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Is Divine Love Altogether Unconditional?

By John C. Peckham



What is the nature of divine love? From a deterministic perspective God is the only active agent in the universe and, consequently, divine love is unilateral and altogether unconditional. If divine love is altogether unconditional it is predicated solely in the eternal divine will independent of conditionality. This complements classical theism's supposition of the divine nature as immutable and impassible wherein love is necessarily nothing more than unaffected, unilateral, indifferent, and wholly subjective, beneficence. However, the biblical data challenges such a conception of the God-world relationship and in such a way that it is misleading, at best, to refer to divine love as altogether unconditional. Rather than trying to address this issue comprehensively, I will focus on divine love in the OT.

Divine Emotion and Evaluation

Divine love often connotes emotion and/or evaluation. In other words, divine love is frequently described as affective and/or tied to actual properties of its object(s). These two features challenge a conception of altogether unconditional love since in order for emotion and evaluation to be part of divine love, it cannot be unilateral nor stem from an impassible nature. Let us view just a few examples of emotive and evaluative divine love, respectively.

Divine emotion is evident in the comparison of God's love for human beings to that of a husband toward his consistently unfaithful wife (cf. [Hos 3:1](#)). That this analogy connotes intensely emotive '*ahav*' is not only implicit in the metaphor itself but explicit in the description of God being affected by Israel's infidelity. God is presented as a wounded lover, a scorned and compassionate God, the victim of unrequited love (cf. [Hos 9:15](#); [11:8-9](#)). The frequent analogy of the father-son relationship likewise connotes deep affection (i.e. [Hos 11:1-4](#); [Prov 3:12](#); cf. [Is 63:9](#)). Elsewhere, the depth of emotion associated with God's love for his people (albeit absent the term '*ahav*') is emphasized as God refers to the people as "My dear son . . . a delightful child" for whom his "heart yearns" and upon whom he will surely have compassion ([Jer 31:20](#); cf. [Is 49:15](#)). Similarly, divine judgment deeply grieves God who expresses his anguish: "How can I give you up? . . . My heart is turned over within Me, All My compassions are kindled" ([Hos 11:8](#)). Positively, God looks to the future when he "will exult [*suws*] over you with joy [*simchah*], He will be quiet [*charash*] in His love, He will rejoice [*giyl*] over you with shouts of joy [*rinnah*]" ([Zeph 3:17](#)).

Divine evaluation is also clearly manifest in some instances. God "loves [*ahav*] the righteous" ([Ps 146:8](#)) as well as "righteousness" itself ([Ps 11:7](#); cf. [33:5](#); [37:28](#)). Similarly, just as the upright's prayer is God's delight (*ratsown*), he loves (*ahav*) the pursuer of righteousness ([Prov 15:8-9](#)). Divine love prompts God to provide substitution for his people ([Is 43:4](#)), whereas wickedness may bring the discontinuance of divine love ([Hos 9:15](#)). Thus, it appears that divine love may be (partially) predicated on positive evaluation and forfeited by negative evaluation. Such divine love which includes evaluation and/or emotion is mutually exclusive to divine impassibility and, by extension, exclusive of a view of divine love as wholly

arbitrary or altogether unconditional.

God's Love - Conditional?

These implications are further supported in other instances where God's love is depicted as explicitly conditional. For example, in Hosea 9 God comes to hate his people and, explicitly because of their wickedness, "will love [*'ahav*] them no more" (Hos 9:15). Accordingly, divine love is neither unilateral nor impartially constant. Such contingency of divine love is also apparent in Deuteronomy: "Then it shall come about, because (*'eqev*) you listen to these judgments and keep and do them," God "will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your fathers" and "He will love you and bless you and multiply you" (Deut 7:12-13). Divine love is thus not altogether unconditional.

God's Love - Unconditional?

On the other hand, perhaps in some (though not all) respects divine love may be thought of as "unconditional." God declares to his people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness" (Jer 31:3). Apparently, then, there is some constancy to divine love. However, unless every descendant of Jacob will ultimately be saved it appears that the limitation of the actual, individual, recipients of God's everlasting love is contingent upon some other factor(s). In other words, God's everlasting love toward his people does not reach all of its desired objects unto eternity. Moreover, as seen above, the supposition of unqualified unconditional divine love is in overt tension with the divine statement, "I will love them no more" (Hos 9:15). What is to be made of this tension?

The Old Testament's Witness on God's Love

If the entirety of the OT data is taken seriously it would appear that God's love is unconditional in some respects yet conditional in others. Perhaps divine love is unconditional in the sense that God wills to love all humans and never wills to remove his love from anyone. However, at the same time, God is affected by his creatures, such that he may take delight in those who respond positively to him, take joy in his creation, etc. Further, if God has given human beings freedom, they may reject his loving overtures and remove themselves from a loving relationship with him. In these respects, related to the categories of affected emotion, and evaluation, divine love is conditional. Yet, that God loves the righteous (Ps 146:8; cf. Ps 11:7) and hates the one who loves evil (Ps 11:5) does not provide the total picture with regard to divine love. The situation is complex, and this is the case precisely because God has mercifully and graciously suspended the execution of judgment temporarily. Otherwise, no human beings would be the objects of his love. In this time between the times, God loves the unlovable, yet also enjoys and delights in the righteousness of humans in a way that is not the case with regard to human wickedness, which prompts divine hatred and loathing (Ps 5:5-6). Love, then, often explicitly includes evaluation, but also surpasses evaluation.

Eventually, at the end of the age, divine love no longer reaches some divinely intended objects, not in the sense that God ceases to be loving but in the sense that the objects of divine love that have finally resisted the call to salvation have spurned and forfeited divine love and thus come to non-existence. While God, in his nearly unfathomable longsuffering, provides abundant opportunity for any who will to come to him, all agents who have rejected divine love, who have persevered and insisted upon being, objectively, unlovable, who have denied the transformative power of God and dismissed his wooings, pleadings and longings, there is nothing left but unbeing. At such a time, God may still long for them, he may still love the idea of them, but a non-existent object cannot be loved with the fulness of love. Non-being removes the essential element of relationality which is essential to love. In this way, the OT biblical data points toward a model of divine love which recognizes that God's love, while unconditional with regard to the divine will to love humans, is also conditional when it comes to its bilateral, personal-relational elements.



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