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Loving God Beyond the Way You Love Ashurbanipal

Israel had a vassal treaty with Assyria which commanded them to love King Ashurbanipal, a "love" that brought with it legal requirements and penalty clause. Deuteronomy's command that Israel "love God" is best understood in this context, but what about God's love for Israel?

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Ashurbanipal, (sculpture). San Francisco Civic Center Historic District. Wikimedia

The Deuteronomic Covenant

Deuteronomy portrays the relationship between God and Israel as political, characterized by a *berit*. While the word *berit* often means “political treaty,” translators tend to translate it as “covenant” when it describes the relationship between God and Israel. Deuteronomy’s divine-human covenant expresses a sworn commitment of mutual obligation based on God’s oath to Israel and Israel’s adherence to God’s demands. In this vein, God’s revelation to Israel at Mount Sinai is a covenant declaration ceremony:

דברים ד:יג וַיַּגֵּד לָכֶם אֶת בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים וַיִּכְתְּבֵם עַל שְׁנֵי לֻחוֹת אֲבָנִים.

Deut 4:13 He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments, and he wrote them on two stone tablets.

Israel must observe the terms of the covenant:

ד:כג הִשָּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן תִּשְׁכְּחוּ אֶת בְּרִית יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת עִמָּכֶם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם לָכֶם פֶּסֶל תְּמוּנַת כֹּל אֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

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

In turn, God will fulfill his covenantal promise to protect and bless the people.

ז:ט וְיָדַעְתָּ כִּי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים: הָאֵל הַנֶּאֱמָן שֹׁמֵר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֶסֶד לְאֹהֲבָיו וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְו‍ֹתָו לְאֶלֶף דּוֹר.

7:9 Know therefore that YHWH your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

Deuteronomy and Esarhaddon’s Vassal Treaty

As Jon Levenson, Pamela Barmash, and Marvin Sweeney have already addressed on this site,[1] scholars have long detected striking parallels in the language, structure and themes of biblical covenant forms and ancient Near Eastern political treaties, especially between the covenant that characterizes God and Israel’s bond in Deuteronomy and first millennium Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties.[2]

Structure

The structure of Deuteronomy strongly resembles that of the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon in which he commands his vassal to be loyal to Assyria and love his son and future successor, Ashurbanipal. Both possess:

* A preamble,
* An historical prologue (which introduces the parties, the treaty and its witnesses),
* An enumeration of the requirements of the treaty,
* A description of the curses that will ensue from breaking the treaty’s laws,

Language and Theme

Moreover, the language of the two covenants is quite similar. For instance, the texts use similar language to describe the curses that will befall dissenters:[3]

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Deuteronomy** | **Esarhaddon Vassal Treaty** |
| **Corpses eaten by animals** | And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and there shall be no one to frighten them away (Deut 28:26).[4] | May Ninurta, leader of the gods, fell you with his fierce arrow, and fill the plain with your corpses, give your flesh to eagles and vultures to feed upon (lines 425-427). |
| **Eating the flesh of the Children** | In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters… because nothing else remains to him, in the desperate straits to which the enemy siege will reduce you in all your towns (Deut 28:53).[5] | Mother shall [bar the door to] her daughter, may you eat in your hunger the flesh of your children, may, through want and famine, one man eat the other’s flesh (lines 450-452). |
| **Heavens turn into metal – no rain** | And the heavens over your head shall be brass, and the earth under you shall be iron. YHWH will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down upon you until you are destroyed (Deut 28:23-24).[6] | May all the gods who are named in this treaty tablet reduce your soil in size to be as narrow as a brick, turn your soil into iron, so that no one may cut a furrow in it. Just as rain does not fall from a copper sky, so may there come neither rain nor dew upon your fields and meadows, but let it rain burning coals in your land (lines 526-533). |

Language and Theme: Instructing Children

Additionally, both Esarhaddon’s Vassal Treaty and Deuteronomy demand that the recipients of the covenants relay the covenants’ terms to their children:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Deuteronomy** | **Esarhaddon Vassal Treaty** |
| Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children (Deut 4:9).[7] | …you do not say and do not give orders to your sons, grandsons, to your offspring, to your descendants who will live in the future after this treaty (lines 284-286). |
| …and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (Deut 6:7).[8] | If you…do not swear with your entire heart, do not transmit it to yours sons who will live after this treaty… (lines 385-387). |

Language and Theme: Loving a King/God You’ve Never Met

Moreover, both Esarhaddon’s Vassal Treaty and Deuteronomy demand that the people “love” their sovereign treaty partners and utilize their “entire heart” in the service of continued loyalty.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Deuteronomy** | **Esarhaddon Vassal Treaty** |
| You must **love**(ואהבת) YHWH your God**with all your heart,** (בכל לבבך) with all your soul, with all your strength (Deut 6:5).[9] | “If you do not **love** the crown prince designate Ashurbanipal, son of your Lord Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, as you do your own lives…” (lines 266-267). |
| So now, O Israel, what does YHWH your God require of you? Only to fear YHWH your God, to walk in all his ways, to **love** (ולאהבה) him, to serve YHWH your God **with all your heart**(בכל לבבך) and with all your soul (Deut 10:12).[10] [See also Deut 11:1; 26:16.] | If you…swear the oath with words and lips (only), do not swear **with your entire heart** not transmit it to your sons who will live after this treaty… (lines 386-387). |

It is doubtful that Esarhaddon’s vassals would have ever met either Esarhaddon or his son Ashurbanipal (for whom Esarhaddon demands “love”). Therefore, it is likely that some of the population would have felt unable to love these political rulers. The same could be said of the feelings of at least some Israelites toward their national deity. Can all the people of Israel really be expected to will themselves to love a deity whom they have never seen or heard? If not, why would Deuteronomy demand the unachievable?

The American Assyriologist, William L. Moran (1921-2000), who taught for many years at Harvard University, has argued, influentially, that:

[I]n 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 expressed in terms of love.[11]

The Actionable Love of a Vassal

Significantly, the command to “love” (אהב) God occurs six times in Deuteronomy (6:5; 11:1, 13, 22; 30:16, 20) but nowhere else in the rest of the Pentateuch. In light of the fact that Deuteronomy modeled itself after an Assyrian vassal treaty, this distinctively Deuteronomic command “may not entail a particular emotional response to the deity.” Instead, similar to Esarhaddon’s command to love Ashurbanipal the command to love God “entails obeying the commandments… it reflects the ‘duty of the vassal toward his sovereign.’”[12] We might refer to this type of love as “actionable love,” a legalistic term which describes Israel’s promise to obey God and the vassal’s promise to obey Esarhaddon.

Deuteronomy underscores the actionable character of this love by commanding Israel to take some kind of action every time it commands Israel to love God:

* **Love God and serve him**

דברים י:יב ...וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשֶׁךָ.

Deut 10:12 ...to love him, and to serve YHWH your God with all your heart and soul.

* **Love God and observe his laws and statutes**

יא:א וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַרְתָּ מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ וְחֻקֹּתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וּמִצְו‍ֹתָיו כָּל הַיָּמִים.

11:1 Love, therefore, YHWH your God, and always keep his charge, his laws, his rules, and his commandments.

* **Love God and serve him**

יא:יג ...לְאַהֲבָה אֶת יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעָבְדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם.

11:13 ...loving YHWH your God and serving him with all your heart and soul.

* **Love God and walk in his ways**

יא:כב לְאַהֲבָה אֶת יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל דְּרָכָיו וּלְדָבְקָה בוֹ.

11:22 ...loving YHWH your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him.

Likewise, in Esarhaddon’s Vassal Treaty, the command to love the sovereign is associated with a set of behaviors, specifically, to transmit the covenant’s terms to the vassals’ sons, and to speak in the kings’ (Ashurbanipal and Esarhaddon) favor.

God’s Anthropopathic Love for Israel: Emotional or Legal?

Is God’s love for Israel similar—also a legal term? On one hand, every time Deuteronomy remarks that God loves Israel, it also portrays him *doing* or promising to *do* for the people. Because God loved Israel, he brought the people out of Egypt (4:37); God loves Israel and promises to bless the nation’s crops and multiply the people (7:7-8, 13). Thus, God’s love is similarly actionable;

On the other hand, several anthropopathic depictions of God’s love imply that divine love constitutes more than just action.[13] For example:

דברים ד:לז וְתַחַת כִּי אָהַב אֶת אֲבֹתֶיךָ וַיִּבְחַר בְּזַרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו וַיּוֹצִאֲךָ בְּפָנָיו בְּכֹחוֹ הַגָּדֹל מִמִּצְרָיִם.

Deut 4:37 And because He loved your fathers, He chose their heirs after them; He Himself, in His great might, led you out of Egypt.

The verse seems to be saying that YHWH’s feelings of love for Israel’s ancestors inspired him to choose them to be his people, perhaps even instead of others whom he did not love. A stronger example, one noted by Jacqueline Lapsley, describes God’s love using emotional language that clearly connotes affection, desire, and passion:

דברים ז:ז לֹא מֵרֻבְּכֶם מִכָּל הָעַמִּים **חָשַׁק** יְ־הוָה בָּכֶם וַיִּבְחַר בָּכֶם כִּי אַתֶּם הַמְעַט מִכָּל הָעַמִּים. ז:ח**כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת יְ־הוָה אֶתְכֶם** וּמִשָּׁמְרוֹ אֶת הַשְּׁבֻעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֵיכֶם הוֹצִיא יְ־הוָה אֶתְכֶם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה… ז:יג **וַאֲהֵבְךָ** וּבֵרַכְךָ וְהִרְבֶּךָ וּבֵרַךְ פְּרִי בִטְנְךָ וּפְרִי אַדְמָתֶךָ…

Deut 7:7 It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that YHWH **set his heart on** you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. 7:8 **It was because YHWH loved you** and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that YHWH has brought you out with a mighty hand… 7:13 **He will love you**, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground…

Lapsley explains that the verb חשק (“set his heart on”), which describes the nature of God’s love in this passage, 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.” Thus, Lapsley concludes, “God’s love for Israel finds its source in the emotional life of the deity.”[14]

Jon Levenson summarizes this point:

[I]f the verb has the same meaning in Deut 7:7 as in these other instances, one can see that, along with the obligations of a covenantal suzerain, God’s love for Israel has a passionate character analogous to human sexual eros.[15]

The Counterintuitive Significance of YHWH’s Anthropopathic Love

Studies of the psychology of religion have demonstrated that the use of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms is a double-edged sword. On one hand, people imagine God to have “naturalistic” features (such as love) so that they can feel like they understand God.[16] Thus, Terence Fretheim posits that the Bible uses the same language to describe both human and divine emotions in order to show that humans are in some ways similar to God.[17] On the other hand, anthropomorphisms also underscore God’s differences from that which is not divine. As Justin Barret and Frank Keil observe,

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.[18]

Thus, for example, the anthropomorphic portrait of God stretching out his arm to deliver Israel from Egypt conjures an image of deliverance such as a human hero might accomplish; but the representation of God delivering an entire nation with a single arm imagines something far beyond human capacity.

Turning back to Deuteronomy, the text’s juxtaposition of divine love against human love stands in line with this reasoning. On one hand, the anthropopathism highlights the similarity between human and divine love; they are both expressed through action. On the other hand, perhaps counterintuitively, the anthropopathism underscores also a difference between God’s divine love and Israel’s human love; God’s love for Israel is freely given and unreservedly passionate whereas Israel’s love is not. On the contrary, God must command Israel to engage in acts of love toward him. Thus, even though Deuteronomy uses the term “love” to describe both Israel’s love for God and God’s love for Israel, the Torah draws a clear distinction between the two forms of love.

God’s Passionate Love: An Aspirational Model

Is the difference really that stark? Is there really no emotional component to the Torah’s command to love God? In light of the role anthropomorphism and anthropopathism play in emphasizing the similarities between the human and the divine realms, I would argue that Deuteronomy’s depiction of God’s love as passionate is meant to influence Israel’s love for God. Throughout the Bible, Israel is adjured to imitate God.

For example, the Decalogue instructs the people to rest on the Sabbath day, because God rested (Exod 20:10). In Leviticus, God demands that the people remain holy because he is holy (והייתם קדשים כי קדוש אני, 11:45). It is not surprising then, that here too the people of Israel are commanded be like God; to love God as God loves Israel. The command to love God, then, is not simply a command to obey, but also a command to aspire to be like God: a command to feel the way God feels.

Nonetheless, as we pointed out above, anthropomorphisms also highlight the differences between the human and the divine realms; in this case, Deuteronomy recognizes that God’s love is freely given and unreservedly emotional, while human love is not. In light of this, Deuteronomy’s juxtaposition of God’s passionate love for Israel against Israel’s command to love God functions to set up divine love as an aspirational model.

Feelings aside, according to the law, Israel must “love” God through her actions (by being loyal and by walking in his ways) just as God “loves” Israel through his actions (by redeeming and caretaking). But, by depicting God’s love for Israel as passionate, Deuteronomy offers Israel a promised ideal. The text assures its audience that by imitating God’s actionable love – by *acting* in love – the people of Israel will, in turn, experience a semblance of the divine pathos exemplified by God; Israel will come to love God with all of their heart and all of their soul.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/loving-god-beyond-the-way-you-love-ashurbanipal)

1. See Jon Levenson, [“The Shema and the Commandment to Love God in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,”](http://thetorah.com/the-shema-and-the-commandment-to-love-god-in-its-ancient-contexts/) Pamela Barmash, [“The Introduction of Blessings into our Treaty with God,”](http://thetorah.com/introduction-of-blessings-into-our-treaty-with-god/) and Marvin Sweeney, [“How Do We Conceive the Divine?”](http://thetorah.com/how-do-we-conceive-the-divine/) See also Moshe Weinfeld, “Berit – covenant vs obligation,” *Biblica* 56 (1975), 120-128.
2. Translation taken from James Pritchard ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating ot the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 534-540. (Originally by D.J. Wiseman, “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” *Iraq* 20 (1958), Part 1.)
3. .וְהָיְתָה נִבְלָתְךָ לְמַאֲכָל לְכָל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְבֶהֱמַת הָאָרֶץ
4. .וְאָכַלְתָּ פְרִי בִטְנְךָ בְּשַׂר בָּנֶיךָ וּבְנֹתֶיךָ… מִבְּלִי הִשְׁאִיר לוֹ כֹּל בְּמָצוֹר וּבְמָצוֹק אֲשֶׁר יָצִיק לְךָ אֹיִבְךָ בְּכָל שְׁעָרֶיךָ
5. .וְהָיוּ שָׁמֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר עַל רֹאשְׁךָ נְחֹשֶׁת וְהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תַּחְתֶּיךָ בַּרְזֶל. יִתֵּן יְ-הוָה אֶת מְטַר אַרְצְךָ אָבָק וְעָפָר מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם יֵרֵד עָלֶיךָ עַד הִשָּׁמְדָךְ
6. .רַק הִשָּׁמֶר לְךָ וּשְׁמֹר נַפְשְׁךָ מְאֹד פֶּן תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ וּפֶן יָסוּרוּ מִלְּבָבְךָ כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ וְהוֹדַעְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְלִבְנֵי בָנֶיךָ
7. .וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתֶךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשָׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמֶךָ
8. .וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת יְ-הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה יְ-הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֹׁאֵל מֵעִמָּךְ כִּי אִם לְיִרְאָה אֶת יְ-הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל דְּרָכָיו וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת יְ-הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשֶׁךָ

1. Moran only implies this, but later scholars explicitly state as much. Jacqueline Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy, ”*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003), 350.
2. Jacqueline Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy, ”*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003), 350.
3. Anthropopathism is a form of anthropomorphism that deals with emotions.
4. Lapsley, *Feeling Our Way*,” 360.
5. Jon Levenson, [“The Shema and the Commandment to Love God in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,”](http://thetorah.com/the-shema-and-the-commandment-to-love-god-in-its-ancient-contexts/) *TheTorah* (2016).
6. Justin Barrett and Frank Keil, “Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts,” *Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1996), 219-247.
7. Terence Fretheim, “theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002), 6.
8. Barrett and Keil, “Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity,” 222.