

Do You Love Me?  
An Exegesis of the Final Conversation between Jesus and Peter

SS 506 – Johannine Literature

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## I. Introduction

The final account in John's Gospel includes a somewhat enigmatic exchange between Jesus and Simon Peter (John 21:15-17). This passage is not enigmatic because its superficial meaning is obscured but because there are several layers of meaning to take into account. Thrice, in progressively lesser strengths, Jesus asks Simon Peter to confirm his love. Thrice Peter gives a similar answer, that Jesus, who knows all, already knows of Peter's love for him. After each of these exchanges, Peter is charged with the task of caring for the lambs or sheep. This discussion will attempt to uncover some of the underlying meaning that John's text implicitly, if not explicitly, includes. To do this, we will first examine the scholarly comments on the relationship of the three questions to each other, focusing on the word translated to English as "love." Next, we will look at the relationship between this exchange and Peter's denial of Jesus during the Passion. Once each of these have been reviewed from the perspective of the academy, we will look to the Church's living tradition for comments and indications of how these should be interpreted in a Catholic context.

## II. How are the three questions related? Is Jesus simply repeating his question?

There are two prevailing interpretations of the three questions that have been posed here. Jesus poses the initial question to Peter as, "Do you love (ἀγαπᾷς) me more than these?" (Jn 21:15)<sup>1</sup> to which Peter answers "Yes, Lord; you know that I love (φιλῶ) you." (Jn 21:15) After his exhortation, Jesus asks a second time, "Do you love (ἀγαπᾷς) me?" (Jn 21:16) Peter answers identically to his previous answer. Finally, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love (φιλεῖς) me?" (Jn

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (Washington, D.C: National Council of Churches of Christ, 1993). All Scriptural citations will come from this version unless otherwise indicated. Greek translation is from interlinear text in Verbum Bible Software.

15:17) Peter is recounted as being hurt that Jesus “said to him the third time, ‘Do you love (εἶπεν) με?’” (Jn 15:17); he answers with a similar protestation that Jesus already knows the answer to this question: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love (φιλῶ) you.”

The prevailing argument in the academy seems to be that these three questions are a simple repetition of the same question. They assert that this is simply a case of John using synonyms for variation in the text or some other unimportant purpose; in any case, in their view, “there is no clear distinction in meaning.”<sup>2</sup> Brown rightly observes that this opinion has been the prevailing opinion in the history of both academic and ecclesiastical writers.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the preponderance of opinion, David Shepherd observes that the interpretation in which the two terms carry different meanings is opposed by the fact that Peter answers each question with “yes” indicating that he is offering that which Jesus requests, not that he is offering all he can offer, but less than Jesus has asked; the latter would expect a negative particle rather than the affirmative.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation is echoed by Brown.<sup>5</sup> Francis Moloney takes this claim a step further by asserting that Peter’s profession of faith is already unconditional and, by implication, perfected to some extent. The threefold nature of the exchange is chalked up to a need for repetition for the sake of creating a binding relationship or to counter Peter’s threefold denial; we will take up the latter of these possibilities below. Moloney observes that there is a question about the two words, but dismisses it without examining its merits.<sup>6</sup> As McKay says, quoting Dr.

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, ed., *The Gospel according to John. [...] (XIII - XXI)*, 1. ed., 23. print, vol. 2, The Anchor Bible 29,A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1103.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1102–1103.

<sup>4</sup> David Shepherd, “‘Do You Love Me?’: A Narrative-Critical Reappraisal of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in John 21:15-17,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 789.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *The Gospel according to John. [...]*, 2:1103.

<sup>6</sup> Francis J. Moloney and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of John*, Rev. ed., Sacra Pagina Series, v. 4 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2005), 554–555.

L. L. Morris “any discussion that overlooks it must be heavily discounted.”<sup>7</sup> It seems that, in ignoring the question, Moloney falls into this category. Francis Martin and William Wright as well as C.K. Barrett also discount the idea, the former relegating even its mention to a footnote. They argue that the words seem to be used interchangeably throughout the Gospel of John.<sup>8</sup> However, I do not find their argument persuasive for the reasons I outline below; the weight of the evidence seems to lean toward John’s intentional use of these two words.

One more particularly weak argument that should be addressed comes from Brown.<sup>9</sup> He observes that there is no consensus about precisely what the change in word implies. This argument, however, simply observes that there is a healthy discussion in the academy, not that the words are necessarily synonyms. If the latter were the correct conclusion, then the nearly two thousand years of discussions of meaning of the New Testament would also make it clear that the entire endeavor of mining meaning from Scripture is futile since there is frequently debate about the nuances of meaning in various passages. If the study of Scripture itself is considered valuable, then this argument cannot be maintained.

The argument for interchangeable usage of these two terms is undoubtedly supported by the meaning of the terms in the classical Greek lexicon. Kenneth McKay observes that the two terms are frequently used interchangeably in classical Greek, with φιλέω being the more common, citing Xenophon and Plato. However, he also cites Plato and Aristotle as, in some cases, drawing a distinction between the two terms. McKay goes on to note that the New Testament, probably drawing from the Septuagint, leans toward αγαπάω. This is such a

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth L McKay, “Style and Significance in the Language of John 21:15-17,” *Novum Testamentum* 27, no. 4 (October 1985): 320.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 352; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 486.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *The Gospel according to John*. [...], 2:1103.

prominent usage that the Septuagint and New Testament brought the noun form, *αγάπη*, back into common usage, a noun that does not seem to appear in the extant writings of classical Greek. McKay goes on to observe John's use of these two terms interchangeably elsewhere in his Gospel.

These details all seem to lend credence to the conclusion that the two terms are simply synonyms, but they also raise a question which, to me, seems to support the idea that the two terms carry a different meaning. Why did the translators of the Septuagint revive a nearly defunct word for love and an entirely defunct noun for the same when a perfectly usable term was available from the then-contemporary lexicon? It seems that a plausible answer could be that the idea of love in the Jewish and Christian mindset was a kind of love modeled by the God of Israel in caring for His people and perfectly lived in the person of Jesus Christ. While this notion may seem better fitted later in our discussion of the religious rather than academic interpretation of the text, it is properly scholarly; whether or not there is truth in the supernatural claim of God's relationship to His people and to Jesus or of Jesus' relationship to his apostles or the Church, it is undeniable that the translators of the Septuagint and John<sup>10</sup> both considered this to be the case, and this belief would be reflected in their writings.

Finally, it should be noted that the three instances of the question are not neatly divided into a question repeated twice and modified a third time. Rather, I argue that the question is weakened each time Jesus poses it to Peter. In the first instance, Jesus uses the word *ἀγαπάω* and adds the comparative "more than these." (Jn 21:15) While Craig Keener feels that it is more likely that the "these" to which Jesus refers are the fish they are eating,<sup>11</sup> it seems odd for Jesus

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<sup>10</sup> Whether or not the Gospel was written by John as in its traditional attribution or not is outside the scope of this examination. For the purposes of this discussion, we will assume the traditional attribution of the Gospel According to John is correct.

<sup>11</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 1236.

to compare himself to fish. With due deference to Keener, I think it more likely that Jesus was asking Peter to compare his love with that of the other apostles, recalling his braggadocious assertions at the Last Supper (see Mt 26:32, Mk 14:29). The second time, Jesus no longer asks for love greater than that of the others, but only asks if Peter has love to offer him. Finally, the third time, Jesus asks for the love that Peter is prepared to give but also, by speaking of Peter's future martyrdom, indicates that his love will grow to the sacrificial love after the example of Jesus himself. If, indeed, there is an intentional difference between the first two questions, it would stand to reason that there should be some difference in the third question to complete the triad symmetrically.

Three weaker arguments that John does not mean for these words to be pure synonyms are possible; if they were the extent of the argument for differing meanings, they would be insufficient, but, combined with the above, I think they complete a compelling argument. First, if John were simply avoiding monotony, we would expect to see him use the word consistently for each speaker, but this argument fails to explain why Jesus suddenly uses Peter's term in the third iteration of his question. Second, John has no qualms elsewhere with repetition of a word. John uses the same word for sheep fifteen times in a single chapter (Jn 10) and even the same word for love (*ἀγαπάω*) repeatedly elsewhere, four times in 13:34 and four in 14:21, each a single verse with significant repetition.<sup>12</sup> His previous free repetition of *ἀγαπάω* for love seems to imply that there is something more at play here where John juxtaposes the two. Third, this interpretation makes sense of the phrasing of Peter's hurt response to the repeated question. This becomes clear if the emphasis is moved from the word "third" to the word "loved," but such an emphasis is nonsensical in English wherein the question has not changed. In the underlying text, however,

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, *The Gospel according to John*. [...], 2:1102.

emphasizing the difference of this question to the previous two and reflecting it to Peter's answers makes far more sense than somehow a third repetition being suddenly enough to arouse distress in Peter.

Admittedly, a large segment of the academy has settled comfortably on the side that there is no meaningful difference in signification between the two terms. I am forced to agree with the minority, in this case. John's use of language is rarely accidental or careless in his Gospel, and I find little reason to believe he is using his terms carelessly in this case or that he is intent upon avoiding monotony uniquely in this passage.

### **III. What is the relationship of this passage to the Passion?**

I alluded above to the idea that these questions could be related to the events of the Passion, most specifically, Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. There is far less debate about the existence of this relationship; it seems self-evident. In the words of Barrett, "The three affirmations of Peter...doubtless correspond to the three denials." However, there is some discussion about the precise form this relationship takes. Barrett goes on to assert "Rehabilitation, however, though it is certainly in mind, is not the primary thought." In his mind, that primary thought is "a prediction of what Peter would become in the Church."<sup>13</sup>

This argument, however, in which Barrett is not alone, ignores the strong parallels to the Passion that John has created, parallels that are too strong to be relegated to a secondary position. As Barrett notes, the correspondence of the three professions of love to the three denials is fairly clear.<sup>14</sup> The setting of this conversation over a charcoal fire, a setting mentioned nowhere else in the Gospels, save Peter's denial, makes the parallels between the two events too obvious to

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<sup>13</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 485.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

ignore. Craig Blomberg asserts that this triple questioning is merely to counter the grave offence Peter committed in denying Jesus and confirm his renewed resolve to follow and fulfill his role as apostle who is to “strengthen [his] brothers.” (Lk 22:32b)<sup>15</sup> However, the aforementioned nuanced difference between each instance of the question calls to mind different moments of Peter’s own actions in the Passion and draws the attentive reader to see another layer of meaning.

Jesus’ first question asks Peter if he “loves [him] more than these.” As noted above, Keener takes this to inquire if Peter loves Jesus more than the fish set out for their breakfast or perhaps Peter’s previous livelihood of fishing.<sup>16</sup> Barrett rejects this reading, rightly pointing out that the fishing gear is now less symbolic of Peter’s life as a fisherman and more his new role as a fisher of men. He alludes, instead, to Peter’s aforementioned braggadocious claims that, even if the other’s were to abandon Jesus, he would remain, and even die for him (see Mt 26:32, Mk 14:29). In the first version of the question, Jesus unbinds, as it were, Peter’s failure to live up to his own boast. A few verses later, Jesus will go on to tell Peter that he will live up to that boast and, indeed, die for Jesus.

Jesus’ second version of the question no longer calls to mind Peter’s assertion of his own devotion, but rather asks merely if Peter can offer the sacrificial love of the kind Jesus has modeled for his disciples. This is a love that, as he explained previously, is perfectly shown in “lay[ing] down one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn 15:13) Jesus has called Peter as well as the other apostles his friends, so he has already indicated the meaning of such a love in relationship to him (Jn 14-17). Again, however, Peter is unable to offer that love. As Jesus predicted at the Last

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<sup>15</sup> Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 278.

<sup>16</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1236.



Supper, however, Peter “will follow afterward” (Jn 13:36), a prediction Jesus repeats at the end of this exchange with Peter.

Finally, in his third iteration of the question, Jesus meets Peter who is now all too aware of his failure to show his love and devotion to Jesus. Jesus asks only for that which Peter can offer, but he predicts Peter’s death which will be evidence of the growth and perfection of his love and devotion; Peter’s martyrdom is predicted to “glorify God” (Jn 21:19), a description that is previously used to refer to Jesus’ own death. In this way, Jesus highlights not only Peter’s own failures during the events of the Passion, but also the growth that Peter will undergo as the apostolic age draws to a close.

#### **IV. How has the Church interpreted this passage?**

The details of ecclesiastical interpretations of this passage are by no means unanimous. The majority of churchmen have treated the two words used for love as synonyms as Brown rightly observes.<sup>17</sup> Saint Augustine, in fact, not only treats them as synonyms but explicitly rejects the idea that there is any meaningful distinction between the two.<sup>18</sup> Augustine’s opinion, however, seems not to be shared by Jerome who, in the Vulgate, translated the two words differently. Jerome translates ἀγαπάω with the Latin *diligo* and φιλέω with *amo*.<sup>19</sup> One could argue that this is just because of the strict mapping of Greek to Latin that sometimes happens in translation, but an equally strong argument could be made that the different Latin used throughout Jerome’s translation is indicative of his interpretation of the words as having different meanings elsewhere, also. Fully exhausting that possibility would require examination outside

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, *The Gospel according to John*. [...], 2:1102–1103.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John,” in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 1 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 446.

<sup>19</sup> *Biblia Sacra Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam. Ed. Electronica* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005).

the scope of this discussion. If the two were simply interchangeable, it would not have made sense for him to use two different Latin words.

Brown implies some connection between Origen and this interpretation distinguishing the two terms. However, he does not offer a specific location in Origen's writing, and I have been unable to locate such a reference. Brown asserts that the ancient writers were unanimous in attributing interchangeable meaning to the two terms.<sup>20</sup> However, Joel Elowsky observes:

Ancient Christian writers often emphasized the distinction between the four different Greek words for "to love." Augustine, however, was the only one found who dealt with the distinctions on this particular passage, although here as elsewhere, he equates *phileō* and *agapō* rather than distinguishing them.<sup>21</sup>

Elowsky's conclusion matches the results of my own research, and it is telling that all of the comments on this passage in Aquinas' *Catena Aurea* reflect other aspects of the passage, not the question of the meaning of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω. This is telling because it seems to imply not so much that the words are synonyms as that this simply was not where the Fathers focused when approaching this text. Through the history of the Church, most mentions of this text are used to point to the scriptural basis for Petrine primacy rather than the question of love, save that love should be the driving force behind all pastoral care and authority.

Contrary to the claims that this is a merely modern claim, however, Aquinas does take up the question of the meaning of the two terms. As in many cases in which Aquinas weighs in, however, his solution is nuanced.

We can also notice, as Augustine points out, that when our Lord asks, "Do you love (*diligis*) me," Peter does to answer with the same word, but says "I love (*amo*) you," as if they were the same. And they are the same in reality, but there is some difference in meaning: Love (*amor*) is a movement of our appetitive power, and if this is regulated by our reason, it is the will's act of love, which is called "direction" (*dilectio*)—because it presupposes an act of election, choice (*electio*). This is why the brute animals are not said

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, *The Gospel according to John*. [...], 2:1102.

<sup>21</sup> Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 11-21*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4b (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 389.

to love (*diligere*). For if the appetitive movement is not regulated by reason, it is called *amor*.<sup>22</sup>

Aquinas' exegesis seems to match closely with what I propose, here. While clearly distinguishing between the two meanings of the word, as they are here used, he acknowledges (and accepts) Augustine's conclusion that, in common usage, the two both reflect the same affect. Aquinas does not, however, support the interpretation that Peter's sadness at the third question is the result of Jesus' change in vocabulary. Rather, according to Aquinas, Peter fears being rebuked as he was at the Last Supper for claiming a devotion beyond his current strength. To Aquinas, this fear also explains Peter's final profession as subject to the perfect knowledge of Christ, that is, if Jesus knows otherwise again, Peter is now ready to humbly concede.

Building on Jerome's translation choice and acknowledging Augustine's assertion that the two are synonymous, Cornelius à Lapide argues the inverse of Aquinas and interprets Peter's *amo* as being greater than Jesus' requested *diligo*. In this interpretation, Peter is unwilling to compare his love to the other apostles both because he cannot possibly know the extent of their love and because he boasted previously of his devotion but then fell lower than any of the other apostles since none of them are recorded as denying that they knew Jesus.<sup>23</sup> While Lapide speaks of Peter's humility in the wake of his personal failure, he seems to say that Peter remained boastful in attributing to himself even more love than Jesus asked of him. This does not seem to be a response resonant of a man who realized how far short he fell of the love about which he boasted at the Last Supper.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, ed. Daniel A. Keating and Matthew Levering, trans. Fabian R. Larcher and James A. Weisheipl, vol. 3, Thomas Aquinas in Translation (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 297.

<sup>23</sup> Cornelius à Lapide, *The Great Commentary of Cornelius À Lapide: S. John's Gospel—Chaps. 12 to 21 and Epistles 1, 2, and 3*, trans. Thomas W. Mossman, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1908), 296–297.

Actual Magisterial texts are remarkably silent on this question. This could be taken to mean that it was accepted as a foregone conclusion that the words were interchangeable. However, it seems more likely that the renewed focus on these two in contemporary exegesis is the result of the revival of text criticism rather than a settled question. Instead, the Church's use of the passage is repeatedly cited, in conjunction with Matthew 16:18, as the scriptural foundation for the primacy of the Petrine Office. This interpretation goes back to the first centuries of the Church and is carried to the present. Aquinas quotes Saint John Chrysostom:

Our Lord passing by the rest, addresses this command to Peter: he being the chief of the Apostles, the mouth of the disciples, and head of the college. Our Lord remembers no more his sin in denying Him, or brings that as a charge against him, but commits to him at once the superintendence over his brethren. If thou lovest Me, have rule over thy brethren, shew forth that love which thou hast evidenced throughout, and that life which thou saidst thou wouldst lay down for Me, lay down for the sheep.<sup>24</sup>

This passage is also referenced in the Catechism in explaining the unique role of the Pope among bishops: When Christ instituted the Twelve, 'he constituted [them] in the form of a college or permanent assembly, at the head of which he placed Peter, chosen from among them'" (CCC 233).

Liturgically, there are two notable appearances of this passage, if only by reference instead of explicit mention. First, this passage is obliquely referenced in two of the three Collects in the Masses for Various Needs for the Pope. The second is highlighted at least by both Cyril of Alexandria<sup>25</sup> and Aquinas. This triple profession of love requested of Peter is the origin for the triple profession of faith required of Catechumens when they seek Baptism.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. John*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 4 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845), 623.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that, contrary to Brown's claim, Cyril of Alexandria did not reject the distinction between the two terms, but rather focused elsewhere. Silence on one question in favor of another cannot necessarily be equated to a rejection of its plausibility or even its importance.

<sup>26</sup> Elowsky, *John 11-21*, 389; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 3:298.

## V. Conclusion

Modern scholarly exegesis clearly leans toward explicitly treating ἀγαπάω and φιλέω as synonyms. These arguments ignore the apparent intentionality behind the movement of the terms, which, rather than being used interchangeably in this passage, seem to be used in a logical manner to add nuance to each part of the exchange. As I have attempted to show, however, the arguments for some intention in the variance do seem persuasive. This interpretation is able to explain the apparent ordering of the terms in a way that is not as random as would be expected if the terms were being used purely interchangeably. It addresses the progressive three-degree transition of the question, and it does not leave us with the question of why, despite not seeming to resist repetitive word choice elsewhere in the Gospel, John insists upon some variation here solely for linguistic flair.

The passage's use in ecclesiastical literature generally perceives Jesus' questioning of Peter as redemption from his triple denial of Jesus around a "charcoal fire." The greater focus is placed on Jesus' charge to Peter to feed and shepherd his lambs and sheep. This is rightly seen in ecclesiastical literature as scriptural evidence of the primacy of the office of Peter. It was accepted as such nearly universally by the Fathers. This does not seem to exclude (with the weighty exception of Augustine) an interpretation nuancing the meanings of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω but rather focuses discussion of the passage on another aspect.

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