

How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count The Ways

With apologies to Elizabeth Barrett Browning (See below for her original poem)

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

How do I love thee? In the Bible - let me count the ways. Hmm, there are 6 ways to be precise.

In the First Testament (also known as the "Old" Testament) there are 2 main Hebrew words that are translated into English as "love."

The first, **'ahab**, is used in a variety of contexts, very much like our English word: sexual attraction; sexual intercourse; erotic attraction; affectionate feelings between spouses / lovers; parental love for children and children for parents; friendship; appreciation or desire for special foods, places, things; and finally God's love for us and human's love for God.

'ahab is the "love" in the great commandment, Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength

And in the second, Leviticus 19:18

Love your neighbour as yourself

The second, **hesed**, is more difficult to translate into English because embedded in its meaning is the unbreakable covenant bond that God initiates with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."
Genesis 12:1-3

Notice that the promises God makes are not conditional. God is **NOT** saying, "If you do this, then I will do that." There are no "if's" in these promises of God. There are no time limits; no cancellation clauses.

This covenant bond between God and Abraham and Sarah and their descendants is uniquely defined in the story of Moses, the escape from slavery in Egypt, and the giving of the Ten Commandments.

And so, while **hesed** has the **feelings** of love, kindness, mercy, and affection it is defined primarily by the unconditional steadfast, loyal, faithfulness, trustworthiness of God for the covenant bond made with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants - i.e., the Jews.

Hesed includes feelings but it continues even when feelings change. So it is important to observe that in the First Testament, God's anger and punishment is **ALWAYS** expressed within the

constraint of the unbreakable covenant bond, and is **ALWAYS** for the purpose of restoring the mutuality of that bond.

Further qualities that are also embedded in **hesed** are righteousness and justice; harmony and well-being. Notice that in the verse quoted above, God says, "I will bless you **so that** you will be a blessing." So, while God's covenant bond is unbreakable and unconditional, it is not an "anything goes" relationship. It is a bond that has a purpose: **so that** you will be a blessing. And the nature of this blessing is justice: right relationships with kin, foreigners, slaves, the land, animals, etc., etc.; and harmony and well-being for all.

Collecting all these descriptions together, **hesed** contains:

- Covenant bond, unconditional, unbreakable
- steadfast, loyal, faithful, trustworthy
- love, kindness, mercy
- righteous, justice
- harmony, well-being

In the Second Testament (also known as the "New" Testament) there are 4 Greek words that are translated into English as "love."

The first, **agape**, is most closely associated with the meanings of **hesed**. That is, with God's unconditional, unbreakable bond of love, kindness, and mercy so that we might live together with righteousness, justice, harmony and well-being. When Jesus quotes the Great Commandment from Deuteronomy and Leviticus above, it is **agape** that is used for "love."

The second most commonly used word translated as "love," **phileo**, is now commonly associated with "brotherly love," but in the Bible it is also used almost interchangeably with **agape**.

A third word, **charitas**, is often translated as "charity," and has the sense of a generous, freely given, gift or action; grace. It connotes feelings of generosity, gratitude, favour, pleasing, beauty, delight, approval, reciprocity

A fourth Greek word, **eros**, is associated with sexual desire, romance and Valentine's Day (making an appearance as Cupid). Oddly enough, the Bible tends to use the word "know" for sexual intercourse. For example, in Matthew 1:24-25, "Joseph took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her," "marital relations" is the translation of the Greek word which is also translated as "know."

David Ewart,
www.holytextures.com

How Do I Love Thee

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, --- I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! --- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.