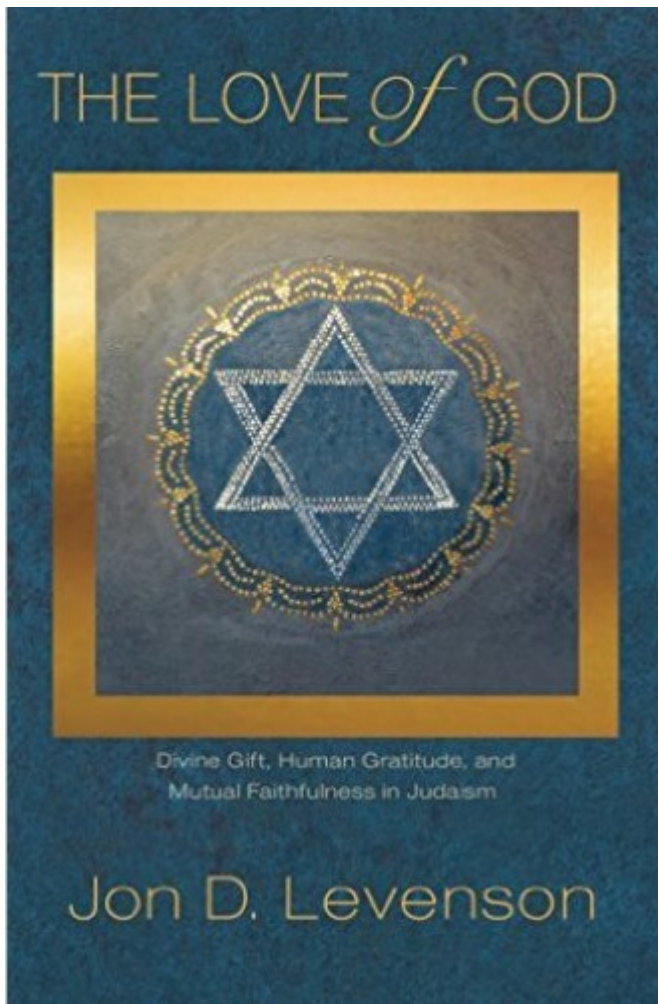


The Love of God, by Jon D. Levenson

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



The Love of God

By Jon D. Levenson
Princeton University Press

Jon Levenson is among the most important and most discerning theological interpreters of the Bible. In another time I might have written, “among our most important and most discerning Jewish theological interpreters,” and Levenson is

indeed vigorously Jewish in his interpretive work. But his work is of immense interest and importance for Christian readers as well.

His new book reflects on the centrality of the theme of love of God in the Hebrew Bible. The three components of Levenson's subtitle suggest the range and depth of his exposition. The emphasis on "mutual faithfulness" reflects an accent on covenantal transactions that are vigorously dialogical—surely a hallmark of serious Jewish reading of the biblical text.

Of Levenson's five chapters, the first three focus intensely on specific biblical texts. The exposition goes to the core of the distinctive pattern of covenantal faith. Because Christian Old Testament scholars share Levenson's sense of the dynamic of that interaction, Christian interpretations have more in common with Levenson's work than with much reductionist Christian theology that fails to appreciate this notion of dynamic interaction and mutuality.

Levenson's first chapter is a careful and sustained reading of the Shema passage of Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The focus is on the odd but defining reality that Israel is commanded to love God. The interface of *command* and *love* defies the assumption that love must be freely given and not commanded. Levenson offers a compelling interpretation of this odd interface that is definitional for the covenant.

He reviews the usual material about the political dimension of covenant, in imitation of the great suzerainty treaties in which the sovereign God can indeed command. But then he notes that the political is disrupted or realigned by use of the very different imagery of God and Israel as husband and wife. That familial imagery introduces into the covenant a dimension of emotion that subverts the usual political relationship. Thus the political and the familial taken together permit the command to love to be both an action to be performed and a feeling to be acknowledged.

When Levenson turns from Israel's love of God to God's love for Israel, his exposition is resonant with the main claims of Christian faith as well, making clear that what is shared between Jews and Christians is indeed a theology of the graciousness of God. The restoration of the covenant that has been violated by Israel requires "God's own gracious intervention." The restoration of covenant is "consummated only when God enables Israel to love him as the Shema requires, with all their heart and soul."

Levenson acknowledges the dreadful ("genocidal") aspect of the texts that derive from covenant but emphasizes the erotic dimension of God's "desire" for Israel.

God's love for Israel is articulated as a unilateral "covenant of grant" that breaks beyond the bilateral notion of the suzerainty treaty. And Israel can respond only in gratitude. I cite the parallels to Christian theology not to colonize Levenson's presentation of Judaism, but to acknowledge how mischievously wrong are many Christian caricatures of Judaism.

In the second chapter, Levenson expounds the imperative to love God "with one's heart and one's soul (*nephesh*) and with one's muchness." Two points are of special interest. First, the love of God "with all our life (soul, *nephesh*)" has generated a strong trajectory of martyrdom, the giving of one's life in utter devotion to God with nothing of self held back from God. Such total love is "selfless and not conditioned by some variety of cost-benefit analysis."

Second, Levenson focuses on the third element after "heart and soul," which we often translate as *might* or *wealth*. He judges that this is not "a third noun" but functions to intensify the preceding "heart and soul." The love of God is not to be "lukewarm, lethargic, or perfunctory." Levenson concludes, rightly in my judgment, that the relationship is both "unconditional and conditional."

The third chapter outlines an inventory of texts to make clear that the covenant requires a rich articulation of erotic, romantic images that bespeak God's passion, which cannot be reduced to a legalistic, moralistic, or quid pro quo dimension. This review of texts pivots on the imagery of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in Hosea, wherein God will "rewind the tape of history" for a restored relationship. Full restoration signifies that "the promiscuous wife and her cuckolded husband" can live in a restored relationship. The focus is on the dramatic story of the relationship through time: "The marriage was beautiful in the past, is ugly and, in fact, suspended in the present, but will be reinstated when the future redemption comes about."

The urgency of the relationship is reiterated even more radically in Ezekiel, where it is seen that Israel can "violate" the covenant but cannot "nullify" it, because God is relentlessly committed to Israel. The chapter ends with an exposition of the Song of Songs that, in canonical purview, attests to the God-Israel relationship, which concerns "the unending romance of God and the people of Israel."

After this close textual work, the final two chapters address trajectories of interpretation that go well beyond the Bible. Chapter 4 considers the work of Bahya

ibn Paquda, writing in Spain in the 11th century, who, by an appeal to Neoplatonism and Sufism, articulated a mystical process of life with God in which the surrender of one's own desires was urged and seen as possible: "The purist love of God is one that is based neither on the quest for benefits nor on the fear of punishment, but derives from 'reverence for [God's] very essence and being.'"

The chapter ends with the abstract reasoning of Moses Maimonides (12th century). Levenson concludes that Maimonides's doctrine of God, too much informed by Aristotle, precludes the notion that God can love, so that his God is "a poor candidate" for a relationship on the order of the biblical covenant. Israel's text simply asserts against such logic that God is capable of deep emotional engagement that makes a future possible for Israel, even in its failure.

The final chapter is a reflection on the famous exchange between Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in the early 20th century. Levenson follows Rosenzweig in judging that Buber has forfeited too much of the communal dimension of the relationship in his reductionism in *I and Thou*. Buber ends with "the sovereign, autonomous, and isolated self of modernity," with an intolerable loss of community. Perhaps that is why Buber has held so much appeal for "modern" Christians!

Levenson imaginatively traces biblical trajectories into rabbinic teaching in a way parallel to the way in which a Christian interpreter of the Old Testament might move toward the New Testament. This is a book that will summon Jewish readers to a reengagement with the wonder and compelling mandate of biblical faith. It will do no less for Christian readers, even if Levenson expends no energy for that.

Absent here is any of the polemic against Christians that characterized Levenson's earlier work. The absence of such polemic likely reflects the fact that Levenson himself has effectively modified interpretive engagement across confessional lines by summoning Christians to a more self-critical stance. Our debt to Levenson is enormous. Here we receive the benefit of his attentive perception, which permits both Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible to see how much is shared, even given our formidable differences.