

The Use of Agapao and Phileo in John 21

Introduction

In studying John 21 from the Greek text many have noticed that Jesus uses two different words for love (*agapao* and *phileo*) when addressing Peter. From this it has been assumed that there is a necessary difference in meaning. In this paper I will discuss this issue and will attempt to show that there is good reason to believe that Jesus simply used these words synonymously.

The dialog between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17 is as follows:

Jesus	ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων	Do you love me more than these?
Peter	σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε	You know that I love you.
Jesus	ἀγαπᾷς με	Do you love me?
Peter	σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε	You know that I love you.
Jesus	φιλεῖς με	Do you love me?
Peter	σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε	You know that I love you.

Two Major Understandings Stemming from the 19th Century

In 1880 Richard Trench published his book *Synonyms of the New Testament* (now reprinted by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985). In one chapter of book he deals with the relationship of *agapao* and *phileo*. Trench studies out these words and gleans a distinction shown in the literature of Xenophon (435-355 BC, Greek historian), Cicero (106-43 BC, Roman philosopher), and other non-Biblical Greek sources. That distinction is then transported onto the Biblical text of John 21.

His studies show that *agapao* expressed a "reasoning attachment, of choice and selection . . . from a seeing in the object upon whom it is bestowed which is worthy of regard." (pp. 41-42). *Agapao* is then seen as more a term of "respect and reverence" while *phileo* is "more instinctive, is more of feelings or natural affections, implies more passion." (p. 42).

Applying this to John 21 and Jesus' use of these words Trench concludes that when Jesus asked Peter the first time if he loved him using *agapao*, it was "far too cold" (p. 42) for Peter. This causes Peter to respond with *phileo* attempting to convey to Jesus that he really had great affection and not just respect for him. The same thing happens with Jesus repeating his question the second time. Finally on the 3rd question, when Jesus uses *phileo* in his question about Peter's love for him, Peter "triumphed" (p. 43) in that Jesus used *phileo*, the very term Peter wanted Jesus to understand about his relationship with Jesus. Hence the dialogue has within it not a desire of Jesus to attempt to see what type of love Peter had for Jesus, but Peter attempting to get Jesus to recognize that he really had the greatest type of love for Jesus.

For Trench, *agapao* is more a choosing to respect another without any passion implied. *Phileo* is the "higher" term indicating passion and affection.

In 1881 B. F. Westcott in his commentary *The Gospel of St. John* (reprinted by Wm. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971) claimed that *agapao* was the "higher love" and the "loftier word" (p. 303) and that *phileo* was merely a feeling of affection, "the feeling of natural love" (p. 303). This claim led to his interpretation that in the John 21 dialogue, Jesus was calling Peter to a higher love (as indicated by Jesus' use of *agapao*), but Peter was only able to muster a *phileo* (friendship love). With the 3rd question about Peter's love for Jesus, Jesus goes to Peter's level and asks him if he even has *phileo* for him and tests even "the truth of the feeling which St. Peter claimed" (p. 303). Jesus no longer uses *agapao* but *phileo*, a lower form of love.

The interpretation goes like this: Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me with God's (the highest) type of love"? Peter says, "I love you as a friend." Jesus asks again, "Do you love me with God's type of love? Peter's response is, "I love you as a friend." Then Jesus asks a third time, "Peter, do you love me even as a friend?" Peter responds, "Yes, I love you as a friend."

In both of the above interpretations there are issues which must be dealt with when doing word studies in order to arrive at the best understanding of the meaning of any word in its context. First of all, Trench has imported from extra-Biblical sources (and sources that are not contemporary with the New Testament) some connotations for *phileo* and *agapao* which may not have existed at the time of Jesus or which may not have been intended by the author, John. If so, this would be an example of an anachronistic interpretation and would be hermeneutically unsound. One must first research the meanings of words within the writer (John), then the New Testament, and then allow extra-Biblical meanings come in to interpret the text *only* when they are contemporary and when one can be sure that they are warranted. Where is Trench's support that the meanings he proposes are still distinguishable in the New Testament times and that they are what John intended here? I do not believe he has made this case a compelling one. The controlling meaning for any word in a text must be based on its meaning contemporary with that day and the use of the word by the author of the text in question. This is not what Trench has done.

As for Westcott's understanding, the assumption is made that *agapao* is a "higher form" of love: It is God's love, a higher form than *phileo*. But is this really the case? As will be seen later in this paper, I believe there is good reason to doubt this assumption. (Note: I am considering only the verbs *agapao* and *phileo* and their use here, not the nouns *agape* and *philia*).

Both of the above positions and their assumptions preclude the possibility that these two verbs may be used synonymously. It is that assumption that I will now examine.

Agapao and Phileo in John 21:15-17

Here I will attempt to show that the assumption that the use of different words for love in Jesus' and Peter's dialogue necessitates a difference in their meanings is not warranted.

This will be shown to be the case by (1) John's/Jesus' uses *phileo* and *agapao* in John's gospel and (2) John's use of synonyms in John 21.

The use of agapao and phileo in John's writings

In the Gospel of John the word *phileo* is very frequently encountered. It is used of the Father's love for the Son (5:20), Jesus' love for Lazarus (11:3, 36), of men loving life (12:25), of the world loving you (15:19), of the Father loving the disciples (16:27), of Jesus loving John the Apostle (20:2), and Jesus' questioning Peter in John 21. In Revelation (also a writing of John) this word is used of the type of love that God has when he rebukes his children (3:19) as well as of people loving falsehood (22:15).

Hence the word *phileo* has a broad range of meaning. It is used to describe the Father's relationship with the Son, Jesus' love for Lazarus, the Father for the disciples, Jesus for John, as well as the negative of men loving life and the world loving us.

The word *agapao* in John is used also to describe many different relationships. It is used of God loving men (3:16), of the Father loving the Son (3:35), of people loving Jesus if God is their Father (8:42), the rationale for God loving Jesus (i.e., he lays down his life, 10:17), Jesus' love for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha (11:5), Jesus' love for John the Apostle (13:23), and love for one another (15:12,17). It is used many times in connection with obedience. Without obedience to Jesus or God, this love for God does not exist (see 8:42 (context 8:39-47), 14:15, 21, 23, 24, 31; 15:9-14. *Agapao* also has a negative side in that it encompasses worldly love. It is used in John 3:19 for men loving darkness and in 12:43 of those loving the praise of men.

In summary, one can see that these two words in John are both used to describe love between God and Jesus, Jesus and people, and people and the world. There does not seem to be a distinction in their use in the Gospel of John. If one determines that there *must* be a distinction then he needs to find that distinction *each* time the words are used in what seems to be a similar fashion. For instance, John is called the "one whom Jesus loved" using both *agapao* and *phileo* (20:2; 19:26). Should we then determine that in one place Jesus loved John with a higher form of love and the other place a lower form of love? I think not. The same question could be asked of the Father's love for the Son (5:20; 3:35). Did He love Jesus with a high form of love in one place and a lower form in another?

The insistence of seeing a distinction in meaning of these two words each time they are used seems artificial. Could not they just be synonyms?

The use of Synonyms John 21

If the use of synonyms is part of John's/Jesus' style in this gospel we have even more reason to see these words as synonyms here in John 21. To this we now turn.

Within the dialogue of Jesus and Peter we see several synonyms used. Note the following:

<i>Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου</i>	feed my lambs
<i>Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου</i>	take care of my sheep
<i>Βόσκει τὰ πρόβατά μου</i>	feed my sheep

Note how *Βόσκει* and *Ποίμαινε* are both words for tending or feeding livestock and *ἀρνία* and *πρόβατά* are both words for sheep. Should we look for hidden meanings here from the fact that different words are used, or just accept them as synonymous?

Another example here is Peter's response use of the word "know." In responding to Jesus, Peter, the first two times, says, "Lord, you know (oida) I love you." Then the last time he says, you know (ginosko) that I love you". Should we infer from this that there is a hidden meaning, a different type of knowing expressed by Peter in the third answer when compared with the first two? I think not. It would seem more plausible to see John as simply using these terms as synonyms since there is no compelling reason to the contrary to assume these words had different intended meanings.

Others have also come to this conclusion that the use of the words *phileo* and *agapao* in John 21 are synonymous. Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich say (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1974, p. 4), "*ἀγαπαω* and *φιλεω* seem to be used interchangeably here, cf., the freq. interchange of synonyms elsewh. in the same chapter."

W. Gunther and H. G. Link (*Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 542-43) say *agapao* and *phileo* are used synonymously in Jn 3:35 and 5:20 (cf. 16:27) "of the Father's love for the Son, and in Jn. 21:15 ff., when Jesus asked Peter whether he loved him and in Peter's reply". Gunther and Link go on to say, "The attempts of B. F. Wescott and others to find significance in the variation between these two verbs in Jn 21:15 ff. have now generally been abandoned-the more so because opposite and mutually inconsistent conclusions have been drawn from the variation (as by Wescott on the one hand, and R. C. Trench on the other)".

Conclusion

It is my conclusion that there is no reason to assume that just because two different Greek words (*agapao* and *phileo*) are used here in John 21, that there is necessarily a difference in meaning. On the contrary, there is evidence to compel one to see them as synonyms since John uses several synonyms in the same passage without any identifiable or intended differences in meanings.

(Note: Could it be that since Jesus emphasized obedience as a sign of true love in John's gospel (see above) that he is here simply bringing home the point to Peter that if he really loved him he needed to obey him in taking care of the sheep?)

(Also another note: It would seem that the question put to Peter was the same each time as is seen in the use of the numbers "second" and "third". If it were a different question, it would not seem to have been a questioning a "third" time. Hence, the third question

would not be different in nature. This would give more reason for Peter being "hurt" or "sad" because Jesus asked him the same thing a third time.)

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