# Complicating the Command: *Agape* in Scriptural Context

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## Abstract

While some of Anders Nygren's critics supplant *agape* with *eros* or *philia*, we may best correct the false simplicity of Nygren's account through a scriptural retrieval of *agape* itself. I suggest what this textual turn may impart by discussing *agape* in passages from Exodus, Leviticus, Hosea, Luke, and John. *Agape* in these texts reflects motivations as disparate as passionate desire, parental longing, committed dutifulness, and protective seclusion—depictions at odds with Nygren's atemporal portrayal of *agape* as unmotivated and spontaneous. We may be called at times to heed one of these scriptural strains more than another, but to say either that impassivity (Nygren) or any one of these motivations represents the apex of love is misleading. I suggest that we resist the urge to condense our intentionally enigmatic canon.


## Introduction

Gene Outka opens his own explication of Christian love by referring to Anders Nygren's impact on subsequent study: "His critics have been legion, but few have ignored or been unaffected by his thesis . . . [O]ne may justifiably regard [Nygren's] work as the beginning of the modern treatment of the subject."[1] I believe that Nygren's method, as well as his thesis, ill informs much of the present conversation concerning *agape*. That Nygren's stark depiction of *agape* continues to influence discussion is evidenced by the Spring 1996 issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, to name one venue, in which Edward Vacek, Carter Heyward,

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Gene Outka and Colin Grant contend concerning Nygren's truth or error. With his critics, I agree that Nygren is in substantive ways myopic about the nature of Christian love. Yet even when we disagree with Nygren's characterization, the form and technique of his argument influence the manner of our disagreement. In particular, we continue to search for the single, most accurate epitome of Christian love. I wish here not only to complicate Nygren's particular account of *agape*, but also to complicate the understanding of God's command that we love our neighbor. I commend a return to Scripture itself as a polyphonic, disturbing text with which we must grapple when attempting to elucidate love.

The methodological trajectory Nygren set six decades ago, of distilling *agape* to produce the vital essence or "motif" of Christianity, oversimplifies the complexity of Scripture. To reuse the words of Hans Frei, Nygren eclipses biblical narrative.[2] While Frei does not deal specifically with Nygren's work or method of "motif-research," Frei's critique of "mythophiles" and others is applicable to Nygren. Describing his work as a "type of scientific analysis," Nygren asserts that with his motif-method we may detect the fundamental undercurrent of Christian love. He goes on to offer an account of *agape* that is "indifferent to value" and thus reliable.[3] We might excuse his assertion as quaint, but in doing so we may overlook the legacy Nygren has left us as we ourselves attempt to encapsulate Christian love. Writing against those who would similarly offer a "central ideational theme" within Scripture, Hans Frei suggests:

> [biblical meaning] is not *illustrated* (as though it were an intellectually presubsisting or preconceived archetype or ideal essence) but *constituted* through the mutual, specific determinations of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web.[4]

Frei argues that to "paraphrase by a general statement" the truth of Scripture is to "reduce it to meaninglessness." Taking this cue from Frei, I suggest that ethicists heed the intricate and vast array of "agents, speech, social context[s], and circumstances" in order to find ourselves judged anew by biblical *agape*.[5]

This paper is in part my effort to stir up and question our current quest for clarity. I do not intend here to find apt consolation in the text—a friendly correspondence between our wishes, aims, and needs and biblical themes—but rather to remind us of Scripture's ability constantly to provoke and judge our various wishes, aims, and needs. In our efforts to unearth a reliable summation of Christian love, we undermine Scripture's use as a "continually disconcerting" text, as a book that "honors ambiguity, acknowledges complexity, and presupposes indeterminacy."[6] Here I am indebted to many scriptural scholars and biblical ethicists who through their work recall us to the enigmatic character of the biblical text. Their work prompts our recognition of Scripture's multifaceted depiction of love. What Wayne Meeks wrote in the 1988 Annual of the SCE regarding the "polyphonic ethics of Paul," we may expand to inform our work on



*agape* in Scripture as a whole.[7] Rather than viewing Scripture as conveying a unified and discernible theme, ethicists may hear the "multivocal" strands of biblical narrative as God's attempt to judge and instruct anew a church that is often original in the way it strays. Because we are tempted like Marcion (and his modern admirer, Nygren) to construct an *agape* to which we may confidently attest, we are appropriately chastened by the varied and even conflicting strands of scriptural *agape*.

In the edition of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* to which I alluded, Colin Grant defends Nygren against Carter Heyward's attempt to supplant *agape* with *eros*, Edward Vacek's more careful call to *philia*, and Gene Outka's suggestion that Christian love need not focus "entirely on normative dedication to others."[8] While each of these inheritors of Nygren's demarcation of *agape* and *eros* instructively broadens our understanding of faithful love, a turn to Scripture itself is a corrective preferable to supplanting or even supplementing *agape* with *eros* or *philia*. *Agape* is used for many different forms of engagement in Scripture, and a narrative, textual turn is more faithful to those different forms than searching for the most accurate term or principle to encapsulate a supposed overriding emphasis in Scripture. By arguing for a return to Scripture, I presuppose with Grant God's otherness, our sinfulness, and our need for revelation if the church is even to approximate God's will. In this presupposition, I may follow a trajectory entirely different from Heyward's, but perhaps not finally incompatible with Vacek's or Outka's. The conversation to determine such congruence is beyond what I intend to broach here.[9] Rather, I wish to suggest what a turn to *agape* in its scriptural variety might impart for our understanding of *agape*. I recount briefly portions of Scripture from the Pentateuch and Hosea, both of which Nygren dismisses, the gospel of Luke, which Nygren distorts, and the gospel of John, which Nygren expurgates. I hope in this short essay to prompt some to begin and encourage others to continue a turn to the texts themselves in the scholarly conversation concerning Christian love.

The method I here commend challenges not only the aim but also the content of Nygren's project. In this effort, I do affirm, with Nygren and Grant, that biblical *agape* is inextricably theological, self-giving, and enduring. But I also claim that it is inherently relational and invested, embedded in a shared complex of narrative memory and hope even when embracing those who are outside the covenant. The texts I recall here challenge especially Nygren's atemporal portrayal of *agape* as unmotivated and spontaneous. Grant himself makes something of my case against Nygren in his insistence that "the reality of *agape* is identified only through the horizon of theological conviction and sustained through the apparatus of religion."[10] The "horizon of conviction" that informs biblical and present *agape* presupposes the temporal sequence of a continuing story whereby what we do is a response to what has occurred. In his characterization of *agape* as "the divine extravagance of giving" that motivates us to love beyond measure, Grant vivifies Nygren's mechanical depiction of human love devoid of memory, affection, or

self. And the necessary "apparatus of religion" to which Grant refers, the worshiping community, is a more biblical setting for *agape* than the individual acting as an isolated conduit of grace.[11] Grant thereby anticipates some of what I wish here to discuss by setting the discussion within the church's shared memories, hopes, and motivations. Precisely because the church's affective imagination is shaped by a varied narrative wherein God and God's people love passionately, determinately, protectively and with sheer delight, even in the midst of anger and at times only with considerable effort, we do well to resist Nygren's effort to condense and clarify the perplexing canon that motivates us.

## The Memory and Tenacity of Old Testament Love

To consider the Old Testament an indispensable reference for *agape* is to resist fundamentally Nygren's methodological and rhetorical trajectory. I would hope that his dismissive link between the Old Testament, a "*nomos* type" of spurious love, and Judaism is now notorious. But we who follow in his wake are still tempted to focus on the Greek New Testament, perhaps because *agape* is a Greek word and, by Nygren's account, a New Testament concept. (One would think that we ethicists in general read only those little green Bibles which include only the New Testament and the Psalms, given our lack of attention to the first two-thirds of the Scriptures.) We do well to remember that the Hellenistic Jews who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek Septuagint overwhelmingly chose *agape* as the Greek word to replace Hebrew words for love, thus rendering *agape* an Old Testament word as well.[12] The importance is not purely semantic. The familial, sexual, legal, royal, covenantal, and marital imagery and assumptions in the Old Testament narratives not only inform but also provide the network of descriptors for Christian love. Nygren hardly begins to address the relation between love in the testaments when he concedes that the Old Testament anticipates the New. Bruce Birch, Joseph Allen, Edward Vacek, and others have attempted to redirect our attention to the meaning of faithful love in the Old Testament, seeking to show how God's love for Israel and the people's care for kin and stranger are more than shadowy precursors to New Testament love.[13]

*Agape* in the Septuagint, as a translation of words reflecting multiple facets of affection and commitment, not only narrates more fully Nygren's version of *agape* as God's wholly gratuitous love, but also widens our purview to include other features of divine and human love. God's self-stated motives run the gamut from maternal ferocity (Hosea 13:7) to resolute loyalty (Deuteronomy 7:8) to sensuous longing (Song of Songs), and the command that we love our neighbor accordingly draws upon divergent metaphors and relational commitments.[14] Much of this variety is lost if we simply interpose Nygren's translation of New Testament *agape* onto *agape* in its Old Testament usage. In the Septuagint, *agape* translates words as disparate as *ahav*, often a form of intimately passionate love;



*rechem*, related to the Hebrew word for womb, a poignantly physical attachment eliciting mercy toward another; and *dodh*, which indicates a joyful delight in another.[15] The biblical writers paired *agape* with Greek versions of *hesed*, an abounding loyalty often linked to forgiveness; *taseq*, to be bound or attached to another; and *rasah*, being pleased with another – all Hebrew words which shade the meaning of *agape* in context. *Agape* is used in these instances both for God's love and our responsive stance toward God and neighbor, creating an inter-textual complex of meanings and memories regarding faithful love.

It would be a worthy task in itself to consider Septuagint *agape* in its many forms, locations, and contexts, but here I will endeavor merely to intimate how *agape* in the Old Testament might inform our language about God's and our corresponding love by looking at a few texts, beginning with Exodus.[16] Here, in the text that originates what Nygren deems the heart of Old Testament error – an emphasis on covenantal law – we find God's unequivocal attachment to the people of Israel. God's love here does differ from Nygren's declared apex, and the Exodus narrative shapes the meaning of *agape* throughout the Pentateuch. As Katherine Doob Sakenfeld notes in her extensive study of *hesed* (which is linked in Exodus to *agape* and is translated as *eleos* in the LXX and steadfast love in the NRSV), those redactors who wove together the different narrative strands in Exodus placed the Mosaic covenant, with its contingent words of blessing, curse, and demand, within a framing narrative of mercifully abiding love.[17] Both Sakenfeld and Bruce Birch call our attention to the context of God's supposedly conditional legal covenant. Coming after God's extravagant promise to Abraham, Sarah, and their grandchildren, and followed by the story of Israel bowing to a shimmering calf, only a myopic reader would deem the covenant on Sinai to describe God's provisional engagement with God's people. God's love is steadfast even while the people are stiff-necked; law is framed narratively by God's work for and loyalty to Israel. The book of Exodus opens with God's salvific act of liberation from Egypt, and immediately preceding the ten commandments God reminds Israel of his liberatory work – "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" – emphatically linking the summons to obedience with God's prior acts on their behalf (Exodus 20:2-3). Exodus closes by reminding Israel that, even with their constant disobedience, God was and is physically present "before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey" (Exodus 40:38).

This quality of God's love to abide and remain steadfast indicates unconditionality but cannot be described as unmotivated or spontaneous, as Nygren characterizes New Testament *agape*. While God is not required to act on behalf of Israel, to say that God's actions toward Israel are spontaneous misses the temporality of the narrative and threatens to isolate each of God's acts and commands as arbitrary moments of divine whim. Temporality need not mean causality, but it does imply memory, motive, and affective connection.[18] Exodus opens with what Birch deems one of the most ominous chords of the Old

Testament, "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1: 8). Israel has been living well as an alien people, but her position is precarious. God's knowledge (*yada*) of Israel is in stark juxtaposition to the Egyptian king's ignorance. The phrase in God's revelation to Moses, "I know their sufferings," relates more than that God is cognitively aware of Israel's torment. Rather, the Hebrew word *yada* "indicates an experiencing of and entering into that which is known."[19] Following on God's enduring promise to Abraham and his intimate struggle with Jacob, God's hearing people's cry is a deepening of engagement with Israel, an intensification that effects what Birch strikingly calls God's vulnerability.

Throughout the Exodus narratives there is a tension between God's freedom and God's willingness to know and become involved with Israel. The memory of God's choice to be with Israel in her liberation and throughout her wilderness rebellion returns continually in Leviticus and Deuteronomy as the basis for Israel's hope. The grandchildren of Jacob, Rachel, Moses, and Miriam are reminded continually in subsequent narratives of God's own willingness to remember them:

> It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you– for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery. (Deuteronomy 7:7-8; NRSV).

In this passage one finds a salient strand that runs through the Pentateuch: God's love is extravagant and unmerited, but in that love, God has chosen to become genuinely related in time to this particular people. In choosing to love an old woman and her wizened husband, in choosing to struggle with the more treacherous twin, in choosing to know an enslaved people, God becomes a part of a narrative pattern that God and the people recall and out of which God and the people act. In his attempt to stress the sheer gratuity of God's love, Nygren calls God's love "spontaneous, unmotivated, and indifferent to value," but thereby dismisses the particular context and memory enacted by God's free choice.[20] In characterizing God's love in this way, Nygren discounts the textual assumptions of and warrant for knowing God as increasingly and tenaciously related to a specific community of faith.[21]

Nygren in fact disparages love in the Old Testament as "exclusive and particularistic."[22] Because Old Testament love "preserves its limits," Nygren explains, love of neighbor in the Old Testament means primarily love of those within the covenant. In one sense he is right, in that Israel's actions toward those who are outcast and without kin, whether Israelite or alien, are to arise out of the very particular memory of Israel's own experience as an alien people. Yet it is



precisely this particular and distinctive memory of God's work in Exodus that is to shape the moral imagination of the descendants of Abraham, thus prompting us in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to see anew those who are also strange. Without recourse to such memory, God's commands elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Leviticus 19:34) that "the alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you," and that "you should love the alien as yourself" would be isolated declarations. God commands the people of Israel to recall the story of their ancestry, and from that story to determine the proper stance toward those who are similarly vulnerable: "for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." They are to show the *agape* God has shown them to any who find themselves unknown, whether they be aliens, widows, or orphans (Exodus 22: 21-22). In both Exodus and Leviticus God links Israel by empathy and gratitude to those who are vulnerable. Israel "knows the heart of an alien," given that the people lived precariously in Egypt (Exodus 23:9), and has known the extravagant love of a God willing to claim them. Thus, with the narrative memory of Exodus comes moral obligation. Those whose voices God has known and to whom God has responded are continually to recall that God will similarly act on behalf of those who cry out against Israel's own oppression (Exodus 22:23). While Nygren is correct in noting that Israel is not called here to turn a fresh cheek to their enemy during battle, the prior and lasting relationship with God is supposed to effect an intentional love for the foreigner as well as the neighbor.

By uprooting *agape* from its Old Testament context, Nygren loses the memory on which the prophets (and later, Christ) play when they remind God's people of the unique call to love the stranger and to live as a beacon to the nations. We who seek to elucidate nuances of love for the Christian community should avoid similarly truncating Scripture, lest we exacerbate the scriptural amnesia already prevalent in the church. To mention briefly two related facets that require us to adjust our assumptions, covenantal love in the Pentateuch attests both to the need for intentional, collective remembering and to God's command that Christians, as a people, assist those who are vulnerable. Both a pietistic and evangelical emphasis on the faith experience of the individual, embedded within our increasingly individualistic society, may contribute to a limited understanding of God's love and God's command, becoming watered down into a baptized version of that bumper-sticker directive: God has performed random acts of kindness on my behalf, so will I commit random acts of kindness on behalf of others.[23] By retrieving these passages in the Pentateuch, Christians may remind themselves that they are called as God's beloved community to resist *systematically* the oppression of others and to attend *corporately* to those who wander without shelter or manna. Further, we are taught in these passages that such advocacy and attention are dependent upon our collective (liturgical) rehearsal of God's loyalty to the generations before us.

Hosea reminds us that our love for those to whom we are closest and whose memories we share is often more difficult to sustain than our commitment to love

the outsider. With the love and memory that make up intimacy come also the potential for particularly acute betrayal. Again Nygren misses a crucial facet of *agape* in the Old Testament: God's love and command entail fidelity even in the midst of such betrayal and fierce anger. Because the God that Nygren describes is determinately impassive, granting love apart from rather than together with divine indignation, there is no room in Nygren's account for the intensity of the prophetic fury and summons. The recurrent theme of God's implacable love for Israel in the Pentateuch is carried into the prophetic writings and is in these texts intertwined with God's anguish and rage over the people's perpetual transgression. In Hosea, God's stance toward Israel is one of profound memory and investment; because God's *agape* is genuinely tied up with God's ongoing history with his people, God's anger is particular, passionate, and vengeful. The prophet Hosea intensifies the memory of God's abiding covenant with Israel, portraying God's resolute love as that of a mother scorned by her own children and of a husband deceived by his beloved wife. In each case, God's intimate knowledge of the people makes their sins all the more unbearable.

The metaphors Hosea uses for God quite clearly work against Nygren's rendition of *agape* as remote and impartial, speaking instead to the intensity and peril of relational *agape*. As is the case in Isaiah and Jeremiah, Hosea's densely layered metaphors draw from the intensity of a parent's love for her small, disobedient children, from a lover's vulnerable, intense connection to his intimate beloved, and from a husband's shame. Because God has known the people from conception, heard their cries in Egypt and held them as they toddled shakily toward maturity, God cannot ignore their present rebellion (Hosea 11: 1-4). Because God has known the people intimately when they accepted God's summons with grateful, youthful, abandon, God cannot turn away as the people seek other lovers (Hosea 2:15). Admonishing a people who have not merely forgotten whose they are but rather have actively sought out more exotic options, God reminds the unfaithful that, as God was their liberation, so can God return them to slavery (Hosea 9:6, 13:4). As God tended their young and made Israel fruitful, so can God with one word render the people barren (Hosea 4:6). Yet that same shared memory that makes distant regard impossible also leads God to continue summoning God's children, reminding them that they are God's own: "It was I who fed you in the wilderness," "It is I who answer and look after you" (Hosea 13: 5, 14:8). Hosea overlays each metaphor with divine meaning, passionately summoning Israel to seek again her parent, lover, and spouse.

Hosea is a text wherein God's memory, judgment and steadfast love entwine, resulting in a portrayal of God's love as resolved even in the midst of extreme and intimate betrayal. This word of judgment and hope may speak more accurately than Nygren's portrait of a distant and dispassionate *agape*, particularly to those who have radically rebelled against God's commands or who have found their own love for another betrayed. First, regarding our own rebellion against God, once a people who have seen themselves closely related to a giving God repent for a deep transgression against that covenant, their stance before God may be more appropriately prompted by Hosea's account of God's *agape*. White southern Protestants, for example, may not find themselves either accurately convicted or forgiven within Nygren's schema of God's relation to us, but rather may require Hosea's word to prompt our confession and hope. In Hosea's context we may see ourselves as having placed God's very covenant in jeopardy and may pray that God will stem his justified anger against us. The experience of the Afrikaner church before God may similarly require that we recall and retrieve Hosea's passionate account of God's *agape* toward his people.



Second, regarding the betrayal of our love by another, a people who worship such a God must also imagine, like Hosea himself, that we are called in our own intimate engagements to hunger for reconciliation even as we rage. Abraham Joshua Heschel notes of Hosea's passion for his iniquitous wife and of God's for Israel, "The pathos of love, expressed first in the bitterness of disillusionment, finds its climax in the hope of reconciliation."[24] While Jewish and Christian commentators have found Hosea's marriage and remarriage to an adulterous woman "morally repugnant," that is what God calls Hosea to do.[25] Hosea is to invest himself intimately with one who will betray him, and he is to reclaim her and cherish her (not merely forgive her) even while she is in the midst of her adultery, just as God reclaims Israel while they pant after little gods and raisin cakes (Hosea 3:1). In Hosea, God's agapic covenant with his beloved Israel seems scandalously foolish and even indecent. We who worship such a God may similarly be called to embrace, not merely to tolerate, those who betray our deep affection and our trust. Nygren's call for us to be mere vessels for God's own indiscriminate *agape* misses this facet of Scripture and may allow some of us to remain distantly engaged to those whom we are instead vulnerably to cherish.[26]

## Some Varied Tones of *Agape* in the New Testament

Because the use of *agape* in non-Jewish literature is scarce prior to the New Testament, and the word seems semantically to convey little more than approval or condescending affection in those contexts, scholars have been tempted to see *agape* as a uniquely Christian term, taken up by the gospel writers so they could invest a "cool, colorless word" with new meaning.[27] An extra-biblical semantic study of *agape's* prior meaning misses the variegated use of the word in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the version with which the New Testament authors were familiar. When those who wrote the gospels use *agape*, they carry over its multi-faceted character from the Septuagint, and the New Testament meaning of *agape* cannot accurately be condensed any more than is the case with Old Testament love.[28] *Agape* and its various forms had already been given narrative context in the Old Testament, where *agape* conveys God's intensely passionate relation to Israel as well as God's universal benevolence toward

creation, and where *agape* for one's neighbor demands involved, imaginative empathy as well as impartial good-will. In both of the gospels I here consider, there are echoes of the many Old Testament uses for the term, as well as particular textual meanings that shade the writers' use of this word for God's and our love. In turning to *agape* in the New Testament, we enter more frequently traversed territory, and I by no means offer an adequate summary of what has been written on the matter. I hope merely to encourage ethicists to return to the New Testament texts themselves and to consider briefly how this retrieval may complicate our attempts to epitomize *agape*.[29]

Nygren elevates *agape* in the New Testament over *agape* in the Old for many less than adequate reasons, but it is hard to differ with his point that the New Testament writers emphasized to a much greater extent love specifically for one's enemy. In both Matthew and Luke Jesus makes explicit that those who worship the God of Israel, who has been and continues to be "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked," must likewise love their enemies; in doing so, they show themselves to be "children" of the one who has maintained mercy even in the midst of cursing, rebellion, and deep transgression (Matthew 5:23, Luke 6:35). While Nygren reads Jesus' command as a completely new rendition of love and as totally distinct from any Old Testament sense, Jesus may rather be read in Luke as playing on scriptural memory to ground what is indeed a significant expansion of *agape*'s purview.[30] In Exodus and Leviticus, Abraham's and Moses' descendants are to remember with gratitude the mercy God has shown them even while they were wandering and murmuring, and they are thus to identify with and show mercy to the stranger. So here in Luke Jesus reminds his hearers of their position before a forgiving God but commands that even enemies be brought within the scope of Israel's resulting stance of mercy.

Given that Jesus' followers, friends, and listeners, especially as depicted in Luke, are often people who have been previously considered beyond the scope of the covenant (whether as prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans, or gentiles), Jesus' words to recall God's mercy may have a more immediate salience as well: those to whom God has shown extravagant grace in Jesus must also love those who we would otherwise exclude. Nygren's depiction of love for enemies in the New Testament as "spontaneous, unmotivated" and commanding "the precise opposite" of what one would "reasonably" expect in the midst of persecution, renders Jesus' words here as almost nonsensical.[31] While I agree that Jesus' command is radical, even without precedent, his summons is not without warrant. By stripping Jesus' command of its Old Testament echo and its immediate narrative context, Nygren does in fact present an *agape* without motive.

Another feature of Lukan *agape* that may be lost in Nygren's or anyone else's distillation of the command is a particular emphasis on Jesus' ministry to sinners and the outcast, what Willard Swartley deems an outrageous extension of the banquet tradition to those who previously were seen as unfit to invite to the table (Luke 14:16-24).[12] We who are on the inside may be tempted, like Nygren, to



miss this aspect of scriptural *agape*. By characterizing God's love primarily as that of the householder toward casual workers in the parable of the vineyard (Matthew 20: 1-16), Nygren sets up *agape* as a standardized wage given indiscriminately to all. Universality or unconditionality is undoubtedly a facet of New Testament *agape*, but the vineyard parable does not narrate the compensatory attention given in Luke to those who have been lost. Again playing on an Old Testament theme, that of God's searching for those who are scattered (as in Ezekiel 34), Luke's Jesus sets up God as one who spends a disproportionate amount of time longing for those who are figuratively "in the wilderness" (Luke 15:4) whether due to oppression or their own rebellion.[33] In parable, Jesus depicts the outsider as the unique recipient of God's interest as well as, shockingly, the model for our emulation of God's love. While the parable of the nameless man on the highway is truly about our call to love indiscriminately, the fact that it is a Samaritan who meets Israel's prophets' call to love readjusts the biblical vision to place the outsider again inside God's covenant (Luke 10:29-37).[34] In Luke's parables of the lost sheep and coin (Luke 15:4-7, 8-10), Jesus' inquisitors, those who are superior to mere shepherds and who are certainly more stately than a woman with a broom, are forced to consider God's love for and even resemblance to the marginalized.

When briefly discussing Jesus' parable of the lost son, Nygren describes the father's love as an example of *agape* because, yet again, the father is "spontaneous and unmotivated" in his regard.[35] As one who "sows broadcast in the carefree manner of love," the father displays *agape*. I believe that this misrepresents the form of *agape* in Jesus' parable. What Nygren overlooks here is crucial for understanding the Lukan version of God's love and our response: the distinguished patriarch runs to embrace his son, who is still literally reeking of his transgression, symbolically declares him as royalty, and puts on a wild celebration *precisely because* "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke15:11-32).[36] Jesus begins this series of parables saying "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). The Lukan parables do indeed recast God's and our *agape* as that which abides in spite of transgression, but it does more than that: the one who is lost, either by self or societal declaration, is the unique recipient of God's preferential concern, and when found, a cause for God's delight.[37]

The Gospel of John, in a different way than Luke's Gospel, belies the generality that God always acts as a carefree sower of *agape*. When Nygren turns to *agape* in the Johannine corpus, he seeks to rid the texts of what he calls their "doubleness." As he describes it, "just when the *Agape* motif is brought to its highest expression it is also in a peculiar way weakened down."[38] The Johannine community does not liturgically recall Jesus' command to love the enemy, but instead, turns in upon itself to concentrate on Jesus' "new commandment," that they "love one another" as Jesus has loved them (John 13:34, 15:12-16).

Although Nygren deems John's elevation of *agape* into God's very being and relation with Christ to be an aptly Christian "metaphysic," he sees the community's concurrent particularism as a betrayal of *agape* itself.[39] In the Johannine community, God's *agape* toward Christ and thus for those who confess Christ's name is inextricably connected to God's creation, through the Word, who "became flesh and lived among us," and who attested that the Father himself wills that the confessing community be known by their *agape* toward one another. In John, God's *agape* in Christ is explicitly linked to the order of the universe, but the form of *agape* that is thereby elevated is, by Nygren's estimation, a tainted version. If God has a particular love for Christ, and the Father has a specific knowledge of and concern for those who confess the son, then Johannine *agape* diverges from the universally distributed, unmotivated, and spontaneous love Nygren sees as the core of Christian doctrine.

I will admit some sympathy for Nygren here. If we are honest, many agapists agree that the gospel of John is problematic in its sectarianism, hatred of the world, and, to be frank, seemingly smug assurance of the truth.[40] In Luke, God's *agape* may be in some sense partial, but toward those who are lost. In John, God's love and the corresponding love commanded are specific to those who know themselves as found. Given my affirmation, with Nygren, that scriptural *agape* does most often convey both God's abiding love for those who least merit it and a summons for us to love in kind, John throws a wrench into much of what I too wish to confess and advocate. But David Rensberger's well-received research on Johannine faith and discipleship may serve as a reminder that those who formed the canon were more directly inspired than we who presently grumble about canonical discord.[41]

Working from the now widely-accepted hypothesis of Louis Martyn, that "John was written late in the first century in a community of Jewish Christians who were in the process of being marked off and expelled" from the synagogues and their own neighbors, Rensberger suggests that John's extreme Christology, urgent believer/world dualism, and selective love commandment are of a piece.[42] It is the community's confession and liturgical celebration of Jesus as the Christ that brings them up against the scorn of and ultimate expulsion from their kith and kin, and "the love that those who abide in Jesus have for one another is the necessary concomitant of their alienation from those outside."[43] It was only by loving one another and supporting one another in the precarious truth that the world itself is ultimately under God's rule in Christ that those who were persecuted could endure.[44] If we ourselves find this version of *agape* morally dubious, it may be that confessing Christ no longer requires such a community, given that such a confession no longer evokes persecution. Or perhaps it is rather the case that the version of Christ to which we attest has become bland enough to allow us to bypass Jesus' command that we love one another. Because we who worship comfortably an innocuous savior are not the only ones called to the text, we should resist Nygren's and our own attempts to bowdlerize the sectarian *agape*



of John's gospel. John's narrative portrayal of God's love and command may even serve to prompt the presently comfortable to recognize that loving discipleship is often tied inextricably to the existence of an abiding, accountable, confessing community.

## Cursory Conclusions

Although I have largely used Nygren's version of *agape* with which to contrast *agape* in these select texts, Scripture may similarly correct those of us who follow in his methodological wake, who seek to articulate an over-arching principle, metaphor, or affective stance that accurately characterizes the apex of Christian love. It is in part my Protestant agreement with Anders Nygren and Colin Grant regarding our intense need for revelation and the resilience of our dubious motives that leads me to resist a common tendency on the part of overwhelmed ethicists to summarize and simplify Scripture. In Nygren's case, the resulting depiction may not be easily achieved (who among us can claim to be a selfless channel of God's love?), but it limits the scriptural account of love nonetheless. It may be in fact that Nygren's call to a self-less, un-invested, unmotivated, spontaneous and universal form of *agape* is not the summons most apt for a Swedish academic, or for many of us. While Nygren offers an apt corrective to those who would reshape *agape* into *eros*, leaving our neighbor neglected and our loved ones potentially exploited, his depiction may leave some of us inadequately chastened. We may instead be called to see God as hearing our cries in the wilderness, as anguished over our deep betrayal, as searching for the lost or advocating for the righteous. You and I may be commanded to remember saliently our time as wandering, nameless nomads, to rage and passionately long for a loved one who has forsaken us, to seek out in particular those who are deviant, or to focus on those within the fold. By submitting ourselves continually to the strange world of Scripture, we may deepen our moral imaginations to hear God's disquieting and complicated command to love.

The many redactors, writers, pastors and bishops who pulled together the baffling canon we call our own left us with numerous narrative strands of *agape* in part, I believe, because we are as a church and as individual disciples called to envision God's love for us and call to us differently, depending on our current contexts and particular temptations. If this latter claim is true, we will do well to reacquaint ourselves repeatedly with texts that unsettle our expectations of God's love and our calling. During the discussion following the presentation of this material at the January 1999 meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics, Stanley Harakas helpfully likened the complexity of Scripture to the many liturgical icons present within a sanctuary. I would extrapolate several suggestions from Harakas's felicitous metaphor. First, if we find ourselves as a community or as individuals focusing exclusively on one image, we are likely receiving an

impoverished impression of God's love and our required response. I would suggest that we often commit this error within the church and as scholars.[45] Second, I may, as an ethicist, attempt to clarify for another the import of one particular image, but the conversation will most ideally take place with the complex image before both of us, lest either of us mistake my summary for the object itself. I believe that we too often seek clarity by substituting some core concept for the passage itself. (I have undoubtedly done this myself in my hasty treatment of the passages above.) Finally, while I do believe that we may as ethicists may help others better perceive nuances of image or narrative, something crucial is lost in my second-hand description either of a sanctuary adorned with holy icons or of a Scriptural story. I will both ineluctably oversimplify the array and be incapable of accurately conveying with descriptors what is best conveyed in the fine strokes of hue and glimmer, setting and character. I believe that we who write on *agape* should ideally commend Scripture itself to our readers rather than offer even the best approximation of the "concepts" therein. While this may blur the line between scholarship and homiletics, writing about *agape* without an eye toward drawing others to the texts themselves is, I believe, equally problematic.

## NOTES

[1] Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1.

[2] See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953) and Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[3] Nygren, 38 -39.

[4] Frei, 150, 280.

[5] Frei, 280.

[6] The first phrase is from Stanley Hauerwas' *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 95, and the second is from Gabriel Fackre's "Narrative Theology" *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 345, but it is Bruce Birch's reusing of both that prompts me to utilize them. See Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 63.

[7] Wayne A. Meeks, "The Polyphonic Ethics of the Apostle Paul" *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1988, 17–29.

[8] See Colin Grant, "For the Love of God," Carter Heyward, "Lamenting the Loss of Love," Edward Collins Vacek, "Love, Christian and Diverse," and Gene Outka, "Theocentric *Agape* and the Self," all in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24.1, Spring 1996. The quote is from Outka's article, 35.

[9] I believe that Vacek is very helpful in his argument that Christian love is diverse, but I want both with Grant to hold up the primacy of self-giving *agape* in Scripture and also subtly to differ with Vacek's characterization of true love as a recognition of value. I believe that Outka's analytic method itself is sometimes at odds with his subject, but the clarity he seeks is much more complex and responsible than Nygren's. I do not here even implicitly address Outka's adaptation of Nygren to justify self-concern, though I believe Outka could justify self-concern in some circumstances using scriptural narratives themselves.



[10] Grant, 19.

[11] Nygren, 733.

[12] For much of the translation information that follows I have used *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Johnannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds, translated by John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds, translated by Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), and Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998). I am also grateful to my fellow graduate students in biblical studies: Guy D. Nave, Jerry Anne Dickel, Carolyn Sharp, and Jaime Clark-Soles. Any semantic accuracy here is due to their assistance; all mistakes are my own.

[13] See Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*; Joseph L. Allen, *Love and Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984); Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994).

[14] When speaking of how divine love informs human love, I assume throughout a combination of what Joseph L. Allen calls an "ethics of response" and an "ethics of example" (Allen, 54–59). I see God's command that we love as drawing upon both our response and our experience of that love in the stories that form us.

[15] For an excellent discussion of *rechem* in the Old Testament, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, esp. 33 forward. She explains that *rahamim*, usually translated as compassion, "connotes simultaneously both a mode of being and the locus of that mode."

[16] While the word *agape* itself is infrequent in the Septuagint version of Exodus, I think it important to begin with Exodus for two reasons. First, the covenantal law in Exodus is often misconstrued as opposed to *agape* elsewhere and, second, explicitly agapic passages later in the Pentateuch refer back to God's abiding love in Exodus. In much that follows I am especially indebted to Bruce Birch's work on Old Testament ethics (*op. cit.*).

[17] Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). God links explicitly God's own steadfast love (*hesed/eleos*) with the people's love (*ahav/agape*) in Exodus 20:6.

[18] Joseph Allen notes that Nygren is mistaken in his word "unmotivated" given that God bestows real value on Israel to which God then continually returns (Allen, 65). Both Allen and Vacek speak, however, more about a recognition of value than what I see here as a grateful and empathetic response to vulnerability and shared memory. I agree with Vacek that *agape* cannot be accurately described apart from our "being affected," but the form of that openness to the other is different, at least in the Pentateuch, than his description of being "moved and attracted to affirm the beloved's real goodness" (Vacek, 162). I would suggest that the motivation is often

in spite of the people's *lack* of obedience, honor, or beauty that God loves in the Pentateuch.

[19] Birch, 119.

[20] Nygren, 75–77.

[21] Here there is a third alternative to Nygren's opposing choices between loving with an ulterior motive and loving "with no further thought in mind and no sidelong glances at anything else" (Nygren, 215). Loving the stranger in Exodus and Deuteronomy is a response to God's activity; God's grace, the "*causa efficiens*," as Nygren calls it, is enacted through God's call to remember God's enduring covenant with Israel.

[22] Nygren, 63.

[23] See again Hans Frei who suggests that an evangelical (here Wesleyan) emphasis on the individual's life of faith may as effectively eclipse the work of biblical narrative as a supposedly scientific quest for the truth (Frei, 153–154).

[24] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 51.

[25] Heschel, 53.

[26] Here I believe that Hosea gives telling evidence that Vacek is quite correct in his insistence that *agape*, repentance, and forgiveness require "inclusion and reference to our own self" (Vacek, 225). I disagree, however, with his suggestion that such self inclusion must involve love of the self.

[27] C. H. Dodd uses the phrase but is not one of the scholars who argues for this theory; quoted in Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

[28] I will admit that I am confused by Victor Paul Furnish's suggestion that the LXX conveys little to NT *agape*. He explains that *agape* is used most frequently in the LXX for marital love, but does not consider the many other uses to which the writers put *agape* in the LXX. See Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Commandment in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 221.

[29] I commend the past and present work of New Testament ethicists Victor Furnish, Richard Hays, Thomas Ogletree, and Pheme Perkins to name only a few.

[30] Nygren, 101.

[31] Nygren, 101. In his section on love of enemies, Nygren footnotes approvingly Bultmann against self-love. Self-love is "the attitude of the natural man, which has simply to be overcome" (Nygren, 101). This notion of a "natural man" as the recipient of the command is revealingly mistaken. In Scripture, God's and Jesus' command come not to a self interested human devoid of memory, but rather to a people whose memory is precisely what is to evoke their concern for the shunned and outcast. I would agree that God calls us to turn away from selfish rebellion, but as a people with whom God has shared the covenant. See also Nygren's argument for revelation versus demonstration (with which I am sympathetic) as an example of how, in his effort to convey the extremity of *agape*, he divorces it from narrative (86–89).

[32] Willard Swartley, *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992). Victor Paul Furnish, Pheme Perkins in *Love Commands in the New Testament*, and John Donahue in *The Gospel in Parable* (Fortress Press, 1988), all see a similar emphasis in Luke on those who were previously outside the covenant.



[33] In much of what follows I am indebted to John Donahue's attentive reading of Lukan parables in *The Gospel in Parable*, esp. 129–158. I highly recommend this book.

[34] Vacek rightly notes that agapists miss here the "transformation of the stranger into a neighbor" but I still cannot find in this parable his particular characterization of *agape* as that which sees in another someone whose worth evokes response (Vacek, 162). Instead, I would suggest that the other's *need* is to evoke our response.

[35] Nygren, 90.

[36] When the father, as host of the party, leaves the festivities to cajole his recalcitrant older son, again he displays extravagant concern over one who is outside.

[37] I could perhaps just as easily put it this way: *we* who are lost are the unique recipients of God's preferential concern and delight. Although one may rightly read Luke to advocate on behalf of the marginalized, in the current, liberationist use of the term, I think it is also the case that Luke seeks to make each one of us see the extent to which we are presently living like swine.

[38] Nygren, 150.

[39] Nygren's disagreement with John is extensive, and I cannot here summarize without losing some of the details. Nygren is also concerned with what he sees as the inherent acquisitiveness in John's configuration of God's relation to Christ and with the general "Oriental-Hellenistic" milieu of the text (Nygren, 152–159).

[40] As Wayne Meeks says in his cover quote about David Rensberger's book, "An honest reading seemed to leave [John] either stuck in history, of no use to us, or aesthetically impressive but morally suspect." Meeks also suggests that our continued misreading and mistrust of John has to do with the "muffling" effect of "individualistic piety." Many scholars have what is a distrust (suspicious in itself) of people who paste John 3:16 on their car or football jersey.

[41] See David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).

[42] Rensberger, 22.

[43] Rensberger, 81.

[44] Rensberger explains, "It is in this community, where the word of love is kept, that the sovereignty of God is truly known and made known" (118) and "It was precisely this radical Christology which enabled the community of the Fourth Gospel to undertake their radical commitment to God in the face of dire risk" (142).

[45] As I suggested during the discussion, I believe that a helpful (but not sufficient) practice for Christian ethicists is to worship within a community that recalls collectively the canon through the use of a lectionary.