

Love's Human Bondage: A Biblical Warning

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From the patriarchs through to the kings of Israel, the Hebrew Bible is replete with exemplars of courage, spiritual devotion, political acumen, even military prowess. In matters of love, however, the biblical *dramatis personae* have a decidedly poor track record. Their failures span the range of possible human relationships, from parental and fraternal to sexual and conjugal. Searching for the source of the myriad missteps quickly proves frustrating: Read together, these biblical expressions of human love seem both erratic and inconsistent, utterly resistant to our attempts to draw universal conclusions. In one instance, a lust-driven rape results in hate (Amnon and Tamar), while in another, in a consummate love (Shechem and Dinah). When Jacob shows a clear preferential love for Joseph, the result is bitter sibling rivalry, even attempted fratricide, and apparent ideals of spousal love, such as that between Isaac and Rebecca or Jacob and Rachel, lead to hopelessly fragmented families. We may thus rightly wonder, are there any normative ethics to be gleaned from the Bible's depictions of human love?

This question is only compounded by the traditional wisdom on the nature of man's love for God, as spelled out in the covenant of Mount Sinai. According to many scholars, this covenant is in truth a political commitment, set down in law: Modeled on the ancient Near Eastern suzerain/vassal treaty, it delineates the obligations through which a "lesser king" earns the grace of a "greater king."¹ To this way of thinking, the act of loving God—the supreme command—is not a subjective disposition, but rather a demonstration of steadfast loyalty and unwavering commitment.² Yet as the biblical narratives make clear, the political dimension of the God-man relationship is far from the only one that mattered to its authors. It seems fair to assume that the numerous stories of human love misplaced, withheld, or gone awry are meant to teach us something about the proper emotional and psychological attachment to God—and, by extension, to each other.

In what follows, I will argue that to make sense of the variegated portrayal of love in the Bible, we must attempt a holistic reading of the text, in which the narrative examples of love inform the legal edicts on the subject, and vice versa.³ What emerges from such a reading, as we will see, is a stark warning: Passionate, unrestrained love, when directed toward other human beings, is fraught with danger. As such, it is safer for it to remain in the religious or spiritual domain. For only by making God the ultimate object of our desire, the Bible seems to say, can we ensure that love will serve as the positive, life-affirming force it was meant to be.

The Garden of Eden, the Jewish Bible's *locus amoenus*, offers our first glimpse into the ideal nature of human relationships. Noticeably missing, however, is any mention of love (*ahava*). Indeed, in drawing the parameters of male-female relationships, the biblical text studiously avoids the term altogether. Rather, we are told at the outset, man has but one task vis-à-vis other human beings: to "leave his mother and father" and "cleave" (*davak*, literally "cling") to his wife, so that they may become one flesh.⁴ It is easy enough to understand from where this odd decree comes. Woman is

constructed out of the flesh of man; through his act of cleaving to her, man reunites a flesh that was incomplete. Why, however, did the text not simply exhort man “to love” (*le’ehov*) his wife? After all, the verb is used elsewhere in the Bible in the context of human relationships, and also denotes a yearning to unite with the object of one’s desire.

The answer, the ensuing biblical narrative appears to suggest, lies in the additional dimension implied by the act of loving someone—namely, that of self-abandonment, or a complete giving over of oneself to the power of emotions. For the Edenic relationship bespoke a very different kind of association, one in which woman stands “opposite” her partner (*k’negdo*), affirming, if not necessarily their equality (however we may choose to understand the term), then at least their mutuality. To be sure, much criticism has turned on the apparently demeaning definition of Eve as an *ezer k’negdo*, or “helpmeet.” Yet it should be recalled that the word “to help” (*la’azor*) is most frequently applied to God himself, as in psalm 70: “You are my help and my salvation, God; do not delay.” In addition, as the great sixteenth-century Italian biblical commentator Ovadiah Seforno observes, when two objects are placed on a scale, they are only “opposite” each other when they are exactly equal in weight—from which we may deduce equality in image and likeness between man and woman. We can thus argue that the term was not meant to degrade. On the contrary, it would seem to underscore the critical importance for each partner of the other’s distinct identity, and the necessity of that distinction for the act of male-female completion.

“Love,” by contrast, when applied to the interpersonal sphere, may easily lead not to mutuality and respect, but to violence. We see this, for example, in the two narrative instances in which the act of “cleaving” is combined with that of “loving”: The story of Shechem and Dinah, and the tales of King Solomon’s lusty pursuits. As described in the book of Genesis, Shechem was a Canaanite prince who, overcome with desire for Jacob’s daughter Dinah, abducted and raped her. Perhaps surprisingly, his soul “cleaves” to Dinah afterward, and “he was in love with her.”⁵ Later, in I Kings 11, we read that “King Solomon loved many foreign women... women of the Moabites,

Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel: ‘You shall not go among them, neither shall they come among you; for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods’; Solomon did cleave unto these in love.”⁶ In both instances, the love these men felt was in direct contravention of divine law—even, in the case of Solomon, leading him to stray from the worship of God alone.⁷ So, too, in both cases, did their actions betray familial and tribal mores, leading to chaos and a breakdown of the social order. The philological evidence suggests, then, that love can wreak havoc when let loose among men. Only when expressed properly can love ensure that distinct identities are not disregarded or destroyed, but rather valued and respected, with each reinforcing the other.⁸

Unfortunately, the biblical narrative offers no few instances of love improperly expressed, beginning with the story of the first patriarch, Abraham. Abraham is famously commanded by God to “take your son, your unique one, whom you love,” and offer him up as a sacrifice.⁹ This triple description of Isaac, it has often been argued, merely emphasizes the formidable nature of God’s command, just as it accentuates the anguish Abraham feels in acquiescing to it. Yet its inclusion may also afford a clue as to God’s motivation for subjecting Abraham to such an agonizing trial. As with Solomon, the love that Abraham bears for his son threatens to usurp that which he bears for God. Indeed, in every other instance in which a divine command conflicted with familial loyalties, Abraham seemed able, if not eager, to accede. First, there was Abraham’s departure from his “father’s house.”¹⁰ Later, when imperiled, Abraham had no hesitation about placing his wife Sarah in jeopardy for his own benefit: “Say you are my wife so that it will be good for me because of you and so that I will live because of you.”¹¹ Moreover, at Sarah’s demand, and with divine approval, Abraham expelled his other son, Ishmael, along with his mother (and Abraham’s concubine) Hagar.¹² Abraham is thus left only with Isaac as an emotional distraction from a theocentric life. We may therefore argue that this improperly directed love provokes God into forcing upon Abraham a starkly horrific choice. In this

reading, it is surely also significant that once Abraham raises the knife to slaughter his son, love is conspicuously absent from Isaac's description: Once his father's "unique" and "loved" son, at the end of the trial, he has now been downgraded to "unique son."¹³ In other words, Abraham's improper love of Isaac is finally vanquished by an act that reflects the new order of priorities.

In the third patriarchal family, Jacob's preference for his son Joseph nearly drives his other sons to fratricide. Their actions, in turn, set in motion the chain of events that lead the Israelites down to Egypt and into slavery. More than the problem of parental favoritism, however, is the issue of the nature of Jacob's love for Joseph: Jacob, we are told, "loved Joseph more than all his sons since he was a child of his old age."¹⁴ While the traditional interpretation explains that Jacob's paramount love for Joseph results from the latter's being the firstborn son of Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loves most, the plain meaning of the text offers up another idea: Being long past his own prime, Jacob sees in Joseph a chance to live the life that he did not. By hanging his hopes and dreams on Joseph, Jacob merges with him psychologically. Consequently, when the brothers bring Jacob the news that Joseph has been killed, he famously "refuses to be comforted,"¹⁵ and insists that he will mourn him the rest of his days. In this behavior, we see Jacob's inability to separate from his son, to acknowledge that they are two separate and autonomous beings. To Jacob, Joseph's death is tantamount to his own.

Then there are the instances of improper male-female love. Isaac's love for Rebecca—the first time in the Bible in which a man is described as loving a woman—is framed at the outset in a subtly yet inescapably negative light: "And Isaac brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother and he took Rebecca to be his wife and he loved her and Isaac was comforted after his mother."¹⁶ For Isaac, the importance of his marriage to Rebecca lies in her having comforted him after the loss of his mother. We might say, in fact, that his gaze toward his beloved is always deflected toward the image of another.¹⁷ Their union is not, then, the "one flesh" the Bible sets out as our goal, in which

two equal identities join in the course of a shared existence. Rather, Isaac relates to Rebecca not for who she is, but for her whose memory she conjures, whose shoes she fills. This initial gap between them widens as their story unfolds, and each ends up “loving” a different son¹⁸—the result of which, again, is a near fratricide, and a breakdown in familial relations.

Recalling other biblical stories, we see that unbridled love consistently bears painful consequences. Jacob’s ardent love for Rachel results in an unloved spouse (her older sister, Leah, whom he was tricked into marrying first) and—needless to say—in bitterness and jealousy between family members. Shechem’s love for Dinah is precipitated by a rape, itself leading to an act of deception and vengeful genocide by Dinah’s brothers. Then there is the episode of King David’s son Amnon and his half-sister, Tamar, which reinforces in the most graphic manner the injurious nature of love: Beginning with a lust-driven rape, Amnon’s feelings for Tamar ultimately transform into a “hatred that was more intense than the love he had for her.”¹⁹ Filled with disgust and self-loathing on account of the act he has committed, Amnon transfers his guilt and shame onto his victim. Once again, love results in familial dysfunction: Amnon’s older brother Absalom hates him and eventually kills him; Tamar is marked for life, unable to marry, and David is left bereft.

The case of Samson, the judge best known for his herculean physical powers, is particularly instructive. Among the three women he engages during the course of his libidinous exploits, he is said to have “loved” only Delilah: “And he loved a woman in Nahal Sorek and her name was Delilah.”²⁰ She alone ensnares him, however, seducing him into exposing his most valuable means of self-preservation (his uncut hair), thus rendering him defenseless against his enemies. Here, the means of his downfall—his having revealed a secret, and her betraying it—harks back to the Garden’s warning: A secret is a barrier to the total fusion of identities, something that preserves the separateness of two individuals; it is a facet of self the other cannot access. Love’s passion, however, erodes the ability to shield a secret. After his initial resistance, Samson feels compelled to “confide

to her everything in his heart.”²¹ As a result of his disclosure, the act of binding that elsewhere serves as a metaphor for God’s ardent love for his people—“I drew them near with human ropes, with cords of love”²²—becomes for Samson literal shackles of captivity, ones from which he breaks free only so that he might suffer death by his own hands.

Michal’s love for David—the sole instance in the Bible in which a woman is said to love a man—also proves destructive: An act of self-sacrifice for her beloved David alienates her from her father, King Saul, and condemns her to a lifeless arranged marriage with another. Even when she is finally reunited with David, their relationship is poisoned by suspicion, indignity, and abuse. Their reunion remains forever devoid not only of romance, but also of any conjugal relations.²³ By surrendering herself for the sake of David’s salvation, and subverting her own desires for the sake of his success, Michal is left, ironically, loveless, and more lonely in her marriage than she has been outside of it.

Finally, as the story of Jonathan and David makes clear, love can also be dangerous between friends. Indeed, the love that Jonathan, Saul’s son, bears for David crosses the line of self-effacement: “For Jonathan’s being was bound to David’s being, and Jonathan loved him as his very own being.”²⁴ David himself acknowledges the monumental scale of Jonathan’s love for him, when he eulogizes it as “more wondrous than the love of women.”²⁵ So excessive is his love for David, in fact, that Jonathan surrenders to him his right to succeed to the throne, removing his royal clothing and weaponry in a demonstration of total fealty and subjugation.²⁶ This act, in a complete reversal of the Edenic directive, captures figuratively the surrender of one’s own identity, and the total fusion of oneself into another. Such is the risk, the Bible seems to be saying, inherent in all interpersonal relationships, when love is left unchecked, and given over to its own power.

If the Bible’s approach to love is hinted at in prose, it surely reaches its fullest exposition in poetry. Song of Songs, the longest sustained treat-

ment of the subject in the canon, offers a convention-defying depiction of an erotically charged relationship between two lovers. Different reasons for its inclusion in the Bible have been offered: Traditional Judaism views it as religious allegory, a dialogue between God and his chosen people; some scholars believe the songs were used in ancient Israelite wedding rites.²⁷ Either way, in its removal of love from the narrative contexts in which it is elsewhere situated in the Bible—in bonds, for example, between families and descendants, and in questions of inheritance—the poem offers an important contribution to the ideals the biblical authors tried to nurture. In this, it is critical to formulating what the biblical scholar Tod Linafelt has called a “metaphysics of love.”²⁸

Song of Songs reflects the conventional wisdom on love in the ancient world: Love’s power is both highly desirable and highly dangerous.²⁹ And indeed, if we look closely, hints of its menacing underside peek through the poem’s pastoral imagery, marring its sensual celebration of the anticipation, enjoyment, and satisfaction love affords. There are the angry brothers that threaten to tear the lovers apart, the wet winter, the foxes that spoil the vineyards, and the cruelty and brutality of the watchmen. Then, of course, there is the powerful presence of death itself, expressed in the beloved’s famous plea to her lover in the last chapter. In this, the book’s sole objective meditation on love, the poet seems to speak in his own voice about a general human condition:

Let me be a seal upon your heart, like a seal upon your arm
For love is as strong as death, jealousy is as strong as Sheol;
Its darts are darts of fire, a blazing flame.
No torrent of water can extinguish love, and no rivers can drown it.³⁰

This curiously morbid association of love and death is explained by means of a shared trait, “strength.” The verse emphasizes this point through its analogy between love and jealousy (*kina*), which itself is described as being “as strong as Sheol,” the biblical purgatory, and which carries overtones

of anger and violence.³¹ Now, since death is the ineluctable and irreversible fate of all mankind, the analogy can perhaps be said to convey a sense of love's durability, or everlastingness.³² More likely, however, is the idea that love shares the *tenacity* of death, in that it brooks no resistance, and eventually overwhelms all its victims. This reading is underscored by the pairing of the death metaphor with two synonyms for strength—*aza* and *kasha*—both of which are used elsewhere in the canon to connote oppression and ferocity.³³ The image of “darts of fire” only shores up this interpretation: *Reshafim* (darts) are biblical tools of devastation, war, and plague.³⁴ In addition, a *reshef* is an ancient netherworld deity, perfectly at home in Sheol.³⁵

Finally, the intensity of love's flame is described as inextinguishable, even by a “torrent of water.” Though these waters are commonly understood to refer to the primeval seas of chaos, they are also frequently associated with the divine glory or presence.³⁶ So defined, love's indestructibility is recast as a flaw: Such a powerful, all-consuming emotion, the poem seems to say, does not even heed the intrusion of God. We might say, then, that the beloved's fear is not that love will create what the philosopher Robert Nozick has described, in *The Examined Life* (1989), as “a new entity in the world... created by a new web of relationships between [the lovers] which makes them no longer separate.”³⁷ Rather, the beloved is distressed by the knowledge that love's passion can become so overwhelming, and so unbridled, as to ultimately annihilate the self.³⁸ By uniting with her lover, she will be compelled to surrender her individual personhood.³⁹

Read this way, “Let me be a seal upon your heart, like a seal upon your arm” should not, then, be understood as an appeal for supreme intimacy, as biblical scholars such as J. Cheryl Exum would have us believe. In her commentary on Song of Songs, Exum writes that the woman “longs to be as close to him, as intimately bound up with his identity as his seal might be.”⁴⁰ Likewise, Linafelt explains these lines as the poem's “most intense moment of continuity and dissolution of borders,” in which the beloved “demands to be stamped into the very being of the other.”⁴¹ As opposed to these interpreta-

tions, I would argue that these lines represent a plea for *protection* from the dire consequences of love. This reading makes more sense when we consider that in biblical literature, a seal most often signifies identity and authority. According to Nahum Sarna, it was “a highly personal object that performed the function of the signature in modern society, a kind of extension of the personality.”⁴² By asking her lover to place her as a seal on his heart, then, the beloved is in effect asking that her lover respect the integrity of her personality, and affirm their individuation. She seeks a relationship that prizes the unique identity of each participant, rather than one that collapses each participant into the other. She wishes, in short, to preserve her own being in the face of love’s tendency toward obliteration. This sentiment can best be summed up in the Songs’ refrain, “My beloved is mine and I am his”—an expression of mutuality and equality that echoes Genesis’ description of the first woman as man’s *ezer k’negdo*, who stands opposite him.⁴³

The definition of love we have so far advanced also explains the absence motif in the Songs, in which each partner arrives just as the other has left, or is constantly in search of the other: Although they seek a wholeness in union, the lovers’ separation preserves their capable, independent, and self-reliant selves. Finally, the love-death analogy helps us to understand the poem’s ultimate verse, in which the beloved cries, “Run away my beloved, as quick as a gazelle or a young stag to the hills of spices.”⁴⁴ With its seemingly incongruous demand for an abrupt end to the lovers’ tryst, this verse has been a source of great puzzlement to commentators, who have offered an array of happily-ever-after alternatives. “Run away” (*brach*) has variously been interpreted to mean “flee with me,” “flee to me,” “return to me,” and so forth.⁴⁵ Even a noted biblical scholar such as Michael V. Fox, who insists that the verb *barach* “always indicates a hasty movement *away from* something,” chooses to read the verse as the beloved’s urging her lover to escape from his companions, rather than from her.⁴⁶ Yet if we accept the verse’s literal meaning, the beloved is indeed imploring her lover to abscond—and with good reason. Given her understanding of love, she recognizes that

the inevitable casualty of their intensely passionate relationship will be her selfhood.⁴⁷ She thus offers a final, desperate plea to preserve her autonomy before becoming submerged into her lover.⁴⁸

If the biblical narratives serve to warn us about the dangers of love for other human beings, the biblical laws attempt to delineate its appropriate expression. We might even argue that these laws are formulated as correctives to the problems of love that emerge from the biblical narratives, acting as the legislative embodiment of the morals their stories contain.

The first of these laws regards the love for the stranger or foreigner (*ger*), whom we are commanded to treat as a full-fledged citizen.⁴⁹ The obvious reason given for this commandment—“you shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in Egypt”—would seem to take as its motivating source compassion: Having yourself known what it means to be an outcast, maltreated and dependent on others for your protection and welfare, do not visit this state on anyone else. Undoubtedly this is true, but such a simplistic interpretation misses a fundamental aspect of the decree. The love commanded here is of a kind that can be expressed only by one who has personally experienced the travails of its object. Inasmuch as there is a dimension of existence that Israel has retained in its historical consciousness—namely, the feeling of being an outsider—love can indeed be the normative basis for a relationship. For aware that they have shared a common experience, the former stranger need not risk self-effacement in his interaction with the stranger; so, too, is the former stranger’s love motivated by a sense of his own precariousness and the awareness of his deficiencies. Here, the danger of self-annihilation love poses—and which is played out again and again in the biblical narratives—is determinedly absent.

Another normative love within the human sphere is the famous “Love your neighbor as yourself,”⁵⁰ which has often been cited as the very cornerstone of both Judaism and Christianity.⁵¹ Those who adopt this

understanding of the verse tend to see it as mandating a limitless embrace of one's fellow, a kind of universalism that collapses distinctions between peoples and cultures in a virtual merging of identities.⁵² Yet this prescription can also be read as legislating the outermost boundary of love. The term "as yourself" places the individual front and center, so to speak, insisting upon his preservation as an autonomous being in the context of his relationship with another. Indeed, this command can be followed only if one maintains a self-directed love, the basis for which is self-respect. In other words, the measure of loving others is precisely the love one has for oneself, and the former must always be a function of the latter. This interpretation may also shed new light on the immediately preceding proscriptions against harboring "hate in your heart of your brother."⁵³ For just as love threatens to destroy the self, so does hate have the power to overwhelm and define our identities. Therefore, it, too, must be expunged, and prevented from becoming assimilated as a facet of oneself.

The remaining normative love is noticeably distinct from the other two in that it alone commands an absolute commitment of the self toward its object; it alone sanctions total self-surrender. This love is summed up in the blessing of the *Shema*, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."⁵⁴ Far from mere poetics, this description is crucial to an understanding of the nature and scope of the love we are to have for God. By encompassing every aspect of the self, from the intellect to the emotions to the body that gives them expression, this is a love that admits no contenders and permits no rivalries. This commandment does not amount to the simple conclusion that God is a jealous God, however. Rather, it reveals the Bible's belief that only when God is the recipient of our most burning, passionate love need we not fear self-destruction, or the destruction of others. Only when the love that would otherwise enslave one being to another is channeled into worship of God may we be assured that man will, in this flesh-and-blood world, remain free.⁵⁵

This insistence that God is the only proper address for servitude—and its corollary, that man is never to surrender himself to another—is reinforced by the law concerning a slave who forgoes his opportunity for manumission, instead expressing his love “for my master, my wife, and my children; I will not be set free.”⁵⁶ As a result of his decision, he is to be sentenced to a life of serfdom and his ear pierced with an awl at the doorpost.⁵⁷ The rabbis explain that by piercing his ear, we are forever marking that part of his anatomy that heard God’s commandments at Mount Sinai:

R. Yohanan ben Zakkai interpreted this verse allegorically: How is the ear different from the other organs in the body? The Holy One said: The ear that heard on Mount Sinai at the time I said, “For unto me are the Children of Israel slaves,” and not slaves unto slaves, and this one went and acquired his own master—he shall be pierced.

Similar reasoning underlies the use of the doorpost:

R. Shimon bar Rabi explained: How are the door and the doorpost different from all the furnishings in the house? The Holy One said: The door and the doorpost which were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintels and the doorposts and said, “For the Children of Israel are my slaves” and not slaves unto slaves, and I brought them out from slavery to freedom, and this one went and acquired his own master—he shall be pierced in front of them.⁵⁸

The love felt by the slave for his master is an obvious expression of that which I have so far argued the Bible abhors: a love that consciously and voluntarily embraces a status of inferiority and dependence as a permanent condition of existence, as the very definition of one’s being. Here we see most clearly how the Bible’s disdain for the self-abdicating risks of love is translated from narrative to *nomos*, circumscribing and curtailing that emotion that carries the greatest risk of self-effacement.

The biblical view of love, it will be noted, is almost precisely opposed to that which reigns in today's modern, secular world, which views the love of God—particularly of the passionate kind—as far more dangerous than the love of man. For, so this thinking goes, while the latter is more grounded, and lends itself more naturally and easily to the good, the former can result in all manner of excesses, of which fanaticism is the most hazardous kind. In his 1902 *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, American philosopher and psychologist William James expressed this sentiment when he wrote that “when ‘freethinkers’ tell us that religion and fanaticism are twins, we cannot make an unqualified denial of the charge.” Conceding that fanaticism must be inscribed on “the wrong side of religion’s account,” James nonetheless went on to say, in “gentle characters, where devoutness is intense and the intellect feeble, we have an imaginative absorption in the love of God to the exclusion of all practical human interests.... When the love of God takes possession of such a mind, it expels all human loves and human uses.”⁵⁹

The Jewish Bible, through both its narratives and its nomos, offers an alternative perspective. Man’s love for his Creator, it maintains, does not require him to relinquish his sense of self; on the contrary, it is self-affirming. Judaism teaches that man alone is made *b’vzelem elohim*, in God’s image.⁶⁰ Like God, man is a creative being, endowed with the power to shape and improve his world. Therefore, he must strive to transcend himself, to think and behave in terms of a life above and beyond his natural, instinctual one. Only then, in acknowledging that his existence is not intended merely as a pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, is man able to take the next, outward step, and truly embrace his fellow men: that is, to consider their feelings, share their concerns, and create with them a just and moral society. In other words, in loving one’s fellow, man is at risk of becoming less than himself; in loving God, however, he strives to become *more* than himself.

As against the current wisdom, then, the Bible maintains that in loving God, we do not lose our humanity, but recover it. Indeed, we come to

esteem and value it. We begin to appreciate that which makes us unique, and we shun that which debases us, rendering us no different from all other animals. True, few of the biblical love stories have happy endings. But in the search for our own happily-ever-after, we could do worse than look to the Bible's wisdom on the proper way to love ourselves and others.

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Notes

1. Chief among them is William Moran, whose classic study "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963), pp. 77-87, has set the tone for all studies thereafter on the subject.

2. See Joshua Berman, "God's Alliance with Man," *AZURE* 25 (Summer 2006), pp. 79-113.

3. Here the legal philosopher Robert Cover's classic essay "Nomos and Narrative" (1983) may prove helpful to our efforts: Although his goal was an analysis of contemporary American legal theory, Cover used the biblical canon as his paradigm in laying out an argument for the mutual integration of law ("nomos") and narrative. Maintaining that "every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse... and every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral," Cover explained that the biblical narratives should be viewed as a kind of legal storytelling, one that assumes its formal shape in biblical law. Robert Cover, *Narrative, Violence, and the Law*, ed. Martha Minnow et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992), p. 96.

4. Genesis 2:24.

5. Genesis 34:3.

6. I Kings 11:1-10.

7. I Kings 11:2.

8. Irving Singer, opposing an understanding of love as a loss of selfhood in exchange for a new, merged identity, notes that the biblical “one flesh” of spousal unity may create a social unit but “such oneness is not, however, a merging.” “Cleaving” would thus be the equivalent of the kind of “interdependence” that love involves, Singer argues, as against the “merging” of identities that undermines the autonomous self. In this essay, I argue that the biblical notion of “cleaving” is analogous to Singer’s notion of love. See Irving Singer, *The Pursuit of Love* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994), pp. 24-27.

9. Genesis 22:2.

10. Genesis 12:1.

11. Genesis 12:13.

12. Genesis 21:9-14.

13. Genesis 22:12.

14. Genesis 37:3.

15. Genesis 37:35.

16. Genesis 25:67.

17. In this, Jacob reverses the direction set out in the Garden, in which marriage is prefaced by the departure from the parental domain (see Genesis 2:24).

18. “And Isaac loved Esau because of the game in his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob.” (Genesis 25:28)

19. II Samuel 13:15.

20. Judges 16:4.

21. Judges 16:17.

22. Hosea 11:4.

23. II Samuel 6:18-23.

24. I Samuel 18:1. Peter Ackroyd points out the ambiguity of the term “bound” (*nikshara*), which can also connote an act of conspiracy, primarily in the political sense. This ambiguity might strengthen the kind of relationship I am here describing, for while Jonathan felt absolute fealty toward David, David viewed Jonathan’s devotion as a weapon in his “conspiracy” to usurp Saul’s dynasty. Peter R. Ackroyd, “The Verb Love-Ahav in the David Jonathan Narratives—A Footnote,” *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975), pp. 213-214.

25. II Samuel 1:26.

26. Although the term *ahav* may have political connotations, as some scholars have argued, I believe that to confine it to that realm, particularly within the David/Jonathan scenario, is to ignore richer dimensions of the narrative. To my mind, love better explains Jonathan's near suicidal devotion to David than does a pragmatic, Machiavellian accommodation with David's inevitable advance toward the throne, as has been argued by John A. Thompson in "The Significance of the Verb Love in the Jonathan-David Narratives in 1 Samuel," *Vetus Testamentum* 24:3 (1974), p. 336.

27. See Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Bible, 1977), for a detailed description of the development and content of the normative Jewish interpretation of Song of Songs as well as more modern, scholarly approaches, including the idea that the poem was a collection of songs to be sung at Jewish weddings.

28. Tod Linafelt, "Biblical Love Poetry (...and God)," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70:2 (2002), p. 330.

29. Tod Linafelt notes the ambiguity inherent in Eros: It is "a fierce, unpredictable, and irresistible force for destruction; it is also an unpredictable and irresistible force for life." Linafelt, "Biblical Love Poetry," p. 334.

30. Song of Songs 8:6.

31. See, for example, Genesis 37:11; Numbers 25:11; Deuteronomy 29:19; Proverbs 6:34; Ezekiel 5:13. Patrick Hunt translates *kina* as "cruel"; see Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 240. See also Stoop-van Paridon, *The Song of Songs: A Philological Analysis of the Hebrew Book* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 434-435. Paridon rejects many of the modern translations of jealousy as mere "passion" or "ardor" as misleading.

32. On the pairing and parallel of "death" with Sheol, see, for example, Psalms 6:6 and 18:6. See also the discussion of the term Sheol, whose theological characteristic is isolation and which "intrudes into life as illness, distress, and imprisonment," in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), vol. 3, pp. 1279-1282.

33. See Genesis 49:7; Isaiah 19:4.

34. Deuteronomy 32:24; Habakkuk 3:5; Psalms 76:4, 78:48; Job 5:7. Egyptian sources cast it as a warrior deity. See David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, pp. 678-679. For its iconographic depiction as an archer, see Marguerite Yon, *The City of Ugarit at Tel Ras Shamra* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), pp. 134-135.

35. See Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

36. See, for example, Ezekiel 43:2: “The glory of God came from the east and its sound was that of many waters, and the earth was illuminated with its glory” (see also Ezekiel 1:24 and Psalms 93:4).

37. Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 70.

38. In a letter to his journalist friend Milená Jesenská, Franz Kafka seamlessly weaves together the images of merging and fire: “Last night I dreamt about you. What happened in detail I can hardly remember, all I know is that we kept merging into one another, I was you, you were me. Finally you somehow caught fire.” Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milená*, ed. Willy Haas, trans. James Stern and Tania Stern (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953), p. 207.

39. Tod Linafelt identifies the risks of love as “the breaching of borders, of one’s separate existence.” Linafelt, “Biblical Love Poetry,” p. 334.

40. J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 250.

41. Linafelt, “Biblical Love Poetry,” p. 330.

42. Nahum M. Sarna, ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 268. See, for instance, the story of Judah and Tamar, in Genesis 38:1-30, in which Judah gives the disguised Tamar his seal as collateral for payment due; see also I Kings 21:8 and Esther 8:8, where it stands for the “name” of the king.

43. Genesis 2:20. Notably, even after Adam and Eve have sinned, and man is appointed by God to “rule” (*mashal*) over woman, alternative connotations of the term “rule” hint at the possibility that God wishes to maintain his prescriptive sense of egalitarianism: The root, *mashal*, can—and usually does—mean “subjugate,” but elsewhere in the Bible, it is used to mean protecting and caring for, as in the case of God and his people. Read this way, it can be interpreted as a decree for the preservation of harmony within the context of male-female—and all human—relationships. See Richard M. Davidson, “The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 3,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26:2 (Summer 1988), pp. 121-131.

44. Song of Songs 8:14.

45. See Paridon, *Song of Songs*, p. 463.

46. Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin, 1985), p. 177.

47. It is interesting to note that this ultimate verse compares the lover to a gazelle (*tzvi*), as is also the case in verses 2:9 and 17. According to William F. Albright, the West Semitic deity of the underworld, Reshef, was a gazelle god, represented iconographically with gazelles on its forehead. Other scholars have explained this link between gazelles and Reshef by means of their common habit of uprooting crops. See William F. Albright, "Gilgames and Engidu, Mesopotamian Genii of Fecundity," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 40 (1920), p. 328; and William Simpson, "New Light on the God Reshef," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73 (1953), pp. 86-89.

48. Exum, while maintaining the "perplexing" literal sense of *brach*, interprets it as a "resistance to closure" that is "its most important means of immortalizing love." I do not see this reading as particularly convincing, however; certainly my own is more loyal to its literal sense. See J. Cheryl Exum, "The Poetic Genius of the Song of Songs," in Anselm Hagedorn, ed., *Perspectives on the Song of Songs* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), p. 85.

49. Leviticus 19:34.

50. Leviticus 19:18.

51. In the three synoptic Gospels, when asked to identify the most important commandment of them all, Jesus cites the love of the Lord and "to love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27). For a comprehensive overview of the verse's interpretation in the Jewish rabbinic tradition, see Reinhard Neudecker, "And You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself—I Am the Lord' (Leviticus 19:18) in Jewish Interpretation," *Biblica* 73 (1992), pp. 496-517.

52. For an overview of ancient interpretations of the commandment to love one's neighbor, ranging from the narrow, restrictive application ("those who are like you") to a universalist approach toward all human beings, see James M. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1997), pp. 455-459.

53. Though I here emphasize an entirely different dimension of the commandment, I agree with Baruch Schwartz's argument that loving one's neighbor as oneself is intended as an antidote to those vengeful impulses prohibited by the previous verse. He writes, "the verse is not concerned with the general love of one's neighbor but with forgiveness and compassion in place of revenge." See Baruch Schwartz, "Peshat and Derash in the Biblical Commandment 'And You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself' (Leviticus 19:18)," in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis*, vol. 5, ed. Moshe Garsiel et al. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2000), p. 73 [Hebrew].

54. Deuteronomy 6:5 and 10:12.

55. The biblical ideal of love undoubtedly reaches its fullest realization in the figure of the reformer King Josiah, described as exceptional in the entire history of the biblical monarchy in his "turn to God with all his heart and all his soul and all

his might according to the entire teaching (*Torah*) of Moses” (II Kings 23:25) This characterization is preceded by a lengthy and detailed record, consisting of approximately twenty verses, of Josiah’s radical extirpation of idolatry in all its forms within the boundaries of his kingdom. He ferreted out and razed every possible monument, symbol, and venue of idolatrous worship and sacrifice, including shrines, altars, fetishes, and images, literally pulverizing much of it into dust. By process of elimination, only the cult of Yahweh remained as the sole viable option for sacred devotion. King Josiah thus created externally what the love of God demands internally: a space so God-suffused that it leaves no room for anything else. The fact that the instrument of his authority was the Torah of Moses demonstrates that, for the biblical authors, the ideal human regime—like the ideal human society—is one in which the personal identity of the king is occluded by the divine constitution he represents. The temptation toward power and domination is thus not only subverted, but channeled into the work of God, which invariably redounds to the moral benefit of all men.

56. Exodus 21:5.

57. Exodus 21:6. The Rabbis interpreted this life sentence as expiring with the Jubilee year (see Kiddushin 21b).

58. Kiddushin 22b.

59. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Rockville, Md.: Manor, 2008), p. 253.

60. Human beings, like all other animal species, possess a “breath of life” (*nefesh chaya*). As described in Genesis 2:7, however, human beings alone have a “soul of life” (*nishmat chayim*) breathed into them by God.