

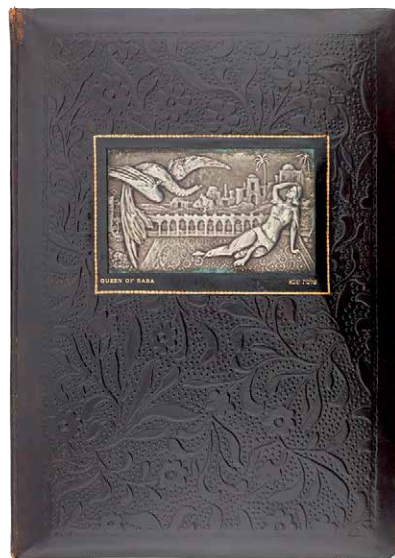
The Song of Solomon

A book of love

Jennifer Baldwin and Susan Thomas

In 2017 a particularly exquisite volume was received by the Baillieu Library for the Rare Books Collection: a 1930 edition of the biblical Song of Solomon, designed by Polish-Israeli artist Zeev Raban (1890–1970). Also known as the Song of Songs or Canticle of Canticles, this is one of the five books of wisdom in the Hebrew scriptures, and is closely associated with the Jewish feast of Passover. It was traditionally read on the eighth day of Passover as an historical allegory, beginning with the Exodus from Egypt and concluding with the coming of the Messiah.

There have been many differing interpretations of the Song of Solomon, which is believed to either have been written by the biblical king Solomon, or to be about him. Down the centuries, the book has been viewed variously as an historical allegory, with the man as God and the woman as Israel, or as the development of spiritual union with God, with the bride as the individual soul who desires God, and the bridegroom as God. The book is also important in the Christian tradition, and is part of the Christian biblical canon. The great protestant theologian Martin Luther suggested that it was an allegory of the relationship between God and Solomon, whereas some modern



interpretations see it as ‘an anthology of love poems’ expressing human emotions and relationships, and affirming human love and sexuality.¹

It has often been asked why a book of love poems has been accepted into the canon of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Some commentators have suggested that its attribution to Solomon and its use on particular religious feast-days meant that a religious reinterpretation of the text was necessary in order to make this usage in Jewish and Christian liturgy more acceptable.² Whatever the interpretation, the language is beautiful, as the following excerpts show:

‘I sat down under his shadow
with great delight’
‘And his banner over me was
love’
‘My beloved is gone down into
his garden’
‘But I found him whom my soul
loveth’
‘For love is as strong as death’
‘Many waters cannot quench
love, neither can the floods
drown it’.³

The artwork

This particular edition is of special interest, not least for its exquisite craftsmanship and intriguing history. Bound in an embossed faux-leather cover inlaid with a copper-relief centrepiece depicting the Queen of Sheba (pictured left), the volume immediately stands out from those shelved around it, beckoning the reader to explore the artwork contained within. As well as a meditation on the biblical love poetry of the Song of Songs, the book reflects the aspirations of a fledgling Israeli art movement, skilfully melded with the fluid natural forms of German Jugendstil (Art Nouveau).

Zeev Raban, born in Lodz in 1890, trained as a painter, sculptor and decorative artist in his native Poland. His distinctive artistic style was further shaped by study at

Previous page: *The Song of Solomon* in coloured plates by Zeev Raban 'Bezalel' Jerusalem, third improved edition, Jerusalem: The Song of Songs Publishing Co., 1930: front cover. Bequest of Dr Gertrude Spencer 2005, Baillieu Library Rare Books Collection, University of Melbourne.

Below: *The Song of Solomon*: title pages in English and Hebrew, showing the lion and deer.

several major academies in Germany, France and Belgium at the height of the Art Nouveau period. In 1912 he was invited by Boris Schatz, founder of the newly established Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, to take up a teaching position, firstly as head of the copper-relief department. The Bezalel Academy was a product of the Zionist movement that was precipitated by a growing anti-Semitism in late 19th-century Europe. As well as providing a Jewish homeland remote from persecution, the newly established British

Mandate of Palestine attracted artists fired with a sense of romantic nationalism, who saw the opportunity to create a Jewish art tradition, born of the soil of their religious homeland.⁴ Raban was familiar with artworks in the European Gothic and Renaissance traditions, Persian miniature paintings, and artists of the Jugendstil, which he drew upon and fused into a style distinctively his own. His works are recognisable for their idealised renderings and highly decorative aesthetic, as epitomised in his outstanding sequence of illustrations for the Song of Songs,

in which he uses a lion and a deer to portray the themes of sensual love as celebrated in this particular book of the Hebrew Bible.⁵

It seems that Raban began his series of biblical watercolour paintings some time before 1918. They first appeared in book form in 1923 in a production by the Berlin Hasefer publishing house, possibly because at that time Israel lacked the printing technology needed to replicate the illustrations. Under the English title *Song of Solomon*, a second edition was printed by the Ariel Press in Jerusalem for the Song of Songs Publishing Company in 1928, followed by a third, 'improved', edition in 1930.⁶ The 1930 version bears a printed dedication: 'To Professor Boris Schatz, founder and manager of the "Bezalel" Arts and Crafts School in Jerusalem, with friendship and veneration. Zeev Raban'. The Baillieu Library's copy is from this third edition.

Interestingly, the book reads from left to right in the European, rather than Hebrew, style. Its 62 unnumbered leaves comprise successive double-page openings, each illustrating a short verse from the Song of Songs. On the right-hand page is a full-size coloured lithographic plate with the Hebrew text below; on the left is the corresponding text from the English

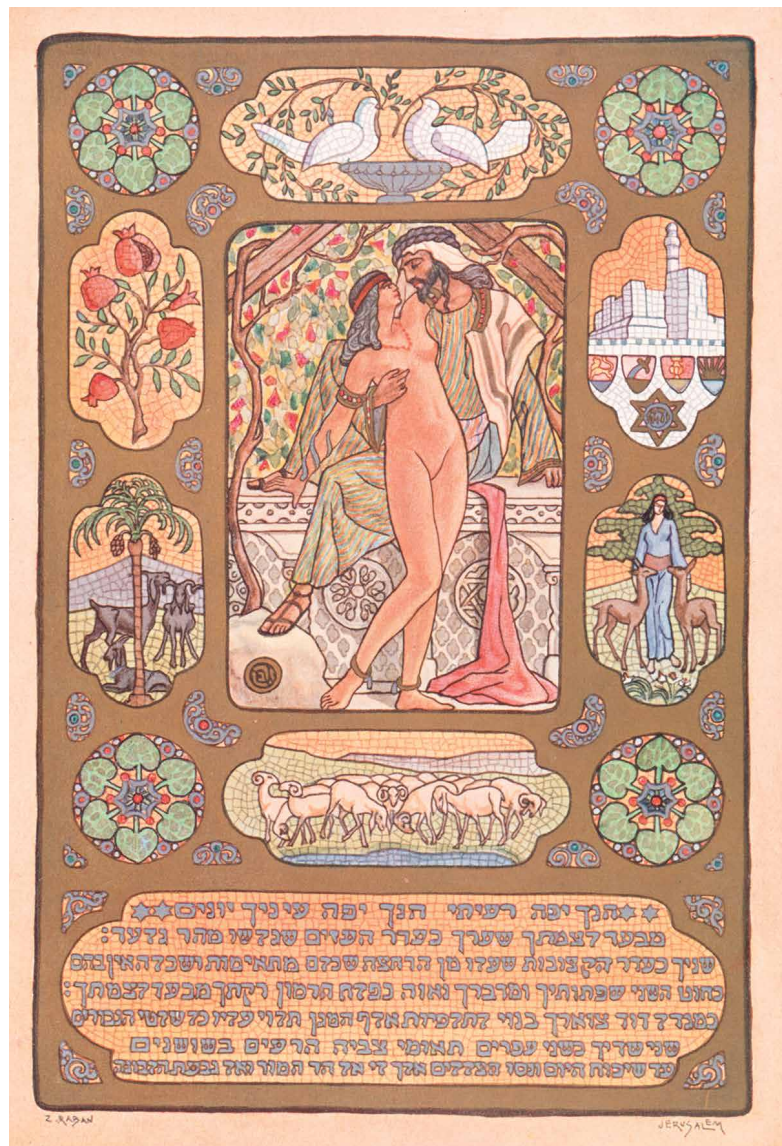


The Song of Solomon: illustration accompanying Chapter 4, verses 1–6: ‘Behold, thou art fair, my love: behold, thou art fair; thine eyes are as doves behind they veil: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that lie along the side of Mount Gilead ...’

Revised Version of the Bible. The effect is that of a modern medieval manuscript, with illuminated script highlighted in gold and silver enclosed by vine-entwined woodcut borders.

Raban’s illustrations reflect the erotic themes of the text, and promote the new Israeli homeland as an idyll by placing the embracing couples in a vernacular landscape of desert scenes and palm trees, echoing the philosophy of the Bezalel school. The images range from beautifully composed pastoral scenes, to exquisitely rendered lovers embracing under a blossom tree, framed by vibrant borders of pinks, reds and oranges. While the models remain chaste, some illustrations have a restrained erotic charge, such as the plate showing a man embracing his lover from behind, coupling his hands around her breasts. Credit for the coloured lithographic plates is ascribed to ‘Editions Artistiques de Paris’, suggesting that the illustrations were printed in France, then tipped into the pages in Israel.

As well as influencing the inside of the book, Raban’s design ethic was integral to the binding, creating a holistic interrelationship between inner and outer, emulating the Arts and Crafts approach to the object conceived and executed as an integrated whole.



Right: Dr Gertrude ‘Trudy’ Spencer on the occasion of her graduation with a Master of Arts, University of Melbourne, 1992.

Below: Bookplate of Dr Gertrude Spencer, pasted inside the front cover of *The Song of Solomon*.



Provenance

The provenance of this volume reveals an interesting chronicle about an alumna and benefactor of the University of Melbourne.

The donor of this book was Dr Gertrude Spencer (née Rabinowitsch, 1922–2005), known as Trudy, who was born in Vienna, the only child of Jewish parents. Given the political situation with the rise of the Austrian Nazi party, the family emigrated to Palestine in 1936. Trudy married in Palestine in 1944; she and her husband, Tibor Bandler (who later changed his name to Theodore

‘Ted’ Spencer), emigrated to Sydney in 1947 with the support of Trudy’s uncle, Leopold. Trudy’s parents followed them in 1951.⁷

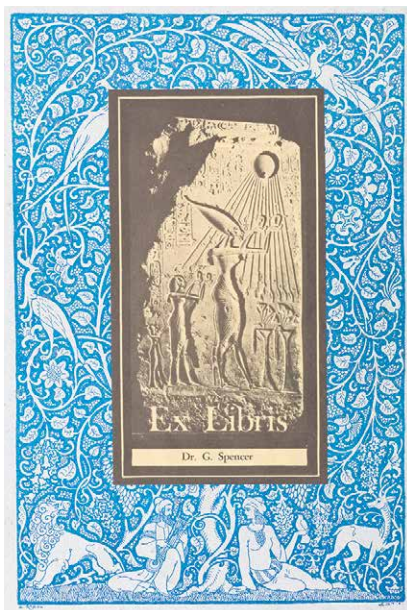
Trudy and Ted’s marriage did not last, and they divorced in 1957, just as Trudy had finished her medical studies at the University of Sydney and her internship in Murwillumbah. After undertaking residencies in psychiatry in the USA, she came to Melbourne in 1961, beginning her career as a psychiatrist with young offenders by working at the Children’s Clinic in Batman Avenue, part of the Department of Mental Health.

Trudy meticulously documented her life, her travels and her work—in scrapbooks, photograph albums and movie film. Her wide-ranging interests were reflected in her extensive library of books and collection of documentary films and cassette recordings. Her book collection covered biblical history, Christian faith, Classics, Judaism, Islam, comparative religion, Semitic languages, Syriac, mysticism, art, music, anthropology, medicine and science, South American travel, history, folklore, the Spanish language, mythology, ancient history, Rosicrucianism, psychotherapy and Carl Jung. There were also 13 Christian Bibles and one volume of the Hebrew scriptures. In all,

there were more than 2,000 books, including a wide range of novels and popular non-fiction. Some are now in the University of Melbourne Library; 37 of the most significant volumes were added to the Rare Books Collection.

The diversity of Trudy’s collection speaks loudly of her academic, spiritual and intellectual interests, as well as her medical and psychiatric training and work as a Jungian therapist. She undertook a Master of Arts degree at the University of Melbourne in Middle-Eastern studies and Syriac, graduating at the age of 70. The acknowledgements in her Master’s thesis,⁸ thanking several academics who guided her research, particularly her supervisor, ‘to the memory of my respected and beloved teacher, Dr James Fraser’, show her commitment to the pursuit of knowledge. Trudy died in 2005 at the age of 82, having outlived both her husbands, Ted Spencer and George Pappas.

The setting up of a substantial charitable trust, the Spencer-Pappas Trust, to support the teaching of ancient civilisations and languages at the University of Melbourne, is fundamental to understanding Dr Gertrude Spencer and what she most valued in her life: knowledge and learning in diverse disciplines.





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Susan Thomas was rare books curator at the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, until November 2017.

The Rare Books Collection is part of Special Collections in the Baillieu Library. Books may be requested for use in the Cultural Collections Reading Room: library.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special-collections/rare-books.

- 1 Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, pp. 2, 3, 24, 32, 33, 59, 70.
- 2 J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A commentary*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, p. 71.
- 3 D.S. Margoliouth (ed.), *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon*, London: J.M. Dent, and Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1902, pp. 102, 104, 110, 114.
- 4 Avram Kampf, *Chagall to Kitaj: Jewish experience in 20th century art*, London: Lund Humphries in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1990, p. 115.
- 5 Gideon Ofrat, *One hundred years of art in Israel*, Boulder, Colorado: Colorado Westview Press, 1998, p. 33.
- 6 Dalia Manor, *Art in Zion: The genesis of modern national art in Jewish Palestine*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2005, p. 220.
- 7 Biographical information is from Jennifer Baldwin, 'A note on Trudy Spencer: Migrant, psychiatrist, scholar and benefactor', *ANES*, vol. 55, 2018, pp. 19–22.
- 8 Gertrude Spencer, *John of Dara and the first book of his treatise on the resurrection of human bodies*, MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1992. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.