

How to Love God: Deuteronomy, Early Rabbinic Literature, and Gospel Texts

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The command to love God in Deuteronomy 6:5 poses a puzzle. The verse demands love, but does not explain how to achieve it. Comparing Deuteronomy's covenant structure to other ancient Near Eastern covenant treaties, modern scholars conclude that Deuteronomy 6:5 charges Israel to perform acts of love. And yet, scholars also suggest that God's passionate love for Israel demands a reciprocal emotional response from them. In attempts to elucidate Deuteronomy's command, both the rabbis of the first few centuries of the Common Era and the Gospels single out specific actions that constitute loving God. However, the sources diverge with regard to which actions they highlight. Significantly, Deuteronomy, the early rabbis, and the Gospels all hint that God's own love for His people is the model of love toward which devotees should aspire.

Keywords: Deuteronomy, love, early rabbinic literature, Gospels, biblical interpretation

Introduction

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ:

You shall love the Lord with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might (Deut 6:5).

The command to love God in the book of Deuteronomy posed a perplexing problem for early Jewish and Christians interpreters. How does one love God? Does God command a feeling, an action, or both? Deuteronomy invariably pairs loving God with “walking in God’s ways,” which suggests that the command to love mandates a set of actions. But which actions should a devotee prioritize in order to love God well? Moreover, Deuteronomy also enjoins Israel to *cling* to God in love, which may call for an emotional response. What is the relationship between action and feeling in the pursuit of loving God?

The ambiguity of Deuteronomy’s blanket decree left theologians of the first few centuries with great uncertainty as they grappled with exactly what kind of love God demands of His faithful. In this paper, we attempt to parse out the meaning of Deuteronomy’s command by exploring its ancient Near Eastern setting. Once we unpack the ancient meaning of the verse, we explore ways in which early rabbinic and Gospel sources interpret Deuteronomy 6:5 in accord with its ancient meaning as well as how they diverge from it.

We find that at this historical moment, when Judaism and Christianity are still closely aligned, both traditions embrace Deuteronomy’s emphasis on action over feeling. Moreover, sources from both traditions suggest that *acts* of love are a means of cultivating a *feeling* of love. And yet, early Jewish and Christian sources diverge from one another with regard to which actions they prioritize in pursuit of loving God.

Though our aim is to parse out different religious traditions, we recognize that human concepts about God are universally influenced by the psychology of religion. Therefore, throughout our discussion, we consider the role anthropomorphism plays in framing religious

interpretations. In particular, we explore ways in which all three sets of sources—Deuteronomy, early rabbinic literature, and Gospel passages—cast God’s divine love as an aspirational model for human love.

The Ancient Near Eastern Context of Deuteronomy

The command to “love” (אהב) God is narrowly distributed across the Pentateuch. It occurs at least six times in the book of Deuteronomy, both in the law code and in the later frame, but nowhere else in the rest of the Pentateuch.¹ Therefore, in order to better understand the intent of the ancient command, we must grasp the distinctive deuteronomic context within which commanded love arises.

Deuteronomy portrays the relationship between God and Israel as covenantal: God offers to protect and to bless the people of Israel, and the people must adhere to God’s laws. As such, God’s revelation at Mount Sinai is a covenant declaration ceremony:

He declared to you His covenant (ברית), which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments, and he wrote them on two stone tablets. (4:13)²

Israel must observe the terms of the covenant:

So be careful not to forget the covenant (ברית) that the LORD your God made with you, and not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. (4:23–24)

In turn, God will fulfill His covenantal promise to protect and to bless the people:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant (ברית) loyalty with those who love Him and keep His commandments, to a thousand generations. (7:9)

Scholars have long detected striking parallels between Deuteronomy and ancient Near Eastern political covenants, especially first millennium Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties.³ To take the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (VTE) as a prominent example, the structure of VTE resembles the structure of Deuteronomy in that they both possess a preamble and historical prologue, an enumeration of the subordinate’s responsibilities under the treaty, and a description of the curses

¹ Deut 6:5; 11:1, 13, 22; 13:4; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20. It also occurs in DtrH, specifically, in Joshua 22:5 and 23:11. See also Ps 24:1.

² Biblical quotes are from NRSV.

³ Deuteronomy resembles other treaties too, but scholars have been ambivalent to compare them. For a recent reconsideration of the similarities between Deuteronomy and the Hittite treaties see Ada Taggar-Cohen, “Biblical Covenant and Hittite *išhiul* Reexamined,” *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011): 461–88. The book of Exodus also employs the term *bryt* to describe God’s relationship to Israel at Sinai (e.g., Exod. 19:5). However, as Dennis McCarthy argues, the original form of the Exodus Sinai tradition did not reflect a treaty genre as it was missing key elements of a covenant treaty. The current covenant outline results from the rearrangement of a composite text. *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 245–46, 276

that will ensue from breaking the treaty's terms.⁴ They also share a number of themes. For example, both sources demand that the less powerful partner relay the terms of the covenants to their children and grandchildren (Deut. 4:9; 6:7; VTE §1:4–6).⁵

Most relevantly for our discussion however, both Deuteronomy and VTE demand that people “love” their sovereign treaty partners and utilize their “entire heart” in this service. As we read in Deuteronomy:

You must love Yahweh your God (וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ) with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. (6:5)

So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him (וְלָאֱהָבָה אֹתוֹ), to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (10:12)⁶

VTE declares similarly:

If you do not love the crown prince designate Ashurbanipal, son of your lord Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, as you do your own lives. (§24:266–268)

While you stand on the place of this oath, you shall nor swear this oath with your lips only but shall swear it wholeheartedly; you shall teach it to your sons to be born after this treaty . . . (§34:385)⁷

In 1963 William Moran argued influentially that “in view of such parallels between Assyrian treaties and Deuteronomy, we may be virtually certain that deuteronomic circles were familiar with the Assyrian practice of demanding an oath of allegiance from their vassals, which was expressed in terms of love.”⁸ Moreover, like the love of a vassal toward his sovereign:

⁴ Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Loyalty Oaths*, SAA 2 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988), 25–58 (text 6); Jacob Lauinger, “Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty at Tell Tayinat: Text and Commentary,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 64 (2012): 87–123. See also Bernard Levinson, “Between the Covenant Code and Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty: Deuteronomy 13 and the Composition of Deuteronomy,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 3 (2012): 123–40; “Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty as the Source for the Canon Formula in Deuteronomy 13:1,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 3 (2010): 337–47; C. L. Crouch, *Israel and the Assyrians: Deuteronomy, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, and the Nature of Subversion*, v. 8 of Ancient Near East Monographs (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

⁵ The texts also record similar curses befalling dissenters such as corpses being left as food for birds (Deut 28:26; VTE § 41:425–427), parents eating their children (Deut 28:53; VTE § 47:450–452), and rain not falling from “iron soil” (Deut 28:23–24; VTE §63:526–3). SAA 2, 6:213–25; D Wiseman, “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” *Iraq* 20, no. 1 (1958): 1–35.

⁶ See also Deut 11:1; 26:16. Importantly, the heart referred to the locus of thought, not feeling. See Thomas Staubli and Silvia Schroer, *Body Symbolism in the Bible* trans. Linda Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 41–44.

⁷ SAA 2.

⁸ William Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 84. Nonetheless, a number of scholars do see enough differences between the two texts to argue that Judean scribes were *not* copying or imitating VTE. On this, see Markus Zehnder, “Building on Stone? Deuteronomy and Esarhaddon’s Loyalty Oaths (Part 1): Some Preliminary Observations,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 3 (2009): 341–74.

Love in Deuteronomy is a love that can be commanded . . . Above all, it is a love which must be expressed in loyalty, in service, and in unqualified obedience to the demands of the Law. For to love God is, in answer to a unique claim (6:4), to be loyal to Him (11:1, 22; 30:20), to walk in His ways (10:12; 11:22; 19:9; 30:16), to keep His commandments (10:12; 11:1, 22; 19:9), to do them (11:22; 19:9), to heed them or His voice (11:13; 30:16), to serve Him (10:12; 11:1, 13). It is, in brief a love defined by and pledged in a covenant—a covenantal love.⁹

In this vein, a number of scholars conclude that Deuteronomy’s command to love God “does not entail a particular emotional response to the deity.”¹⁰ Rather, loving God is expressed exclusively in terms of actions, specifically Israel’s observance of God’s laws.

Indeed, the deuteronomic injunction to love God (ולאהבה אתו) is typically accompanied by an instruction to engage in specific actions. For example, Israel is commanded to love God and serve Him (10:12; 11:13), to love God and observe His laws and statutes (11:1), and to love God and walk in His ways (11:22). Jon Levinson summarizes, “These [ancient] sources held a concept of love that was more outward, action-oriented, and practical than the one that has come to dominate modern Western culture.”¹¹

However, the book of Deuteronomy does not always equate love with action alone.¹² God’s own love for Israel is multifaceted, exhibiting both action and feeling. On the one hand, every time Deuteronomy refers to God loving Israel, it also portrays Him *acting* or promising to *act* for His people. For example, because God loved Israel’s ancestors He brought them out of Egypt (4:37; cf. 7:8), and because God loves Israel He will bless, and multiply them and their crop (7:13).

On the other hand, God’s love for Israel is also emotional. Deuteronomy 7:7–8 reads:

⁷It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set His heart (חשק יהוה בכם) on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸It was because the LORD loved (כי מאהבת יהוה אתכם) you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Similarly, 10:15 reads:

⁹ Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background,” 78. Moran points out that love belongs to the language of international relations already in second-millennium texts from Mari and Amarna.

¹⁰ While Moran only implies this, later scholars explicitly state as much. See Jacqueline Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003): 350–69.

¹¹ Jon Levinson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 19.

¹² To be precise, love is associated with action alone in Deuteronomy’s law code (23:6 and 13:3; 19:9), but not in Deuteronomy’s later frame, which describes God clinging to Israel and commands Israel to cling to God (7:9, 13; 10:18; 11:22; 30:20). This suggests that Deuteronomy’s law code may have viewed love as expressed exclusively via action—such as in VTE—but later, love came to be viewed as possessing both actionable and emotional elements.

Yet the LORD set His heart in love (חשק יהוה לאהבה) on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.

Jacqueline Lapsley points out that the verb *ḥšq* (חשק), which is associated in these passages with God's love, elsewhere in the Bible "denotes affectionate love, desire, yearning, or longing, sometimes with a sexual connotation (Gen 34:8; Deut 21:11), but always with an affective dimension." The use of *ḥšq* implies that "God's love for Israel finds its source in the emotional life of the deity."¹³

Interpreting God's covenant love for Israel as emotional makes sense also in light of the social background of covenants. A number of scholars suggest that ancient Near Eastern covenants may have functioned to bind unrelated people in kinship-type relationships. As Frank Cross posits, "The language of love ('ahabah) is kinship language, the bond that holds together those in intimate relationships of family and kindred."¹⁴ Emotional love is a naturally anticipated, though not always present, aspect of kinship. It is not surprising then that Deuteronomy would describe God's love for Israel, His covenant partner, as emotional (7:7; 10:13).

The emotional tenor of God's love in Deuteronomy 7 and 10 distinguishes it from love in the Assyrian political treaties. In fact, God's "sovereign" love for His "vassal" Israel has *no* parallel in VTE at all, for Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal do not "love" their vassals, let alone in any emotional way.¹⁵ More broadly, God's love is distinct from divine love depicted in the Mesopotamian royal annals, for God loves His entire people, whereas the Mesopotamian gods of the royal annals love their kings alone.¹⁶

Deuteronomy's depiction of God's love *for* all of Israel sets the stage for God to demand reciprocal love *from* all of Israel (not just from Israel's king). In a recent philological survey of *'ahb* in Semitic literature, David Vanderhooft convincingly argues that the earliest attestations of *'hb* connote an aspect of choice and carry an expectation of reciprocity, such as between a divine patron and a human devotee.¹⁷ Deuteronomy's use of *'hb* displays this same element; God chooses

¹³ Lapsley, "Feeling Our Way," 360. While the root likely derives from "to stick" (as in parts of the tabernacle sticking together [Exod 38:28]), when describing relationships, *ḥšq* is likely related to the Arabic *'asiqa*, "love passionately." Gerhard Wallis, "*ḥāšaq*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 4 (1980), 262. Two cases of erotic *ḥšq* are Shehem's desire and love for Dinah (Gen 34:1–8), and a soldier's desire and love for a woman he has captured (Deut 21:10–14).

¹⁴ Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2000), 3–21; Paul Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982); and Mark Smith, *How Human is God? Seven Questions about God and Humanity in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 47–51. Levinson echoes this point when he suggests that the covenant concept informs the husband and wife metaphor for God and Israel, which is so prevalent in the Prophets. Levinson, *The Love of God*, 42.

¹⁵ This stands in contrast to the earlier Amarna letters, which *do* portray more powerful Egyptian overlords loving their subordinate Canaanite kings. Levinson, *The Love of God*, 37.

¹⁶ This setting for divine love in Deuteronomy may seek to limit the authority of the king (Richard Nelson, *Deuteronomy* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 6), for the God of Israel loves the people without royal mediation. This stands in contrast to, for instance, Assur, who loves the king (SAA 2, 9).

¹⁷ David Vanderhooft, "AHĀBĀH: Philological Observations on 'āheb/'ahābāh in the Hebrew Bible," in *Ahavaḥ – Die Liebe Gottes im Alten Testament*, ed. Manfred Oeming, v. 55, Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte (Leipzig: Buchhandlung Heesen, 2018), 41–54. Vanderhooft also points out that biblical *'hb* connotes an aspect of choice. For

to love Israel (“He will love you” [7:13]) *and* he demands that Israel love Him reciprocally (“You shall love the Lord” [6:5]).

A comparison between Deuteronomy 4:37–40 and Deuteronomy 6:4–9 underscores this point:

³⁷And because he *loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them*. He brought you out of Egypt with His own presence, by His great power, ³⁸driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. ³⁹*So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.* ⁴⁰*Keep His statutes and His commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time.* (Deut. 4:37–40)

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* ⁶*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.* ⁷*Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.* (Deut 6:4–9)

The chapters share several themes, among them, a testimony of God’s sovereignty, an evocation of multiple generations, and a declaration of love. The chapters diverge with regard to the subject of love. In Chapter 4, God declares His love for Israel’s ancestors and her descendants, and in Chapter 6, God demands that Israel and her descendants love God.

This demand for reciprocity situates God’s multifaceted love for Israel as an aspirational model for His people. Specifically, God redeems His people and also clings to them in love (7:7; 10:13). Israel must love God likewise by serving Him (10:12; 11:13), observing His laws and statutes (11:1), walking in His ways (11:22), and also by “clinging” (דבק) to Him. Thus we read:

²²If you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the LORD your God, walking in all His ways, and clinging to Him (ולדבקה-בו). (Deut 11:22)

. . . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying Him, clinging to Him (ולדבקה-בו); for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut 30:19–20)

Deuteronomy’s command that Israel “cling” to God evokes God’s own “clinging” to Israel in love. However, Deuteronomy uses different roots to denote God and Israel’s respective “clinging,” ascribing the root *hšq* to God and the root *dbq* to Israel (7:7; 10:15). The etymology and range of contexts of the roots suggest that they are, to some degree, equivalent. Both roots denote

example, a husband chooses to love one woman at the expense of another (e.g., Genesis 29–30), or a father chooses to love one heir to the exclusion of potential others (e.g., Genesis 37).

“clinging,” and can describe an emotional attachment to another.¹⁸ However, their connotations diverge. The root *ḥšq* “does not suggest a sudden surge of emotion; it presupposes not just an unconditional erotic attraction *but also* a reasoned and unconditional decision.”¹⁹ It is not surprising then that *ḥšq* always has a positive connotation. Jon Levinson expresses a similar interpretation of *ḥšq* in light of the broader Pentateuchal canon:

But the cumulative evidence of *ḥašaq* in Deuteronomy 7:7 and *'ahavat* in verse 8 argues, in my judgment, for something more passionate. It suggests that because God fell in love with the Israelites (or with their ancestors, the patriarchs of Genesis), he entered into a covenant with them, the very covenant that brought about their liberation from Egypt and now demands a reciprocal faithfulness from the beneficiaries of the redemption.²⁰

By contrast, the root *dbq*, which describes Israel’s aspired relationship to God, elsewhere “expresses the passionate element of love more strongly.” As such, *dbq* can be directed irrationally toward prohibited relationships and can lead to negative behaviors.²¹

By juxtaposing God’s multifaceted love, which is expressed in action and with feeling, against God’s command that Israel love Him with both action and feeling, Deuteronomy presents God’s love as a model of love to aspire. And yet, by employing two distinct roots to describe their respective loves, Deuteronomy also depicts God’s love as unique. God’s clinging love (*ḥšq*) is unquestionably rational and good, whereas Israel’s clinging love (*dbq*) can be capricious.

The notion that God’s love is in some ways different from human love accords with what we know about the function of anthropomorphism. Scholars who study the psychology of religion suggest that comparisons between God and human beings have a two-fold function. People imagine and describe God as having “naturalistic” features (such as love) so that they can feel like they understand God.²² At the same time and conversely, anthropomorphisms serve to underscore God’s differences from that which is not divine. In explaining Pascal Boyer’s theory, Justin Barrett and Frank Keil write: “Religious ideas are propagated if they (1) violate some cognitive intuitions regarding characteristics of members of their particular ontological categories while (2) adhering to the bulk of these intuitions.”²³ For example, the biblical portrait of God stretching out His arm to deliver Israel from Egypt conjures an image of deliverance such as a human hero might accomplish. However, the representation of God delivering an entire nation with a single arm imagines something far beyond human capacity.

¹⁸ Wallis, “*ḥāšaq*,” 263.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (italics added)

²⁰ Levinson, *The Love of God*, 42.

²¹ Wallis, “*ḥāšaq*,” 262. This would explain why the narrator of Genesis 34 uses the root *dbq* to describe Shehem clinging to Dinah, but the root *ḥšq* when narrating Hamor’s defense of Shehem. Hamor is attempting to paint Shehem’s behavior in a more positive light. The affective dimension of *dbq* is further suggested in DtrH, Joshua 23:8–11, where the command to love God is enclosed by a command to cling to God (*dbq*), and *not* other nations by marrying them. The link between cling and marriage may evoke the affective nuance of the root.

²² Justin Barrett and Frank Keil, “Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts,” *Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1996): 219–47.

²³ Barrett and Keil, “Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity,” 222.

Indeed, when considering divine love more generally, the mere juxtaposition of God's generous love for Israel against God's command that Israel love Him distinguishes God's love as unparalleled. Both God and Israel love, but God loves Israel freely, while His people do not; God must command Israel to love Him. Nonetheless, by juxtaposing the two forms of love, Deuteronomy intimates that God's love is the model of love toward which His people must aspire.

But how might the people of Israel realize such a multifaceted love?²⁴

Early Rabbinic Literature

Early rabbis from the first through third centuries of the Common Era sought to answer this question. Likely drawing on the close association between love and action in Deuteronomy, rabbinic sources tend to interpret the command to love God as a call to action. Accordingly, the rabbinic conversation has typically revolved around *which* ritual actions one should perform out of love, and not *how* to evoke the emotion of love.²⁵

One rabbinic tradition interprets Deuteronomy 6:5 not as a command to engage in an action *or* feel an emotion, but as a multipronged command to *act on an emotion*. In this vein, a Midrash recorded in *Sifre Devarim* argues that God's laws are best performed out of love alone rather than for any ulterior motive:

“To love the Lord your God”: Lest you say: I shall learn Torah to be rich, to be called Rabbi, to receive reward in the world to come—it is therefore written “to love the Lord your God.” All that you do shall be out of love alone.²⁶

In citing Deuteronomy 6:5 as its proof-text, the Midrash affirms that love is inextricably tied to action, perhaps even the source of it.²⁷

Indeed, a number of first- and second-century rabbinic texts identify love as the preferred impetus, over and against fear, for “doing” God's word. For example, in describing the causes of Judea's downfall, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai explains, “Because you did not serve the Lord your

²⁴ The book of Joshua may contain an early attempt to answer this question. Joshua's instructions in 22:5 cite Deuteronomy 6:5 but further delineate *how* to act and *how* to feel. Deuteronomy 6:5 reads, “[L]ove God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” In a more elaborate explanation (noted in italics) Joshua enjoins, “. . . to love the LORD your God, *to walk in all His ways, to keep his commandments, and to hold fast to Him (dbq) and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.*”

²⁵ Nonetheless, some medieval thinkers and Kabbalists do understand loving God in a mystical sense of intense longing for the nearness of God and for communion with God. Some Kabbalists in fact, compare loving God to the erotic love between a man and woman. Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (London: Oxford, 1995), 322.

²⁶ *Sifre Devarim* 41.23 (see also 48.12). The final redaction of *Sifre Devarim* dates back to, at least, the late third century CE. H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 273.

²⁷ Later medieval commentators perceive similarly, such as Abraham Ibn Ezra, who suggests that loving God means doing “all the commandments” (Ibn Ezra on Deut 6:6).

God with love, therefore you shall serve your enemy in hatred.”²⁸ Likewise, the *Sifre* states, “‘And you shall love the Lord your God’: Act out of love. There is a difference between acting out of love and acting out of fear. If one acts out of love, his reward is doubled.”²⁹ For these sources it seems that acts of love are essential, but feeling love is nonetheless the ideal impetus for action.³⁰

Other rabbinic sources derive the actions by which a Jew loves God from the very same verse that commands love. The *Sifre* interprets an apparent redundancy in Deuteronomy 6:5 as intended to explain *with what actions* one should love God:

R. Eliezer says: If it is written “with all your soul,” why need it be written “with all your might”? And if it is written “with all your might,” why need it be written “with all your soul”? For the man who holds his body dearer than his wealth, it is written “with all your soul” and for the man whose wealth is dearer to Him than his body, it is written “with all your might.”³¹

According to the Midrash, the prepositional phrases “with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” do not describe the emotional fervor with which one should love God, but rather the particular ritual actions one should perform. Accordingly, the emotion of love is subsumed by the charge to act.

Rabbi Akiva appears to have held in accordance with this view, for while he was being tortured during the Hadrianic religious persecutions, he recited Deuteronomy 6:4–9. His students asked him how he could do this.

In the hour that they took Rabbi Akiva out [to be executed], his disciples said to Him, “Our teacher, so far?” [i.e., is this necessary]. He said to them, “All of my life I was troubled by the verse, “And you shall love the Lord with all thy soul”—even though He takes your should—and I said, when will it come to my hand that I may fulfill it. Now that it is come to my hand, shall I not fulfill it?”³²

Some midrashic and mishnaic sources widen their gaze to derive acts of love from the verses that immediately follow the command to love in Deuteronomy 6:5. For example, some rabbis interpret verse 7 as enjoining a twice daily recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4–9. Verse 7 reads, “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” The *Sifre* interprets:

²⁸ *Mekhilta* attributed to Rabbi Ishmael, 47.1. Translation by Jacob Neusner, *Lost Documents of Rabbinic Judaism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 97.

²⁹ *Sifre Devarim* 32.1. The Talmud (*Sotah* 31a) attributes a similar statement to a *baraita* by the Tanna, Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar. For more citations see Adolf Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (New York: Ktav, 1967), 159.

³⁰ And yet, by associating the two, the Midrash also implies that they are closely related. Perhaps the Midrash imagines that loving God arises from penetrating His law. Cited in C. G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960), 111.

³¹ *Sifre Devarim* 32.6. The Midrash is cited in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 74a) and medieval commentaries. See Rashi on Deut 6:5; Rashbam on Deut 6:5. Additionally, a number of Midrashim speak about dying for God (e.g., *Mekhil Exod* 20.6 68b). See Montefiore, *Rabbinic Anthology*, 102.

³² *Berakhot* 66a. Translated in Daniel Boyarin, “Language Inscribed by History on the Bodies of Living Beings: Midrash and Martyrdom,” *Representations* 25 (1989): 146.

Variantly: “And you shall teach (lit. repeat) them to your sons.” These sections: Shema [Devarim 6:4–9], Vehaya im shamoā [Devarim 11–21], and Vayomer [Bamidbar 15:38–41], the section of tzitzith must be repeated [morning and evening].³³

This interpretation reflects the fact that by the end of the first century, Deuteronomy 6:4–9 was already part of an important devotional invocation, which came to be known as the *Shema* (from the first word of 6:4).³⁴ In an early midrashic expression of the centrality of the Shema, God comforts Jacob by reminding him that his children recite it in the morning and in the evening.

This is what you desired all of your days—that your sons “awake and retire” with the recitation of the Shema. This is the intent of “Hear O Israel.”³⁵

The integral role of the Shema in early Judaism is demonstrated by the fact that the entire corpus of the Mishna begins with a long discussion about precisely when and also how the Shema should be recited.³⁶ Theologically, the Shema functions for the rabbis as an avowal of the “Yoke of the Kingdom of God,” which is a precondition to accepting the “Yoke of God’s commandments.” Thus, a Mishnah asks:

Why does Shema [likely Deut. 6:4–9] precede Vehayah im shamoā [Deut. 11:13–21]? So that one may accept the yoke of the kingdom of heaven first, and after that accept the yoke of the commandments.³⁷

Each time someone recites the Shema, a person avows his or her commandedness to love God. Perhaps the rabbinic charge to repeatedly confess God’s sovereignty and a Jew’s commandedness to love Him (6:4–5) reflect an early notion that the *act* of declaring love facilitates the *feeling* of love.³⁸

³³ *Sifre Devarim* 31.7.

³⁴ Though the precise composition of the Shema may have been somewhat fluid, it likely consisted of Deuteronomy 6:4–9, which was succeeded by several other passages such as Deuteronomy 11:13–21 and Numbers 15:37–41 (*Mishnah Berakhot* 1.1–3.6). The Shema’s integral role in the theology and practice of early Judaism is indicated in a number of ways. It is revealed, for example, in the above Midrash about Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom (*Berakhot* 61b), by Josephus’ note that the *Shema* was recited twice daily (Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.13), and by the Midrashic reference to Jacob reciting it on his deathbed (*Devarim Rabba* 2:25). Moreover, the parallel account of Rabbi Akiva’s death in the Palestinian Talmud explicitly identifies the Shema with the command to love God. Rabbi Akiva states, “I loved God with all my heart, and I loved God with all my possessions, but I was not sure of my love of Him with all my soul; now that the opportunity for loving Him with all my soul has come, and the time for reciting the *Shema* has arrived and my mind is not wavering I am reciting the *Shema* and rejoice” (*Yerushalmi, Berakhot* 9:5). Cited in Levenson, *The Love of God*, 86.

³⁵ *Sifre Devarim* 34.2.

³⁶ *Mishnah Berakhot* 1.3.

³⁷ *Mishnah Berakhot* 2.2.

³⁸ Such would accord with Mishnaic interpretations of Deut 6:8–9. Rabbinic tradition interprets verse 8, “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,” as enjoining devotees to affix on their arms and foreheads parchments (*tefillin*) upon which are written several verses including Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (*Mechilta derabbi Ishmael* 13.14.4). Evoking an earlier Mishnah, the Talmud interprets verse 9, “And write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates,” as enjoining dwellers to affix parchments on their doorposts (*Berakhot 15b*) upon which are written several verses, including Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (*mezuzah*). Notably, all three practices derived from Deut 6:4–9—the twice daily devotional Shema, *tefillin*, and *mezuzah*—comprise either a recitation or a writing down of the

The *Sifre* seems to think so:

“You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart” and I do not know in what way God is to be loved? Therefore it says: “Take to heart instructions with which I charge you this day.” Take these to heart and in this way you will come to recognize God and be drawn (שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את הקב"ה ומדבק בדרכיו) to His ways.³⁹

On the one hand, the *Sifre* addresses the question of how to evoke love, a topic rarely discussed by the early rabbis. On the other hand, the Midrash blurs the lines between loving God and loving God’s laws, which is typical of the rabbis. As such, the *Sifre* answers a question about God (“I do not know in what way God is to be loved?”) with a directive to heed God’s instructions (“Take to heart instructions with which I charge you this day”).⁴⁰ In so doing, the Midrash teaches that a Jew comes to love God by clinging to God’s ways, and he or she clings to God’s ways by following God’s instructions.

Significantly, the *Sifre* uses the root *dbq* to describe how a devotee will come to relate to God’s ways. This root evokes Deuteronomy’s command to cling to God in love (Deut 30:20). We suggested above that Deuteronomy’s portrayal of God clinging to Israel in love (“The Lord clung [*hšq*] in love” [10:15]) serves as an aspirational model for how Israel should cling to God in love. Thus, with the root *dbq*, the *Sifre* dangles the prospect that clinging to God’s ways yields a love for God, such as God loves.

Broadly speaking, the rabbinic sources share a common interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:5; loving God comprises both action and feeling, and acts of love may precipitate feelings of love. In a modern interpretation of this early rabbinic perspective, the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod questions:

How can love be commanded? Can an emotion be commanded? Is genuine love not something that arises spontaneously without being commanded? But it seems that Scripture is not of this view. Not spontaneous emotion but obedience to a divine command is what the Torah demands . . . God’s command is not rendered helpless by the autonomy of human emotions . . . So the divine command reaches levels in the human personality which nourish the wells of emotion and the love of God in obedience to the command results.⁴¹

command to love God. This may reflect a belief that action (speaking, writing, wearing *love*) precipitates emotion (feeling love).

³⁹ *Sifre Devarim* 33:1.

⁴⁰ On the rabbinic merging of God and law see Büchler, *Sin and Atonement*, 158–60.

⁴¹ Michael Wyschogrod, “The ‘Shema Israel’ in Judaism and the New Testament,” in *The Roots of our Common Faith: Faith in Scriptures and in the Early Church*, ed. Hans Georg Link (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984), 26–28.

Wyschogrod argues that for the rabbis, a Jew can love God only by following God's commandments. And yet, by *commanding* love, God "lays credence" to the emotion that naturally flows from actions performed in obedience to God's commands.⁴²

Perhaps we can find in these Jewish interpretations a theology of promise: if a Jew follows God's command to love in action, *he shall love the Lord God*, the Jew will come to fulfill God's command to love with a passion akin to God's own, *with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might*.

First- and Second-Century Gospel Texts

In keeping with early rabbinic traditions that prioritize action over feeling, the Gospels similarly relate the command to love God to the obligation to keep God's laws. However, whereas the early rabbis associate loving God with a range of possible actions, the Gospels prioritize performing one command over others: loving one's neighbor.⁴³

In the book of Mark, when a scribe asks Jesus "Which commandment is the first of all?" (12:28), he famously propounds not one command, but two:

Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (12:29–31)

In answering the scribe, Jesus links two injunctions that occur in separate books of the Pentateuch—loving God (Deut 6:5) and loving one's neighbor (Lev 19:18).⁴⁴ However, since the broader interaction between Jesus and the scribes is not hostile, Jesus' answer is likely acceptable to them. Accordingly, Walter Moberly argues that "Jesus' Pharisaic interlocutors take for granted" his linking of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.⁴⁵ Indeed, several Midrashim portray rabbis from Jesus' era (for example, Hillel) through the first century (for example, Rabbi Akiva) privileging ethical behavior as the most important teaching of Judaism. However, the rabbis do not develop a robust interpretive tradition linking the command to love one's neighbor to the command to love

⁴² Wyschogrod further argues that obedience to the commandments presupposes a love for God (Wyschogrod, "The Shema Israel," 27), but we do not see this in the sources we cite. He also suggests that love results from obedience to commandments (Wyschogrod, "The Shema Israel," 28), which *is* a perspective we see in our sources.

⁴³ This perspective is evident as early as second-century Sirach. See Büchler, *Sin and Atonement*, 146.

⁴⁴ In Deuteronomy 10, the injunction to love the stranger precedes an instruction to fear and cling (*dbq*) to God (vv. 19–20). The adjacency may suggest a biblical association between one's love for people and feelings for God.

⁴⁵ Walter Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 124–44.

God.⁴⁶ Instead, rabbinic teachings typically associate the command to love one's neighbor to concepts of empathy and respecting God's creations.⁴⁷

This being the case, the thrust of Mark's narrative may then be found in what follows. As Mark 12 continues, the scribe affirms Jesus' teaching:

³²You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; ³³and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbor as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices. ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.⁴⁸

With this passage, Mark argues that loving one's neighbor stands together with loving God as greater than all other commandments. As such, a devotee serves God best by loving his or her neighbor, even more so than by offering sacrifices.

The book of Luke similarly associates loving God with loving one's neighbor:

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." (Lk 10:25–28)⁴⁹

In linking these two discrete Pentateuchal commands, Luke's account resembles Mark's.⁵⁰ However, Luke diverges from Mark in that he does not rank loving God as "the first" command and loving one's neighbor as "the second." This suggests that the two commandments are of similar import.

Since the association between loving God and loving one's neighbor may have been taken for granted, Luke's focus may be on defining the scope of the term "neighbor." Luke 10 continues with the tale of a Samaritan who helps a man, while neither a priest nor a Levite would do so:

⁴⁶ Though links between loving God and loving one's fellow are not developed as robustly in rabbinic literature as we see in the Gospels, Leviticus 19:18 is nonetheless heralded. As an example, a Talmudic narrative records first-century rabbi Hillel responding to a request to summarize the entire Torah on one foot. Hillel says, "That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study," *Shabbat* 31a. The quote evokes Leviticus 19:18, but rather than link the verse to Deuteronomy 6:5, the Talmud proceeds to discuss the importance of rabbinic tradition. Such reveals the extent to which morality is embedded in rabbinic thought.

⁴⁷ On this, Reinhard Neudecker, "'And You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself—I am the Lord' (Lev 19.18) in Jewish Interpretation," *Biblica* 73 (1992): 496–517.

⁴⁸ For more on this see George Keerankeri, *The Love Commandment in Mark: An Exegetico-Theological Study of Mk 12,28–34*, vol. 150, *Analecta Biblica* (Rome: Gregorian Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ Scholars suggest that Mark's version was either misunderstood, "tendentiously reshaped," or both, in Luke and Matthew. On this, see Dean McBride, "The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4–5," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and History* 27 no. 3 (1973): 273–306 esp. 279–87.

⁵⁰ Though it lacks the acclamation of God's sovereignty cited in Mark (Mk 12:29).

³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them . . . and took care of him . . .” ³⁶“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Early rabbinic traditions converged around the view that “your neighbor” (Lev 19:18) refers to a fellow Jew.⁵¹ With this account of the Samaritan, Luke argues that the term neighbor is unrelated to kinship. A neighbor describes anyone who acts with mercy toward another; such an individual offers a model of love and must be loved in return.

The commands to love God and the neighbor are again linked in the book of Matthew. In Matthew 2, a lawyer asks Jesus:

³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it (δὲ ὁμοία αὐτῇ): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt 22:36–40)

In keeping with Mark and Luke, Matthew elevates 19:18 above other commands by associating it with Deuteronomy 6:5 and by distinguishing it as one of the first two commandments. In fact, by describing the command to love one’s neighbor as “like it” (that is, like the command to love God) Matthew may be arguing that loving one’s neighbor is of equal importance to loving God.

Like Luke, Matthew expands the definition of “neighbor,” arguing that the term refers also to one’s enemies. Matthew continues:

⁴³*You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”* ⁴⁴*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* (Matt 22:43–48)

With verse 48, Matthew argues that God is an aspirational model for loving even those “neighbors” who are one’s enemies. The Gospel reasons that just as God is the caretaker for both the righteous and the unrighteous, so the disciples should not distinguish, in their love, between them.⁵²

⁵¹ Neudecker, “And You Shall Love your Neighbor,” 499–503.

⁵² The association of loving God and loving one’s neighbor could lead a faithful to equate the two. Thus, Karl Barth cautions:

If we try to love god as the neighbor, it will not be the God whom we are commanded to love. And if we try to love the neighbor as God, it will not be the neighbor whom we are commanded to love. If we are not to

Echoing the Synoptics, John relates loving God to loving one's neighbor. Moreover, John sets Jesus' love as an aspirational model for how one loves the neighbor. Jesus' final discourse, in John 15, teaches that one abides in Jesus' love if he loves others *as* Jesus loves:

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love (καὶ μένω αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ). ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. (15:9–14; cf. 13:34)

Francis Moloney explains:

Jesus is not the source of this abiding love, as it flows from the relationship of love that exists between the Father and the Son, the result of Jesus having kept the Father's commandments . . . The disciples' abiding in the love of Jesus and keeping his commandments unites them with Jesus' response to the Father in whose love he abides. Keeping the commandments inserts the disciples into the "chain of love."⁵³

The term "abide" (*menein*) in 15:10 conveys a loving mutuality, a reciprocity wherein the Father and Son love another. By observing God's commandments such as Jesus did, particularly the command to love one's fellow, the disciples can abide in Jesus' love. The disciples repeat "in their relationship with Jesus, what Jesus had always with the Father," and thus insert themselves into this reciprocal "chain of love."⁵⁴

For John, God's love for Jesus is the model for Jesus' love for his disciples (15:9) and Jesus' love for his disciples is the aspirational model for human love for one another (15:12). In this vein, John 13:34 states, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Stephen Voorwinde explains:

The disciples are to remain in Jesus' love in precisely the same way as he remains in the Father's love. Just as he kept his Father's commandments, so they are to keep his commandments. Jesus' love is therefore the perfect paradigm for the disciples (v. 12).⁵⁵

deviate from the divine revelation, if we really want to obey the one commandment of God, we can only love God and our neighbor.

Nancy M. Victorin-Vangerud, "Some Questions of Barth's Doctrine of Reconciliation." In *Karl Barth: A Future for Postmodern Theology?*, ed. Geoff Thompson and Christiaan Mostert (Adelaide, Australia: Australia Theological Forum Press, 2000), 180.

⁵³ Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, ed. Daniel Harrington, vol. 4, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 421–22.

⁵⁴ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 422.

⁵⁵ Stephen Voorwinde, "Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel," vol. 284 in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 247.

But how does one love the neighbor? John 10 singles out Jesus' martyrdom as an example of Jesus' ideal love: "For this reason, the Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again" (10:17). Voorwinde explains, "Just as the Father commanded Jesus to lay down his life (cf. 14:31), so Jesus commands his disciples to love one another (vv. 12, 17)"⁵⁶ to the point of laying down their own lives. In fact, John may interpret Deuteronomy 6:5 as commanding devotees to go so far as to lay down their lives for their fellows. Lori Baron suggests:

In response to the Father's love and in obedience to the Father's command, Jesus models the way that Israel is to love God and keep God's commandments. For this reason, the Father loves me, because I lay down my life (ἐγὼ τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν μου) in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it." . . . Jesus fulfills the commandment to love YHWH with all his soul by giving his life for the sheep, and Jesus' disciples will be asked to do the same (15:13). By laying down his life willingly, Jesus models the Shema's command to love God with all one's soul. In so doing, Jesus imparts life to all who believe in him.⁵⁷

Notably, both the rabbis (see *Sifre Devarim* 32.6) and John exalt giving up one's life as an ideal form of love. For the sages, ideal love for God is determined by sacrificing one's life for God or for one's neighbor.⁵⁸ According to John, abiding in a reciprocal love with Jesus and God is expressed first and foremost by sacrificing one's life for another person.

Conclusion

Deuteronomy 6:5 commands love, but does not explain how to achieve it. This presents a puzzle that modern scholars, early rabbis, and Gospel authors have all attempted to solve. Comparing Deuteronomy's covenant structure with other ancient Near Eastern covenant treaties, modern scholars conclude that deuteronomic love is achieved through action. And yet, scholars acknowledge that God's passionate love for Israel suggests that Deuteronomy's command to love God involves something more.

Both the ancient rabbis and the Gospels relate the command to love God to performing acts of love. The ancient rabbis direct Jews to cling to God by following God's commandments, and the Gospels similarly exhort the faithful to abide in love by following God's commands. The traditions diverge however in how they prioritize the commands.

Finally, a common perspective pervades Deuteronomy, rabbinic tradition, and the Gospels: God's (and/or Jesus') manner of loving people is a model of love toward which devotees should aspire. Perhaps all three traditions trust that by engaging in acts of love, devotees may come to experience a semblance of the divine love that God feels for people.

⁵⁶ Voorwinde, "Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel," 249.

⁵⁷ Lori Ann Robinson Baron, "The Shema in John's Gospel against its Backgrounds in Second Temple Judaism" (PhD diss. Duke University, 2015), 357.

⁵⁸ See *Sanhedrin* 74a.

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