

Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 235.

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Biblical scholarship has largely viewed covenantal love between Israel and God in the Hebrew Bible in terms of a political relationship. William Moran's classic study of Deuteronomistic love, in 1963, set the stage by showing that it is modeled after ancient Near Eastern Suzerain-Vassal treaties.¹ As such, it delineates the obligations on the part of a subordinate "lesser king" for the grace and protection bestowed upon him by the "greater king." To this way of thinking, the act of loving a king is not a subjective disposition, but rather a pact calling for steadfast loyalty and allegiance. However, the Hebrew Bible suggests something more when that king is God, sanctioning that love with the command to love God "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). Subsequently, rabbinic Judaism elevates it to a cardinal theological value by memorializing it liturgically in the *Shema* prayer. The renowned Bible scholar Jon Levenson² argues for a biblical conception of love of God that, while certainly built on this mundane political dimension, also transcends it. Political fealty is far from the only one that mattered to the biblical authors when it came to God. In a study that mirrors its subject matter in its passion, lyricism, and sensitivity, Levenson reintroduces the romance the love of God demands, which has heretofore been critically drained.

Levenson methodically teases out those essential elements that are unique to the covenantal love of the Bible. First, as opposed to

other ancient Near Eastern law codes, is its "placement of law within a covenantal framework" (p.14). Second, if love of God entails actions rather than pure emotions, as opposed to what most in the modern world would immediately think, there is another love that comes to mind beyond the romantic kind. It is one that encompasses far more than feelings. Drawing on biblical metaphors of parental rather than spousal love, what the parent *does* for the child is surely an essential component of that love. Third, as Levenson notes, is that the feeling of love can be *generated* by deeds such as a "ritualized remembering" (p. 32) of revelation. This resolves the problem of how emotions can be commanded. Fourth, God's love for Israel is gratuitous—a "gift, not a reward" (p. 46). As such, it is in a sense built into Israel's "DNA" and passed on generationally rather than earned. Fifth, and here, perhaps, is its crucially unique dimension according to Levenson: God's love is irrevocable. However, that does not mean His love is unconditional, in that it does require some type of compliance and observance on the beloved's part. On the other hand, while disobedience can only disrupt, alienate, and sour the relationship, non-observance or rebellion can never definitively terminate it.

God's covenant with Abraham is unconditional and arbitrary as far as the narrative advises us. That said, the arrangement also grounds the subsequent Sinaitic communal covenant with

the nation Israel, which conditions it on further obligations and commandments. Betrayal of the covenant is always portrayed as a temporary “rupture” (p. 114) between an idyllic past and a rehabilitated future that is certain and promised by God to arrive. Levenson demonstrates this in what I found to be the strongest and most insightful part of the book, by examining closely the marriage and erotic metaphors of the love between God and Israel as they are worked out in Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and, finally, in the Song of Songs. Hosea’s adulterous wife and Jeremiah’s equally promiscuous spouse signify Israel’s idolatrous breach of her marriage vows to God. As such, the law that governs human beings would have demanded an inexorable divorce. However, the love that grounds the covenant between Israel and God ensures the covenant’s or marriage’s, if you will, survival, despite any infidelity. That love also surmounts Ezekiel’s graphically depicted whoring women and the death of his wife, both representing defilement of the Temple and its destruction. Temple reconstruction and cultic restoration will inevitably occur, supported by the guarantee that “the unavailable lover will return” (p. 125).

As far as the “Song of Songs,” Levenson, surprisingly, but with cogent reasoning, finds classic midrashic readings of the lovers—as stand-ins for Israel and God—to be actually more in line with its intended meaning. This runs counter to the general scholarly trend, which views this kind of interpretation as allegorical. An intense love between a lover and a beloved, the elusiveness of the male lover, and external forces that threaten the relationship, line-up with the shaky romance between God and Israel described elsewhere in the Bible. Ironically, the biblical book that is totally absent of any mention of God is actually all about God. When read in the larger context of the Bible as a whole rather than in isolation, it, as Levenson insightfully notes, “places both the marriage metaphor of the prophets and the poems of erotic longing in the Song of Songs

within a new framework, in which love is again the central term, the essence, in the relationship of God and Israel” (p. 132).

Though Levenson’s reading of the Song of Solomon and, more generally, his exposition of the biblical love of God, are convincing, there are, as one would expect, questions remaining and alternative readings equally plausible. His narrow focus on Deuteronomic love, which ignores the larger context of the canonical scriptures that comprise the Hebrew Bible, is problematic. Surely, a study that deals with an aspect of *Jewish theology* (i.e., the approach of rabbinic Judaism throughout its long history) rather than merely *biblical theology* (i.e., the attempt to understand the theology of the Bible in its original context) must encounter the text holistically in its final redacted version. Such is the way Jewish theology has evolved during the entire history of rabbinic Judaism for two millennia. Indeed, that is the very way Levenson asks us to read the Song of Songs—as part of the entire biblical corpus in which it is set, and what we would expect of a book that purports to examine a key concept within *Judaism*.

Would it not be instructive to examine the various human love affairs in the Bible characterized by the same term for love (*ahv*) for other clues as to what love of God might entail? Could the fact that virtually every one of these loves ends in disaster, familial disintegration, or death (Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Jacob and Joseph, Samson and Delilah, and Michal for David, to name a few) suggest a negative view of love between earthly beings. The bond between David and Jonathan, a love so intense as to garner the phrase mentioned only one other time (“being [*nefesh*] bound up with being”), illustrates best this deleterious view of human love in terms of its effects on Jonathan. In his blinding, self-abnegating love for David, he surrenders his royal prerogative as crown prince and, therefore, extinguishes his future. His alliance with David against his father, Saul, turns his back on his past. Jonathan risks impending death to protect David, imminently

exposing his present to obliteration. In fact, his actual ensuing death on the battlefield is instrumental in clearing the way to David's ascendancy to the throne. Perhaps the message is that the Bible wishes human beings to displace their own loves in favor of the love of God.

Hence, the Song of Songs could even be read in light of this narrative account of love to render a reading antithetical to Levenson's. Taking the lovers in their most evident sense as simply human lovers (instead of allegorizing them as God and Israel) may very well poetically capture the Bible's advocacy of love of God over love of human beings. The book's sole objective meditation on love by its author, detached from its protagonists, reveals or points, if you will, to the message as a general human phenomenon (Song of Songs 8:6–7) and is a key concept. Though Levenson cites this passage as "most memorable," he fails to explain precisely why. It is significant that love is almost exclusively cast in morbid metaphors: It is first analogized to "death." It then likens love to "Sheol," a kind of posthumous purgatory. It further deepens love's ominous features by comparing its consequences to "darts of fire." The last analogy, *Reshef* (darts), conjures a common biblical sense as an instrument of devastation, war, and plague, as well as its ancient Near Eastern connotations of a netherworld deity. Love is then placed alongside "jealousy," a term most often associated with violence and anger, heightening its devastating force. Taken all together—the lesson might be that human love is damaging and explains why the beloved, in the ultimate verse of the book, pleads for her lover to "run away." She does so because she is not willing to surrender to its injurious consequences.

This message may not appeal to our modern maudlin sensibilities but that is no reason to reject it as an overarching biblical idea. In fact, it may be vital to our understanding of the binding of Isaac, the *akedah*, where the term love (*ahavah*) appears for the very first time in the final redacted chronology of the biblical canon. Abraham's love for Isaac sets the stage for the trial.

Could the *akedah* provide the most graphic form of the Bible's deprecation of human love as a threat to the love of God? Abraham's love for Isaac threatens to usurp the love of God, which the Bible holds supremely vital to human life. God demands that Abraham vanquish his love for another human being, his son, in favor of loving Him. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his parental love for God demonstrates that human love must be subordinate to the love of God.

When Levenson moves from the biblical age to the Middle Ages, his eagerness to locate a medieval rationalist such as Maimonides on a biblical trajectory leads to mischaracterization. For example, Levenson argues that despite Maimonides' intellectualism, he promotes a publicly committed life, and his ideal lover "is hardly a monk or a hermit" (p. 170). In that sense, Levenson claims, Maimonides veers away from Greco-Roman and Islamic philosophical influences and toward "the covenantal theology of the Hebrew Bible to a high degree." However, even though Maimonides is notorious for being subject to diametrically opposing interpretations, Maimonides' description of his ideal lover, which Levenson cites in support of this assertion, is anything but an endorsement of the active life so prominent in the Bible. Maimonides' portrayal of the very highest state of intellectual perfection achieved by Moses, which is also an ideal love of God, is the point where he "talks with people, and is occupied with bodily necessities, while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him" (*Guide for the Perplexed*; 3:51). In fact, the only thing that is really active in this "lover" is the mind. The philosopher/lover retreats into himself, with his own mind and inner-self replacing the proverbial cave. His external actions are disembodied acts, attributed to him only in the sense of an automaton. It is, in fact, a hermetic existence sealed off from what is merely a façade of public life. He is always with God because his essential self, which for Maimonides is the intellect, is with God and not with people. This reinvention

of Moses, as paradigmatic of the Maimonidean ideal, is unrecognizable in the Bible.

Though Levenson's book purports to deal with the theology and practice of love of God "developed over the millennia" (p. xiii), its predominant focus is on the Bible, unsurprisingly for an outstanding scholar who has dedicated his life to the study of the Hebrew Bible. Even when Levenson moves to the Middle Ages of Bahya and Maimonides and onto the modern period of Buber and Rosenzweig, it is to show the idea's consistencies with its origins in the ancient Near Eastern context. And so, in the chapters dealing with the medieval, Levenson's preferences, are for Bahya ibn Pakuda's eleventh-century ethical tome *Duties of the Heart* and Joseph Albo's (1380-1444) *Sepher Ha-Ikkarim*, since they allow for greater traces of the divine biblical romance involving a personal, reactive God possessed by a supra-rational love of Israel. Levenson emphasizes their continuity with the Bible on love *of* and love *by* God as "striking" and "remarkable" (165, 178). Likewise, Rosenzweig is the clear winner in the contest with Buber for the soul of Jewish theology. Buber's rejection of essential elements of the biblical God as a lawgiver and as a lover of community, both of which undermine his "contentless" individualistic I-Thou encounter, rule him out as an authentic bearer of the biblical tradition. Accordingly, Levenson literally grants Rosenzweig the very last words in the book, which allows the divine lover's commandment

"Love Me" to resonate with the "genuine tone of the ancient commandment."

Notwithstanding the inevitable criticisms and questions raised by any review of a learned work, Levenson's fine study is a noteworthy contribution to the understanding of a difficult and central theological concept. It should be a staple for any course dealing with Jewish theology or the love of God in religion. Like its topic, it is a lovely book. Levenson's work also provides a sorely needed antidote to current expressions of a love of God that perversely motivates so much death and destruction. Suicide bombers declare such love the instant before murdering scores of innocent people in its name. On the contrary, to abide by the divine law "Thou shalt not kill," and to preserve life, as the rabbis understood the overarching principle governing all mitzvot of "You shall live by them," captures Levenson's characterization of Rosenzweig's notion of loving God. It is to take "a principled stance of openness to the Torah as the medium for encountering the loving and commanding God of Israel" (p. 192).

REFERENCES

1. William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near East Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1963): 77-87.
2. Jon D. Levenson is the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at the Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA.