) The difficulty, as Origen presents it, arises only if one attempts to preserve both a strictly chronological sequence and the unique, ultimate status of the Song of Songs.

Origen resolves this tension by redefining ultimacy. The Song of Songs is supreme not only in relation to the songs that precede it but also with respect to those that follow historically: "canticum esse canticorum non tantum eorum, quae prius, sed et quae postmodum canenda videbantur." (CCt. Prol. 4.13) This formulation may reflect Origen's awareness of a rabbinic enumeration in which Isaiah appears after the Song of Songs, particularly in connection with the Song of the World to Come. In response to this difficulty, Origen further extends the discussion by mentioning the "quindecim graduum cantica" (CCt. Prol. 4.14)—the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134), traditionally associated with pilgrimage and spiritual ascent, though absent from rabbinic lists of the ten songs.

This reconfiguration becomes intelligible when read in light of Origen's understanding of perfection and spiritual ascent. As Alexander and Goshen-Gottstein have both emphasized, the significance of the number seven in Origen is not merely numerological but ideological. The perfection at stake is not historical completion but the perfection required of the soul approaching God. From this perspective, the Song of Songs functions as the organizing principle of the entire sequence, while the preceding songs mark successive stages of spiritual progress culminating in the mystical union of the soul with the Word of God.

Origen himself describes this ascent as a graded movement in which the Bride advances step by step toward the nuptial chamber of the Bridegroom. The origin of such an ascending order can be traced to Platonic models of spiritual progress, reconfigured within a biblical and allegorical framework. The Song at the Sea, interpreted as an allegory of baptism, marks the beginning of the believer's journey. At the same time, the Song of Songs alone takes the form of a dialogical epithalamium, sung not by the friends of the Bridegroom but by the Bridegroom himself in direct address to the Bride.

By contrast, the midrashic enumeration operates according to fundamentally different criteria. The selection of songs is governed primarily by lexical and chronological considerations, with songs ordered according to the historical moments at which they were sung. The sequence traces decisive events in Israel's collective history and culminates in an eschatological expectation of future redemption. In Origen's interpretation, by contrast, historical events are subordinated to their spiritual significance and function as figures of an inner history of salvation. The contrast between the two models thus reflects differing concepts of salvation itself: a collective, historiographical anticipation of the world to come on the one hand, and the individual soul's ascent toward union with the Word of God on the other.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate three interrelated points. First, the convergence in time and space of Origen and the Mekhilta tradition provides a plausible historical framework in which Origen could have known, directly or indirectly, the rabbinic enumeration. Second, the principle of enumeration functions differently in each tradition: historical moments of collective redemption versus the individual soul's ascent and union with the Logos. Origen's adaptation thus reflects a shift from communal to individual experience. The rabbinic narrative of salvation history, rooted in historical events, becomes interiorized in Origen's exegesis. What matters is not the nation's past but the soul's mystical progression. Finally, this comparison highlights two distinct yet related modes of interpretation. The rabbinic enumeration organizes biblical history in anticipation of future redemption; Origen transforms the same or similar material into a theology of mystical ascent. This juxtaposition reveals not a simple borrowing, but rather a case of creative adaptation in which Origen reshaped a Jewish exegetical pattern into a Christian spiritual framework.

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