

CHAPTER 3

Relations of Love in Texts Read by Early Christians

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Abstract: Religious texts talk about love. The present paper comments on a few texts read by early Christians. There are several texts in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), and in the New Testament, where the specific Jewish-Christian word *agapē*, translated “love”, occurs. The texts were originally used in contexts where relations between humans followed norms that are not immediately recognizable to us, and words describing relations refer to experiences, emotions and ideas partly foreign to late modern readers. In the Gospel of John love is envisaged in hierarchical relations. God is the supreme. John’s Jesus calls him the Father. Jesus has kept his Father’s commandments, and Jesus passes the commandment to love on to believers, those below him in the hierarchy. In the book of Deuteronomy Jewish and Christian readers could hear that the Lord had “set his heart in love” on their ancestors (Deut 10). The assertion is surrounded by several commandments, expressing what the Lord requires of those involved in the divine love relation. These formulations seem originally to have been couched in the political language of the time. How relevant can these texts be for late modern notions of divine love and human love?

Keywords: love relations, commandment, love of God, political context, social experiences, semantics

Introduction

The texts discussed in this paper belong to the sacred scriptures of Christianity. They are therefore important for later Christian conceptions of love.

Religious texts talk about love. It goes without saying that love is a central topic in Christian and in other religious texts. Love is written about

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endlessly in both philosophical treatises and popular songs. The present essay contains comments on a selection of passages from texts read by early Christians. My interest is in semantics – that is, notions and emotions potentially activated by linguistic signs. The essay singles out the interrelation between meaning and context, points to changes in communication contexts and discusses the implication of those changes for what the textual signs mean.

Perspectives

The present essay discusses historical readings of texts, asking about the notions and emotions of early Christian readers. This brings out the contrasts with our late modern contexts. Concerning these contrasts, there are several important circumstances to consider, a couple of which will be mentioned here. Firstly, the Israelite, early Jewish and early Christian texts were written by men. These texts were authored by, and read with, an androcentric mindset that supposed men to be the stronger sex, to be superior in public affairs and in family businesses, to be better equipped than women to live virtuously, and to be more capable of controlling their desires than women, for women were considered rationally weaker and more easily driven by passions; moreover, this mindset presupposed that communication of literary texts normally took place among men. The specific character of that mindset is foreign to late modern reading contexts, but is highly relevant for the readings of texts about love. Secondly, the texts and the first sympathetic readings – even of the early Christian texts that later became canonical – cannot be supposed to represent authoritative or mainstream early Christianity. The authors were men hoping to impart their wisdom to others. An author like Paul from Tarsus never meant his writings to be sacred texts; they were meant to be part of an educational dialogue with fellow believers. Furthermore, a literary text like the Gospel of John writes itself into a literary tradition, through formulations, allusions, citations and references. The use and understanding of these texts required a certain measure of literacy on behalf of the users. Hence, if we search for an early Christian theology about love, these texts should be heard as voices partaking in an ancient interlocution about god-relations and ethos.

It is a challenge to discuss the meaning of ancient texts about love and in that discussion to take full account of the presuppositions formed in the cultural tradition to which we belong. For my part I cannot claim to know thoroughly how love is dealt with in this tradition. To me it exists as fragments from an education, and in the general language of our culture, not least the Christian culture, which I am strongly influenced by. Love is perhaps the most striking positively-charged word in our culture. When we talk about it, we take care not to destroy it. We would like to amplify it, to spell out its positive values, maybe because we would not know how to live without love. Should such positive amplification seem absent from the present essay, it is the result of an attempt to focus on a critical reading of texts from another age. This can easily produce a somewhat narrowed perspective.

Trying to follow a path in the forest of many texts and interesting perspectives, this paper sees love as a term of *relation*.¹ When talking about loving one's neighbour, it is obvious that relations between humans constitute the "habitat" of this term. When we talk of relations in our religious studies disciplines, it is natural to link the term to areas and themes like social relations, social roles, power in relations, relations that knit groups together and give groups identity, and also to lack of relations, or negatively charged relations, which mark the boundaries between groups. It is also relevant to link relations to values. Morality is about relations and it seems obvious that love is a main principle in the morality reflected in the texts of the early Christians. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, love is also relevant for the God-human relation. Therefore, love is also a theological term. Some of these issues will be touched upon in the following. And one further issue: talk about quality in relations refers, amongst other things, to the experiential or emotional dimension of interpersonal relations.

There are many texts in the Christian Bible that either contain a word for love or deal with topics that we relate to the concept of love. I shall comment on a small selection of texts which have become important in Christian tradition and which seem to refer to the kinds of relations mentioned

1 For "love as relation", see the Bible theological study by Feldmeier and Spieckermann, 2011, pp. 99–102, for an emphasis on relations, where love is an aspect.

above. We start with a text in the Gospel of John, where both the God–human relation and the human–human relation are qualified by love.

A Command to Love in the Gospel of John

Jesus said, [...] ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love (*agapaō*) one another. Just as I have loved (*agapaō*) you, you also should love (*agapaō*) one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love (*agapē*) for one another.² (John 13)

In this saying, two relations are paralleled in terms of the quality love. Firstly, however, some comments on the words used. The words translated “love” here are the Greek verb *agapaō* and the noun *agapē*. Many Christians know, and those who have studied Christian religion have learned, that *agapē* is the prominent word for Christian love. This is elaborated on in other essays in the present volume.³ In classical Greek and in Koiné Greek, *agapē* was a rare word. It had a rather limited use and was not the common Greek word for notions we would translate with “love”. *Eros* and *philia* were the most frequently used Greek words for “love”. *Agapaō* could mean “to be satisfied with something” (Stauffer, 1964, p. 36), to “greet with affection”, to “be fond of”.⁴ The word *eros* is not found in The New Testament, while *philia* is found once (“friendship [*philia*] with the world”, James 4:4). The verb *phileō* occurs just over 20 times. It may mean “like” (“they love [*phileō*] to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues”, Matt 23:6), or “kiss” (“the one I will kiss [*phileō*] is the man”, Mark 14:44), but is also used in contexts similar to those where *agapē* is used: “Whoever loves (*phileō*) father or mother more than me ...” (Matt 10:37); “The Father loves (*phileō*) the Son ...” (John 5:20); “for the Father himself loves (*phileō*) you, because you have loved (*phileō*) me and have believed that I came from God” (John 16:27). In the scene recounted near the end of the gospel, two words occur in a striking

2 The translations of the texts from the Bible are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), 1989.

3 See esp. the essay by Torstein T. Tollefsen in the present publication.

4 Liddel & Scott, 1940 (*A Greek-English Lexicon*).

combination: “Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love (*agapaō*) me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love (*phileō*) you’. [...] He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love (*phileō*) me?’” (John 21:15–17).

In the New Testament, *agapaō/agapē* is the most frequent word for love. “Words from the *agapē* family occur 341 times and are found in every book of the NT”;⁵ I am not suggesting, though, that “love” is thereby conceptualised in an entirely new way, differing clearly from philosophical or other literary notions of love in Greek literature. In the use of *agapē* the NT writers were dependent on the *Septuagint* (LXX), a collection of Greek translations of Hebrew writings. In the 3rd century BC some Jewish scholars initiated a translation of the important Hebrew scriptures into Greek, first of all the Torah, later the Psalms and the Prophets. Probably some time after the birth of Christ, most of the writings we know as “books” in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament were translated. In these translations the Greek word *agapē* became the most prominent word for rendering Hebrew words for love. Thus, the Greek words *agapaō/agapē* entered new contexts and took on new meanings – that is, they experienced new usages. The words obviously then came to refer to notions that in other Greek literature are expressed by *philia* and *erōs*.

We turn to John 13 again. In John 13 the authorial voice renders a commandment. In the literary world of the gospel, it is spoken by the Son of God, and the readers perceive this as a divine commandment.⁶ The ideal reader already believes that the speaker, who gives the new commandment, is the Lord – the dead and then risen and exalted Lord Jesus, “the glorified son of man” (13:31). To give a command presupposes a relation: “I have loved you” – a relation between the Lord Jesus and the believing reader (represented by the listening disciples in the text). This relation is

5 Klassen, 1992. Further Klassen writes: “Acts has only one occurrence of the adjective *agapētos*, but in Luke’s Gospel both noun and verb appear. The *agapē* family is most frequent in some of the shortest books, e.g., 1 John (52x) and Ephesians (22x). It appears in the Pauline writings 96 times (excluding Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles)”.

6 Rudolf Bultmann, 1968, p. 402f. links this saying to the preceding text that recounts that the disciples are left alone because Jesus is going to a place that is off-limits to the disciples. How can the disciples retain the relation to Jesus in this situation of loneliness? This question receives its first answer in the new commandment, v. 34.

linked directly to the other relation, the relation between believers: “that you love one another”. The first relation is a model (paradigm) for the second.

John 13 talks about love between believers. One question concerns the motivation for the commandment for mutual love, and another what the commandment means in terms of mindsets and notions. Motivation is complex, and we might understand something of the motivation communicated in the text if we ask for notions that could have been linked with the sayings. In the present text the link is established through “in the same way as” (Greek *kathōs*): “In the same way as (*kathōs*) I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34). The Lord’s love for the addressees is the example, the pattern to follow.⁷ In other paragraphs the Gospel of John elaborates on the way Jesus has loved the disciples, the believers – for example, later in the text, where the words of the commandment and the relations are developed.⁸ In chapter 15 the Lord teaches:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower [...].⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. [...]⁹ As the Father has loved (*agapaō*) me, so I have loved (*agapaō*) you; abide in my love (*agapē*).¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love (*agapē*), just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love (*agapē*).¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.¹² This is my commandment, that you love (*agapaō*) one another as I have loved (*agapaō*) you.¹³ No one has greater love (*agapē*) than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (*filos*).¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.¹⁵ I do not call you servants (*doulos*)

7 Charles K. Barrett, 1976, p. 377 comments that “the immediate reference is to the feet-washing (cf. vv 14f.); but since this in its turn points to the death of Christ this last must be regarded as the ultimate standard of the love of Christians (cf. 15:13)”. Rudolf Bultmann interprets the commandment in view of the liberating belief that is open to the future, building on the love of the revealer where it is not primarily the how-to-love that is to be learned, but rather that the love of the revealer is the reason for the mutual love between the believers (Bultmann, 1968, p. 403).

8 Bultmann writes that the discourse 15:1–17 comments on 13:34f., where the motivation for the commandment to love was mentioned only briefly in the *kathōs ēgapēsa hymas*. This is now argued more profoundly. Insofar as the commandment to love is developed as the essential content of the loyal faith, it is made clear that faith and love constitute a unity (Bultmann, 1968, p. 406). A similar point is made by Feldmeier & Spieckermann, 2011, p. 440.

any longer, because the servant (*doulos*) does not know what the master (*kyrios*) is doing; but I have called you friends (*filos*), because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love (*agapaō*) one another.

The highest expression of the love spoken of here is a person who puts his life at the disposal of his friends. This probably refers to the knowledge of the author and the readers that the speaker of those words was in fact crucified. It indicates that the passion of Jesus Christ, his cross and crucifixion, serves as an example for the believers in their relations to their fellow believers. This is commented on in The First Letter of John:

¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love (*agapaō*) one another [...] ¹⁶ We know love (*agapē*) by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love (*agapē*) abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love (*agapaō*), not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 John 3:11–18)

The model is found in Jesus Christ giving his life, and the letter points to how it should be practised.⁹ The motif of the passion of Christ is also used by Paul when he talks about his own sufferings (2 Cor 4:7–15).

John 15 starts with metaphorical speech of the vine and the branches, metaphors that are then applied to the readers/listeners. The branches' belonging on the vine means in plain words to "keep my commandments". In many New Testament texts we find the word "commandment" in the context of love¹⁰ (e.g. Matt 22:36–40; John 13:34; 14:15; 14:21; 15:9–17; Rom 13:9; 1 John 2:7–11; 3:22–24; 4:21; 5:2–3; 2 John 4–6). It occurs

9 Both Bultmann and Barrett read the commandment to love in the Gospel as not primarily concerned with morals: according to Bultmann, it is not the case that Jesus, when he is about to leave, establishes an ethical principle as replacement for his presence, a principle generally relevant for human life. In that case the problem of parting, the problem concerning the relation to the vanished revelator, would not be resolved. The relation would be dissolved. The revelator would not be needed anymore (Bultmann, 1968, p. 403). Barrett: "the love of the disciples for one another is not merely edifying, it reveals the Father and the Son" (Barrett, 1976, p. 377).

10 See Barrett, 1976, p. 377.

throughout and is dominant in the text from John 15. We will return to this conjunction of love and commandment below.

Before we leave the Gospel of John, I would like to add a comment on the language of friendship in John 15. The sentences cited above talk about friendship, but not in terms of equality; it is friendship in terms of sharing knowledge. The disciples, these friends of Christ, are given knowledge of a kind that servants or slaves normally do not get.¹¹ We could suggest a semantics referring to slaves obeying orders without knowing their master's plan, without knowing the reason or purpose. In this context, the addressees should know the reason and the purpose of loving one another. The reader should see the bigger picture within which loving the fellow believer makes sense. But this is still not friendship in terms of equality. The relations envisaged here are hierarchical. God is the highest level. John's Jesus calls him the Father. Jesus said: "I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (v. 10), and Jesus gives his commandments to the believers, the ones below him in the hierarchy.

There is one set of relations encompassed by the word "love" which we might see as egalitarian – among the believers who are being exhorted to love one another. They may be thought of as equal. But the focus is not on equality. The bigger picture is a hierarchy, where God, the Father, is on the top, the Son is below him and the Son again gives his commandments to the groups of adherents, to his group of followers:

¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.
(John 15:6–17)

A key statement, both with regard to passages already commented on and to passages to be commented on below, is "You did not choose me but I chose you". In the texts we have read so far God is the active part in

¹¹ According to Bultmann, the difference emphasised here between the friend and servant is the friend's freedom. The freedom is given to the believer through God's revelation (Bultmann, 1968, p. 334), a freedom that includes knowledge of the truth and everything Jesus has heard from his Father (418). Bultmann comments that the friendship is a mutual relationship, but that there is no equality in it (419).

the relation between God and the humans. God loves humans. God's love for humans is the motivation, and the model for the mutual love between humans (the believers).

Other texts reflect the same pattern. In his Letter to the Galatians Paul writes:

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;¹² only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". (Gal 5:13–14)

The phrase "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" is probably a citation from Leviticus 19:18, which seems to be the point of reference for loving one's neighbour in early Christianity. This is also the phrase cited in the so-called "double law of love" in the synoptic Gospels (e.g., Mark 12:30–31). And in 1 John 4:19 we read: "We love because he first loved us". A successor of Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved [*agapēta*] children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1–2). These are texts talking about love relations similarly to the texts in the Gospel of John.

The semantics of utterances expressing the two relations (God–humans, and humans–humans) may inform one another in ways beyond those suggested in the present essay. In theological reasoning the God relation has priority. This relation is the frame within which the idea of love between humans is developed. Widening the perspective, it is interesting to ask in which forms and in which contexts the one relation can motivate the other. Through reasoning, through experiences, and/or through admonition? These issues can follow us when we look at a couple of other texts.

Relations of Love in Deuteronomy

We turn to texts in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy, with the other books of Moses, the Psalms and the book of Isaiah, were books esteemed by the

¹² The Greek term translated "brothers and sisters" is *adelphoi*.

first Christians as classic and authoritative, and were possibly for a long time generally more important literary texts than early Christian writings such as the Gospel of John. In Deuteronomy we find texts speaking of similar relations to those we have seen so far, and also texts which link the God relation to relations between humans. We read:

¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵ yet the Lord set his heart in love [LXX: *agapaō*] on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. (Deut 10:14–15)

Taking a reader's approach, you could figure yourself as the addressee of this text. So, the Lord has chosen to love you. And the expression could activate experiential connotations in a zone we late modern readers might perceive as romantic love: a boy has noticed one girl, the most beautiful girl in the world. There seems to be only one girl in the world. One day you realise that the most amazing thing has happened. She has chosen you out of all other boys in your neighbourhood, in your town, all other boys in the world, no matter how handsome, intelligent or witty they might be; she has chosen you and you are the happiest person in the world. Your overwhelming feelings and your gratitude flow over, you become friendly and generous. From the text:

¹⁵ yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you [...], out of all the peoples [...] ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10)

Let us now involve the literary context: sentences that make the picture more complex, sentences reflecting a development you perhaps would experience in your relation to this girl. She is still the greatest girl in the world, but she shows herself to be demanding; she is controlling; she shows herself to be a jealous lover. So, what does she require of you?

¹² So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. ¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong

to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. ¹⁶Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. ¹⁷For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. (Deut 10)

Verse 12 answers our question with a list of clear demands beginning “Only to ...”. So, are the demands easy to fulfil then? The line-up of requirements does not at all seem easy. With reference to the passages in John we notice the word “commandments” again. The assurance of God’s love is followed up by a request: “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer” (v. 16). We also notice the words about fear and worship (v. 20).

In the context of the present essay it seems at least important to notice the two relations linked together here: God’s love for humans and the love of human for human. Concerning the character of the second relation, the text does not envisage only love for your brothers and sisters, the children of Israel; for it says: “you shall also love the stranger” (v. 19). This, the love of strangers, has two motivations in the text. Firstly, the God who loves you, also loves the strangers. Here, as in John, God’s love is an example for the love between humans. The text explicates the pattern to be followed: God “is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Deut 10:17–18).

The second motivation invites the readers to identify with their forefathers experiences: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (v. 19). A similar reasoning is found in Leviticus 19: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:34).

The texts read so far have referred to God as the active loving part in the God–human relation. To ask for the alternate direction – human love for God – leads us to another interesting, and well-known, text.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart”

In a reading of Deuteronomy, people listening to the passages on how the Lord chose to love them (ch. 10) have already heard the passages in Deut 6. This central Jewish text was presumably well known in early Judaism and among those who became Christians. This text also talks about commandments that are to be observed “so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey” (6:3). At least according to later readings, the subsequent announcement is the central part of the passage: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (6:4), followed by the commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” (6:5). In Deut 6 there is no mention of loving the stranger and also no talk of love in inter-human relations. The focus is the human–God relation and the text even combines love and heart, which creates a resonance with a modern romantic way of talking about love.

The text further suggests traits in the Lord’s character as lover. The Lord your God is a jealous lover. The Lord is watching you to see that you love only him and no one else, and not only outwards, but in your heart – that is, in your will: “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (v. 5). You shall keep his words in your heart – that is, you shall

recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:7–9)

The words of the person you are supposed to love, your king, your master or superior, shall be in your consciousness day and night,¹³ at home and away, you shall recite them, talk about them, they shall be your identity,

¹³ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann interpret the notion of God’s jealousy in a somewhat different direction, linking it to the side of God’s love that is willing to forgive (Feldmeier & Spieckermann, 2011, pp. 33–134. See also p. 102).

who you are (“bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead”). His words shall be (like) the wedding ring on your finger. There is no place of your own anymore. God is a jealous lover, and his love controls all your thoughts, all your time, all your places. There are no exits, there is no *exodus*, except death. If you break up, if you try to escape, he will hunt you down and “destroy you from the face of the earth” (6:15).

This line of thought may, to our sensibility, refer to violence between previously romantic lovers. In a historical reading these sentences should, however, rather be thought of in political terms: “The jealousy of the biblical god is a political affect, roused by the wrongdoing of a contractual partner rather than the infidelity of a beloved” (Assmann, 2010, p. 38). The notion, then, is more that if you try to run away he will treat you like a deserter. The Exodus myth is explicitly referred to at the end of Deut 6 as the decisive chapter in the relationship between Israel and the Lord God. According to Jan Assmann,¹⁴ within the Jewish and Christian tradition the Exodus myth depicts a transition, where religion

places itself on a strict normative footing (the laws) [...]; it gives itself the form of a “covenant” (*b’rit*), modeled on a political alliance, according to which Israel not only agrees to become the people of god, but god likewise vows to become the god of a people. (Assmann, 2010, p. 112)

And these political relations also concern the heart. According to Assmann, this religious form fosters

a higher degree of consciousness because [...] the distinction between truth and lies [...] cuts through the human heart as well, which for the first time becomes the stage upon which the religious dynamic is played out. It may suffice to recall the Shema prayer, which brings god’s oneness into the closest possible connection with the intensity of inner acceptance. (Assmann, 2010, pp. 112–113)

These comments concern our understanding of the nature of God–human relations and point to an essential feature in Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith.

14 Jan Assmann is Professor of Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg.

Reading in Context

The comments above suggest contexts for notions and emotions possibly activated by text readings. With reference to fields of meaning¹⁵ touched upon above, it seems relevant to refer to Christopher D. Stanley,¹⁶ where he writes about the language of God in prayers in the book of Psalms:

Prayers of this type usually assume that the supernatural realm operates much like the hierarchical societies in which nearly all of the major religions originated. Requests for divine assistance place the worshipper in the physical and emotional posture of a deferential and self-effacing peasant seeking a favor from the local landowner, while expressions of praise and thanksgiving recall the flattery and obeisance that courtiers use when seeking favors from a king.¹⁷

Christopher Stanley points to huge differences in cultural ideas and value judgments and also writes that the challenge in understanding the texts is “to enter imaginatively into the mind-set of people who viewed the world very differently than most of us do today”.¹⁸ We in our late modern western societies are convinced that we will get what we are entitled to from the authorities without having to fall to the ground on our faces before an official, and without having to praise or sing hymns to the municipality. Nonetheless, if we are pious Jews, Christians or Muslims, we use a language in our own hymns and liturgies that originally was at home in a, to us, very foreign context. We sing praises to God, even if we have no idea of the original semantic and experiential context for the metaphorical language of such praises. And when the semantic context is forgotten, what do the words actually mean? This could lead into a broader discussion of

15 The term “field of meaning” is here not used in a very strict sense. It suggests that certain ways of speaking have an affiliation with certain areas of life. We could talk about fields of experience or even semantic fields, although the latter term suggests more delimited areas of language use.

16 Christopher D. Stanley is professor of theology at St. Bonaventure University, New York.

17 Stanley, 2010, p. 394. Stanley writes further: “Both types of prayer presuppose that the supernatural world exercises significant power over human affairs and must be treated with respect if humans are to enjoy happy and successful lives. Both also imply that the inhabitants of the divine realm are not always concerned with or favorably disposed toward humans and must therefore be persuaded, enticed, or cajoled into acting in a way that benefits the worshippers” (p. 394).

18 Stanley, 2010, p. 133. I assume that the question of meaning and context that I try to discuss here may also be related to, for example, the descriptions by Charles Taylor of changes in culture and society linked to the concept of “social imaginary” (Taylor, 2007, pp. 171–176). See also Repstad, 2012, p. 31.

religious language, but it also has some relevance for the language of love in the biblical texts.

There seem to be some experiences from modern life that are relevant for understanding these ancient texts about love, but there are also elements in the texts that are foreign to modern notions. I would like to formulate a couple of principles that are important for my discussion of semantics:

- social experiences are preconditions for the semantics in language about relational love. There are no exceptions for the language about the love of God even if you claim God's love to be of another quality. Social experiences are preconditions for the semantics in the language about divine love
- between cultures there are huge differences in social relations, and in the (bodily) experiences learned from social relations.

This goes for the more romantic or emotionally loaded fields of meaning suggested above, and also for other fields of meaning. For the texts we have been reading, it seems relevant also to consider a *political* sphere, and the political includes *morality* and ethics. We can dwell briefly on the experiential dimensions of these two fields of meaning: a field related to our modern and late modern conceptions of romantic love, and a field related to the political sphere.

1) When it comes to emotionally charged fields of meaning, we could ask how relevant our conceptions of romantic love are for understanding the texts in John and in Deuteronomy. Given that they have some relevance, we speak of notions and experiences related to romantic love and to love declarations. To be loved or to hear a declaration of love, you *feel* like the chosen one, you do not just perceive (or hear) it as thought, as concept. You may hear the words directed to you, a voice moves the air, physical waves reach your ear and move your eardrums. Listening is a physical thing. You hear words directed to you, communicating: "you are the chosen one". Those signs – sounds or written characters – if you grasp them, create cognitive images, but your emotions are also, possibly, moved. The declaration of love may create an immediate response in you,

in your emotions and in your will – in your *heart* if you like. And your body responds without the signs being processed in your thoughts, without mediation through your rational reflections. For Deuteronomy 10, we could even suggest a ritual setting, where the text is recited, a setting also relevant for late modern uses of the texts. A ritual has the potential to amplify the emotional and experiential impact of the text.

2) Now we turn to the second field of meaning, the political sphere. The God in Deut 10 requires the hearer

- to walk in all his ways, to love him,
- to serve “the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”,
- and to keep “the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being” (Deut 10:12–13).

“Serving”, “commandments”, “decrees”, “your own well-being”. This may be read as political language. In that field of meaning God is the Lord, the ruler of the earth and also of the heavens. He is your king, your political ruler. How does this God love you? How does a ruler love his people? And how does a member of the people experience the love of the ruler? It is probably not like falling in love with the charming boy/girl, who then turns out to be a prince/princess, and you live happily ever after. For notions connected with the political field of meanings we could consider the bodily experiences of relating to a superior authority, bodily experiences like the gestures you have to perform in the concrete encounters. We could consider the feelings of fear and but also of hope, *fear* of the power which the authority could exert to harm you, but on the other hand *hope* in the power of that superior – a power that is able to change your situation to the better.

I am talking here about the impact of communicating or perceiving a text, how we, an audience, perceive, and how *concepts* are activated and how *memories* are evoked. Those memories may be of a kind that some like to call bodily memories or bodily experiences.¹⁹ They are immediate,

¹⁹ For an overview of issues related to such “embodied knowledge”, see Ulland, 2012, pp. 95–96.

sensual reactions, not mediated through reason or thought, but memories from gestures, actions, and emotions in relations. In scholarly discussions about the semantics of texts, we may be more used to considering cognitive domains than these experiential dimensions.

Concluding Questions

One issue emerging from the foregoing discussion is the significance of the relations depicted in Deuteronomy and its relevance for the New Testament language about love in the God–human relationship. If the New Testament language has left the Deuteronomistic context, which context has it moved into? For early Christian readers, it was certainly not swallowed up by notions like a modern romantic concept of love between woman and man, and it had certainly not moved into a democratic mindset, where all parts have equal rights and obligations. It seems to have been modified and interpreted through experiences in new social contexts, in groups sharing an identity as worshippers of Christ. The notion of commandment is still explicitly present. The readers of the gospel of John hear the new commandment as given by the crucified and exalted Lord, which gives the perceptions a new twist. This new element is also applied as an example for relations between believers.

A further issue is what relevance the hierarchical concepts envisaged in these texts have for love in human relations, between the believers, towards the neighbour, and towards the enemy – concepts like human rights, human dignity, equality. Are these qualities, highly esteemed in our times, relevant for a historical understanding of early Christian texts about love? My suggestion is that they are indispensable, but subconscious, presuppositions for our readings. They are essential to late modern discourses about the conditions of human relations.

A straightforward late modern reading of texts in Deuteronomy and John may find edifying notions of God's love (*agapē*) as a love that can find a reflection in inter-human relations, but it also leaves several elements unintelligible to, or not tolerable for, our sensibilities or our sense of virtue. I assume that some of these unintelligible elements belong to the experiential dimension commented on above. The original characteristics

of immediate, sensual reactions are gone when the context is gone, and for later readers they might be replaced by other immediate reactions, or appear as white spots or enigmatic signs in the texts. Attempted readings in historical contexts at least go some way to revealing how different contexts shape diverse meanings. It is a challenge for believers that the meanings of their sacred texts change, and this is true of some of the best known and best loved passages in them.

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