

- **Love in Plato and the New Testament**
- ***Liebe bei Plato und im Neuen Testament***
- ***L'amour chez Platon et dans le Nouveau Testament***

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## **ZUSSAMMENFASSUNG**

*In dem wichtigen Forschungsbeitrag Agape und Eros von Anders Nygren wird behauptet, daß weitreichende und deutliche Unterschiede bestünden zwischen den beiden Formen von Liebe. Bei Agape handele es sich um den neutestamentliche Begriff für Liebe, bei Eros um den platonischen. Der Unterscheidung der beiden prägnanten Begriffe ist sicher zuzustimmen, nicht aber der Zuordnung zum Neuen Testament bzw. Plato. Passender wäre die Unterscheidung von göttlicher und menschlicher Liebe. Beide Formen finden sich bei Plato wie im Neuen Testament und beide sind nicht mit einem einzigen Begriff zu bestimmen.*

*Plato wie das Neue Testament kennen eine Form menschliche Liebe, die vereinnahmend und egozentrisch ist. Es*

*ist die emotionale Zuwendung zu etwas Schönerem und Gutem, von deren Erwerb Befriedigung von Wünschen, Genugtuung und Glück erwartet wird. Daneben kennen das Neuen Testament und Plato eine Form göttlicher Liebe, die nicht besitzergreifen will, sondern sich verschenken, sich für den Geliebten weggeben will. Wie bei körperlicher Liebe durch geschenkten Samen Leben verliehen wird, so findet sich sowohl bei Plato wie im Neuen Testament die Vorstellung der 'Besamung' in einer vergeistigten Form. Dabei geht es um die Befruchtung durch Worte, die als ein Same in einem Menschen Leben hervorbringen sollen. Natürlich ist die Art dieser Liebe bei Jesus und Sokrates nicht identisch, die Unterschiede werden im Schlußteil dieses Aufsatzes aufgeführt.*

## **RÉSUMÉ**

*Dans un livre important intitulé Éros et Agapé, Anders Nygren écrivait qu'il y avait des différences bien nettes entre deux sortes d'amour, l'agapé et l'éros. Alors que l'agapé serait l'amour dont parle le Nouveau Testament, éros serait le thème Platonicien. Nous sommes d'accord pour affirmer qu'il y a deux sortes d'amour distinctes, mais pas pour distinguer entre l'agapé et l'éros, ou entre le Nouveau Testament et Platon. Il semble plutôt que la distinction soit entre l'amour divin et l'amour humain. Les deux sont mentionnés aussi bien dans le Nouveau Testament que chez Platon, et il n'y a pas un terme*

*spécifique pour désigner chacun d'eux.*

*Platon et le Nouveau Testament décrivent un genre d'amour humain qui est possessif et égocentrique. C'est une affection pour ce que nous croyons être beau ou bon, et dont la possession satisfera notre désir et nous apportera le bonheur que nous recherchons. Le Nouveau Testament et Platon décrivent aussi tous deux une forme divine de l'amour. Dans le Nouveau Testament et chez Platon, cet amour divin est essentiellement une intimité qui conduit à la procréation. C'est un désir non pas de posséder mais de donner à la personne aimée. De même qu'un homme qui aime transmet et donne la vie à celle qu'il aime en lui communiquant une*



*semence physique, il y a dans le Nouveau Testament et chez Platon l'idée de la communication d'une semence spirituelle. Jésus et Socrate aiment tous deux dans la mesure où ils cherchent à communiquer à ceux qu'ils aiment des*

*paroles qui agiront comme une semence pour produire la vie en eux. Naturellement, Jésus et Socrate ne conçoivent pas l'amour de manière identique et l'article présente en conclusion les points de divergences.*

In 1930, Anders Nygren's landmark work, *Agape and Eros* offered many interesting insights concerning our understanding of love as it is put forth in the New Testament and Plato. Over the years, several scholars have challenged the polarity he found between New Testament *agape* and Platonic *eros*. Indeed, Nygren imagines hard and distinct conceptual difference between New Testament *agape* and Platonic *eros*. With the idea that there are two unique and distinct kinds of love I agree, but that the distinction is between *eros* and *agape*, or between New Testament and Platonic love, I disagree. It would rather seem that the distinction is between divine and human love, both of which can be found in the New Testament and Plato, and both of which are without a specific word to designate or distinguish them.

Plato and Aristotle both understood human affection to be motivated by something either beautiful or good within the object of our affection. This would seem to be very much in conflict with the New Testament command to love our enemies. It would seem that a neat and hard line could be drawn between human and divine love on this basis that the one is founded upon something beautiful or good that we find in the object that we love, while the other is independent of the object and instead must come out of the nature of the lover himself. This later type of love seems to be the kind of unmerited affection which is denoted by the fact that Jesus loves his enemies. Nygren associates the Greek term *agape* with this more divine notion of love which is independent of anything good or beautiful within the object. But the situation is more complicated than this.

To begin with, the Scripture, in addition

to speaking about the kind of divine love that is unmerited and object-independent, also speaks of more normative kinds of affection, namely those forms of affection that are the result of something good or beautiful within the object. Contrary to the common notion, which Nygren has endorsed and propagated, the New Testament does not designate the unmerited and object-independent kind of love with the word *agape*, nor does it reserve the word *philia* for that less than divine affection that is object driven. Of course there are times when *philia* does seem to designate a worldly type of affection that is dependent upon the object of the affection, but in other places *philia* looks like godly, object-independent affection: 'For the Father *loves* the son (John 5:20 NIV),' or 'the father himself *loves* you because you have loved me (John 16:27 NIV).' These certainly seem to be examples of godly rather than human affection, but the word *philia*, and not *agape* is used.

The same is true in regard to *agape*. At times it does seem to denote the special, divine kind of object-independent affection of which Jesus spoke, but at other times it refers to common object-driven human affection: 'because you *love* the most important seats in the synagogues (Luke 11:43 NIV),' 'men *loved* darkness instead of light (John 3:19 NIV),' 'they *loved* praise from men more than praise from God (John 12:43 NIV),' or 'Do not *love* the world or anything in the world (1 John 2:15 NIV).' All these instances of *love* are translated from the Greek *agape* and all are examples of something far less than the special sort of divine love that we are told *agape* is supposed to denote.

The truth is that *agape* was used by the writers of Scripture to refer to a broad



variety of types of affection. Since, however, Jesus, and later the disciples, often spoke of a new and radically different kind of affection, we can understand why later writers would want to designate that unique kind of affection with a specific word. So today we designate *agape* as that word which refers to that special kind of affection of which Jesus spoke and manifested with his life, but this distinction and designation of *agape* is not to be found in Scripture or the early church.

But although the Scripture does not have two different words to designate the two different concepts of love, there is clearly put forth in Scripture a divine kind of love that is distinct from the acquisitive and egocentric kind of love that seems so natural to humans. Nygren claims this divine kind of love is marked by four characteristics that distinguish it from the acquisitive and egocentric love that he claims makes up the Platonic motif. These characteristics include being: 1) 'spontaneous and unmotivated,' 2) 'indifferent to value,' 3) 'creative,' and 4) '*Agape* is the initiator of fellowship with God (Nygren 75–80).'

At first glance these characteristics (especially the first two) certainly do seem to represent the kind of unmerited favor of which Jesus speaks. Indeed, New Testament love does seem to be 'spontaneous and unmotivated,' and 'indifferent to value' in that it is independent of the object of affection and originates instead from within the divine nature itself.

If this were true, however, and God's love were completely independent of anything within us, then God could as easily love an onion as a man. Certainly God's love is not so indiscriminate that He has the same love for man as for the rest of His creation—that He loves rocks as much as men. But if God's love for man is unique from the love He has for the rest of His creation, there must be something good or beautiful within man that is missing from the rest of Creation. There must be something in us that makes us a special object of God's affection. But the Scripture tells us that there is no good thing in us. 'All have turned aside, they

have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one (Psalm 14:3 NIV).' Or, 'All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags . . . (Isaiah 64:6 NIV).' How can God love something in us, and his love be more than purely indiscriminate, if there is nothing good in us which might serve as the object of His affection?

Of course, it is possible that God's love is not totally indiscriminate and it is connected to something in us, but that thing within us that is the object of God's affection is a potential rather than an actual thing.

God loved us 'while we were yet sinners.' But would he love us if there were no possibility that we would ever be anything but sinners? (Streiker 338)

True, there is no actual good thing in us, but God is not interested in who we are, but who we could become. God sees us with eyes of faith which reveal a potential good or beauty within us. When we look at people, we most often see what is actually there, but that is because we lack God's vision which sees with the light of faith which illumines the potential Good or beauty that God sees even in His enemies. When Jesus loves His enemies, He does not see an enemy but an apostle to the gentiles. His is a love mingled with hope and faith in the potential that He desires to bring about in the beloved through His love. His love intends, not to gratify a desire or bring a gain to Himself but to enrich the beloved. Jesus' love 'is not self-seeking' (1 Cor. 13:5 NIV), but is intent upon bringing the beloved to an ever greater perfection. Furthermore, not only is the thing within us that is the object of God's affection a potential that God sees and intends to bring about, but His love is the agent or active force that causes that potential to be realized.

This is the great difference between human and divine love. Unlike human love which is an affection because of something within the object of our affection which we believe will satisfy a desire within us, God's love is a desire for



creation. His affection is not a desire to acquire but to impart. It is an affection that has the power to create and bring to actuality a potential within us.

So although Nygren is not exactly correct about divine love being 1) 'unmotivated,' and 2) 'indifferent to value,' he is correct about it being 3) 'creative.' Truly, what God loves is not to acquire, which is the basis for human love, but to impart and create.

This creative nature of God's love and its contrast to human love can be seen in the story of Jonah. After Jonah had preached repentance to Nineveh, he sat outside the city to see what would become of Nineveh.

Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?'

'I do,' he said. 'I am angry enough to die.'

But the Lord said, 'You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up over night and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people . . . (Jon. 4:6-11 NIV)

God says that Jonah has had pity upon the gourd for which he did not labor or make grow. In fact, Jonah's only concern for the gourd was because it brought him pleasure. That is the nature of human affection, and once the pleasure ceases the cause of the affection ceases. Of course, God's affection is for Nineveh even though its people do not bring Him pleasure. They are His creation, and for that, rather than the pleasure they bring Him, He loves them. Furthermore, God sees that if they could be brought to repentance, they would have an ever greater capacity for God to continue His creation within them.

This is the nature of Godly affection. It is a desire to continually impart and create within us. This is obvious when we consider that divine affection is the affection of a creator for His creatures. It is even obvious that as our father, God demonstrates a desire for creation. But God's desire for creation is not limited to His being our Creator and Father, it extends also to include the affection He has for us as our Lover.

### **The lover as impregnator or sower**

Nygren is also correct concerning his last point about God's love being what initiates our relationship with Him. The extent to which this is true, however, goes beyond what Nygren imagines. He says,

Not only does *agape* determine the essential and characteristic content of Christian fellowship with God, but in virtue of its creative nature it is also important for the initiation of that fellowship. (Nygren 80)

This is certainly true, for in the relationship between God and man, God is the initiator and lover, while man is the beloved. Today, we do not make much of a distinction between the lover and the beloved, and we often consider their roles as mutual and reciprocal. But the idea of the lover as uniquely distinct from the beloved was well understood in the ancient world. In the ancient world it was understood that the lover is the initiator to whom the beloved responds. The beloved is the one who receives the love, and responds to it, but the beloved is wanting and does not have the love initially but must receive it from the lover.

This distinction between lover and beloved can perhaps best be seen when we consider that in the physical sense the lover is the impregnator of the beloved, and conversely the beloved is the one who is impregnated by the lover. I think this analogy goes a long way to explain the true extent to which God is the initiator in the love relationship. In the spiritual realm, as in the physical realm, the roles of lover and beloved are not reciprocal and



the beloved cannot impregnate the lover, nor can the lover be impregnated by the beloved.

This idea of the lover as the impregnator of the beloved also provides a good basis upon which to understand the way in which divine love is different from human affection. While human affection seeks to acquire what we believe to be beautiful or good, the kind of affection Jesus has for us is not a desire to acquire, but a desire to give what is truly beautiful and good. Jesus is our lover in so far as He impregnates us with His seed so that we may bring forth offspring after His likeness.

This analogy of the lover as the impregnator or sower of seed is seen all over the New Testament. In Matthew 13:3–13:43 we see three parables in which God sows seed in order to bring about life. The second of the three parables is the parable about the tares.

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among his wheat . . . (Matt 13:24–25 NIV)

Later when Jesus' disciples ask Him to explain the parable of the tares, Jesus says,

The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of man. The field is the world, the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil . . . (Matt. 13:37–39 NIV)

Here we are told that the sower of the seed is the Son of man. Indeed, Jesus is one who impregnates and plants His seed within us in order that new life might spring up within us. It is His seed that causes the new birth and makes us into the children of God.

In the Gospel of Luke only the first of the parables that Matthew offered is presented. This is the parable of the seed that falls on different ground.

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of

the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown. (Luke 8:5–8 NIV)

In explaining this parable, Jesus says, 'This is the meaning of the parable: the seed is the word of God' (Luke 8:11 NIV). This seems to be different from the parable of the tares, since in that parable the seed were the children of the kingdom, while here the seed is the word of God. Or are they the same thing? It would seem that they are, for just as my physical existence began as a seed, in the same way my eternal life in Christ began as just such a seed, namely the word of God. My eternal existence began when I allowed the word of God to impregnate me.

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. (1st Peter 1:23 NIV)

How exactly this happens, we do not know. It is indeed a mystery.

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleep or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. (Mark 4:26–27 NIV).

But as mysterious as this is, we do know what we must do in order to bring this new life about and cause this seed to grow. We must open ourselves and allow Jesus' words to impregnate us. He is our lover and we must choose to become his beloved and allow Him to impregnate us.

God's love is always a desire for creation, whether it be His love as our Creator, our Father, or our Lover. Of course, as God's creatures or children, we had no choice but to accept His creative love, but as His beloved, we do have a choice. We must choose to become His beloved and receive His seed, if we are to be made into the fullness of His image and bring forth new life, we must first be



impregnated. Those who have not been impregnated by the word of God that Jesus brings may look like Christians, they may even act like Christians and do miracles in Jesus' name, but if they were never impregnated by Him, He never knew them, and they are not His beloved.

Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matt. 7:22–23 NIV)

It is difficult to interpret this passage, and in particular the word *knew* in any other way but as a personal intimacy as when Scripture says, 'Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived (Gen. 4:1 KJV).' To understand the word in any other way simply does not make sense. God knows all things. The hairs of our head are all counted, so no one escapes His notice, but many refuse the kind of intimacy that would allow His seed to produce life within them. He may be their Creator, but they have never become His beloved because they have never given themselves over to be impregnated by Him. As their creator, He gave them life (over which they had no choice), but, concerning the new life that He wants to give them, they do have a choice. In order to have that new life, they must give themselves over and allow Him to become their lover by impregnating them with His seed. They must choose to whom they are to be joined.

Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.' But he who unites himself to the Lord is one with Him in spirit. (1 Cor. 6:16–17 NIV)

The intimacy which the Scripture tells us God desires is nothing less than the intimate union that produces new life. This is the unique affection God has for us as our lover.

## Platonic love

Contrary to what Nygren has to say about Platonic *eros*, this idea of the lover as the impregnator of the beloved seems to be key to the higher form of love of which Plato speaks. Like the New Testament, Plato also speaks of two distinct loves, human and divine. And like the New Testament, Plato does not use different words to distinguish between human and divine love. It is very clear, however, that there is a common or human love that we all have for the beautiful or the good. Indeed, the very *eidos* or essence of man is that we all love the beautiful or the good, or at least what we consider beautiful or good (Meno 77B–78C). Such love is common to all human beings, but, as Socrates points out, although everyone loves what they believe to be beautiful or good, that is not what makes someone a 'lover,' for not all are called lovers (Symposium 205A6–206B5). In order for someone to truly be a lover and to have more than the generic love that is common to all human beings, one needs to have a special kind of desire or love for the beautiful in order to satisfy their desires. For Socrates, the lover's desire for the beautiful is a desire for '... engendering and begetting upon the beautiful (Symposium 206E).' Thus, unlike the universal desire to possess the beautiful, the lover's desire is the very specific desire to impregnate the beautiful and bring forth offspring. The implication on the physical level is that while many men may want to have sex with a woman to gratify their own desires, the true lover of that woman wishes to impregnate her and have offspring with her.

For Plato there is a spiritual lover as well. The spiritual lover wishes to impregnate the soul rather than the body of the beloved and thus bring forth spiritual offspring. So the Platonic desire to beget and bring forth offspring can be directed at either body or soul.

... those who are teeming in body be take them rather to women, and are amorous on this wise: by getting children they acquire



an immortality, a memorial, and a state of bliss, which in their imagining they 'for all succeeding time procure.' But pregnancy of soul—for there are persons, . . . who in their souls still more than in their bodies conceive those things which are proper for soul to conceive and bring forth. (Symposium 208E–209A)

Thus, just as the desire to impregnate and bring forth offspring with a woman is an instance of love, so too is Socrates' desire to impregnate young men with philosophy and have them bring forth wisdom and virtue an instance of love.

. . . the true lover's *eros* does not lead him to want to possess and use his beloved physically . . . or even spiritually. (Armstrong 199)

It is rather the desire to impart to the beloved and create within them, either in the physical or spiritual sense. This procreative aspect of Platonic love is very similar to the creative nature of divine love as it is set forth in the seed parables and other Scriptural analogies.

In Plato, as in the New Testament, there are two kinds of love. The one is human and acquisitive, and the other is divine and desires, not to acquire, but to bestow blessings and impart life to the beloved. In the *Phaedrus*, these two loves are very clearly put forth.

After having made a first speech in which he spoke of how rational it was to seek to possess the beloved in order to gratify one's own desires, and that the true lover who desires more than the gratification of his own desires is in fact mad, Socrates says that he needs to repent for the lie he had just told. Of course, it is rational to acquire that which will satisfy our own desires, but such a love is earthly and less than ideal or divine. Socrates says there is a greater love which seeks to bestow blessings and impart life to the beloved. It is difficult to explain rationally how such giving is better than acquiring, and Socrates does not attempt to do so. Rather he argues that this higher form of love (which in his first speech he called madness) is indeed

a form of madness, but it is a divine madness and heaven sent.

That was a lie in which I said that the beloved ought to accept the non-lover and reject the lover, because the one is sane and the other mad. For that might truly have been said if madness were simply an evil; but there is also a special madness which is the special gift of heaven, and the source of the chiefest blessing among men. (Phaedrus 244A)

Or, as he says later, ' . . . the madness of love is the greatest of heaven's blessings . . . (Phaedrus 245C).' Socrates love then is not rational in an earthly sense, but is out of a divine madness which is heaven sent. Such a madness causes one to forsake the earthly desire for possessions that would gratify ones own desires, and instead pursue a divine desire to create within the beloved.

As much as Platonic love might resemble the Christian idea of divine love, however, it is distinct in several ways as well. Two of the most important distinctions should be noted. First, unlike Socrates who wishes to produce wisdom and virtue in his beloved, Jesus intends His words to be seed that will supernaturally produce His own nature and the nature of His love within us. Secondly, although Socrates is the lover of his students and thus their impregnator, it is possible that one day they could become his lover and impregnate him with wisdom and virtue. This of course is not possible with Jesus. We are not capable of being His lover and impregnating Him as He has impregnated us. Thus, we can never be God's lover, as He is ours. Surely we can love God because human beings love beautiful and good things, but in terms of divine love, we are always to be the beloved and never the lover.

This raises a very interesting question. If we can never be God's lover, and can never have toward Him the same divine love He has toward us, how are we to be made into His image and take on His nature and the nature of His love? It must be that if we are to take on the divine nature and become divine lovers, we must



do so toward other human beings and not toward God. Although we cannot be God's lover with anything but a human love or affection, we can be lovers of other human beings and have for them the same divine love God has for us.

Interestingly then, the idea that we can be Christians and take on the nature of Jesus, and the nature of His love, simply through our relationship with Him is wrong. It may seem that the Christian life can be lived, and can be lived best, when one is in constant and exclusive communion with God. But God's purpose for our lives can never be realized in that way. If we are to take on God's nature and manifest His kind of love, we must do so in our relationship with other people. If divine love is to be manifest within us, it requires someone besides God and ourselves. It requires a third party to whom we may be the lover and impart to them the same words of life that God has imparted to us.

## Notes

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