



## “To love” (אהב) in the Bible: A Cognitive-Evolutionary Approach

Ronit Nikolsky

### Introduction

This chapter examines the use of the root *'h-b* (אהב, to love) in the Hebrew Bible from a cognitive–evolutionary approach. It will show that the word “love” is used in three different meanings, which comply with three cognitive strategies described by Merlin Donald in his study on the evolution of human cognition, and will follow how the root translates from one strategy to the other.

The chapter will therefore demonstrate that ignoring the variety of cognitive strategies renders the research un-attentive to the text. It also shows that the meaning of emotional words in their biblical usage may be quite different from the one our culture, so the modern meaning of the emotions should not be assumed to have existed in the biblical text, ~~because~~ our current understanding of the word includes additional cultural narratives and conventions which the word has acquired throughout the years since the biblical text was formed. Further, this research validates the theory of Constructed Emotions, as developed by Lisa Feldman Barrett, which claims that there are no “basic emotions,” but that every culture categorizes certain concepts as emotional and others as not (Feldman Barrett 2017). Feldman Barrett’s theory also claims that “concepts” are not a result of language, but are the reason for it: neurons that fire as a team on a regular basis form a “cognitive concept,” and such a concept may be assigned a word in a certain culture, and thus become more stable in the brain (Feldman Barrett 2017), but the focus of the article is on the biblical usage of the word.

I will first briefly describe Donald’s evolutionary–cognitive strategies, then outline cases where the root “to love” is used in the Bible, and lastly discuss my approach in comparison with other studies of “love” in the Bible (viz., Ackerman 2002, 437–58; ~~Ellen~~ van Wolde 2008, 1–24; Brenner 1997; Kazen 2011; Mirguet 2016, 224–65).

An early version of this article was presented as a lecture in the workshop Cultural Evolution of Religion in 2017 in Helsinki, which was organized by the project “Ritual and the Emergence of Early Christian Religion” (REECR), in the University of Helsinki headed by Risto Uro, and co-organized by the project “Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions” (CSTT), in the University of Helsinki, headed by Prof. Jutta Jokiranta.



I will not relate to the prophetic literature or wisdom literature, both for the limited scope available for this chapter as well as unique use of the verb in these literatures, which merits a separate study.

### Donald’s theory: Three cognitive strategies for creating culture

Donald’s *central hypothesis* in his book *Origins of the Modern Mind*<sup>1</sup> describes three<sup>2</sup> major cognitive transformations leading from the non-symbolic cognitions of animals to the fully symbolic representations of humans. These are three new uniquely human systems of memory representation that find their expression in three stages of human culture.

The first transformation from primate cognition was into *mimetic cognition*. The mimetic strategy is based on the human cognitive property of voluntary retrieval of memory, and it enabled a supramodal (i.e., cross-sensory systems), motor-modeling of the memory. The second, into *mythic cognition*, developed a specialized mimetic subsystem, the phonological apparatus (which in itself is devoid of meaning), into verbal capacity by inventing lexicality (where a meaning is attached to the phoneme). The third transition, into *theoretic cognition*, introduced external memory storage and retrieval system, and a new working memory architecture (Donald 1993, 739).

“The structural arrangement of these uniquely human representational systems is hierarchical” says Donald, with the skills of each stage serving as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the next (Donald 1991).<sup>3</sup>

### *Mimetic cognition*

The first transition, into mimetic cognition, entailed the motor skill of humans to use the whole body as an intentional representational and communication device, and they used it for translating event perceptions into action. Mimetically reenacted sequences require a highly abstract modeling process, involving input from various senses and producing action in a variety of bodily systems (Donald 1991, 162–200, 1993, 740–43). Donald talks about the human reaction to rhythm as exemplifying mimetic cognition, as well as other examples:

Rhythm is an excellent example for mimetic skill, in which an abstract perceptual event (such as a temporal pattern of sound) is “modeled” by the motor system. Humans seem unable to resist rhythm ... to imitate, rehearse and modify the rhythmic sounds ... to virtually any skeletomuscular system in the body, ultimately creating the cultural product of dance; other mimetic culture products are “complex games, extended competition, pedagogy through directed imitation ... a subtler and more complex array of facial and vocal expressions, and public action-metaphor such as intentional group display of aggression, solidarity, joy, fear and sorrow.” (Donald 1993, 741)

Mimetic representation is still essential to those who work with the body, like actors, athletes, or traditional constructional skills such as arts and crafts.

But the inherent fuzziness and ambiguity of mimetic representation resulted in it reaching a level of complexity where a method of disambiguating about the mimetic messages would be an adaptive benefit. This new level was the Mythic Cognition, which serves as a communication device of greater speed and power.

### ***Mythic cognition***

As the first step into mythic cognition, Donald talks about lexical invention, namely, the assignment of a unique sign to a specific meaning. Phonology is a specialized mimetic subsystem, which had developed as a primary manner of expressing the lexical invention (Donald 1991, 201–68, 1993, 743–44).

Language with its lexical, syntactic, and morphological features became the default tool for mythic cognition despite the great respiratory dangers associated with a descended larynx. This, according to Donald, points to the great survival value of phonology to archaic humans. As for the cultural product of mythic cognition, Donald says:

The natural product of language is narrative thought ... language, like mimesis, evolved primarily as a method of modeling reality. Dunbar has argued that the normal social use of language is storytelling about other people—gossip—and he has produced observational data to prove this. But day-to-day storytelling in a shared oral culture eventually produces collective, standardized narrative version of reality, particularly of past events; and these become what we call the dominant “myths” of a society.<sup>4</sup>

The development of Mythic Cognition did not eliminate the expression of the mimetic one: “mimetic skill continued (and continues) to serve its traditional social purposes perfectly well: it still provides the cognitive foundation for institutions like dance, athletics, craft, ritual, and theater.” (Donald 1993, 750)

### ***Theoretic cognition***

The transition into the third cultural—cognitive stage involves technological rather than biological developments, as Donald describes it:

Since the upper paleolithic humans have gradually developed three new representational devices. The first was *visuosymbolic invention* ... writing systems. The second was *external memory*. The third was the emergence of very large, externally nested cultural products called *theories*. (Donald 1991, 273, 1993, 745)

At the crux of the theoretic cognition is the externalization of memory. The development of external mediums for the storage of symbolic content allows humans to circumvent the limitations of biological working memory. This change also entails a new architecture of the human brain, one which is focused on information retrieval and not retention (Donald 1991, 269–360, 1993, 744–48).



With the development and increase of external symbolic storage, a society is no longer dependent on personal distribution of knowledge, since any individual, after proper training, can access the symbolically coded information. They gather information from the external storage just as they used to scan the natural environment, only now the processing will occur on two levels: the first is the items displayed in the external memory, which are treated natural objects and events, and second is when these items are processed as symbolic representations. Literacy, which was developed in the mythic cognition stage, is a prerequisite for encoding and decoding the external memory.

### Donald's stages as analytic concepts<sup>5</sup>

The three cognitive strategies ~~each come~~ with a set of behaviors and a range of cultural artifacts which stem from it; typical to evolution, the one does not disappear with the emergence of the next, and thus humans are free to activate each of the strategies with all its accompanying behaviors and artifacts at will. And indeed, we can recognize the core strategy being activated in accordance with the circumstances: In a dance party, for example, certain manners of dressing or movements are possible, but the same behavior is unaccepted in other circumstances, where verbal communication is expected as the core behavior. Similarly, the core of verbal behavior, which is focused on people and their incentive to act, is expected in certain circumstances, such intimacy with a family member, a close friend, or a psychologist. A different form of verbal interaction is expected in a workplace or official institution, where the content of the communication should always take into account externally decided categories (being a student, a secretary, or a professor) and the hierarchies attached to them regardless of individual biography or the interpersonal sentiments. In the former, the presentation of the self has a strong component of mythic cognition, and the latter— theoretic cognition. In mythic cognition, the scope of emotions expressed is wider, and engagement with personal experience is central, while in theoretic cognition the focus is on the official ideology or legal system, and issues of wealth, social markers such as status, titles, or official identity take the fore. People are cued by the circumstances to choose a total strategy ~~of~~ their behavior, which ~~are~~ very often culturally regulated.<sup>6</sup>

The sharp distinction between the three cognitive strategies is mainly an academic construction; in the reality all strategies exist to some extent in modern human behaviors and cultures at all times, and each strategy is tainted by the others. In fact, the border between the categories is not strict, and they can be seen as a continuum, where the later stages of one cognitive strategy are already the early stages of the next. One therefore finds cultural artifacts that belong to one strategy in the overall sense, but have markers of other strategies. Yet the core character of the artifact may still be recognized in many cases.

An important aspect to keep in mind is that the cultural capital of the society— namely, all the material and non-material cultural artifact—used in all three strategies are basically the same. The most obvious example is language: a person can use English in both mythic and theoretic cognition, and while some of the vocabulary might change, much of it still remains the same. The same holds true to mimetic cognition,



in a pre-linguistic stage, the sounds and rhythms produced in a mimetic context by an individual socialized into an English-speaking culture would be the same as those of their narrative language in the case of mythic cognition.

This combination of similar cultural capital and different cognitive strategies is at the crux of this study, since when studying the use of the verb “to love” in the Hebrew Bible, I study what the same verb—i.e., the same cultural artifact—means in the different cognitive strategies, starting from the mimetic and moving to the mythic and theoretic. The change in the meaning of “to love” from one strategy to the next is done by various cultural cognitive processes, such as a type of blending, by which qualities of the artifact (~~the meaning of “to love” in our case~~) are expressed in one way in the mimetic strategy and then are merged into or transform to qualities typical to the mythic strategy.<sup>7</sup>

The example of language brings us closer to the present study. The Hebrew Bible as we know it today is a written text, and in this respect, it represents theoretic cognition (being an imprinting of memory on external storage). But beyond this obvious trait, we can see the various cognitive strategies active behind the various texts of the Bible, and to some extent, and without being very restrictive about it, these strategies agree with a distinction between literary forms or genres. Genres that rely heavily on the auditory and other sensory aspects of language, such as poetry or songs, exhibit more aspects of mimetic cognition than genres which develop a long storyline absorbed in causal explanations and rich in subplots, such as narrative texts. The latter exhibits more of the traits of mythic cognition. As of theoretic cognition, we find it represented in texts which are close to what we today call theories, the content of which is general truths which do not refer to a case in a particular time. Such are legal texts which portray generic or idealistic modes of behavior or give general juridical instructions.<sup>8</sup> These rules are expected to be deductively applied to particular real-life cases, if such occur, but are not in themselves describing such cases.

I would like to stress that in this chapter, I use the concepts “mimetic,” “mythic,” and “theoretic” only in the Donaldian manner, which is different from the commonsensical usage, or even from the usual academic use of these concepts.

### The use of the verb “to love” (אהב) in the Bible

I have chosen to study the verb “to love” as part of my research on emotions from a cultural-cognitive perspective. In my previous work, in order to learn about emotions, I focus on a protagonist’s incentive for action within narratives and other types of texts. In this chapter I take a similar approach. I will be looking at what are the actions that take place in the syntactic and the storied environment of the verbs “to love” (אהב); that is, I am interested in the actions of the agent (usually either a person or God in the biblical context) in connection with the verb “to love.” As we shall see, the action depends on the cognitive strategy in which the organism finds itself: mimetic, mythic, or theoretic.

Exploring the use of the root “to love” in biblical texts does not imply that the Bible understood “love” as an “emotion” as we think of emotions nowadays, or even in the



Greek notions of *pathos*; earlier studies have already shown the contrary, as will be discussed below. I will therefore not study a variety of other verbs or biblical words which seem to agree with the modern understanding of "to love," but I will look into the use to one particular root, אהב, and follow its use in the biblical texts. As we will see, these uses represent the different cognitive strategies outlined by Donald.

I will not be working on the prophetic literature, both because the tasks would be too big for one article, and also because of the secondary usage of the verb in this literature: in prophetic literature, the verb is often used metaphorically or parabolically to illustrate the behavior of the nation or the relationship with god, and this secondary nature merits a separate study. Instead, my focus will rest upon texts that are associated with the three cognitive strategies described above, namely poetry for mimetic cognition, narratives for mythic, and legal texts for theoretic cognition, and see how the verb "to love" is used in them.

### The Song of Songs: Love in mimetic cognition

#### *The mimetic nature of the Song of Songs*

The biblical book Song of Songs is a collection of songs (Zakovitch 1992, 3) describing the erotic attraction between a young woman and a young man; these songs were possibly performed in wedding celebrations. They are telling, mostly in the first person (the protagonists telling what they feel) or second person (when one protagonist speaks to the other) about the beauty of the loved one, and about efforts to reach intimacy. There are also dialogues of the protagonists with secondary characters, such as the "guards of the city" or "the daughters of Jerusalem." The texts do not culminate in a continuous drama or plot, but remain a fragmentary collection.

As poetic techniques, the Song of Songs uses repetitions, rhythmic sentences, rhymes, alliterations, parallelisms of all sorts, and others techniques (Zakovitch 1992, 24). All these are typical for poetry in general, and for ancient Hebrew poetry in particular, and are considered as memory anchors for the performer as well as activating the mimetic memory of the listener (van Es 2012, 69–91). These mimetic aspects make the audience involved with the visuo-audial aspect of the song, prior to being involved with the meaning of the words or the fragmentary narratives.

The fact that the Song of Songs is of the more basic cognition, i.e. mimetic, does not mean that the text itself is from early period. In fact, it seems to be, at least in its present form, from a later strata of the Bible, i.e. from the Hellenistic period.<sup>9</sup> What is "early" or rather "mimetic" about it are its characteristics as a cultural product, that is, its nature as mimetic cognitive strategies. Thus, studying the meaning of the verb "to love" in the Song of Songs exemplifies its use in a mimetic context.

#### *The text and its analysis*

By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul (נפשי, *naphshi*) loves (שאהבה, *she'ahavah*); I sought him, but I found him not.



Let me rise<sup>10</sup> and go about the city, in the streets and in the broad ways, I wanted to seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but I found him not.

The watchmen that go about the city found me: “Did you see him, whom my soul loves?”

Scarce had I passed from them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her who had conceived me. (Song 3:1–4)

In this song, we hear a first person teller saying that she could not sleep in her bed at night because she missed the one her soul loved<sup>11</sup>; she therefore got up and walked around the city in search of him, and when she found the loved one, she held him and brought him to her room in her mother’s house.

The context is erotic; love is the obsessive sexual attraction to a particular individual, who comes to occupy the woman’s imagination (i.e., memory) even when he is not around (i.e., at night when she is trying to sleep). The teller is motivated to leave her bed at night in search of physical proximity with the loved one. When he is found, he is taken back to the “chamber,” i.e., keeping the physical proximity with the loved one, and strongly suggesting sexuality.

### *Conceptualizing love in mimetic cognition*

Enumerating the characteristics of love in the Song of Songs will serve as typifying love in the context of mimetic cognition, and these characteristics will be concepts ~~(in parenthesis below)~~ which will be the point of comparison with the findings of the mythic and theoretic forms of cognition. Here are the characteristics:

- **The verb “to love” in the Song of Songs denote the sexual-erotic semiotic context:** We saw that love belongs to the erotic-sexual semiotic sphere; it is something that is happening to the soul (נפש, *nephesh*). In the Song of Songs, it is happening to a woman, while the man protagonist in the book uses other verbs to describe their attraction, such as: לבבתיני, *libavtini* (4:9, translated as “ravished my heart”); הרהיבוני, *hirhivuni* (6:5, translated as “they have overcome me”).
- **The verb “to love” in the Song of Songs is used to denote engagement with a particular individual (particularity):** As the woman was searching for one particular individual, not looking for any man, love can be said to be directed toward a particular person; the woman does not just pick any man she encounters, but the sexual attraction is to a particular one; this point would be different in theoretic cognition.
- **The verb “to love” in the Song of Songs denotes coercion:** There is no talk of choice or control of love in the Song of Songs; it is something that happens to the person without the possibility of resistance. This again would be changed in the context of theoretic cognition.
- **The verb “to love” in the Song of Songs drives the person to act (incentivizing action):** Love drives the organism into action; not any action, but one aiming at physical closeness with the loved one.





- **The action caused by the verb “to love” in the Song of Songs is irregular (abnormality of the action):** The discourse in Song 3.1–4 suggests that being in bed at night is the normal course of events, but getting up and roaming the city is not; still, this is what the teller is driven to do. This action is of high investment of energy, i.e., acting beyond that which is expected in the circumstances, and can be typified as “obsession.” The abnormality of the action is noticed by other members of the social group.

I would also add that there is no talk about marriage or wedding in the text, even though the historical context could have been that. Further, there is no negative attitude toward the erotic love, nor any hint for “immorality.” What we currently experience as negative, immoral, or “secular” attitude toward erotic love in our cultures is a result of institutional control of sexuality, which regulates parental investment or birth rights; such control existed, no doubt, in biblical times as well, but alongside of the inhibition of sexuality, a society has to make sure that sexuality and procreation exist, to avoid population decline, and encourage population increase. The Song of Songs presents the promotion of sexuality. Albeit not immoral, what is acknowledged in the Song of Songs is the high investment of energy in love, which renders the organism acting irregularly, or even “sick” (“I am love-sick,” Song 2:5). What we do not find in the text which expresses the mimetic cognition is ~~the understanding of the individual~~, with a name, a personal biography, and a goal in life, characteristics which are typical to mythic cognition.



Other occurrences of אהב in the Song of Songs support the characteristics above: It is acted by females in 1:3–4; it is considered a sickness (2:5) and therefore, irregular. It is as strong as death (8:6) thus no wonder it moves the whole organism to act (1:7). Being focused on a particular object (2:3), and being obsessive, i.e., not allowing other things to disturb while it happens (2:7).



When moving to study love in narrative texts, we find that the meaning is transformed.

### Love stories: Mythic cognition

#### *Mythic cognition and narratives*

Perceiving reality as a story is a cognitive strategy. This strategy focuses on explaining human action (or that of other personified beings) in terms of a will to act and the result of the action; the product of this strategy is the storying of human actions as a series of circumstances and choices.

Through the various cognitive processes, such as personification, recursion, metaphorizing, and others,<sup>12</sup> humans apply the categories from the biological family on the general society, the country, or other imagined communities; this results in the large impersonal social units to be as engaging for the individual as ~~much as~~ the real people from the immediate small group of ~~known~~ individuals, and the stories of these large units become as ~~meaning~~ as stories about real known people. Language has developed as the most prominent tool for expressing stories, first orally, then in





writing. As individuals, the “storied people” of narrative artifacts become a model of behavior, and as metaphorized entities (such as ~~the nation as a person~~) they explain the social values as well as the history of the group.

~~Language has eventually developed as the most prominent tool for expressing stories, first orally, then in writing. As individuals, the “storied people” of narrative artifacts become a model of behavior, and as metaphorized entities (such as the nation as a person) they explain the social values as well as the history of the group.~~

Narrative texts are abundant in the Bible, and among them, many have storylines which are motivated at least partially by the verb “to love.” A non-comprehensive list of stories where the root אהב is used initiating the main actions of the plot includes the story of Isaac loving Rebekah (Gen. 24:67), Isaac loving Esau and Rebekah loving Jacob (Gen. 27), Jacob loving Rachel (Gen. 29), Shechem loving Dinah (Gen. 34), Jacob loving Joseph more than his other sons (Gen. 37–44), Samson being blamed by his wives for not loving them (Jud. 14–16), Elkanah loving his barren wife Hannah (1 Sam. 1), Saul loving David (1 Sam. 16), Jonathan loving David (1 Sam. 18, 20, 2 Sam. 1), Michal loving David (1 Sam. 18), and Amnon loving Tamar (2 Sam. 13).

### *The text and its analysis*

The text to be studied here is the love story of Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:1–10). The story is about the man Elkanah who had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. With the latter he had children, but the former was barren. Elkanah used to go every year to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord in the temple in Shiloh. The story goes on (verse 4 onward):

And it came to pass one day, when Elkanah sacrificed, that he gave to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and her daughters portions, but unto Hannah he gave a double portion, **because he loved Hannah** (כי את חנה אהב, *ki 'et Hannah 'ahav*). But the Lord had ~~shut up~~ her womb. And her rival vexed her sore, to make her fret, because the Lord had ~~shut up~~ her womb.

And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she vexed her; therefore she wept, and would not eat.

And Elkanah her husband said to her: “Hannah, why do you weep, and why do you not eat, and why does your heart grieve? here, I better to you than ten sons!”

Elkanah’s words seem not to have influenced Hannah, and she prayed to God for a son, ~~which she got~~ in the end. This son was Samuel, who later became an important prophet during a critical time in ~~the story of the~~ Israelites’ history.

In the context of the yearly sacrifice in Shiloh, Elkanah gives a double portion of the meat to the barren Hannah because he loves her. This raises Peninnah’s anger against Hannah, and she hurts her. Hannah is disturbed and weeps. The husband tries to appease the barren wife, saying that he is better for her than children, but she is not appeased, and prays to God to have a son. The story ends with the barren wife getting the child she has longed for, Samuel, who will be the one to anoint the future first king of the children of Israel.



To compare with the findings about love (אהב) in the Song of Songs, we see that love in this story is not equated with sexual activity, certainly not exclusively, since Elkanah apparently has had sexual relations with his fertile wife, while he is still not described as loving her.

With regard to incentive to act and the nature of the act: Elkanah’s love motivates him to prefer Hannah and give her more than her portion<sup>13</sup> of the sacrificial meal. This action is perceived as injustice, and thus “irregular,” and is noticed by Peninnah who then works to irritate Hannah. So Elkanah’s love is the ultimate reason behind the important historical event of the birth of Samuel. Thus, what appeared as an “irregular” behavior of the mimetic cognitive strategy has become an action which results in “social unrest.”

Checking these findings against other love stories in the Hebrew Bible, we find similar traits in many of them: love leads to irregular or socially imbalanced behavior which eventually influences the course of personal life, or of history. Here are some of the major narratives where we find this formula (in all cases the root אהב is used):

*Isaac loving Rebekah* (Gen. 24:67): This love helped Isaac get over his mourning for his mother, thus away from the expected sorrow and into a new state of mind.

*Isaac loving Esau and Rebekah loving Jacob* (Gen. 27): Isaac’s love is apparently the expected behavior (father’s love to the first born), Rebekah’s love changes the course of history by making the younger son receive the blessing of the elder. While the plot fits well with the boys’ previous agreement (the selling of the first-born rights by Esau), the outcome is still the result of love causing Rebekah to trick Isaac into blessing the wrong child.

*Jacob loving Rachel* (Gen. 29): Love ignores the proper order of marriage, and motivates Jacob to work more than he planned for his father-in-law.

*Shechem loving Dinah* (Gen. 34): This love indeed goes against the social rules, but it is improper, since it works against God’s instruction not to intermarry. Consequently this love brought disaster upon the lover and his ethnic group.

*Jacob loving Joseph more than his other sons* (Gen. 37–44): This love motivated the older brothers to mistreat Joseph. It all ended well only because it was apparently part of God’s plan and agreed with Joseph’s dreams, but in terms of human behavior, the improper love of Jacob brought about Joseph’s hybris and the brothers’ jealousy.

*Samson*. Samson was blamed twice by his wives for not loving them (Jud. 14:16, 16:15), because he failed to treat them as preferred individuals, that is, to entrust them with information which could, and eventually did, harm him: in the first case, the solution to a riddle, and in the second, about his own physical weakness. Samson is said to have loved only the second woman, Delilah, (Jud. 16:4) but did not voluntarily make her into a preferred person in terms of trust (Jud. 16:7, 13). Samson’s love is therefore of mimetic nature, and in this respect, the usage of the verb is close to its usage in the Song of Songs.<sup>14</sup> It is the women in the story who claim that Samson does not love them, referring to mythic love, i.e., that he is not engaging with them in a conversation, or benefits them outside the sexual context.

*David*. The verb “to love” (אהב) is never applied to David. But before becoming a king, he himself was loved by a few people, all of whom from the house of the king Saul. The first being Saul himself (1 Sam. 16:21), then by Jonathan, Saul’s son (1 Sam.



18:1, 3, 20:17, 2 Sam. 1:23, 26), and by Michal, Saul's daughter (1 Sam. 18:28). Further, David is said to have been loved by all of Saul's slaves (1 Sam. 18:22), or, at least this is how things are presented to David himself, and all the people of Judea and Israel (1 Sam. 18:16). While the discourse of the Davidic narratives is of particular individuals and their relationships, the status of these people, as the reigning king and the future king, makes these relationships point to the political sphere. The loves in David's stories seem to accompany, if not to explain, the transition from the reigning of the house of Saul to the house of David, the latter being hegemonic in the biblical narrative overall. Therefore, beyond telling the interpersonal story, the narrative has a *pars pro toto* meaning of asserting the validity of David's dynasty rather than Saul's. This process, of turning from personal into political, is quite common in the ancient Near East as well as in our current cultures,<sup>15</sup> and for our purpose, these two points (the personal and the political) mark the transition ~~into~~ mythic cognition (the personal) ~~and the transition~~ into the theoretic one (the political).

*King Solomon.* Solomon is said to have loved two things: in the beginning of his life he loved God (1 Kgs. 3:3) even though he still worshipped foreign gods, and toward the end of his life it is said that he loved foreign women (1 Kgs. 11:1, 2). Both these love actions had consequences for Solomon's life and for the history of the Judeo-Israelite society. I will discuss loving God in the section on theoretic cognition. With regard to the foreign women, they are said to have turned his heart toward worshipping foreign gods, and consequently the Judeo-Israelite kingdom was divided by God. While on the surface, it seems that the story is similar to previous mythic cognition stories about love which, by its nature of being irregular or counterintuitive, changes the course of history, there is something imminently different in Solomon's story. Solomon is said to love a *category* of women, not any unique person.<sup>16</sup> This contradicts the concept of "particularity" which we have seen in the mimetic cognition, and which is also present in the cases of mythic cognition which we have seen so far: Elkanah loved Hannah, he did not love a category, such as "a wife," since he had another wife whom he did not love; so were the cases with Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob who each loved one son and not the other(s). This categorization turns the woman more into a concept than a concrete person, and is therefore more a "universal entity," which is typical to theoretic cognition, and not "a particular person" which, in my understanding, is typical to the mythic cognition.

The stories discussed earlier, about the patriarchs and Elkanah, affect the listener by getting them involved with the life of another human being. If a lesson was to be learned, such as the disaster that follows from mixing with the nations (Dina), or why the younger child continues the family line (Isaac, Jacob), it is learned by way of induction from the individual to the whole group, including the listener.

### ***Conceptualization of love in mythic context***

In the mythic cognitive strategy, love, while not opposed to being sexual, also extends to other aspects of life. Love is an incentive for irregular interpersonal action; it takes the form of the loving person preferring the loved one and benefiting him or her more than is socially accepted. The unruly preference is recognized by the environment, and causes social imbalance. The loving couple may be a man and a woman, but other

relationships are also indicated by the verb "to love," such as parents and children. All this is part of the biography of individuals who are names and know, and have a life-story in the biblical narrative. This was not the case in mimetic love which, while directed toward a particular individual, was fragmentary and lacked the acquaintance with the biography of the people involved.

The important development is that in mythic cognition love begins to signify things other than its mimetic sexual meaning. We can place this development on a continuum of love-motivated stories, which start with love still being primarily sexual, close to the mimetic form, through stories which are about personal preference of another person, but this preference explains the historical situation of the ethnic situation (the stories of the patriarchs), to narratives where the love story is but a thin framing which is used to indicate or argue the benefit of some rules or regulations. The thinness of the frame and the personal story is lost in favor of categories of people (i.e., "foreign women" loved by Solomon).

To compare the function of love in the mythic cognitive strategy with the five points I have conceptualized about mimetic one:

- **Sexual context:** This is not exclusive in mythic cognition; the sexual nature and the physical proximity change into caring and preferring the loved-ones by giving them gifts or special attention.
- **Particularity:** As a rule, this seems to be the case in mythic cognition just like in the mimetic one. But in the case of king Solomon there is a development into love as a whole category (foreign women), and thus complying more with being a "rule" and not a personal story.
- **Coercion:** This seems to still be the case in mythic cognition as it was in the mimetic: love is a force that compels a person to act, it appears spontaneously, not leaving the person with a choice whether to love or not; this will change in the theoretic cognition.
- **Incentivizing action:** As in mimetic cognition, also in the mythic, love incents action: the person who loves is driven to act upon it.
- **Abnormality of the action:** Similar in mythic and mimetic cognitions.

### Theoretic cognition: Love in legal text

Theoretic cognition deals with universal truths and the principles that are behind worldly phenomena. It therefore does not focus on the unique and the personal, as mythic cognition, nor does it rely on sensory input as mimetic cognition, but rather on conceptualized logic such as mathematical rules. It is thus impersonal, and its rationality is not focused on the human, as mythic cognition.

One cultural artifact of theoretic cognition is societal laws that ensure what came to be conceptualized as "justice." This concept entails universality of proper behavior, and the accountability of the social group, and the regime, for enforcing the proper behavior.

In the ancient Mediterranean, the law was imposed by a ruler who received his authority from the gods, the ultimate rulers of the world. Since the Bible's overall

narrative sees God as the ultimate ruler, He is the source of the ultimate justice and of all rules. These rules are spelled out in the legal texts. For the sake of looking into theoretic cognition, I will look into these legal texts in the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

As a general observation, there are twenty-nine verses where the verb “to love” appears in texts of legal nature. Of these, six are cases where God loves,<sup>18</sup> and in all the others, people are the subject or the implied subject of the verb “to love.”<sup>19</sup> Of these latter twenty-three cases, there are seven cases where people are said to love other people, and in the rest, two-third of the cases, people are said to love God. I will look at each of these categories separately.

### ***God as the loving person<sup>20</sup>***

The cases where God loves are of a narrative nature, and are not commanding, instructing, or expounding the rules to be followed. ~~This makes much sense, since in the biblical discourse, God is not in a position to be commanded or instructed. But the~~ texts where God loves are adjacent to legal texts and are framing them.

One unique case (Deut. 10:18) tells that God loves the foreigner (*ger*). This love is instructive for the Israelites, who are then commanded to love the *ger* as well. Out of love, God gives the foreigner clothes and food. Thus this love follows the pattern familiar from the mythic cognitive strategies: it is a non-erotic love, in which the one who love prefers the loved one beyond what is expected, such as giving clothes (like Jacob to Joseph) and food (like Elkanah to Hannah). What makes this case close to the theoretic cognition (on the continuum from mythic to theoretic) is that God loves a category of people, and not a particular individual.

All other five cases of God loving speak of God’s love toward the people of Israel. The simplest case (Deut. 23:6) tells that God loves the people and this is why he turned Balaam’s curse of the Israelites into a blessing. This is again following the familiar structure of the lover benefiting the loved one. More elaborated are cases (Deut. 4:37; 10:15) where God has loved the forefathers, and therefore benefits the offspring (by preferring them over other people, and bringing them out of Egypt).

Again, this falls for the most part under the familiar pattern: he who loves benefits the one loved. But the cases where God loves people on account of the forefathers suggest an innovation: benefiting the loved one is not a spontaneous result of the acquaintance of the two parties, it has a reason, which is not in the lover and the loved, but a promise made in the past. The level of spontaneity is, therefore, reduced.

Even less spontaneity is suggested in Deut. 7:12–13: the text says that if the people adhere to God’s laws, God will love them, as he has promised to the forefathers. As a consequence of this love, God will benefit the people by making them fruitful with offspring and agricultural products. Love and its benefits are therefore a part of a “deal”: love is gained in exchange for adhering to God’s laws.

To sum up, narratives about the love of God show a transition from the mythic love to one which is less spontaneous (as will be the case in the more legalistic texts) and less personal (as we have seen happening already to King Solomon, who loved the category “foreign women”).

### *Love between people in legal texts*

Four different objects of love are mentioned in legal text, in cases where people love other people: one's master (Exod. 21:5; Deut. 15:16), one's wife (Deut. 21:15–16), the foreigner (גר; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:10), and the fellow Israelite (Lev. 19:18). Of these, the first two cases follow characteristics of mythic love, except the aspect of particularity, as the genre does not talk about particular people: a slave loving his master more than his freedom, and a husband loving one wife more than the other. Love in these cases is spontaneous and goes against the socially expected, these are, then, transitional cases: they have some characteristics of mythic love, but they are being generalized and turned into a rule, not a unique case, and in this respect they are theoretical. In the case of the slave, love results in physical proximity of the lover (slave) to the loved (master/family), as we have seen in the mimetic strategy in the Song of Songs; in the case of the husband, loving one wife more than the other, the lover (husband) wants to benefit the loved (one wife) more than expected, as was the case in mythic cognition, only here, the law is resisting this *outcome of love*, indicating that he may not do so.

The next two cases, of people loving the foreigner and the fellow Israelite, we also find an innovation of theoretic *cognition*: a command to love, but the other aspect, benefiting the loved one, is still there. The command to love will be the common usage in the next category.

### *The command to love*

The command to love is the most prevailing use of the verb "to love" in legal texts, and in most cases (except those mentioned above) the object of love is God; an example is: "This commandment which I command you to do, to love the Lord your God" (Deut. 11:22).<sup>21</sup>

More has been written about love in legal texts than other loves in the Bible. Mostly in the context of ancient Near Eastern parallels, emphasizing the hierarchical aspects of the verb. But this strict hierarchical aspect is an innovation of the theoretic cognitive strategy; in the previous strategies, it was the disregard to hierarchy and correctness that was characteristic of the usage, and the fact that love went against social norms. Love brought about a turn in history, precisely because it went against the expectation.

Three things changed in love when used in texts which represent a theoretic cognitive strategy in its core: first, that love has a reason, second, it is done intentionally, and third, love is beneficial for the lover (e.g., when the people love God they get a fertile land) and not to the loved one, as was in the mythic cognition. These characteristics stand in contrast to previous cognitive strategies where love was spontaneous and unintentional, sometime to the level of harming the lover (like Jacob who had to work seven more years for Laban), and it moved the lover to endow the loved with benefits.

Conceptualizing the usage of the verb "to love" in theoretic cognition in comparison with its usage in the mimetic and mythic cognitions render the following:

- **Sexual context:** This was the major focus in mimetic cognition, one of the options in mythic one, and hardly ever the focus in theoretic cognition.

- **Particularity:** Particularity goes against the idea of theoretic cognition, since this cognition focuses on inducing universal concepts and categories. Therefore it is hardly found in legal texts, and when they are (such as God loving the forefathers), God is the one loving, and the texts are not legal text per se, but are framing them. This notion continues its beginnings at the end of the continuum of mythic cognition, where the protagonists stood for more than their own particular person, such as David standing for his whole dynasty and Solomon loving a category of women.
- **Irregularity of the action:** Being a rule that has to be followed, theoretic love hardly leaves room for love to be abnormal in legal context. What might be “left over” from the abnormality is found in the framing narratives (God loves the Israelites more than other nations), and as the demand for preference of God over all other gods.
- **Coercion:** This is perhaps the most innovative aspect of theoretic cognition: love is not coercive, but is dependent on the will of the lover; only in this manner, can a command to love (God) be issued.
- **Incentivizing action:** This aspect of love is greatly transformed in texts of theoretic cognition. The one who performs the action in legal text is God, when he is making the land and the people fertile. But God is not the one who loves in legal texts, he is the one loved. This is a complete role reversal from what we saw in the other forms of cognitions.<sup>22</sup>
- **Hierarchical relation:** This was much emphasized by previous scholars (Ackerman 2002; van Wolde 2008, 16–17), but is in fact typical mainly of theoretic cognition, resulting from the artifact being of a generalized nature, and of God commanding it. One may argue that also in mythic cognition one finds hierarchies of the persons involved (husband loving wife, parent loving offspring), but these hierarchies are stricter and more emphatic in the theoretic cases, where one is commanded to love.

## Discussion

Many studies have been devoted to the verb or the concept “love” in the Bible. The intention of this study was to show the advantages of taking a cognitive evolutionary approach, particularly the stages of cognitive evolution suggested by Merlin Donald in *Origins of the Modern Mind*. Assigning various biblical texts to these stages was based on the type of cognitive strategy behind the text, which in general overlap with literary genres, and not on textual sources of the Bible. This categorization yielded results which have otherwise not been apparent, and even resulted in a somewhat skewed understanding of the meaning of אהב (“to love”).

I chose to follow one verb, *to love* (אהב), not assuming a semantics of romantic love, with all its modern associations, or any other emotion or feeling, but instead, to analyze its usage according to the action associated with it. By this, the current study differs from the work of Kazen (2011, 6, 37–41), who looked at how the modern notion of “empathy” is used as an argumentation in legal texts in the Bible; so he



was not restricting himself to a particular verb, but searched for the modern notion. Similarly, Mirguet (2016, 455), in her study, was not focusing on a particular verb when she studied the response to the pain of others in the biblical text (intentionally not verbalizing this action in any modern emotional term). In another aspect Mirguet's and my study are similar in that they both look for the action, a "cluster of actions" as formulated by Mirguet, or as "incentive to act" as I phrased it, to understand the meaning of biblical emotions.

The study began with the Song of Songs; this book exhibits many aspects of mimetic cognition, being of poetic nature with a possible performative function as well as being devoid of a firm narrative (as in mythic artifacts) or universal categorization (as in theoretic ones). Mimetic artifacts are not common in the biblical corpus, given that this cognitive strategy is preverbal and thus not easily represented in verbal artifacts such as the Bible. Love in this context is in nexus to sexuality, albeit it is happening in the "soul" (*nephesh*); it is directed from the subject to a particular person, and thus it is one-sided; it forces the agent to move into action, an action which is irregular in its scope—judging by the reactions of the environment; the core of the action is seeking proximity with the loved.

In the Song of Songs the sole agent of "to love" is a woman, and other verbs are used to describe the attraction of the male protagonist; the uni-directionality seems to be inherent, since the overwhelming incentive to act (getting up from bed, searching the city, finding, grabbing, bringing home) is what typifies the verb "to love," and is the cause of the union. If both are interested in the union, there is no need for action so irregular in its scope.

A notion that has been extensively discussed by scholars is the prevalence in the Bible of male agents of love in comparison to female ones. This has been interpreted as a sign of the hierarchical nature of the love relations (Ackerman 2002; Van Wolde 2008) or its manliness nature (Brenner 1997, 18). The data from the Song of Songs shows a different picture: it is the woman who loves, and there is no indication for hierarchical concern. By ignoring or setting aside the data of the Song of Songs, scholars misinterpreted the meaning of love, and it became gendered in a skewed manner.

Since women are anyway underrepresented in the Bible, the statistical data regarding their being the agent or subject of the verb "to love" is less revealing, beyond recognizing their underrepresentation.<sup>23</sup>

The one-sidedness of love has also been lamented by scholars (Ackerman 2002, 457; Brenner 1997, 17; de Wolde, 19), but the expectation for love to be reciprocal is associated with the modern use of the verb, and expresses modern values. Reciprocity was not associated with the biblical verb, and this is not part of the semantics of the biblical word, as I explained above.

So the biblical verb in its mimetic context seems to indicate an obsession that makes the agent be overactive in appropriating a uniquely preferred subject. In the Song of Songs the obsession was of feminine erotic nature, which seems to lead to sexual relations. The male protagonist in the Song of Songs seems to comply with the sexual possibility, a compliance which is argued by the verbs other than "love," such as *libavtini* (Song 4:9, "ravished my heart") or *hirhivuni* (Song 6:5, "they have overcome me").

The moralistic aspect associated with love in the modern culture was not there in the mimetic strategy.<sup>24</sup>

In biblical narratives, the sexual association, proximity, and obsessiveness of love transform when expressed in mythic cognition.

In some of the stories we find sexual contexts, but it is very much toned down since, as Brenner indicated, a man loves his wife (and thus sexuality is assumed), but love happens mostly not prior to sex, as in Song of Songs, but after the marriage, and possibly without direct connection to sexuality (Brenner 1997, 16). Elkanah's love of Hannah is such an example, and also Isaac loving Rebekah. Interestingly, whenever a manly love precedes sex, the sex that follows is portrayed as a rape (Amnon and Tamar, Shechem and Dinah), unless the man does not initiate sexual relation, at least not until marriage took place, such as in the case of Jacob loving Rachel.

In contexts other than sexual, אהב ("to love") in mythic cognition indicates the preference of a unique individual beyond what he or she deserves according to their social status. This is actualized in terms of endowing of food or clothes, friendship (i.e., a relation that disregards social status) or support. This notion of mythic love is a transformation of the irregularity of the action we saw in the mimetic cognition.

We found a continuum which runs from the private personal narratives, telling about the preference of a particular person (such as Elkanah loving Hannah) all the way to the preference of a category of people (in the story of Solomon loving foreign women), the former changing the course of history because the biblical protagonists are the ancestors of the nation, and the latter being a direct theo-political narrative used to establish current values.

Theoretic cognition expresses itself in a universal manner, which goes beyond the particular time, space, and person. This study focused on texts of legal nature (not necessarily the legal collections in the Bible), which formulate their message in a universal, or a generalized manner. Some of these instructional texts talk about inter-human love (a slave to his master, or a man to one of his wives), and, contrary to narrative texts, the insistence of these text is to keep the social structure (by instructing the husband to go against his love, for example) and not allowing the protagonist to ignore these norms. However, in the majority of legal texts, the Israelites are the most prevailing subject of the verb to love, the object being God.

The command to love God contradicts some aspects of the verb as we have seen earlier: love now is not spontaneous nor coercive, but planned and executed at will; it does not lead the agent to endow favors on the loved one, but on the contrary, the one who loves receives advantages from the loved (God).

Based on Moran's recognition of the hierarchical nature of "love" in the Deuteronomic legal texts, Ackerman studied the use of "love" in narrative, to see if the usage there overlaps with Moran's observations. Ackerman found that "love" in the Bible is one-sided and of hierarchical nature.<sup>25</sup> As we saw above, one-sidedness seems to be inherent in the verb "to love" in its biblical usage. With regard to the hierarchical nature, Ackerman's understanding can be influenced by Moran's, the latter being based on the study of Deuteronomy. Learning from the Deuteronomic-political usage about the personal meaning of love is "going backwards," not chronologically, but in terms of cultural evolution, not starting from the biological to the cultural. Ignoring the Song of Songs data leads scholars to ascribe hierarchy to the basic meaning of "to love" in the Bible, and this understanding is skewed.



There are only a few cases where God is the loving subject, and in those cases the Bible has him love the fathers three times (Deut. 4:37, 10:15, 23:6), the Israelites three times (Deut. 7:8,13, and in a political–narrative context 1 Kgs. 10:9) and once as a reason to love the foreigner, because God loves them (Deut. 10:18). This picture completely changes when the prophetic books are taken into consideration. There, the love of God toward his people is prevailing in both direct description and in metaphoric usage. It is, thus, an innovative move of the prophetic books, which is reshaping of the legal discourse into a narrative one, and by this changing the engagement of the people with these texts, and their accessibility; but discussing this topic goes beyond the limits set for this paper.

When cultural evolutionary categories are employed, a new level of understanding of the ancient sources unfolds. The old typifications of “love” in the Bible as being one-sided and hierarchical are shown now to be only part of the picture, and does not help understand the essential use of the verb and the nature of the phenomenon.

