

# Agape

**Agape** is one of several Greek words translated into English as love, one which became particularly appropriated in Christian theology as the love of God or Christ for mankind. (pronounced /'æɡəpi:/<sup>[1]</sup> and sometimes English pronunciation: /ə'ɡɑːpeɪ/ after the Classical Greek *agápē*; Modern Greek: αγάπη Greek pronunciation: /a'ɣapi/). Many have thought that this word represents divine, unconditional, self-sacrificing, active, volitional, and thoughtful love. Although the word does not have specific religious connotation, the word has been used by a variety of contemporary and ancient sources, including Biblical authors and Christian authors. Thomas Jay Oord has defined *agape* as "an intentional response to promote well-being when responding to that which has generated ill-being."<sup>[2]</sup> In his book, *The Pilgrimage*, author Paulo Coelho defines it as "the love that consumes," i.e., the highest and purest form of love, one that surpasses all other types of affection. Contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek refers to it as "political love".<sup>[3]</sup> Greek philosophers at the time of Plato and other ancient authors have used forms of the word to denote love of a spouse or family, or affection for a particular activity, in contrast to *philia* (an affection that could denote friendship, brotherhood or generally non-sexual affection) and *eros*, an affection of a sexual nature.

## Ancient usage

Although some sources claim *agapeh* appears in the *Odyssey* twice, the word is in fact not used there. Instead, two forms of the word *agape* may be found: *agapêton* and *agapazomenoi*. *Agapêton* is found in Book 5 of the *Odyssey* and means "beloved" or "well-loved". *Agapazomenoi* is found in books 7 and 17 of the *Odyssey* and means "to treat with affection".

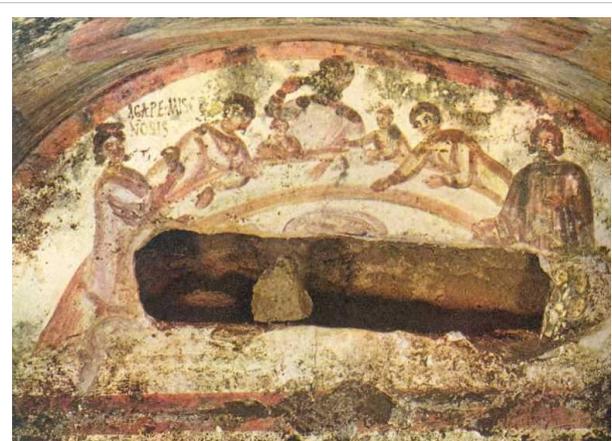
The verb *agapao* is used extensively in the Septuagint as the translation of the common Hebrew term for love which is used to show affection for husband/wife and children, brotherly love, and God's love for humanity. It is uncertain why *agapao* was chosen, but similarity of consonant sounds (אָהַבָּ) may have played a part. The Greek concept may have originated as a transliteration from some Semitic tongue. This usage provides the context for the choice of this otherwise obscure word, in preference to other more common Greek words, as the most frequently used word for love in Christian writings. The use of the noun *agape* in this way appears to be an innovation of the New Testament writers, but is clearly derived from the use of the verb *agapao* in the Septuagint.<sup>[4]</sup>

## In Christianity

A journalist of *Time Magazine* has described John 3:16<sup>[5]</sup> as "one of the most famous and well-known Bible verses. It has been called the 'Gospel in a nutshell' because it is considered a summary of the central doctrines of Christianity".<sup>[6]</sup> The verb translated "love" in this verse is *agapao*.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. — John 3:16 (NIV)

*Agape* received a broader usage under later Christian writers as the word that specifically denoted "Christian" love or "charity" (Corinthians 1 13:1–8), or even God himself (John 1 4:8, ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν, "God is Love").



Fresco of a female figure holding a chalice at an early Christian Agape feast. Catacomb of Saints Marcellinus and Peter, Via Labicana, Rome

The term *agape* is rarely used in ancient manuscripts, but was used by the early Christians to refer to the self-sacrificing love of God for humanity, which they were committed to reciprocating and practicing towards God and among one another (also see kenosis). When 1 John 4:8 <sup>[7]</sup> says "God is love," the Greek New Testament uses the word *agape* to describe God's love.

*Agape* has been expounded on by many Christian writers in a specifically Christian context. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, used *agape* to describe what he believed was the highest level of love known to humanity—a selfless love, a love that was passionately committed to the well-being of the other.<sup>[8]</sup>

The Christian usage of the term *agape* comes almost directly from the canonical Gospels' accounts of the teachings of Jesus. When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus said, "'Love (*agape*) the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love (*agape*) your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40)

In the King James Version of the New Testament, the word *agape* is translated "charity" which has a contemporary connotation of giving to meet needs of the less fortunate.<sup>[8]</sup>

In Judaism, the first ("...love the LORD your God...") is the Shema, the second ("...love your neighbor...") is the Great Commandment.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love (*agape*) your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love (*agape*) your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? — Matthew 5:43-46 (NIV)

Christian writers have generally described *agape* as a form of love which is both unconditional and voluntary. Tertullian, in his 2nd century defense of Christians, remarks how Christian love attracted pagan notice: "What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is our loving kindness. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another' " (*Apology* 39).

In the New Testament the noun *agape* is often used to describe God's love. However, the verb form *agape* is at times used in a negative sense, where it retains its more general meaning of "affection" rather than divine love. Such examples include:

- Timothy 2 4:10—"...for Demas has forsaken me, having loved [*agape*] this present world...."
- John 12:43—"for they loved [*agape*] the praise of men more than the praise from God."
- John 3:19—"but men loved [*agape*] darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."

## As a meal

The word *agape* in its plural form is used in the New Testament to describe a meal or feast eaten by early Christians, as in Jude 1:12, and 2nd Peter 2:13. It is sometimes believed to be either related to the Eucharist, or another term used for the Eucharist.

## See also

- Agape feast
- Agapism
- Compassionate love
- Love styles
- Loving-kindness
- The Four Loves
- Thomas Jay Oord

- Martin Luther King

In Judaism:

- Jewish theology of love
- Chesed, Hebrew word, given the association of kindness and love
- Sephirot of Kabbalah
- dveikut

In Eastern Religions:

- Mettā Sanskrit word, given the association of "loving-kindness" or "friendliness"

## Citations

- [1] OED
- [2] [www.calvin.edu/~jks4/city/Oord-Defining%20Love.pdf](http://www.calvin.edu/~jks4/city/Oord-Defining%20Love.pdf)
- [3] Žižek, Slavoj (2010). *Living in the End Times* (<http://books.google.com/books?id=3-MOQgAACAAJ>). London: Verso. p. 98. ISBN 9781844675982. . Retrieved 11 July 2010.
- [4] *Agape* as a term for love or affection is rarely used in ancient manuscripts. According to Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Love definition) the word is believed to have been coined by the Bible authors from the verb *agapao*
- [5] <http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=John%203:16;&version=NIV>;
- [6] John 3:16 in Pop Culture. Time.com <[www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1870689,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1870689,00.html)> Accessed: 22 May 2009
- [7] <http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=1john%204:8;&version=>
- [8] Kreeft, Peter. "Love" <<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/apologetics/ap0019.html>> Accessed: May 22, 2009

## Other references

- Lewis, C. S. (June 5, 2002). *The Four Loves*. Fount. ISBN 0-00-628089-7.
- Thomas Jay Oord *The Altruism Reader* Templeton Foundation Press, 2008.
- Thomas Jay Oord *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* Brazos Press, 2010. 1-58743-257-9
- Thomas Jay Oord *\*The Nature of Love: A Theology*, (2010) ISBN 9780827208285
- Robert Heinlein *Time Enough For Love* Ace Science Fiction 1973.

## External links

- "Agape" in Jewish Sources (<http://www.balashon.com/2007/12/agape.html>)

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