

LOVE IN JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S WRITINGS

Eirini Artemi

Associate Professor, Hellenic Open University /
Professor, Israel Institute of Biblical Studies of Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
E-mail: eartemi@theol.uoa.gr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8852-9907>

Introduction

Love is the word about which much has been written pages in literature, philosophy and religion. Many ancients' Greek authors used this term together with its derivatives of in many of their writings. In ancient Greek the word "love", "Ἀγάπη" is related to the verb "ἄγαμαι" or "Ἀγάζομαι" which means to admire and wonder, but it comes from the root of the verb love: Ἀγαπῶ, which has the meaning of devoting, wiping, kissing and other similar verbs. The noun "love" as a meaning is directly related to the word "friendship" φιλία and the verb "love" Ἀγαπῶ conceptually become synonymous with the verb φιλῶ that means I love with limits.

In the Old Testament the word "love" is used nineteen times totally. Separately, it is used eleven times in the Song of the Songs¹, and has the meaning of the man's romantic love for his wife which allegorically is the love of Soul for God. With the same meaning it is used twice in 2nd Kings². Along with the importance of simple love it appears in Ecclesiastes³ twice and in Jeremiah⁴ one more time, in Wisdom of Solomon⁵ twice and finally to Wisdom of Syrah only once⁶.

¹ Song of the Songs 2:4; 2:5; 2:7; 3:5; 3:10; 5:8; 7:6; 8:4; 8:6; 8:7.

² 2nd Kings 1:26; 13:15.

³ Eccl. 9:1; 9:6.

⁴ Jerem. 2:2.

⁵ Wisdom of Solomon 3:9; 6:18

⁶ Wisdom of Syrah 48:11.

The love in the Old Testament as content was about kindness, goodness, friendship and respect that a Jew had to show towards another Jew and Judean. The first commandment of the Mosaic Law is to love God. The second commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves⁷. On these two orders of the Mosaic Law, “love your God” and “love your neighbour” the Jewish religion is based. Thus, through the words of Christ it becomes clear that purpose of the Old Testament was to transform people from mass in to human persons who love God and, after God, their neighbour. In the New Testament Christ goes a step further by noting that we must love our enemy too: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you”⁸.

In the Old Testament, love as a term must be directed from man to God. In the New Testament there is a Copernican turn, in which love has as primary source God himself. God is the source of love and man is its recipient. The true meaning of love is connected with the nature of God, “for love is of God”⁹ and “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him”¹⁰. So God is love and manifests His love in everything He created and in each of His attributes. And as an ultimate proof of His love for His beloved creature, man, He incarnated his Son, for the salvation of perishing man. Therefore, God does not act on the basis of love but is love Himself. Consequently love is identified with God as His natural idiom.

⁷ Lev. 19:18. Matt. 22:39.

⁸ Matt. 5:43-44

⁹ Jn 4:7.

¹⁰ Ibid 4:16.

The Place of love in relation to the other virtues in the work of John Chrysostom and the interpretation of this term in the gospels and the Letters of Paul

John Chrysostom as an imitator of Paul is greatly influenced by Apostle Paul's theology. So Chrysostom, like Paul, considers love as the highest Christian virtue besides charity. The latter is the result of love to our neighbor. Then, love possesses an important place in the theology of John Chrysostom. It is the cornerstone of the Christian Church's teaching. The love of God for man was the cause of the incarnation of Logos. Divine love is unfolded throughout the mystery of salvation. God Father created the whole world and man with the help of the eternal Word and through the Holy Spirit, to make all human beings partakers of the divine life¹¹. Since then divine love indissoluble and eternal constitutes the foundation of all creation, the innermost core of the universe. This love gives life, as uncreated grace and energy, "connects" and unifies the whole creation. The pillar of all goodness is no other than love. "On this", Christ said, "hang all the law and the prophets"¹² and John Chrysostom adds: "For as fire set to a forest is wont to clear away everything, so the fire of love, wherever it is received, consumes and makes way through everything that is hurtful to the divine harvest, and renders the soil pure and fit for the reception of the seed. Where there is love, all evils are removed"¹³. Love helps all the virtues of man to emerge, since it is the factor that purifies human nature¹⁴. Love is the way of the foundation of virtues

¹¹ Ps. 32[33]:6. In parenthesis we use the number of psalm according to the masoretic text.

¹² Matt 22:40. John Chrysostom, *On Second Timothy*, homily 7, transl. by Ph. Schaff, *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first Series, vol. 13, ed. by Ph. Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889) Revised and edited for New Advent by K. Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230707.htm>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ S.S. Fotiou, „The human being as creator of love according to Saint John Chrys-

in human soul and the neutralization of passions. It helps man to discern not only the passions of others but also his own. The latter is the most difficult because it is easy for a man to point out and condemn the passions and vices in other people but hardly does the same in him. The evil, however, is not combated in the faces of others and by showing of some people's "moralistic virtues". This creates a false morality. Virtues without love as a basis create a completely immoral, unchristian and false situation, which leads man to empathy and conceit. At the same time, it strengthens the presence of evil in man's life and in society general¹⁵.

Perfect love helps man to experience the artfulness of unity of human nature. Only by this presupposition love will be able to become the foundation of the goodness of human nature. So, it will become the soil in which virtues are cultivated and flourish. But all this needs continuous efforts and struggles¹⁶. These attempts attract the grace of the Triune God and have the catalytic role for putting into practice all the virtues as fruit of the love. The absence of the latter leaves room for injustice, sin and all those which follow them. Besides this, love encapsulates and recapitulates all the virtues. It gives meaning to them and defines them within the framework of a true Christian morality, of a Christian ethos and not according to the false ethic of the secular world¹⁷. So love is the beginning and end of every virtue¹⁸.

The bishop of Constantinople underlines in another part of his work that without love no one can be saved, no work and no fruit of

ostom", *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* vol 3, issue 3, (2012), p.163.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.165.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* in Church Fathers (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), vol. 72, p.52: „In love all blessings have their root and source and mother. If there is no love, other blessings profit us nothing. Love is the mark of the Lord's disciples, it stamps the servants of God, by it we recognize his apostles”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Idem, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* ...p.31.

someone's attempt can be accepted by God, "For what could equal this love which embraces all the prophets and the whole Law? Without it nothing will be able to save a man even if he possesses faith, understanding, and knowledge of mysteries, martyrdom itself, or any other gift. For Paul says: "If I hand over my body to be burned but have not love, I gain "nothing"¹⁹. And again in another place, where he is showing that love is greater than all things and the crown of all blessings, he said: "But prophecies will cease, and tongues will be silent, and knowledge will pass away."²⁰ There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love."²¹. So, the human being must respond to God's gift of love by cooperating by his own earnestness and zeal, and these require man's own efforts²².

In the connection of virtues with love in John Chrysostom's texts, it is underlined that the power of love transcends any temporal or geographical limitation and unites all who are bound by love's energy, "For such is the power of love, it embraces, and unites, and fastens together not only those who are present, and near, and visible but also those who are far distant; and neither length of time, nor separation in space, nor anything else of that kind can break up and sunder in pieces the affection of the soul"²³. Also, if love is possessed, this declares the unity of the virtues as it is the beginning and the end of all virtues²⁴. Man who has love; he has the fullness of every virtue.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.53. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:3.

²⁰ John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*" p.53. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:8.

²¹ Idem 13:13.

²² John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*" ...p.53.

²³ Idem, *Letter to a Young Widow*, 3, trans. by W.R.W. Stephens, *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 9, ed. by Ph. Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889). Revised and edited for New Advent by K. Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1904.htm>.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, *Against Anomeans*, PG 48, 754D-755A.

Additionally, for John Chrysostom love is the greatest of virtues and encompasses them all. It up builds and never fails. It is greater than faith and hope. Christians must put on love over all the other virtues, because love binds those other virtues together and makes them perfect. And above all love for one another must be constant, because love covers a multitude of sins²⁵.

Moreover, in his biblical commentaries, John Chrysostom connects the interpretation of the various doctrinal and general theological teachings, which are mentioned in the Bible, with the real love from God. Thus he shows that the source of everything is to be found in the love that God expresses in the creature of mankind²⁶. Because of God's love, the Word (Logos) was incarnated to save man from the bondage of Satan. For the sake of love, the God-Man Christ was humbled, suffered, crucified and died on the cross as a villain. But even after His resurrection He did not cease to love and care for the human race. In the parable of the prodigal son is shown the great joy of love that God feels for each of us, who repents²⁷.

To sum up, throughout his works, John Chrysostom uses love as a key factor in the interpretation of the texts of the Bible. God's love for man is a model of the love that man should feel for another man, for a friend or an enemy. This love is identified with true Christian morality. In Chrysostom's treatise, *On Priesthood*²⁸, he affirms that sin consists of not loving the one who loves you. This shows the great egoism which a person has, when he doesn't love his neighbour and he thinks that he or she deserves a greater love from God and from the other people.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, p.269.

²⁶ V. P. Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament*, (Abingdon: Nashville, 1972), p.42.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 42-45.

²⁸ John Chrysostom, *On Priesthood*, II, 10

Conclusions

The true meaning of love was first revealed in the ten commandments in the Mosaic Law, but its whole real meaning was in the teaching of Incarnate God He taught, “Behold I give a new commandment To love one another”²⁹. One of the Fathers who dealt with the concept of love is John Chrysostom. He spoke of the vertical concept of love from God to man and the horizontal from man to his fellow man. Chrysostom didn’t only write about love for God and love among people but he put into practice these both kinds of love to the end of his life.

Chrysostom speaks of the fact that Agape (Love) is God³⁰ and He is known by men only through love³¹. Love in its quality is the likeness of God, as far as this is possible for human beings. In love’s attribute, it is an intoxication of the soul, and in its quality, it is a source of faith, the abyss of longsuffering. At the same time love is a big sea of humility. Chrysostom’s teaching on love is based on the teaching on love of St. Paul, whom he honors and loves. Chrysostom applied his teaching on love throughout his love for God and through charity for people.

Love in the Christian life is sacrifice for the other person but respecting his freedom. Love for the stranger and the relative is not only about only about sharing material things but also to fulfill his own sentimental. According to Chrysostom, there is “the mystery of the altar of Christ” and the “sacrament of the Eucharist” in the Divine Mass, and the “mystery of the communion with our brother”. In both of these altars Christian should place his offering of love. Chrysostom emphasizes whoever has Christian love, he continues to love

²⁹ Jn 13:34.

³⁰ 1 Jn. 4:7.

³¹ Ibid 4:8.

his neighbour, whether the latter hates or abuses him. Through his love a Christian imitates Christ who forgave His enemies on the cross: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."³² Finally, in Christianity our salvation come through the salvation of the other and this means love.

³² Lk. 23:34

LOVE IN JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S WRITINGS

Eirini Artemi

Associate Professor, Hellenic Open University /
Professor, Israel Institute of Biblical Studies of Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
E-mail: eartemi@theol.uoa.gr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8852-9907>

Love is the word about which many pages have been written in literature, philosophy, and religion. Many ancient Greek authors used this term together with its derivatives in many of their writings.

Chrysostom speaks of the fact that Agape (Love) is God and He is known by men only through love. Love in its quality is the likeness of God, as far as this is possible for human beings. In love's attribute, it is an intoxication of the soul, and in its quality, it is a source of faith, the abyss of long suffering. At the same time, love is a big sea of humility. Chrysostom's teaching on love is based on the teaching on love of St. Paul, whom he honors and loves. Chrysostom applied his teaching on love throughout his love for God and through charity for people.

Chrysostom emphasizes whoever has Christian love, he continues to love his neighbour, whether the latter hates or abuses him. Through his love a Christian imitates Christ who forgave His enemies on the cross: „Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” Finally, in Christianity our salvation come through the salvation of the other and this means love.

Keywords: Love, John Chrysostom, Theology.