Hebrew And Greek Words About God’s Love

Relevant Hebrew Old Testament words

The Old Testament speaks much of God having an *almost unbelievable love* for people. The main Hebrew words used in the Old Testament to define God’s love are “ahab”, “ahabah”, “habab”, “hashaq” and “hesed”.

The word “ahab” is defined by Wilson as “to love that in which a man *delights*, or which he earnestly desires; it implies *ardent* and vehement inclination of the mind, at the same time *tenderness* and fullness of affection,…and is used of the *unspeakable love* and *tender mercies* of God in covenant with his people”. 1 Vine says of “ahab”: “Basically this verb is equivalent to the English ‘to love’ in the sense of having a strong emotional attachment to and desire either to *possess* or to be in the presence of the object”. 2

The word “ahab” is used of the love of Isaac for his wife Rebekah (see Genesis 24:67), of parents for children, for example Abraham for his son Isaac (see Genesis 22:2), and of Jonathon for David, his closest friend (see 1 Samuel 18:1). Jonathon’s totally unselfish treatment of David is a human example of the type of love God has for us. Jonathon put David’s interests before his own. 3

Isaiah 43:4 uses “ahab” when it refers to God’s love: “*Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honoured, and I have loved you*…”

The Hebrew word “ahabah” is derived from the above word “ahab”. Brown, Driver and Briggs say one of the meanings of “ahabah” is “God’s love to His people”. 4 “Ahabah” is used according to this meaning in Deuteronomy 7:8, 1 Kings 10:9, 2 Chronicles 2:11, 9:8, Isaiah 63:9, Jeremiah 31:3, Hosea 3:1, 11:4 and Zephaniah 3:8. Hosea 3:1 expresses God loves people even when they commit wickedness and turn away from Him: “*like the love of the Lord for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagan.*”

The Hebrew word “habab” is used in Deuteronomy 33:3 in relation to God’s attitude to His people: “*Yes, He loves the people…*” Wilson says “habab” means “to *cherish* with *tender* love, to hide in the bosom, to love *fervently*, and so to *protect*”. 5 Do you believe God loves you with a tender love, wishes to hold you closely, loves you fervently and will protect you despite the troubles you experience in life?

The Hebrew word “hashaq” is used in Deuteronomy 7:7, Psalm 91:14 and Isaiah 38:17 about God’s love for His people. “Hashaq” means “be *attached to*, love”. 6 Wilson says

---

1 Wilson, page 260.
2 Vine, page 141.
3 The word “ahab” is used in the following verses in relation to God’s love for people – Deuteronomy 4:37, 7:13, 10:15, 10:18, 23:5, 2 Samuel 12:24, Psalm 47:4, 78:68, 146:8, Proverbs 3:12, Isaiah 43:4, 48:14, Hosea 11:1, 14:4 and Malachi 1:2 (three times).
4 Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 13.
5 Wilson, page 260.
6 Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 365 and Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 332.
“hashaq” means “to connect or join together. It signifies that connexion of heart with any object which inclines us to love it, to delight in it, to desire and long for it, to set one’s love on”. Do you believe God delights in you, desires and longs for you and your company?

God’s cherished loved ones

The original Hebrew Old Testament uses a few words which describe God’s people as His beloved. One of these is “yadid”. According to Wilson, the word “yadid” means “…delight, that which is loved; ‘dearly beloved’”. This word is used in Deuteronomy 33:12, Psalm 60:5, 108:6 and 127:2 in relation to God’s attitude to His people. The expression “beloved” is an older English word which means “loved one”.

The New Testament Greek word for God’s love

The major words used in the New Testament for God’s love are “agape” and its corresponding verb “agapao”. Vine says: “‘agapao’ and the corresponding noun ‘agape’ present the characteristic word of Christianity, and since the Spirit of revelation has used it to express ideas previously unknown, inquiry into its use, whether in Greek literature or in the Septuagint (the earliest translation of the Old Testament into Greek) throws but little light upon its distinctive meaning in the New Testament”. Vine also says, “In respect of ‘agapao’ as used of God, it expresses the deep and constant ‘love’ and interest of a perfect Being towards entirely unworthy objects, producing and fostering a reverential ‘love’ in them towards the Giver, and a practical ‘love’ towards those who are partakers of the same, and a desire to help others to seek the Giver”.

The beloved or loved ones of God

The New Testament reveals God deeply loves every person, even the most wicked (see John 3:16 and Romans 5:8). But through its use of two key Greek words – “agapetos” and “agapao”, the New Testament reveals God has a special love for believers. This is the love of a groom for his bride who is responding to his love. The word “agapetos” means “dear, beloved, indicating a close relationship especially between parent and child”. A form of “agapetos” is used of believers in Romans 1:7: “To all who are in Rome, beloved of God…”

A form of the Greek word “agapao” is translated “beloved” in Colossians 3:12 and 2 Thessalonians 2:13. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 says; “…brethren beloved by the Lord…”

---

7 Wilson, page 260.
8 Wilson, page 36.
9 Vine, page 381.
10 Ibid, page 382.
Bible Study Questions

1. Describe what the following Hebrew and Greek words mean:
   a) “ahab”
   b) “habab”
   c) “hashaq”
   d) “agape” and
   e) “agapetos.”