

The Assurance of Salvation and the Love of Jesus in the Gospel of John

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A. Overview

The preceding article has sought to demonstrate from Romans 8:31-39 that the believer's assurance of salvation is securely anchored in the love of God. Come what may, nothing in heaven and earth can separate the believer from God's love. More than this, Paul also teaches in this context that the love of God is itself inseparable from the love of Christ. In fact, his final appeal is to "the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). So for Paul the love of God and the love of Christ are essentially one and the same. The love of the Father is pre-eminently the love that gave the Son, and the love of the Son is pre-eminently that he gave himself. In such love the believer is eternally secure.

The question must now be asked whether this perspective is unique to Paul. Is he the only New Testament writer who so closely identifies the love of God and the love of Christ? Is Paul the only one who sees the sacrificial and redemptive love of Christ as being essentially divine in nature? Or does the apostle John convey the same perspective in his Gospel? Is the love of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel to be equated with the love of God or is it primarily the love of a human being – admittedly a perfect human being – for his fellows? Is Jesus' love in John portrayed as the very pinnacle of human love or does it also have elements of the divine?

In John's Gospel these are fascinating questions and also very important questions. They are closely linked not only with the two natures of Christ but also with the nature of our salvation. The way we understand the love of Christ in this Gospel will therefore have significant theological implications. This is highlighted by the fact that, apart from the solitary reference to Jesus' love for the rich young ruler in Mark 10:21, John is the only Gospel to mention the love of Jesus at all. What makes the question so complex is the fact that John refers to the love of Jesus in a variety of ways. It can come as the noun ἀγάπη, and it does so three times, exclusively to express Jesus' love for his disciples (15:9, 10, 13). More frequently, however, a verb is used to indicate the love of Jesus. Unlike Paul, John uses

two verbs to express Jesus' love. On twelve occasions he uses the verb ἀγαπάω and on a further three occasions he uses the verb φιλέω.

Whether these verbs are synonymous is a question has long been debated by New Testament lexicographers. At an earlier occasion I have traced the debate as it emerged in the nineteenth century (which tended to emphasise the differences between the two verbs) and as it further developed in the twentieth (when the synonymy of the two verbs was more strongly stressed). At the end of almost two centuries of scholarly research the relationship between the two verbs remains a complex matter and cannot be defined with precision. My former study closes with the somewhat unsatisfying conclusion that their meanings “are neither easily distinguishable nor absolutely synonymous.”⁵² In John's Gospel, however, the synonymy between the two is at a very high level. It seems that often these verbs can be used interchangeably. Several of the relationships described in the Gospel are indicated by both verbs, e.g. the Father's love for Jesus (3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9; 17:23-36), and Jesus' love for Lazarus (11:3, 5, 36) and the Beloved Disciple (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20).

The high level of synonymy and interchangeability between ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in the Fourth Gospel makes it difficult to distinguish different nuances in the love of Jesus as it is presented in this Gospel. However, some light is cast on this question from a rather surprising direction. It is not the verbs for *love* as such that highlight different dimensions of the love of Jesus, but rather the tenses in which those verbs are cast. The verb ἀγαπάω expresses the love of Jesus in four tenses – the present [1x], the future [1x], the imperfect [5x] and the aorist [5x], while φιλέω does so in two – the present [1x] and the imperfect [2x]. These data show at a glance that the majority of cases [12/15] are covered by the so-called past or augmented tenses, namely the aorist and the imperfect. Traditionally both these tenses were understood as referring to an action in past time. The aorist was understood as the simple past (e.g. ‘he threw’), while the imperfect was seen as indicating continued or repeated action in past time (e.g. ‘he was throwing’ or ‘he used to throw’).

In recent years this traditional understanding has been strongly challenged by the Fanning-Porter debate of the early nineties.⁵³ The general upshot of

⁵² Stephen Voorwinde, “‘Αγαπάω and Φιλέω - Is there a Difference?’” *Reformed Theological Review* 64 (2005): 90.

⁵³ See Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) and Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

this debate has been a greater appreciation for the importance of verbal aspect. Under this system the aorist is seen as an external or summary tense; the imperfect (and the present) are understood as internal or progressive tenses. Daniel B. Wallace offers an illustration that is commonly used to explain the difference between these two aspects of the Greek verb:

More than one grammar has suggested the “parade analogy” to describe the various aspects. To sit in the stands as a spectator and watch a parade as it is passing by is an *internal* perspective: One views the parade in its progression, without focusing on the beginning or end. To view the parade from a blimp as a news commentator several hundred feet in the air is an *external* perspective: One views the whole of the parade without focusing on its internal makeup.⁵⁴

To depict the love of Jesus in the aorist tense, therefore, is not necessarily to view it as a past action, but rather to view it as a whole, as complete, and in summary, i.e. from an external perspective. To express the love of Jesus in the imperfect tense, on the other hand, is to see this love as in progress, developing and unfolding, i.e. from an internal perspective. In the imperfect the emphasis is on the details rather than on the action as a whole. The examples that we find of Jesus’ love in John’s Gospel bring out this distinction beautifully. When the aorist tense is used it depicts Jesus’ love more generally, i.e. for his own (13:1) and for his disciples (13:34; 15:9, 12). When the imperfect tense is used it refers to Jesus’ love for individuals, i.e. Mary, Martha and Lazarus (11:5, 36) and the Beloved Disciple (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). By way of strong contrast, the love of God is never expressed in the imperfect tense, but there are several occurrences of the aorist (3:16; 15:9; 17:23-26).

If Fanning and Porter are essentially correct in their understanding of verbal aspect, then it is entirely reasonable that the love of God should be expressed in the aorist tense. The aorist in such cases should not be understood as though God’s love is in the past, but that it is portrayed as a whole and in summary, rather than as a process. When Jesus’ love is referred to more broadly, it is again understandable that this tense is used. A significant example is found in John 15:9, 12 where, in his farewell discourse in the upper room, Jesus can speak of his love for his disciples in

⁵⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 500.

the aorist. He is not referring to his love in the past, but in a comprehensive way, so that it both anticipates and includes the cross.

If, as is argued below, the imperfect tense combines progressive aspect with past time, then it stands to reason that the uses of this tense stress human love. This would describe a process or progress that is past and it would therefore be an unfitting way to refer to divine love. When Jesus' love is cast in this tense, therefore, it is suggestive of his humanity. His love for the trio at Bethany, for example, should be seen as an indication of human affection and friendship. The text says as much, in that Jesus refers to Lazarus as "our friend" (11:11). His love for his special disciple would seem to be that of a brother (19:26, 27). This human love, however, is not without a redemptive dimension. He lays down his life for his friends (15:13). After his death and resurrection he can also refer to his faithful disciples as his brothers (20:17). This is the only time in this Gospel that he does so, presumably because it is only through his death that he can give them the right to become children of God (1:12). If they are God's children and he is God's Son, then it follows that they are not only his friends, but also his brothers.⁵⁵

So it is the tenses of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω, rather than the use of these verbs as such, that bring out the complementary dimensions of Jesus' love. While the redemptive nature of Jesus' love for his people is common to both tenses, the aorist tense accents his love for them as their covenant Lord. The disciples are loved in this way by both Jesus (13:34; 15:9, 12) and the Father (17:23, cf. 14:21, 23), as both Jesus and the Father fulfil the role of covenant Lord (cf. Deut 7:7-12 and John 15:12-16). The imperfect tense of both verbs, on the other hand, is unique to Jesus in this Gospel. Here he loves his people not so much in his capacity as their covenant Lord, but as their friend and brother. John's understanding of Jesus' love is therefore not only finely nuanced, but also richly expressive of the human and divine dimensions of his person.

If the above understanding of John's references to the love of Jesus is correct, it makes a profound contribution to the believer's assurance of salvation. Jesus' death demonstrates his faithfulness as covenant Lord. At the same time it constitutes believers as his brothers and sisters and betokens a friendship that stops at nothing, not even death. With such a

⁵⁵ In John's writings Christians are consistently called children (of God). Only Jesus is the Son of God. For John this distinction is absolute, whereas in Paul's writings Christians can sometimes be called sons of God (e.g. Rom 8:14; Gal 4:6, 7).

friend, brother and Lord, all Christians can rest assured that their salvation is guaranteed.

B. Argument in Depth

In an endeavour to discover the precise nuances of the Johannine use of the tenses of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω, it is profitable to compare all of the occurrences of these verbs in the Fourth Gospel, not only those that refer specifically to the love of Jesus. In a consideration of the tenses of these verbs it will therefore be useful to have an overview of all the relevant data. The chart below takes all the evidence into account, and that from a grammatical as well as a lexicographical perspective. The main subjects of the verbs stand at the head of the three columns, while the objects of their love are indicated within the table itself.

The Tenses of φιλέω and ἀγαπάω in John⁵⁶

| φιλέω | | |
|---|---|--|
| <i>God</i> | <i>Jesus</i> | <i>Others</i> |
| - The Son (5:20) - The disciples (16:27) | <i>Present Tense</i> - Lazarus (11:3) | - Whoever loves his life (12:25) - Peter loves Jesus (21:15, 16, 17 [3x]) |
| | <i>Imperfect Tense</i> - Lazarus (11:36) - The disciple whom Jesus loved (20:2) | |
| | <i>Perfect Tense</i> | - The disciples have loved Jesus (16:27) |

⁵⁶ The uses of the imperfect of these verbs in either the protasis or apodosis of “unreal” or “unfulfilled” conditions (i.e. 8:42; 14:28; 15:19) have not been included in this table.

| <u>ἀγαπάω</u> | | |
|--|--|--|
| - The Son (3:35; 10:17) | <i>Present Tense</i> - The Father (14:31) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The disciples' love for Jesus (14:15) - The one who loves Jesus (14:21 [2x], 23, 24) - The disciples to love one another (13:34 [2x]; 15:12, 17) - Does Peter love Jesus? (21:15, 16) |
| - The one who loves Jesus (14:21, 23) | <i>Future Tense</i> - The one who loves Jesus (14:21) | |
| | <i>Imperfect Tense</i> - Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (11:5) - The disciple whom Jesus loved (13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20) | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The world (3:16) - The Son (15:9; 17:23, 24, 26) - The disciples (17:23) | <i>Aorist Tense</i> - His own (13:1[2x]) - His disciples (13:34; 15:9, 12) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Men loved darkness (3:19) - Many of the rulers loved the praise of men (12:43) |

The following preliminary observations about the love of Jesus may be gleaned from the above:

1. *The Present Tense* of the two verbs is used for both the love of God and of human beings, as well as that of Jesus. In the case of ἀγαπάω the reciprocal love between the Father and the Son is indicated by this

tense (3:35; 10:17; 14:31), as is the mutual love that is to exist between the disciples (13:34; 15:12, 17).

2. *The Future Tense* has a far more limited scope, being used only of ἀγαπάω with either the Father or Jesus as the subject or agent (14:21, 23). In each case the love is for the one who loves Jesus. At this point the love of Jesus and that of the Father seem to be virtually identical in character.
3. *The Imperfect Tense* of both verbs is used only with Jesus as the subject. Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and the Beloved Disciple are the objects of Jesus' love in this tense. Other imperfects of ἀγαπάω (8:42; 14:28) and of φιλέω (15:19) do not provide genuine parallels, as they occur in very different grammatical constructions (see footnote 5). Jesus is therefore unique as the subject of the imperfect for both verbs.
4. *The Aorist Tense* is used only with ἀγαπάω, and with a range of subjects. It is used to designate both the Father's and Jesus' love for the disciples (13:34; 15:9, 12; 17:23), the Father's love for the world (3:16), and Jesus' love for his own (13:1). The Father's love for the Son is expressed in a variety of ways, most frequently by the aorist of ἀγαπάω (15:9; 17:23, 24, 26), but also by the present of both ἀγαπάω (3:35; 10:17) and φιλέω (5:20). Human love is designated *in malam partem* in the two instances where the aorist of ἀγαπάω has an unequivocally human subject (3:19; 12:43). Could this suggest that when Jesus' love is referred to by the aorist of ἀγαπάω hints of deity are to be detected?

To assess the validity of these preliminary observations we need to further examine the wider use of these verbs in the present, future, imperfect, and aorist tenses in the New Testament, the LXX, the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, and Philo.⁵⁷ Comparing these sources with John

⁵⁷ For the computer aided dimension to this research I am indebted to Dr. D. G. Hart, librarian at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, for the use of the library's *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* program. Other resources used for this research included the following:

- (a) For the LXX and Apocrypha: Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (including the Apocryphal Books)* (two volumes; Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1975 [unaltered reprint of the edition published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1897]).

should reveal whether or not John's use of these tenses to indicate the love of Jesus carries any particular significance. Because there was only one isolated occurrence of the perfect tense, and that to express the love of the disciples, it will be excluded from consideration.

1. The Present Tense

There are 78 occurrences of ἀγαπάω in the present tense throughout the New Testament. Only six of these have God or Jesus as their subject (John 3:35; 10:17; 14:31; 2 Cor 9:7; Heb 12:6; Rev 1:5). In the case of φιλέω there are eighteen occurrences, of which four have the Father or Jesus as their subject (John 5:20; 11:3; 16:27; Rev 3:19). Out of a New Testament total of 96 all but ten uses of these verbs in the present tense have unequivocally human subjects. In this tense both verbs refer to a broad range of human love (for God, neighbours, parents, the Christian brotherhood, prestige etc.). The synonymy and interchangeability of these verbs that has been discovered in John's Gospel⁵⁸ finds wider support in the New Testament as a whole.⁵⁹

In the canonical LXX God is sometimes the subject of the present indicative of ἀγαπάω (12/29x), while on occasion the present participle also refers to God (3/34x). In the LXX God loves both his people and such qualities as righteousness and justice. The proportions are very similar in the Apocrypha. The indicative of ἀγαπάω sometimes has God as its subject (3/8x), and the participle has only one such reference (out of three occurrences). Likewise in Josephus ἀγαπάω is used of God in the present

(b) For the Pseudepigrapha: James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (two volumes; New York: Doubleday, 1983-1985); Albert-Marie Denis, *Concordance Grecque des Pseudépigraphes d'Ancien Testament* (Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1987).

(c) For Josephus: K. H. Rengstorf ed., *A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus* (four volumes; Leiden: Brill, 1973-1983); H. St. J. Thackeray et al., trans., *Josephus* (ten volumes; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966-1977).

(d) For Philo: F. H. Colson et al., trans., *Philo* (ten volumes; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960-1971); Günther Mayer, *Index Philoneus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).

⁵⁸ See for example Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (two volumes; Anchor Bible 29, 29A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966-1970), 2:498-499.

⁵⁹ A particularly interesting case in point is the New Testament use of Prov 3:12a, which in the LXX reads: ὁ γὰρ ἀγαπᾷ Κύριος, ἐλέγχει. This verb is retained in quotation in Heb 12:6, while the allusion in Rev 3:19a reads φιλῶ.

tense only in a minority of cases (2/36x). A similar result was obtained for the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (2/37x) and Philo (2/30x).⁶⁰ In none of these writings is the present tense of φιλέω used with reference to God.⁶¹

In the above literature the present tense of ἀγαπάω is therefore used infrequently of God, and the present of φιλέω even less. In the vast majority of cases these verbs have human subjects. This factor will need to be taken into account as we assess the significance of the use of the present tense of these verbs with respect to Jesus in John's Gospel.

2. The Future Tense

In the New Testament most non-Johannine uses of the future of ἀγαπάω carry imperatival force, relating particularly to the two great commandments (e.g. Matt 5:43; 22:37, 39; Mark 12:30, 31; Luke 10:27). The three Johannine occurrences (John 14:21[bis], 23) are all genuine futures and have either Jesus or the Father as their subject or agent. The love of the Father and that of Jesus, here expressed in relation to the obedient disciple, are therefore conjoined in a most intimate way. Only here in the New Testament is the future of ἀγαπάω used with respect to God. In the LXX merely two of the fourteen occurrences have God as their subject. On both occasions his love for the people of Israel is in view (Deut 7:13; Hos 14:5). Perhaps a link is to be seen between the love of God for Israel in the Old Testament and the love of Jesus and the Father for the obedient disciple in the Fourth Gospel. In the remaining literature the references to God are minimal. The future of ἀγαπάω is used once (out of three times) for God in the Apocrypha, also once (out of five times) in Josephus, and in three of the five occurrences in the Pseudepigrapha.

3. The Imperfect Tense

There are seven uses of the imperfect of ἀγαπάω in the New Testament, all of them in John's Gospel. Apart from the two occurrences in "unreal" conditions (8:42; 14:28), all the other occurrences refer to the love of Jesus

⁶⁰ Philo uses ἀγαπάω with reference to God only in the present tense, and on both occasions he is quoting the LXX (*Migr.* 60 = Deut 7:8; *Congr.* 177 = Prov 3:12). He never uses φιλέω to refer to God.

⁶¹ The only possible exception is found in *Sib. Or.* 3:710. On that occasion the subject of the verb is ἀθάνατος which should probably be understood as a reference to God.

– for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (11:5), and for the Beloved Disciple (13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20). A similar pattern presents itself in the case of φιλέω. It occurs a total of three times in the New Testament, once again exclusively in John. Again one of these occurrences is found in an “unreal” condition (15:19). The two remaining occurrences refer to the love of Jesus – for Lazarus (11:36) and for the Beloved Disciple (20:2). When it comes to the imperfect tense, not only is the Johannine usage unique to the New Testament, but the synonymy between the two verbs at this point seems to be complete. The parallels between the two verbs are certainly impressive. In the case of 11:5, 36 Jesus’ love for Mary and Martha, and particularly for Lazarus, is that of human friendship and affection. By parity of reasoning the love of Jesus for the Beloved Disciple later in the Gospel must be of the same character. The same verbs in the same tense are used to depict Jesus’ love for him. Again it would therefore appear to be the love of human friendship and affection.

This conclusion seems to be bolstered by the occurrences of these verbs in the imperfect tense in the remaining literature. In the LXX the imperfect of ἀγαπάω is found six times and that of φιλέω once, and exclusively with human subjects. In the Apocrypha only the imperfect of ἀγαπάω is found. The sole occurrence has a human subject. In Josephus the imperfect of ἀγαπάω is used 12x, but never of God. The imperfect of φιλέω occurs once, in the passive and with a human agent. Philo never uses ἀγαπάω in the imperfect, and registers only a single occurrence of φιλέω in this tense, presumably with the meaning of *kiss* (*Ios.* 182). In the Pseudepigrapha there are no occurrences of φιλέω in this tense, while the seven occurrences of ἀγαπάω in the imperfect have exclusively human subjects. Thus in all the literature consulted the imperfect of neither verb is ever used with reference to God. The focus is rather on human affection, friendship, and devotion.

From the above data a fairly strong case can be made for the proposition that neither ἀγαπάω nor φιλέω as such refers to a human emotion, but rather that the imperfect tense of both these verbs consistently refers to a human emotion. There is certainly no indication anywhere in the literature consulted that the love of God is ever referred to by the imperfect tense of either verb. Nevertheless, care needs to be taken that every instance be considered within its context lest one fall victim to broad generalisations. The Beloved Disciple, for example, is referred to in these terms only in the narrative following John 13:1. So even if the love of Jesus for this disciple be conceived of only in terms of human friendship, it is viewed through the prism of redemptive love which receives such a sharp focus in John 13-21.

4. The Aorist Tense

In marked contrast to the three tenses discussed so far, the aorist of ἀγαπάω in the New Testament predominantly refers to the love of God or Christ. Of the 32 occurrences, 24 have God or Jesus Christ as their subject. This makes for a particularly interesting comparison with the present tense, where only six out of a total of 78 occurrences had God or Christ as the subject. In 1 John the contrast between the divine and human is absolute. All three aorists have God as their subject, while all 24 presents have human subjects! While the data in the Gospel are more nuanced (see especially 3:35; 10:17; 3:19; 12:43), this consistent line of evidence from the New Testament document most similar to John's Gospel cannot be ignored. Moreover, in the Johannine writings all aorists (except the participle in John 13:1) are indicatives.

Throughout the New Testament aorist indicatives are confined almost exclusively to Jesus and the Father (20/25x). When there is a human subject, the object of the love is always impersonal rather than personal (Luke 7:47; John 3:19; 12:43; 2 Pet 2:15; Rev 12:11). Personal love in the aorist indicative is restricted to the Father and Jesus in the New Testament. In many such cases the love indicated is clearly redemptive in character (e.g. John 3:16; 13:1; 15:12; Eph 2:4; 5:2, 25; 1 John 4:10, 11, 19). The aorist of φιλέω, on the other hand, occurs only three times in the New Testament, always with the meaning of *kiss* (Matt 26:48; Mark 14:44; Luke 22:47). For all their synonymity in the imperfect tense, ἀγαπάω and φιλέω vary widely in meaning when they are used in the aorist in the New Testament. The former refers predominantly to divine love, the latter exclusively to the traitor's kiss.

The pattern for the aorists of ἀγαπάω detected in the New Testament certainly cannot be traced back to LXX usage as a whole. There the human subjects are again in the majority. Of the 75 occurrences of the aorist only seventeen are used with reference to God (i.e. 22.7%). This proportion is very similar to the use of the present tense where fifteen out of a total of 63 occurrences refer to God (i.e. 23.8%). Such a difference is hardly significant and stands in marked contrast to the differences between the aorist and present tenses of ἀγαπάω in New Testament usage.

In the Apocrypha three out of the nine aorists (and four out of the 25 presents) of ἀγαπάω refer to the love of God. In Josephus the proportion is 2/14 for the aorist (and 2/36 for the present), while in the Pseudepigrapha it is 6/27 for the aorist (and 2/37 for the present). Philo has five instances of

the aorist, exclusively with human subjects. In all these writings the emphasis of the aorist of ἀγαπάω therefore falls strongly on human love. This makes the New Testament (and particularly the Johannine) use of the aorist of ἀγαπάω to signify the love of God and of Jesus Christ quite unique. While the use of this tense does not stand out in the other literature, it does in the New Testament. This feature is worth further investigation.

In the LXX the New Testament pattern returns when the data are broken down further. On the nineteen occasions where the love of God for Israel is referred to by the verb ἀγαπάω, no less than thirteen are in the aorist tense,⁶² whereas in only two of the eight references to God's love for individuals is the aorist tense used.⁶³ The preference for the aorist is therefore stronger when God's love for the nation is being depicted than when his love for individuals is in view. Thus it is possible that, where the New Testament aorists of ἀγαπάω refer to God's love for his people in Christ, the cue has been taken from these references to God's love for Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus' love for his disciples in John may also reflect this usage. If so, his love for them parallels Yahweh's covenant love for Israel.

5. Evaluation

From the above discussion the most noteworthy contrast discovered was that between the two augmented tenses (the imperfect and the aorist). In the case of the imperfect of both ἀγαπάω and φιλέω no example of divine love could be found in the literature. The aorist of ἀγαπάω, on the other hand, predominantly referred to the love of God or Christ in the New Testament, while in the LXX this tense was used significantly to designate the love of God for Israel. The present tense, with its far heavier emphasis on human love in the case of both verbs throughout the literature consulted, tended to align itself with the imperfect. Gleaning the literature for futures yielded a relatively small sample, but the occurrences of ἀγαπάω in this tense in John, and on a few significant occasions in the LXX, showed some marked affinities with the aorist. Thus the similarities between the tenses fall out along broadly aspectual lines. Could this be a significant observation?

⁶² See Deut 23:6; Pss 47:4; 78:68; Isa 43:4; Jer 31:3; Hos 11:1; Mal 1:2 [3x] (indicative); Deut 4:37; 2 Chron 2:11; 9:8; Hos 9:15 (infinitive).

⁶³ See 2 Sam 12:24 (Solomon); Isa 41:8 (Abraham). As king and patriarch respectively, these two figures can be understood as representatives of the nation of Israel.

Recent grammars that have attempted to view the tenses of the Greek verb from the perspective of aspect have identified at least two major aspects – the imperfective and the perfective or aoristic. In McKay’s summary, “the imperfective basically represents an activity as in process (or progress), the aorist an activity as a whole action.”⁶⁴ For Fanning “[t]he crucial aspectual distinction is whether the reference point [from which the action of the verb is viewed] is internal or external to the occurrence.”⁶⁵ He later elaborates: “When a speaker chooses the internal viewpoint of the present, he signals a focus on the details of the occurrence ... The aorist, on the other hand, looks at the occurrence in summary without attention to the details.”⁶⁶ Porter explains the distinction in terms of an analogy drawn from a spatial representation of the world:

The planes of discourse can be divided into foreground and background. The Greek aorist is the ‘ground’ or ‘background tense’ and the Greek present/imperfect is the ‘figure’ or ‘foreground tense’. In Greek often the basic narrative is laid down by the 3rd person aorist, a common trait of the background tense, while the imperfect/present introduces significant characters or makes appropriate climactic references to concrete situations, typical of the foreground tense. When an extended description is given, the foreground tense is often used.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ K. L. McKay, “Time and Aspect in New Testament Greek,” *NovT* 34 (1992): 225.

⁶⁵ Buist M. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method”, in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson; JSNTSup 80; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 49.

⁶⁶ Fanning, “Approaches”, 54; cf. his more detailed definitions in *Verbal Aspect* where he writes: “The present reflects an *internal* viewpoint concerning the occurrence which *focuses on its development or progress* and sees the occurrence *in regard to its internal make-up, without beginning or end in view*” (103) and “[T]he aorist presents an occurrence *in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence*” [italics his] (97).

⁶⁷ Stanley E. Porter, “Keeping up with Recent Studies 17: Greek Language and Linguistics,” *ExpTim* 103 (1992): 205; cf. his definitions in *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (second edition; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 21: “a. *Perfective aspect is the meaning (‘semantics’) of the aorist tense: the action is conceived of by the language user as a complete and undifferentiated process. This is regardless of how in actual fact the action occurs, that is, whether it is momentary or lasts a significant length of time ... b. Imperfective aspect is the meaning of the present tense, including the so-called imperfect form* (augmented

In spite of the differences in nomenclature and in the number of categories adopted by these grammarians,⁶⁸ the combined contribution of these scholars is significant, particularly their essential agreement on the fact “that the core of aspect is the contrast between present and aorist. The issues involve viewing a situation as a whole and viewing it partially.”⁶⁹

These grammatical insights throw some significant light on the references to love in the Fourth Gospel:

1. Porter’s observation that in Greek the basic narrative is often laid down by the third person aorist verb can be aptly exemplified by the use of ἠγάπησεν in John 13:1. The love of Jesus for his own provides the background for the ensuing narrative and sets the stage for the drama that is about to unfold.
2. The references to Jesus’ love for individuals are predominantly in the imperfect tense. They illustrate the use of the imperfect as a foreground tense that introduces significant characters (11:5, 36; 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20).
3. That the love of God should be indicated by the aorist is entirely natural and to be expected (3:16; 15:9; 17:23, 24, 26). It stands to reason that John and other Bible writers should portray divine love “as a whole action,”⁷⁰ “in summary,”⁷¹ and as “a complete and undifferentiated process.”⁷² God’s love for Israel in the LXX and Jesus’ love for his disciples in John (13:1, 34; 15:9, 12) both readily fit this category.
4. Human love, on the other hand, can often be more adequately described as being “in process or progress,” or as still unfolding and developing,

present form with secondary endings): *the action is conceived of by the language user as being in progress*. In other words, its internal structure is seen as unfolding.” [italics his]

⁶⁸ Porter, *Idioms*, 21-22, adds a third category, the “stative aspect,” which is the meaning of the perfect tense. McKay, “Time and Aspect,” 225, recognises four aspects: “imperfective, aorist, perfect and future (this last being partly anomalous).”

⁶⁹ Daryl D. Schmidt, “Verbal Aspect in Greek: Two Approaches,” in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson; JSNTSup 80; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 72.

⁷⁰ Thus McKay, “Time and Aspect,” 225.

⁷¹ Thus Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 97.

⁷² Thus Porter, *Idioms*, 35.

and is better viewed partially rather than as a whole.⁷³ The present tense is therefore generally preferred. The disciples' love for Jesus (14:15; 21:15, 16; cf. 14:21-24) and for one another (13:34; 15:12, 17) could be cited as examples of this use.

5. As a foreground tense the present can also be used to "introduce significant characters or make appropriate climactic references to concrete situations."⁷⁴ Jesus' love for Lazarus can perhaps best be identified in this way (11:3), as can the mutual love between the Father and the Son (3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:31).
6. If the imperfect tense does indeed combine imperfective aspect (involving such features as progress, process, and development) with past time,⁷⁵ then it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to designate divine love by the use of this tense, as it would imply that in relation to the present the love is known to be past. Such an implication would be theologically problematic.
7. The future tense has not featured prominently in the debate on verbal aspect. Porter calls it "an anomaly in the Greek verbal network,"⁷⁶ while according to Fanning "the future must be taken as a non-aspectual *tense*-category, indicating occurrence *subsequent* to some

⁷³ Schmidt, "Two Approaches," 72, explains that if a situation is viewed partially, "then the focus can be on the beginning, or end, or continuing, or merely ongoing, or repeating."

⁷⁴ Porter, "Greek Language and Linguistics," 12.

⁷⁵ This is one of the key issues in the current debate concerning verbal aspect. Porter insists that the Greek tenses do not grammaticalize temporal reference. On this point he goes well beyond the scholarly consensus and has not been without his critics. Moisés Silva, "A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson; JSNTSup 80; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 77, has highlighted an obvious weak spot: "Porter's analysis is particularly vulnerable in its reluctance to distinguish more sharply between the indicative and the non-indicative moods. I find it perplexing that Porter can so easily dismiss the significance of the augment for this issue." In his critique of Porter's work Schmidt, "Two Approaches," 71, also draws attention to Porter's "complete disregard of the augment as morphologically significant." He is therefore unsupportive of Porter's contention that tense has no temporal dimension: "The more accurate claim would appear to be: tense forms in the indicative do not grammaticalize *absolute time*, any more than they grammaticalize *absolute aspect*. But this is far short of demonstrating that tense in the indicative has no temporal dimension" (70-71).

⁷⁶ Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 403; cf. his further elaboration: "The Future is not fully aspectual and is thus aspectually vague, since it offers no morphologically-based choice between forms" (438).

reference-point.”⁷⁷ The futures of ἀγαπάω in John 14:21, 23 are therefore best taken as having only temporal (not aspectual) significance.⁷⁸

These grammatical observations coupled with the investigation into the lexical background of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in biblical and other related Greek literature show that John has used the tenses of these verbs with precision. The grammatical and lexical work also enables us to draw some cautious conclusions. Not the two verbs in and of themselves, but rather the tenses in which they occur, suggest that the love of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is portrayed as having both divine and human dimensions.

Conclusions

Firstly, the love of Jesus is closely linked to that of the Father. This stands out most clearly in this Gospel’s use of the present, future, and aorist tenses of ἀγαπάω. The present tense indicates the mutual love between the Father and the Son (3:35; 10:17; 14:31). In the future tense their love for the obedient disciple comes to expression (14:21, 23). The aorist tense expresses God’s love for the world (3:16), Jesus (15:9; 17:23, 24, 26), and the disciples (17:23). Jesus’ love for his own, predominantly his disciples (13:1, 34; 15:9, 12), is likewise conveyed by the aorist tense. This strong connection between the love of the Father and that of the Son in the Fourth Gospel is paralleled by the frequent use of the aorist to indicate the redemptive love of God and of Christ in other New Testament writings,⁷⁹ as well as by its use in the LXX to designate Yahweh’s love for his covenant people.

Secondly, it should probably be seen as significant that the imperfect tense of both ἀγαπάω and φιλέω is used only of Jesus and never of the Father.

⁷⁷ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 123.

⁷⁸ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 120, recognises that ἀγαπήσω in John 14:21 implies a “durative, continuing occurrence,” but this derives from the lexical sense rather than from any aspect-value inherent in the future form. He argues that the mixture of usage in the future, in that it combines punctiliar and durative senses, would appear to indicate its non-aspectual character.

⁷⁹ In 1 John the aorist is used to indicate the prior love of God (4:10, 11, 19), supremely demonstrated in that he “sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (4:10 NASB). The human love that responds to this divine love is indicated in this epistle without exception by the use of the present tense (2:10, 15; 3:10, 11, 14, 18, 23; 4:7, 11, 12, 19, 20, 21; 5:1, 2; cf. 2 John 1, 5; 3 John 1).

Curiously the imperfect of both verbs is unique to John in the New Testament. In the related literature these verbs were found to have only human subjects or agents when used in the imperfect tense. This grammatical phenomenon supports the conclusion that Jesus' love for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (11:5, 36) was the human love of friendship and affection.⁸⁰ This love for the trio at Bethany in the Book of Signs (John 2-11) would appear to have its counterpart in Jesus' love for the Beloved Disciple in the Book of Passion/Glory (13:23; 19:26; 20:2) and the Epilogue (21:7, 20), as the same verbs and the same tense are used. The verbal and grammatical parallels suggest that the love for the Beloved Disciple was one of human friendship and affection.

The love of Jesus in John's Gospel would therefore seem to be a finely nuanced emotion which does not necessarily carry the same significance every time it is found. Whether Jesus' love points to a divine or a human role seems to depend largely on which verb is used and the tense in which it comes. Although the Father's love can also be conveyed by the verb φιλέω (5:20; 16:27), when it is used of Jesus the context seems to underline his humanity (11:3, 36). It expresses the human bonds of friendship and affection. The same is true when the imperfect of ἀγαπάω is used. The other tenses of this verb, however, seem to underscore Jesus' divine functions. Thus both Jesus and the Father *will love* anyone who keeps Jesus' word and loves him (14:21, 23). The love of the Father and the Son would appear to be indistinguishable at this point. Likewise, in the aorist tense, ἀγαπάω conveys the redemptive love of both the Father (3:16; 17:23) and the Son (13:1, 34; 15:9, 12). Especially in the augmented tenses, two complementary dimensions of Jesus' love for his own suggest themselves. In the imperfect tense we are given a glimpse of his warm human affection. In the aorist, on the other hand, there are overtones of a divine and covenantal love. These two tenses in particular are therefore used with great care and consistency when applied to the love of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.

⁸⁰ This conclusion also applied to the present tense of φιλέω when it was used to indicate Jesus' love for Lazarus (11:3).