

## LOVE AND HATE IN SEMITIC PARLANCE

Virgil Warren, PhD

Several well-known scriptures combine love and hate. They appear first as worded in the *New American Standard Bible* followed by the wording in the *Conversational Version*. The manner of expression in the latter represents what gets at the Hebrew idioms that impact this set of words. After the examples, there are notations about the rationale for the translation in the *Conversational Version*.

### Genesis 29:31-30

(NASB) “<sup>30</sup>So Jacob went into Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served Laban for another seven years. <sup>31</sup>Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved [margin ‘hated’], and he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.”

(CV) “<sup>30</sup>So Jacob had relations with Rachel too. He loved her more than Leah and worked for Laban for seven more years. <sup>31</sup>The LORD saw that Leah wasn’t loved, and opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.”

### Deuteronomy 21:15-17

(NASB) “If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved [margin ‘hated’], and both the loved and the unloved [margin ‘hated’] have borne him sons, if the first-born son belongs to the unloved [margin ‘hated’], then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the first-born before the son of the unloved [margin ‘hated’], who is the first-born. But he shall acknowledge the first-born, the son of the unloved [margin ‘hated’], by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the first-born.”

CV “If a man has two wives, one loved more than the other, and both have had male firstborn, he can’t put the firstborn of the one loved more ahead of the firstborn of the one loved less if the latter is older. <sup>16-17</sup>When he wills his possessions, he must give the double portion to the firstborn of the one loved less. The one that first issued from his virility holds the right of the firstborn.”

### Ecclesiastes 3:8

(NASB) “A time to love, and a time to hate.”

(CV) “A time to love and a time not to love.”

### Romans 9:13 (crossover text: NT < OT)

(NASB) “Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’” [Rom 9:7].

(NASB) “<sup>2</sup>I have loved you,’ says the LORD. But you say, ‘How hast thou loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the LORD. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob; <sup>3</sup>but I have hated

*Esau, and I have made his mountain a desolation, and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness''' [Mal 1:2-3].*

(CV) "As the scripture says, ***'I loved Jacob more than Esau'***" [Rom 9:7].

(CV) "<sup>2</sup>*The LORD says, 'I've loved you.'*"

But you say, "*What do you mean 'loved us'?*"

*"Wasn't Esau Jacob's brother? Yet I've loved Jacob <sup>3</sup>and set Esau aside, made his hill country desolate, and left his inheritance for jackals in the desert" [Mal 1:2-3].*

#### **Matthew 6:24**

(NASB) "*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*"

(CV) "*Nobody can serve two masters. You'll be loyal to one and disregard the other. You can't serve God and money.*"

#### **John 12:25**

(NASB) "*He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal.*"

(CV) "*If you love your life, you'll lose it; if you look on past your life in the world, you'll keep it forever.*"

#### **Luke 14:26**

NASB "*If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.*"

CV "*None of you that come to me can be my disciple unless you love me more than your father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters—even your own life.*"

See similar sentiment in **Matthew 10:37** as a control passage:

#### **Matthew 10:37-38**

(NASB) "<sup>37</sup>*He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.*"

(CV) "<sup>37</sup>*If you love your father or mother more than me, you don't deserve me. If you love your son or daughter more than me, you don't deserve me.* <sup>38</sup>*If you don't pick up your cross and follow me, you don't deserve me.*"

Elsewhere the love-hate terminology seems more appropriate to the English ear.

#### **Psalms 45:7**

(NASB) "*Thou has loved righteousness, and hated wickedness,  
Therefore God, Thy God, has anointed Thee  
with the oil of joy above Thy fellows.*"

**Hebrews 1:9:** “*Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;  
Therefore GOD Thy GOD, hath anointed Thee  
with the oil of gladness above Thy companions.*”

(CV) “<sup>9</sup>*You love goodness and hate sinfulness;  
so God, your God, has anointed you  
with more happiness than your companions.*”

**Hebrews 1:9:** “*You’ve loved goodness and hated lawlessness,  
so God, your God, has anointed you  
with more happiness than your companions*” [Ps 45:7].

### **Psalm 139:21-22**

(NASB) “*Do I not hate those who hate Thee, O LORD?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee?*

<sup>22</sup>*I hate them with the utmost hatred;  
They have become my enemies.*”

(CV) <sup>21</sup>*Don’t I hate those who hate you?  
Don’t I despise the ones that oppose you?*

<sup>22</sup>*I have total disdain for them;  
they’re my enemies.*

### **Matthew 5:43**

(CV) “<sup>43</sup>*You’ve heard, ‘Love your<sup>sg</sup> neighbor [Lev 19:18] and hate your enemy.’* <sup>44</sup>*I’m telling you<sup>pl</sup> to love your enemies and pray for people that mistreat you, <sup>45</sup>so you can be like your Father in heaven. He raises his sun on bad people and good, and sends rain on just and unjust. <sup>46</sup>If you love the ones that love you, what’s special about that? Don’t tax collectors do that? <sup>47</sup>If you just say ‘Hi’ to your buddies, what’s special about that? Don’t even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup>You be perfect like your Father.*”

Jesus’ quotation in Matthew 5:43 may represent a contemporary saying since there is no Old Testament direct command to hate enemies (Ecclesiastes 3:8?). But the saying could also be an adapted combination of Leviticus 19:18 and Psalm 139:21-22 (cp. Hosea 9:15).

## **Explanatory Comments**

Categories put for degrees

Languages tend to word matters in two-term sets even though the referents are not exact binaries and the speakers realize it. In an example like “it’s a tree or a rock,” the two terms apply to unrelated categories. But people say things like “good or bad” even though they know both are

degree matters whose labels come from the two ends of a continuum. The form of statement is categorical even though the reality is continual.

Hebrew has an even greater tendency to use the binary format than English does, and does it with a greater range of topics. One prime example is these love-hate expressions. Here, category (form) is put for degree (referent). In Luke **14:26**, Jesus talks about loving him and hating family members and oneself. In this case, a similar sentiment appears in Matthew **10:37**, *“He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me”* (NASB). The passages laid beside each other show that Jesus is talking about different degrees of love, but Luke’s account words the point in categorical form under the paired words *love* and *hate*. The Hebrew idiom would have been “to love x ‘from’ y.”

A similar approach applies to Jesus’ comment about serving two masters (Matthew **6:24**; Luke **16:13**). Loving one does not in itself mean hating the other. The more likely point is that an employee will prefer one boss over the other. It is all the more so, of course, with a slave and two masters; a slave situation would call for total and involvement with two masters, which is not possible. The slave will do the will of one and “set aside” the will of the other.

John **12:25** follows this format as well. Transcendent, eternal “life” takes precedence over physical life (“in this world”). Category is put for degree. After all, Paul says with approval, *“Nobody hates his own body, but feeds and takes care of it”* (Ephesians **5:29**).

#### Opposites put for alternatives

In the Jacob-Esau instance, a similar element comes into play. In choosing one rather than the other, something is said about what God does with the other. God loved Jacob and “hated” Esau (Malachi **1:2-3**). Likewise, is God’s choosing David as Saul’s successor (1 Samuel **16:1-13**). The LORD “refused” Eliab, Jesse’s oldest son (KJV). The parallels with the other brothers say “not chosen.” In both instances, God’s choosing the one (David or Jacob) necessarily means passing over, not choosing, the others (David’s brothers or Esau). “Refuse/reject” sounds like a deliberate, active negativity toward, when the real situation is more that David was a better choice. Opposites are put for alternatives.

Maybe this same construct could apply to Ecclesiastes **3:8**, a time to love and a time where love needs to be kept out of the situation, *i.e.*, a time to love and a time not to love. But the wording is handled as paired opposites rather than alternatives: *“a time to love and a time to hate.”* Another approach could adjust the meaning of “hate” from negative to neutral. Doing so would call for adjusting the second category. The other entries in Ecclesiastes **3:1-8** do fit as paired opposites.

Binary terminology put for threes

Positive<sup>a</sup>-<sup>neutral</sup>-negative<sup>b</sup> applies to situations with three possibilities, which can get handled verbally as two. Moral-immoral may be the way people talk—and even think—about matters that really require a three-part format as in moral-amoral-immoral. In addition to the moral continuum of one extreme to another, another category parallel to that continuum occurs in the real situation. What is amoral can carelessly get dumped in with immoral and be considered equally objectionable. This last example could apply to belief-unbelief-disbelief while scripture can say “not believe” to both the second and third idea.

Supplementary notations

Ancient Hebrew had a less replete vocabulary than modern English. Cases put as opposites (“not A but B”) may mean “not so much A as B.” Listeners are expected to supply the distinction.

Applied to non-personal matters (ideas and behaviors), *love* and *hate* can carry their unqualified values: “*You’ve loved goodness and hated lawlessness; so God, your God, has anointed you with greater joy than your companions*” (Hebrews 1:9).

Love-hate usage is part of a larger characteristic of Semitic usage: a tendency toward binary expression. It shows up in the habit of (a) making an affirmation plus a denial of its opposite: “*She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life*” (Proverbs 31:12); and (b) using parallelism as the primary feature of poetry as well as in narrative and didactic material.

Binary expression, in turn, is part of an even larger tendency toward replete expression as seen in (a) specificity (“Hear ~~the sound of~~ his voice” vs. “hear his voice” or even “hear him”) and (b) anaphoric use of adjective, article, prepositions, possessives, and conjunctions.

All of that in turn is part of Hebrew’s pleonastic expression, which to the English ear is unnecessarily “wordy.”

As a couple final notes, (1) judgments on the examples above derive more from reality than from wording about reality, which is a feature of language in general. Sometimes as well, (2) statements occurring in other texts serve as guides for adjusting first impressions on this text for harmonization purposes.

Proper interpretation comes from (1) proper thinking (rationality), which is based on realities more than language: reality thinking. That is because language is a loose fit for its referents and derives from them. Experience coupled with revelation elsewhere in biblical interpretation supplies a basis for correct understanding. Proper thinking comes from (2) having a grasp of all relevant information and from (3) understanding how language works (linguistics). Those three factors—especially the third—inform the above comments about *love* and *hate* in Hebrew parlance.