

## LOVE AND COMPASSION IN THE (CHRISTIAN) BIBLE

### Preliminary Notes

Love and compassion are indeed behavioral codes which are so significant and prominent in the Christian Bible. Their important roles are not based primarily on the frequency used of the terms, but more significantly are based on the personal character of God himself as the creator of earth and heaven. In the book of Isaiah 49: 15 and 66: 13 for instance, God of Israel is illustrated as a “mother” who has compassion on (רחם racham) her son of her womb and will always comfort (נחם nacham) him too. The personality of God as love is expressed more clearly in the book of Hosea 11: 1-4; 7-9. God’s love to his covenant people cannot be swayed by passion or diverted by disobedience. His love and compassion are everlasting and cannot be stained by the obedience of his beloved people. It is said, for example, in Jeremiah 31: 3 “... I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you”. Thus, it is not surprising whenever on the basis of these passages of the Old Testament, God is almost to be described as Love itself.<sup>1</sup> Because God himself is Love, his call for his people is none other than to love also, either to God, to its neighbor as well as to its surrounding environment<sup>2</sup>. Hence, loving is religious duty to be fulfilled by God’s people in the Old Testament. The obligation to fulfill this religious duty is encoded so empathically in the *shema*. This term is a transliteration from the Hebrew word *shema* (שמע) in Deuteronomy 6: 4 meaning “hear”. The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary notes that the *shema* is emphasizing the oneness of God and the obligation to love him. This is the most important prayer in Judaism and needs to be recited twice daily.<sup>3</sup>

The personality of God as love is continued to be religious experience of the people of God in the New Testament. In fact, the New Testament does not reluctantly address God as Love. The most vivid passage presenting the very nature of God as Love can be found in the epistle of 1 John 4: 8. It is said here that: “He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν = *hoti ho Theos agapē estin*). It is typical of the New Testament indeed where the relationship between God of the universe and his beloved people is expressed in language of familial imagery. Jesus himself teaches his disciples of how to pray to God by addressing him with the formula “Our Father who art in heaven” (Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς; Mat. 6: 9). In the preceding verses, God is already addressed as “your Father” four times (ὁ πατήρ σου; Matt. 6:4,6,8), indicating an intimate relationship between God and human being as father and sons-daughters which is based particularly on God’s pure and everlasting love. Jesus’ teaching seems to spring from his own personal experience of having a very unique relationship with God whom he addresses also as Father. This can be seen clearly in his farewell speech in front of his beloved disciples as testified in the Gospel of John 15: 9. It is said here that: “As the Father has loved me” (Καθὼς ἠγάπησέν με ὁ πατήρ = *kathos ēgapēsen me ho patēr*). It has been commonly noted that the Gospel of John is more frequently addressing God as the Father in comparison with the other three Synoptic Gospels. In a polemical context with Jewish people of the day, addressing God as Father would help Jesus to secure his position as God’s emissary who was bearing the portrait of his Son. But in the context of farewell with his disciples the prominent idea that the term brings is particularly love which underlies the saving work of God in Jesus Christ the Son. It is because God the Father loves his begotten son that he entrusted him to do his mission to represent God’s saving activity to the world. Thus, the term can secure the mission of Jesus as the one whom

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<sup>1</sup> Based on his thorough study concerning the language of love in the Old Testament, Gerald Bray reaches the conclusion that the God who is testified in the Christian Bible is indeed Love. See his study in his *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Illinois: Crossway, 2012) pp. 25ff.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion in F.H. Palmer, “Love, Beloved” in Derek Wood (co-ed.), *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* Part 2 (England: Intervarsity Press, 1980) pp. 916-917.

<sup>3</sup> Tremper Longan III (ed.), “Shema”, *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013)

“God has sent to declare him” so that God the Father can now be known and approached.<sup>4</sup> The love of God to his Son Jesus Christ is eventually becoming a pattern for Jesus’ love to his disciples and also his sending of them to do his mission in the midst of the world. Clearly this pattern is expressed in John 15: 9 and 17: 18. It is written: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love”. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. Accordingly, love is also a religious call for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (Jn. 15:13 NRS). In fulfilling this commandment, then, all the disciples have also to be ready exercising love with one of its manifestations is the readiness to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of others. Love which is instituted by Jesus as pattern of behaviour for all believers is undoubtedly in accord with love in the Old Testament. In fact, it can be ascertained that the teaching of Jesus on love is a continuation or a fulfilment of love in the Old Testament. It is indicated at least in the fact that Jesus quoted the Israeli *Shema* as he said: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; (Mk. 12:29). It is not surprising, therefore, if Jesus himself instituted love as the daily behavioural foundation of believers. This can be attested in Matthew 22 37-40: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

The meaning of love as described above is certainly linked intimately with “compassion”. In the Old Testament, compassion (רַחֵם = racham) belongs firstly to God which eventually has to become personal character for God’s people. It is stated for example in Deuteronomy 13: 17: “... that the LORD may turn from the fierceness of his anger, and show you mercy, and have compassion on you, and multiply you, as he swore to your fathers”. Similarly, in the New Testament “compassion is also attributed to God who manifests himself in the presence of Jesus in the world. Thus, it is said: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion (σπλαγχνίζομαι) for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt. 9: 36). This compassion is undoubtedly anchored in the very personal character of God, both in the Old as well as in the New Testament. As love finally becomes religious duty for God’s people so does compassion must also manifest in daily lives of all believers.

### **A Closer Look at selected verses of the Bible:**

The most significant, interesting and yet difficult passage in the Old Testament concerning love is Hosea 3: 1-5. Particular important in this occasion is verse one which reads: “The LORD said to me again, "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes." (Hos. 3:1 NRS). First of all, it needs to be ascertained that the passage has to be understood in the context of covenantal relationship wrought by God with his people Israel. Within this covenantal relationship the people of Israel is figuratively described as “a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress”. This would symbolize the Israel’s unfaithfulness to the covenant that they were obliged to fulfil. They broke their covenantal relationship with God because they were led astray by worshipping another god. That is why they were described symbolically as an adulteress. Ironically, however, God who was figuratively described as the deserted husband was still in love with her. Here the writer uses the word *'ahab* (אָהַב) which literally means “to love” particularly within human affairs including family and sexual matters. However, the writer seems to use the ironic act of God in order to show that God’s love is indeed everlasting no matter how it found an unexpected response from the one whom he loved. This kind of love is in consistent to what God himself has spoken before in chapter 2: 19. It is said here that: “And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy” (NRS). The keywords here are “steadfast love” and “mercy”. “Steadfast

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<sup>4</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, “God” in Joel B. Green & Scot McKnight (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992) pp. 270-276.

love” is translated from the Hebrew *chesed* ( חֶסֶד ) which can be translated with lovingkindness such as found in the New American standard, for example. Lovingkindness is more referring to the dynamic of heart which can easily be moved by a pity feeling. Taking Israel as God’s wife forever will not be possible without the presence of lovingkindness. With this lovingkindness, the marital bond will not be fragile, easily broken but will remain steady and unshaken. From the perspective of God this ideal love is manifested in that he is willing to restore his unfaithful wife to her original status as his beloved spouse. It is also stated clearly that the Marital bond between God as husband and Israel as wife is also sealed with mercy. The word mercy is translated from Hebrew *racham* ( רַחֵם ), which can be translated also with compassion. Compassion that springs from the bottom of heart to do favour for others who are in needs for help. God’s heart is always ready to do favour to whatever help his wife needs.

In the New Testament, a particular passage needs to be considered is John 3: 16-18 with its focus on John 3: 6. The text reads “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”. This text is part of a dialog between Jesus and one of Jewish leader of the time named Nicodemus. After responding the question from Nicodemus concerning born from above, Jesus is now giving testimony of how God’s love is not confined to any national group or spiritual elite but to the world.<sup>5</sup> It is love which proceeds from his very being as Love (1 John 4: 8, 16). According to John, this love for the world manifests itself in the person of his begotten Son Jesus Christ. This is clear from the phrase “... that he gave his only Son...”. The phrase would tell us that Jesus Christ is indeed a gift from God in whom every believer could have eternal life. Jesus himself would demonstrate the love of God by laying down his own life for the benefit of his friends through dying on the cross. In another word the cross is indeed the proclamation of God’s eternal love to the world. If the restoration of humanity is done by God through his eternal love in Jesus Christ, it is understandable if Jesus puts love as the great commandment to be fulfilled by all who believes in him as discussed above. Jesus himself gives the very example of how living a life with love. His heart for example would easily be aroused by compassion. It is reported for example in Matthew 9: 6 that Jesus had compassion for the crowds because they were like sheep without shepherd (cf. Mar. 6: 34). In Mat.14:14 Jesus is reported to have compassion for the crowds who were sick and heled them. In Mat. 15: 32, Jesus is reported to have compassion for the crowds who had been following Jesus for three days without food, and gave them food (cf. Mar. 8: 2). In Luke. 7: 13 Jesus is reported to have compassion for a widow who lost her only son, and giving her comfort. In Luke. 10: 33 Jesus is reported to encourage his disciples to follow the example of the good Samaritan who had compassion for the suffered man because of robbery. In Luke. 15: 20 Jesus is reported delivering his teaching in a parable mentioning a father who had compassion for the returning son from his wandering. Those few examples would not fail to describe Jesus as one whose heart was always filled with compassion for every humanity struggle. It is interesting to note that all the usages of the terms are derived from Greek word **σπλαγχνίζομαι**. The root word *splagchna* is referring to inner organ of slain animal ready to be offered as a sacrifice. Customary, before the *splagchna* is offered in sacrifice, a seer had to ascertain that the *splagchna* was without blemish.<sup>6</sup> This may symbolize originality, sincerity, and truthfulness. When Jesus is reported as having compassion for humanity struggles, his compassion truly springs from his very bottom of his heart without any artificial act. His compassion for humanity struggle was free from any blemish, worthy to be offered as fragrant sacrifice to God. Consequently, all believers are called to follow the example of their Lord Jesus Christ, by having compassion for every humanity struggle in their surrounding society. This would be possible only when they are faithful to the great commandment instituted by the Lord Jesus:

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<sup>5</sup> See the discussion by Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John revised version* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) pp. 210-211

<sup>6</sup> See W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (London: University of California Press, 1983) p.6

“**Love** the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... Love your neighbour as yourself”. (Matt. 22:37, 39 NIV).

### **Conclusion**

From the short discussion above, it seems clear that Love and Compassion are two related and complementary words which should have characterized the living behaviour of God’s people. These living codes found their foundation only on God’s personal character which manifests in his eternal love and his compassion for humanity struggle as they are represented practically in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the basis of this conviction all believers are accordingly called to put Love and compassion as daily living codes for promoting happiness in the midst of society at large.

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