



Dov Lerner, Berel. *Human-Divine Interactions in the Hebrew Scriptures: Covenants and Cross-Purposes*. London and New York: Routledge. 2024. 150 pp.

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This volume aims to be a comprehensive reading of the Old Testament by shedding light on the divine project of creating a world worthy of existence. As the author himself explicitly states, the present work's intention is to look back to all the biblical stories that involve some sort of godly interactions with humans to understand God's nature and motivations. By examining the Pentateuch and other books of the Scripture, the author analyses the several ways according to which divine interventions in human history have both threatened and prevented the extinction of humanity. God's project of creating the worthiest world traces back to the Genesis narration of the Flood, which describes the massive destruction of the humankind. The project continues through the Patriarchal and post-Patriarchal eras, leading to the foundation of Israel and the fulfilment of His covenant with humans. The number of quotations from the Scriptures used by the author helps the reader to follow the description of the various events, all the more so when the English translation is compared to the original Hebrew. Nevertheless, despite the book's comprehensive scope and overall success, the lack of a proper conclusion may leave the reader unsatisfied. The narration that conducts us from the event of the Flood to the foundation of Israel, feels incomplete without a final closure that could have helped to synthesize and, most importantly, highlighted the final goal of the work.

The twelve chapters that structure the book follow the chronological and historiographical descriptions of biblical narratives. Within these chapters, the author found recurring themes that guide his interpretation of biblical events. Drawing on philosophical, theological, Rabbinic, and political literatures, Dov Lerner analyzes the difference between divine and human moral and ethical motivations and commitments. The author also highlighted the necessity to distinguish between an *imitatio Dei* as a "play to be God" by humans – which the author strictly condemns, especially from a political standpoint – and "the idea that moral attributes and modes of action attributed to God have direct application to the way humans should live" (p. 20). Another interpretative line that the author revises and extensively follows is the epistemic status of humans when facing God's decisions, interventions, and, eventually, absences.

From chapter one to five, the exposition is devoted to the motives and the modalities of God's interventions in humans' history, along with the distinction between God's and humans' moral commitments. The first chapter is focused on the narration of the Flood and the election of Noah as the chosen one to save the various species of His creation so to rebuild



a worthier world. By facing the destruction of the world He created, God makes an oath to humans: “*nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done*” (Gen. 8, 21), declaring His loyalty to this world. However, the responsibility of keeping the world as good as possible is also in humans’ hands: God asks them to enforce justice among themselves. The political tone of the book, despite not explicit, is present especially regarding the formation of laws and norms functional for the final establishment of Israel. Since God’s covenant with humans, they are now entitled to create a worthy and good society; nevertheless, the author presents the puzzle of Sodom and Gomorrah as the turning point for the distinction between godly and humans’ moral commitments. In this narration, Abraham is introduced as a biblical hero: by interceding with God, he tried to save the two wicked cities, since he viewed the destruction of them under a human ethic, rather than a godly one. The second chapter analyzes the intervention of God in fertility and reproductive ability of humans, starting from the blessing of Adam and Eve in the Garden before the sin, and the damnation to hard work and painful labour after the fall. The author’s interpretation traces back to the possibility to resist God’s punishments, focusing on humans’ free will and, consequently, the possibility to act differently from God’s intentions. The same theme is present also in the third chapter, where, again, the difference between humans’ and God’s moral commitment prevents King Saul from committing genocide against Amalek (1 Sam.), leading the king to fail both in piety and in statesmanship. The ethical dilemma *par excellence* in the Scriptures – the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham, the *Akedah* – is then examined. Here the author correctly presents some philosophical interpretations (Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s), concluding that the binding of Isaac would not have ended in his murder, due God’s promise to Abraham to “maintain My covenant with him [Isaac] as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come” (Gen. 17, 19). After depicting in chapter four God’s conversation with Satan and the story of Job as a manifestation of “divine humanism” (p. 58), by placing the humankind at the centre of His interests – an interesting and convincing argumentation by the author, the fifth chapter is devoted to the actual foundation of Israel. The author interprets the dispersion of Babel by God as the enactment of His plan to create Israel, since Babel was about to be a “super-nation” (*ivi* 63), in which all humanity could have lived together. Since God’s promise not to destroy the world He laid His loyalty to, and given the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah previously exposed, there would have been the risk of not having a foreign empire available into which to send Babel’s resident to exile but rather annihilate all humanity once again.

Chapters from six to ten are particularly devoted to the epistemic role of the human-divine interactions. Recalling the importance of fertility and reproductive capacities controlled by God, the author states how the role of each Patriarch and Matriarch is to ensure a successor who will inherit the oath God has made with Abraham. It is this re-enactment of the covenant that allows us, humans, to know about the presence of God in the world (*ivi* 69). The author comes to this conclusion by analysing “the Covenant of the Pieces” (Gen. 15, 9-21), according to which it has been revealed to Israelites their future enslavement in Egypt. This covenant has been interpreted to be unilateral since God has promised the Land to Abraham without demanding any commitments on his part: failing the covenant would have meant the death of God, interpreted by the author in a Nietzschean meaning. Here, the author distinguishes between “God as the Creator” and “God of the covenant,” Whose presence in the world depends upon the Israelites, to which He made the oath. By exposing Elijah’s empirical test



of religious claims (1 Kings, 18), the author defends the idea that the epistemic ability of a pre-scientific society lacks disciplines, opening the biblical historiography to historical critique. With chapter seven the author exposes what he defines the epistemic decline of the Patriarchal era: Joseph, Isaac's eleventh son, is the figure of this decline, due to his misinterpretations of dreams. Before Joseph, dreams were comprehensive messages from God, while post-patriarchal dreams are ambiguous, lacking clarity, and of explicit divine authority. Another sign of the epistemic decline is the progressive missing of God's name, i.e. *Hashem*, in the Scriptures: it would be only in the Exodus that Moses will know God in terms of *Hashem*, meaning that humans acquainted themselves with God "as active in history" (p. 86). Chapter eight is devoted to show how Joseph's interpretative failure is the prediction of the future enslavement of Israel in Egypt, whose epistemic value, in chapter nine, is represented by the loss of both temporality and agency. The whole enslavement – that "happens because it has to happen" (ivi 94) – and redemption in Egypt is convincingly interpreted by the author to be a meditation on the concept of temporality and agency of Israel, through the "harsh work", the *befarekh*, as the pointless and oppressive labour that the Pharaoh imposed over the Israelites to control their reproductivity. This kind of control, however, fails to succeed. During the period of enslavement, the Scriptures lack any direct reference to time, age, and future of the slaves' condition: the author interprets this to be a dehumanization tool that is restored with the Paschal Sacrifice, described in chapter ten. The restoration of temporality comes with Israel's renewal of agency, and consequently with the improvement of their epistemic status under Moses. In chapter eleven, Moses' miracles and direct contact with God helped him to establish his prophetic authority; however, the author points out how his influence may be a risk for idolatry by Israel, underlying once again the importance of distinguishing between God's and human's actions. For this reason, God prevents Moses from entering the Promised Land, leaving the guiding role of Israel to Joshua. A great part of the eleventh chapter is devoted to the figure of Moses, to his miracles, his leadership during the war with Amalek, and to the actual humanity of the prophet: "But Moses' hands grew heavy" (Ex. 17, 12). It is the author's contention to appoint the Torah's description of Moses' frailty as the manifestation of his human status, rather than divine. The last chapter of the book is devoted to the Book of Esther and the Book of Ruth. The author exposes, through these two female figures, the vision of a life within the covenant of God but without the supernatural and miraculous intervention of God in the natural order.

The book gives a comprehensive overlook of the biblical narrations of the formation of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. The divine intervention named in the title is extensively investigated in the analyses made by the author, whose presence in the argumentations is well justified, leaving space for the readers to follow one or more interpretative lines highlighted through the book. As mentioned earlier, the lack of a conclusive chapter that could have summarized the various biblical events described, may leave the reader without a univocal, straightforward interpretation of the work, thus conveying a general sense of incompleteness. Nevertheless, despite its Jewish perspective, as acknowledged by Dov Lerner, the book is accessible to readers of various theoretical and religious backgrounds, regardless of their prior knowledge on the topic.

