

Love in the Hebrew Bible

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Introduction

The Background of Love

“God is love,” the writer of 1 John confidently declares. Yet this theologically pleasing statement raises more questions than answers. In saying this, the writer of 1 John does not so much tell us about the nature or identity of God as to address a riddle with another riddle. That is, if God is love, then what is love? And when we turn to this daunting query, we hit an impasse. Can any possible answer adequately explain love? Writers who have written on the subject say no. For example, Diane Ackerman, the author of a book on this topic, states frankly, “Love . . . cannot be measured or mapped.”¹ Indeed, she and other writers go further. Considering how a single term, love, is used to refer to myriad things,² they state that love cannot even be defined, let alone explained.³

Yet this book attempts to do just that—to explain love. Or at least just a tiny sliver of it. In particular, this work looks closely at a handful of stories in the Hebrew Bible that use or center on the Hebrew term and concept *’ahav/’ahav* or *’ahavah*, translated as the verb “to love” or the noun “love,” which I will henceforth simply refer to as *ahav*. This word has an unclear etymology,⁴ and

1. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love* (New York: Random House, 1994), xvii.

2. Morton Hunt, *The Natural History of Love* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1959), 5, 7.

3. Diane Ackerman writes, “Everyone admits that love is wonderful and necessary, yet no one can agree on what it is” (*History of Love*, xvii).

4. Anthony Tambasco, “Love,” in *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 567–68; Gerhard Wallis, “אהב,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. G. Wallis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 99–118.

appears at least two hundred times in the Hebrew Bible as a verb⁵ and almost fifty times as a noun.⁶ Through a close reading of these narratives, this examination, though limited, also explores larger questions concerning love: What does love look like in the Hebrew Bible? What do biblical writers say about love, and more important, what do they mean when they use this term and concept? How is love portrayed, discussed, and conceptualized? What is associated with this term, and what nuances does it have in the Hebrew biblical corpus? Through this research, by offering more insight into this complex and difficult concept, I show that the Hebrew Bible is “as rich a source of insight into love as has ever been put to page,”⁷ and is integral to the ways in which relationships, both among people and also between humanity and God, are imagined in the Hebrew text. As a result, an understanding of love in the Hebrew Bible remains fundamental to our knowledge of the biblical text.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Love is difficult to discuss. Something about this subject induces even the most well-intentioned interpreter to slip into something approaching a bad sermon, aphorism, or pedagogical “lesson.” Indeed, I am well-accustomed to sermons and pedagogical lessons. To provide some background, I am a 1.5 generation (or more accurately, 1.75) Korean American woman who received her doctorate in Hebrew Bible. Like in many Korean American families, religion and church were central. My paternal grandmother had converted to Christianity in North Korea before she fled to the South during the Korean War. And she was so pious and dedicated to the church that she pressured my uncle to become a minister when we moved to the United States. I, of course, as a female, was never pushed, never advised to go into religion as a possible career. (However, I was advised to go to law school; so perhaps it was more about money and practicality than gender.)

Looking back, my family’s background influenced my interest in the biblical text and my decision to become a scholar of the Bible. And in turn, my background influences how I read these stories and how I understand love in them. For example, the centrality of God and family in the understanding of love in the Hebrew text feels familiar. Also recognizable is the idea that love is intrinsically connected to sacrifice and suffering in the Hebrew Bible; and that

5. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Love,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 376. Leon Morris says the term appears 208 times (*Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 9).

6. Wallis, “אהבה,” 102.

7. Douglas N. Morgan, “Love in the Hebrew Bible,” *Judaism* 5 (1956): 31.

love, while deeply felt, is more often and more clearly demonstrated through behavior and actions than through words.

My background also may explain my longstanding interest in love. Growing up in a family where declarations of love were rare but actions that demonstrated love were frequent, I have long wondered what love really was. I had even originally wanted to examine love in the Hebrew Bible for my dissertation. However, when I mentioned this as a possible topic to an eminent Israeli scholar of the Hebrew Bible more than a decade ago, she rightly steered me away from this topic, stating that it was too complex a subject for the dissertation format. I was still too green, she hinted, to address such a challenging topic, especially while simultaneously trying to satisfy the sometimes sporadic and whimsical concerns of a dissertation committee. She was wise and correct in her guidance, and I wrote my dissertation on a different subject.

Yet when I finally turned to write on this topic a little over a decade after receiving my doctorate, I have not found it easier to write about. I even wondered at times if the senior scholar in Israel had it all wrong. The older I got, the more I realized my limitations. I had much less time, energy, or knowledge than I had hoped and imagined I would have at this age. The goalposts seem to keep moving. Perhaps love is for the young, I dejectedly thought at times while trying to write this book. Maybe this topic is better fit for newer scholars who, with their fresh energy, eager bravado, and less experience, have yet to recognize fully the immensity and complexity of this topic and therefore have the confidence to barge ahead, forcing the biblical text to yield its secrets.

Yet here we are nonetheless, and what you are reading is a book where I attempt to explain a bit more about love in the Hebrew text. Like most things in life, all you can do is try—especially if you have already agreed to write on this topic with a publisher and have signed a contract. Needless to say, this subject is immensely complicated. Indeed, as I stated earlier, love is tricky because it is difficult to talk about and even more difficult to think about in ways that are not clichéd and hollow. This is especially the case when the topic concerns love in combination with anything having to do with God, such as love in the Hebrew Bible. When working with theologically significant texts and ideas, the temptation to lapse into meaningless truisms or facile advice, such as “God loves the world” or “you should love God,” is especially strong.

These easy lapses into tautologies or preachy or teachy sounding nonsense stem from the ambiguity and vastness of love. Love is immensely important, but it is nearly impossible to define and explain because it is used to talk about many different things. This problem is compounded when the subject is not just love, but love in ancient religious texts—texts from way back when, from a non-Western part of the world, and which were handed down, edited, revised, and eventually canonized over a long period of time. The gap between the modern-day interpreter/reader and these stories is

so enormous that it feels and may be almost unbridgeable. Indeed, though my identity and context has undoubtedly affected my reading, I am pretty sure that someone like me—a 1.75-generation, female Korean American Bible scholar—was never imagined by the biblical authors, editors, or even modern biblical scholars a mere sixty years ago to be the intended audience, reader, or interpreter of this text.

Yet the very difficulties of understanding love in such a text—the challenges—elucidate the very reason why we should try to understand it better. The gulf between text and reader points to the need. Because we cannot and should not presume that love had the same connotations in the Bible as it does today, more knowledge of love will help us to better understand the biblical text—a text that many of us consider authoritative and religiously significant and meaningful in some way. What does it mean, for example, when it states that “You shall love the LORD” (Deut. 6:5) or that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18)? Indeed, we cannot presume to understand even simple statements in the Bible such as “Jacob loved Rachel” (Gen. 29:18) without really knowing what love means in this particular story.

Relatedly, better comprehension of the connotations of love in the Hebrew Bible will help us from lapsing into stereotypes and generalities, especially about the Bible and the people from which this text stems. For example, it is not uncommon for people I meet in adult Sunday school or sometimes in my classes to wonder aloud to me in a fit of quasi- or perhaps full Marcionite longing whether it would have been and perhaps still would be best to simply drop the first part of the Bible and, along with it, the supposedly “unfriendly,” “not-so-loving,” “foreign” deity so prominently featured in it. If not drop, they hint, maybe it would be better to simply skip this first half of the Bible or pretend it does not exist,⁸ and instead focus on the second portion, the place where the “friendlier” and “more familiar” God, the one who actually loves and cares, is found. This tendency to privilege the New Testament (and by extension, to center Christianity over against Judaism) as the only part of the canon that speaks about love and, therefore, the “nicer” or more relevant testament stems, in part, from our ignorance of the place of love in the Hebrew corpus.

Moreover, aside from greater literary and theological comprehension, a better understanding of love in the Hebrew biblical text also has some practical and personal benefits. Though this is not a pastoral book, greater knowledge of the Hebrew text and what it says about love can be personally meaningful, especially if the reader views the biblical text as authoritative in some way. As

8. On the difficulty of ascertaining a Christian theology of the Old Testament, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), esp. 62–81.

the biblical scholar Jacqueline Lapsley puts it, understanding what love means in the Hebrew text is fundamental if we are to grasp how God loves humans and how we, in turn, are to love God.⁹ Moreover, better comprehension of the various ways that different ancient writers, especially biblical writers, conceived of love will help increase our knowledge of love in general. Indeed, the personal and practical implications of this understanding cannot be overstated according to bell hooks. As she wisely notes, “To love well is the task in all meaningful relationships, not just romantic bonds.”¹⁰

CONTOURS OF THIS STUDY

In the chapters that follow, I hope to further our understanding of love by presenting a theological and literary examination of love in the Hebrew Bible. As Lapsley insightfully observes, a study of love “is not simply a matter of examining specific occurrences of the terms for love,” but how the narrative framework of certain stories “shapes how love is conceived.”¹¹ As such, considering the importance of narrative framework, this study focuses on a handful of stories, mostly from the Pentateuch or the Torah (that is the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the books from Genesis to Deuteronomy), and the Deuteronomistic History (that is, the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), that use or mention *ahav*. For those familiar with the general layout of the Hebrew Bible, I have focused on the narrative portion of the Hebrew text. Though I do briefly discuss the Song of Songs in the final chapter of this work, this means that I largely leave aside the rich but very complicated poetic and prophetic portions (known as the Latter Prophets or the Minor and Major Prophets) of the Hebrew Scriptures that mention *ahav*.

Moreover, to further narrow this vast subject into something more manageable, I have limited my focus to the term *ahav* and the stories that mention or use this term. There are certainly other important terms and concepts that are related to and perhaps even overlap with *ahav*, such as *sana'*, which means “hate,” or *hesed*, a multivalent word, which has a range of connotations but is usually translated as “loving kindness” or “loyalty” or “steadfast love.”¹² However, in this study, I stick to just this one term and concept, *ahav*, and the stories

9. Jacqueline Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2003): 350–69, esp. 366–69.

10. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 2001), 9.

11. Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way,” 355.

12. See, e. g., Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. A. Gottschalk (Cincinnati: The Hebrew Union College Press, 1967); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978); Glenn Yarbrough, “The Significance of *hsd* in the Old Testament” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1959).

that use or prominently feature it. A study of *ahav* is challenging enough without the need to add in other equally dense terms and concepts. Speaking of terminology, throughout this work, I refer to God by the male pronoun. Not only is God portrayed as male deity throughout the Hebrew corpus, but as I will argue in the last chapter, God's gender impacts how we understand love.

While I focus on *ahav*, this work is not a word study: that is, this book does not consist of a philological examination and classification of *ahav* per se but of a theological and literary analysis of biblical narratives that feature ideas and concepts concerning *ahav*. While word studies are helpful and useful, and though this research has benefited from them, they are mainly of interest to academic specialists. By focusing on the stories instead—stories that I discuss and question in my classes and in my own research—by approaching this topic in a larger, more literary manner, I hope to engage a broader audience. Relatedly, though this research is textually focused, I have tried to keep overly academic jargon, technicalities, and terminology to a minimum.

For those diehard biblical studies fans who are interested in a philological study of *ahav*, there is a useful dissertation on this subject by Alexander To Ha Luc.¹³ In his work, Luc examines every occurrence of *ahav* in the Hebrew Bible as well as related synonyms. Moreover, he helpfully categorizes the ways in which the term appears and is utilized in the biblical text. I will discuss Luc's findings a bit more in the first chapter when I go over the history of scholarship on love in the Hebrew Bible. Suffice it to say, however, unlike Luc's dissertation and other words studies, which usually proceed by examining the various occurrences of this word in the biblical text, this work will take a broader perspective, focusing on specific stories about love instead of the ways in which a particular terminology is utilized.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Through this broader exploration of key narratives that contain *ahav*, I will uncover some interesting aspects of love and how it was imagined in the Hebrew text. Among other things, I hope to show that:

Biblical characters, like people today, more often love those who act like them.

When it comes to love, there is no separation between actions and emotions.

13. Alexander To Ha Luc, "The Meaning of *'hb* in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss. University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1982). For a brief discussion on the meanings of *ahav*, see also Ellen van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition, and Context* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 45–50.

- Love is associated with food and the enjoyment of it but not in an altogether positive manner.
- There are distinctions made between love based on appetites and bodies and a love that is higher and divine.
- Love in the Hebrew text is deeply intertwined with the matters of politics and power.
- Love is connected to divine preference and favoritism, and also its opposite, divine rejection.
- Love is envisioned as mysterious and unknowable and perhaps even capricious as a result of its connection to God.
- Though God's preferences are connected to love, God is also vulnerable to love's powers and is capable of heartbreak and blindness when it comes to the object of his love.
- Love has a gendered meaning, as female characters are almost never said to be the ones who love and also experience the negative effects of love more so in the Hebrew text.
- The negative association between love and women, however, might indicate that love is a feminine force.
- Therefore, love in the Hebrew Bible, as in life, remains complicated, contradictory, and ultimately mysterious, and therefore a key source of questions and struggles.
- Despite these complexities, love is a vital component of the ideology and theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, and therefore an understanding of it remains fundamental to our knowledge of the biblical text.

To see the ways in which these messages and meanings about love emerge and are reflected in these stories, I begin our exploration of love in the first chapter by going over briefly the history of scholarship on this subject. Though I have tried to keep this book readable and geared toward a nonspecialist audience, some foray into the academic research on this topic is unavoidable, yet, I hope, helpful. That is, in order to know how this work stems from, veers from, and adds to previous understandings of love in the Hebrew Bible, we have to know what others have said on this topic. Hence, in the first chapter, I summarize quickly what we know thus far about love in the Hebrew biblical text. In particular, this chapter discusses the general scholarly consensus that the covenant between God and Israel, as facilitated by Moses, plays a key role in the conception and understanding of love in the Hebrew Bible. This love, known as covenantal love, has theological, familial, social, political, and emotional valences, which bleed into other instances where *ahav* is mentioned. Hence, the covenantal understanding of love is evident in and indeed affects the meaning of other stories about love in the Hebrew corpus.

Moving from the covenant between God and his people, the second chapter highlights the divinity of love by examining the story of Rebekah and Isaac, and their twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Rebekah loves one twin, Jacob, while

Isaac loves the other twin, Esau (Gen. 25:28). The oppositional parental love of their children divides love into two types: a higher, holy kind of love, and a baser, more appetite-centered love. Though the narrative asserts the divinity and superiority of this higher love, it also simultaneously undermines this claim of its preeminence by showing how this love leads to deceit, discord, and the disintegration of the family. Through assertion and subversion, the narrative wrestles with love and God's relationship to it.

The power of love is given greater emphasis in the story of Saul and David, the subject of chapter 3. Showing how human love preferences are intimately connected to and indeed mirror divine preferences, this chapter explores the ramifications of divine favoritism and its opposite, divine rejection, on love. Similar to Esau and Jacob, Saul, the divinely rejected, is contrasted to David, the divinely favored. As a result of God's preferences, David becomes increasingly beloved by everyone around him, while Saul, in contrast, becomes increasingly unloved. This, in turn, leads to a decrease in success and political power for Saul and an opposing rise in power and prestige for David. Despite the dramatic effects of divine favoritism and rejection, the narrative never explains the reason behind God's capricious preferences. However, clues in the story suggest that God's rejection of Saul results from divine heartbreak and that God too is vulnerable to love's powers.

Continuing the exploration of love in the stories about David and Saul in chapter 4, I turn to the painful effects of divine favoritism and rejection on Saul's family, especially Saul's firstborn son, Jonathan. Looking at the various interpretations of David and Jonathan's love relationship, one which some have argued is erotic or romantic, this chapter uncovers the betrayals that mark their relationship as well as that between Jonathan and his father. These betrayals are explained and downplayed by the biblical authors in two ways: by contrasting the unfavored, unloved, and ungifted Saul to the favored, respected, and gifted doubles, Jonathan and David; and by using love to obscure David's role in using these betrayals to usurp Saul's throne. The problematic portrayal of God as supportive of David's exploitation of the love of Jonathan and Saul hints that God too might be enamored of David, so much so that he has turned a blind eye to his beloved's ruthless machinations.

In the final chapter, I turn to the relationship between love and gender by focusing on the stories about female characters who are either the active subjects or the passive objects of love. Reflecting discomfort with the connection between love and women, almost all the female characters suffer as a result of their love. Hence, the narrative appears to target women who are associated with love for special punishment. Similar feelings are evident in the ultimate erotic love song in the Hebrew text, the Song of Songs/Solomon, or Canticles. This book, which features a seemingly sexually open and expressive female

protagonist, initially seems to celebrate female expressions of love. At the same time, however, by associating the female lover with images of violence, war, and death, the book evinces a deep sense of ambivalence and apprehension about women and their role in love.

In the conclusion, I summarize what we have learned about love in the Hebrew Bible through our exploration and close reading of stories that mention *ahav*. Love, *ahav*, is depicted as a dense term and concept that has a web of associations, meanings, and connections—and it is this dense consortium of meanings that is evoked when *ahav* is used and appears in a particular narrative. In particular, in the stories we have explored, love is shown to be a divine, powerful, painful, mysterious, and ultimately feminine force that might be on par with God. As such, through the use of *ahav*, the biblical writers ultimately profess to both the lingering significance of love as well as its ultimate unknowability and mystery.