

# Anders Nygren and the ‘Babylonian Captivity of Agape’ Once and Now

ODA WISCHMEYER

*Oda Wischmeyer is Professor emerita for New Testament Studies and Ancient Judaism at the Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. She has published in the main fields of New Testament Studies, especially on Paul and Mark, as well as in Early Judaism, especially on Ben Sira. The particular focus of her academic interest is on hermeneutics. Recent publications include Liebe als Agape. Das frühchristliche Konzept und der moderne Diskurs (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015) and Paul. Life – Setting- Letters (London/New York: T&T Clark. Continuum, 2012). She has also edited the Lexikon der Bibelhermeneutik (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2009, 2012) among other works. On May 28, 2015, she gave the present lecture at the Centre for Language and Literature at Lund University, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate.,*

First of all I want to express my gratitude to the Faculty of Humanities for the honour of being invited and for giving me the opportunity to speak to an audience of *doctores philosophiae* and *theologiae*.<sup>1</sup> I have chosen a topic that belongs primarily to my own scholarly work, which is dedicated to the New Testament in its ancient contexts, but is also part of what most scholars of humanities are dealing with in one way or the other: the interpretation of eminent texts, ideas and concepts from the past – an expression that was used by Hans Georg Gadamer. Specifically, I shall focus my talk on the Early Christian concept of love from the perspective of the Lundian theologian Anders Nygren, and since I have a lasting interest in hermeneutics, in particular in hermeneutics of the Bible, I shall treat my topic from a hermeneutical perspective.

Lund – Anders Nygren – and the paradigm of Eros and Agape: these terms build a triad that is intriguing for every theologically educated person, especially if one feels connected to Lund University. So this morning I shall devote myself to Anders Nygren, to his main opus, to the adventure of reading six hundred pages of “Eros

and Agape”, to the issue of reflecting on an eminent work about three generations after its first publication and to the impact on the scientific community that was made by Nygren at your university.

## 1. Nygren’s Concept

In 1954 Anders Nygren wrote the preface to the second edition of his *opus magnum*, *Eros and Agape* from 1930. Here, at the outset of his work, he defined his research aim as follows – and I beg your pardon for my quoting from the German translation. I do so in order to honour Nygren’s wife who translated the comprehensive Swedish version into brilliant German:

Das Hauptziel meiner Darstellung geht ... darauf hinaus, die Agape des Neuen Testaments aus *einer solchen babylonischen Gefangenschaft* zu befreien und sie in der ihr eigenen Bedeutung auftreten zu lassen.<sup>2</sup>

What did Nygren mean by the phrase “einer solchen Gefangenschaft” (“such a captivity”)? To

<sup>1</sup> The style of the talk was maintained.

<sup>2</sup> A. Nygren, *Eros und Agape*, <sup>2</sup>1954, Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage.

whom did he refer? Whom did he attack by this aggressive Old Testament metaphor? Nygren's wording is ambiguous. By using the term of "babylonische Gefangenschaft" first and foremost he *alluded* bluntly to one of the most influential and anti-Catholic polemical writings of Martin Luther "Von der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche" (The Babylonian captivity of the church). But ironically enough, though Nygren superficially alluded to Luther, he did not quote him. What he actually did, was that he *quoted Victor Warnach*. Who was Victor Warnach?

Warnach, a Benedictine monk and a German Catholic scholar, was the author of another important work on love that was in competition with Nygren's famous monograph. The title of this book was "Agape. Die Liebe als Grundmotiv der neutestamentlichen Theologie" published in 1951, and you recognize Nygren's "Grundmotiv" in Warnach's title. This post-World War II work was very influential in German Catholic scholarship of its time. Warnach and other Roman Catholic scholars felt the need and the specific Christian commitment to help to rebuild moral values in the young Federal Republic of Germany. And it was the Catholic treasure of classical virtues and Christian interpretations of these virtues that they wanted to bring back into use.<sup>3</sup> So, in fact Warnach's book was a critical response to Protestant Nygren, especially since Warnach claimed the Nygren-term of "Grundmotiv" for his own concept. And it was Catholic Warnach who in a bold reversion of Luther's famous title claimed to liberate "Love" from the *Babylonian captivity* by his own work. Nygren felt Warnach's reproach against himself and could not but read Warnach's work as an affront against his work and as an attack on his own already widely-accepted interpretation of New Testament love in a Lutheran context. He saw himself as the scholar who had already liberated Agape once and for all from the fatal concepts of a Catholic synthesis between Agape and Eros. So, Nygren counterattacked Warnach in his preface by pointing to the fact that it was especially Warnach who again used the medieval ontology for interpreting the New Testament ex-

pression of Agape and thereby lead theology into a new kind of Babylonian captivity.

What I have just outlined very briefly could be a telling example of the famous and dangerous *rabies theologorum*. It could, however, also be read as a sign of something more important and more serious than mere ephemeral theological dispute, in particular between denominations. One recent proof of the lasting importance of the issue of "Eros and Agape" may be found in the encyclical letter "*Deus caritas est*" of Pope Benedict XVI written in 2005. I can only touch upon Pope Benedict's contribution here without going into any detail.<sup>4</sup> To put it briefly, Benedict repeats and strengthens once more the Catholic interpretation of Christian love (Agape/Caritas) as purified Eros and attacks Nietzsche, but wisely abstains from dealing with the renowned Lutheran bishop Anders Nygren.<sup>5</sup> But, as Werner Jeanrond highlights in his recent monograph on love, it is Nygren against whom Benedict actually argues: against an idea of Agape without Eros. The fact that, of all things, the Pope argues in favour of Eros against a Protestant theologian is not as surprising as one could think. Benedict thinks of a synthesis between Eros as tamed love within the bond of marriage on the one hand and Agape as behavior in and outside the ecclesial community on the other. Interestingly enough, Benedict's concept of purified Eros is not far from Plutarch's concept of matrimonial love. In his brilliant dialogue *Amatorius*, Plutarch elaborates on an analogue concept of purified Eros that is no longer only the basis of homosexuality, but also and much more of conjugal affection. Learned Benedict would probably like this support from a religious official of the Apollo of Delphi, if he is not already aware of the treatise.<sup>6</sup>

But, what was Nygren's actual intention? His impression was that the essence of what the New Testament calls *αγάπη* (Agape) had not been un-

<sup>3</sup> Josef Pieper, *Über die Liebe*, München 1972.

<sup>4</sup> See O. Wischmeyer, *Liebe als Agape. Das frühchristliche Konzept und der moderne Diskurs*, Tübingen 2015, 240-250.

<sup>5</sup> See W.G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, London 2009, 163.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *Dialog über die Liebe. Amatorius. Eingeleitet, übersetzt und mit interpretierenden Essays versehen von H. Görgemanns u.a.* (Sapere X), Tübingen 2006.

derstood and interpreted in a proper way so far and that the fact that ἔρως (Eros) is not a single time mentioned in the New Testament was persistently overlooked by the scholars of dogmatic theology and Christian ethics. During the long centuries of Christian interpretation of the New Testament, according to Nygren, the true meaning of ἀγάπη always was blurred by ἔρως, a term, though not used in the New Testament, was thought to be part of the Agape-motif and inserted in the concept of Christian love since the church fathers in Plato's wake. In Nygren's eyes, it was only Luther who reshaped Agape in the way the term was originally conceptualized by Paul and John. Nygren was deeply convinced that Agape in the New Testament sense of the term is the core "motif" of Christian existence past and present and, accordingly, of Christian theology. And he was even more convinced that it was love in the sense of Agape that was needed by the world and that ought to be gained back and should be reworked in a fresh perspective and announced both in Christian dogmatic theology and in ethics. Love in the double sense of God's love and love to the neighbour would provide the basis for living one's life in the right way.

Nygren's analysis of the contemporary situation and its main needs responded primarily to the situation after World War I. Its validity even increased after World War II, as the second edition demonstrates. It would be carrying coals to Newcastle to remind you of the foundation of the Lutheran World Federation here in Lund in 1947 and of the leading role Nygren played during the first conference. I only want to point to the fact that in Nygren's involvement in the LWF his concept of Agape and his theological and social commitment met the political and social post-war situation. He decided to take international – today we would say global – responsibility for the improvement not only of the spiritual but also of the social conditions of the Lutheran churches everywhere in the world. For the status of today's university theology it could matter that Nygren was elected the first president of the LWF when he was still professor of dogmatic theology and not yet Bishop of Lund. Our university administrations love and promote the idea of our participation in social work and

overall social progress, nationally and globally. Nygren did so, namely on the basis of his learned *opus magnum*.

I said that Nygren's polemics against Victor Warnach could be understood as an expression of the feeling of both a loss and a need of Agape – a feeling that he shared with Warnach – and as the conviction that this loss could not be replaced by Warnach's new conceptualizing of love in ontological categories. In contrast, Nygren aimed at reinstating the strength of Agape as the core of Christian theology and of faith and life. And he struggled for an interpretation of Agape that would fit the New Testament meaning of the term. This return to the sources is clearly inspired by Reformation theology: skipping over patristic and medieval interpretation of the Bible, going back to the sources and referring to the *prima veritas* on the one hand and applying the original meaning directly to the current situation on the other.

What was the strength of New Testament Agape? Anders Nygren elaborated very clearly and precisely on what he thought to be the true Agape. His concept can be summarized in two definitions: in ethical terms, Agape is a concept of community and in theological terms it is the expression of a theocentric religion. Nygren's point will become more understandable if we think about alternative concepts of love. In the tradition of ancient ethics, love could be understood as a concept of self-love with a focus either on *eudaimonia*, or, with Plato, as a concept of longing or desire. Theologically, in that sense Agape could be understood as the expression of an egocentric religion that cares not for God, but for man's own sake. Against these interpretations, Nygren sharpened the strength of Agape by interpreting love as an antithesis to Eros waiving any kind of self-love or *eudaimonia*. To sum up, from a theological point of view, according to Nygren the New Testament responds to the question "What is God?" with "Agape". And in the same way it responds to the question "What is the Good – *summum bonum*, τὸ καλόν?", with "Agape". So, Agape is the answer to both, the religious and the ethical core question of humankind.

Nygren takes about 600 pages to unfold the ideas which European theologians and philoso-

phers have developed on love. He leads the reader along the winding paths of ancient theology and philosophy, of medieval religious and profane interpretations and finally achieves his goal with Luther. He describes Luther's struggle against the theological construction of *fides caritate formata* that is debunked by Luther as self-love, and acknowledges Luther's concept of love as God's love of humankind and the corresponding love of human beings towards the neighbours and towards God. And without any doubt, here we read what Paul and John intended when they used the unusual substantive of ἀγάπη that replaced the Hebrew *ahaba* and was hardly known in the Greek lexicon outside the lexicon of the Jewish Septuagint.<sup>7</sup>

Having finished the study of Nygren's book, one is particularly impressed by his confidence in Luther's concept. Nygren's last sentence is about the glory of love that sacrifices itself: no application, no more reflections on how this concept can work in Nygren's time and world. The reader understands: the New Testament concept that is Luther's concept as well just acts and will act, and Nygren's ecclesial commitments are the necessary consequence of this confidence.

## 2. Nygren's Agape from the Vantage Point of the Present

What I am going to touch upon now, might seem unexpected, especially on today's occasion. Anyway, though Nygren's work, its title and its main thesis were familiar to me since my study time, I read it only two or three months ago, when I prepared for this lecture, but *after* having completed my book on love as New Testament concept. The *reason for my reading* Nygren was that I felt the necessity to learn about Nygren as one of the leading figures of the Lundian school of theology and as the author of a famous classical dogmatic and historical monograph. In my mind, scholarly curiosity and the urgent suspicion that perhaps I had missed strong arguments and important perspectives on love balanced each other out. The *reason that I neither read*

Nygren nor referred to him during the process of writing my book was: Nygren's book was simply too old for being a work of reference in a current exegetical endeavor. And it is exactly this verdict "too old" that, in my mind, needs further investigation.

In my discipline – and probably also in yours – a monograph published in 1930, is no longer meaningful in current discourse and will not be quoted in that sense. It is not an active voice anymore and no longer plays in the present scholarly league, so to speak. And even worse: not only biblical scholars or scholars from humanities think along the line that publications older than twenty or thirty years are to be treated primarily as a burden, but especially librarians – often pressed by so called cultural or scientific politics – argue this way and like nothing better than getting rid of these "old books". Of course, there is also a somewhat more positive perspective on publications from about 1930 which I shall not ignore: some publications are thought to be historical documents which deserve special interest – doubtless an honourable status, but at the same time rather useless within recent scholarship and hardly satisfying for the authors. (By the way: did you notice, distinguished colleagues, what happened your earlier monographs and articles? Those of you who already look back on thirty or more years of publishing may know the special feeling of disappointment when you learn that an early but important monograph of yours suddenly is no longer quoted in recent bibliographies).

So far, so good, but what can be said about the status of "Eros and Agape" as a classical monograph on love? At this point of my argument, I would like to introduce a second kind of definition of "old books". *First*, on the one hand there are those "old books" that are simply obsolete and on the other such works that maintain their position as part of the history of research, and continue to be quoted. But, *second*, there is another type of "old books", those books that have a stance of their own and are discussed or referred to by their title. They are thought to remain important and to represent a concept, like "Sein und Zeit" or "Glauben und Verstehen". When I started reading Nygren, I was very sure that "Eros and Agape" is to be counted among

<sup>7</sup> For all details see: Wischmeyer, *Liebe als Agape*.

this group because of its scholarly quality, even if not within the field of New Testament Studies – Nygren never longed for this qualification – but certainly within Christian ethics. Therefore I felt more than only slightly irritated when I learnt from the fourth edition of our leading theological encyclopedia “Religion Past and Present” (2008) that in the two-column article on “Eros and Agape” Nygren’s book is mentioned only in two sentences, just in passing.<sup>8</sup> The third edition of the lexicon (1958) had still offered a three-column-article on “Eros and Agape” that was completely focused on Nygren’s leading ideas.<sup>9</sup> What had happened between those two editions? From a positive perspective one could argue that Nygren’s book has done its job and has pointed to the original meaning of New Testament Agape. Now, other authors can build on this foundation. From a negative perspective one could ask: Was Nygren’s effort in vain? Has he been placed back in the semi-anonymity of the ranks, i.e. to be merely a part of a lengthy bibliography? Where is the liberating power of Nygren’s interpretation of love? What has happened to the strength of his concept?

### 3. Is Nygren Outdated?

This leads me to the next point of this morning’s enquiry: to the blunt question whether *Eros and Agape* is outdated. Though perhaps I touch a delicate subject, in my mind it is precisely this kind of question that provides some fresh insight not only into the labyrinth of historical hermeneutics that is one of my main subjects, but also in our scholarly work as theologians and philosophers, as philologists and historians in general.

Some weeks ago, I met a bright young scholar who works on Gnostic documents and told him that I was going to give a talk on Nygren. His answer: “O, why Nygren – but he is so *outdated*”. I could have replied quick-wittedly: “Really? More outdated than your Valentinus Gnosticus”? But actually, I was so struck by his

interjection that I could not answer as smart as I should have done. I was very concerned or even worried by the term “outdated” itself, feeling uncomfortable with the idea that the subject of my talk was thought to be simply outdated in the mind of a colleague. But what was or is outdated? Is the past *per se* outdated? Or is it our task as scholars in humanities always to reconsider whether or not and since when and why scientific books are outdated? My concern at what “outdated” may mean in the field of historical interpretation then lead me little by little to some – hopefully – creative thoughts upon the young man’s verdict about Nygren. The fog disappeared, and I felt that a fresh view on what “outdated” actually means in our scholarly business emerged in my mind.

Please, don’t be worried when I agree with my Gnostic friend, at least at first glance. Yes, Nygren’s *Eros and Agape* is somehow outdated. But in which regard? Here we have to dig deeper. One of the successors of Nygren in Lund, Werner Jeanrond, later Professor of Divinity in Glasgow, now in Oxford, a modest Roman Catholic – I have already mentioned him and his monograph on love – expresses sharp criticism of Nygren’s approach when he writes at the end of his chapter on Nygren:

Nygren’s theology of ‘Christian love’, continuing and enlarging Luther’s emphasis on the uniquely Christian nature of this love, does not pay attention to any kind of phenomenology of love, since its chief interest was to rehabilitate the Lutheran doctrine of justification as the only legitimate framework for a Christian understanding of love.<sup>10</sup>

Jeanrond’s critical approach argues from the perspective of contemporary anthropology in general and refers to constructions of love from the side of sociology, psychology and political philosophy. And so far, Jeanrond is right, at least in technical terms. But his critique does not go far enough, when he argues that it is especially the Lutheran perspective that is too narrow compared to contemporary anthropology. Exactly the same applies to Catholic ethics as conceptualized in the encyclical letter.

<sup>8</sup> K. Stock, Art. “Eros III. Eros and Agape (*Caritas*)”, in: RPP IV, Leiden/Boston 2008, 529f.

<sup>9</sup> V. Lindström, Art. “Eros und Agape”, in: RGG<sup>3</sup> II, Tübingen 1958, 603-605.

<sup>10</sup> Jeanrond, *Love*, 120.

What we have to learn actually, is that love in the sense of Christian Agape is no longer meaningful by itself because theology is no longer part of a society which itself is as confident about the strength and the validity of Christian social values or modes as Nygren was at his time. The ditches that divide us from the general situation of society and academy of Nygren's time are deeper than Jeanrond thinks. And at this point, Jeanrond's analysis remains at the surface of what is true about Nygren. Nygren is not outdated because he is wrong in his interpreting Paul and John and Luther against Catholic tradition, or because he did not take as much anthropological scholarship of his day into consideration as Jeanrond does in our time. Nygren is not outdated, because he was "wrong" and we are right, or because we know better. Actually, the whole Western mindset in and outside academia has changed. And exactly this is the reason for our feeling of insufficiency with regard to Nygren's concept of Agape: the changed intellectual and moral conditions of our research. The original concept of Christian love does no longer convince us in the way it did with Nygren.

It may be hard at a place like this to admit that Nygren does no longer speak to us, at least not in the way he intended to do and did in his time. Perhaps it is helpful to give one other example of what I mean: an example that is not linked to Lund and that clarifies that my reasoning is not so much about scholarly quality but about changing intellectual worlds. I just came across a recent article in one of our leading theological reviews on how we should read famous Clive Staples Lewis' work, *The Four Loves*, from 1960.<sup>11</sup> I remembered that I had read the treatise during the end of my schooldays and that I had been impressed by the mild and at the same time superior and sophisticated sound of Anglican piety that was so different from the German Lutheran quest for God. But astonishingly enough, after having read the recent article my first im-

pression was: why does this scholar waste his time with a discussion on how the simple and absolutely outdated book of Lewis should be interpreted today? And only afterwards I recognized the term "outdated" that had come to my mind by itself and I felt unhappy with my hasty and undifferentiated reaction. You can imagine that what I said about Nygren is true also about Lewis. Both were brilliant minds. They are neither wrong nor unimportant. Our feeling that they are outdated is nothing else than the unclear impression of the change of the counterpart with whom they discussed and the lack of *our own* fresh ideas that are needed to meet the intellectual and religious conditions of the present time. And we understand that we have to do anew the same job Nygren, Warnach, Lewis and many other scholars did. What matters is the constant change in the world which we address with our interpretation of Agape. So, in the end it is neither the paradigm of "right" or "wrong" nor the verdict of "modern" or "outdated" that we work with in the field of reframing ideas and concepts and of interpreting eminent texts. Instead, it is what I want to denote as the scholarly endeavor to *liberate* ideas and texts times and again from the Babylonian captivity of the vast amount of previous interpretations which were echoes and answers of their time, not of ours. And this is something that could be regarded as a Sisyphean task which must be done again and again without any final result. The horizon is always terribly open.

At this point, we encounter another related problem that I can touch on only briefly. What about scholarly results that argue apparently successfully against earlier solutions? A friend of mine, an art historian, just finished a comprehensive study on the original setting of a famous piece of medieval architectural sculpture. Her proposal seems to be very sophisticated and to better meet the original situation than do previous reconstructions of the original place and the iconographical interpretation of the monument. For that, she had my congratulations. Currently she is "right" which includes that her predecessors have been "wrong". So far, there is indeed something like "right" and "wrong" in our work of interpretation. But when my friend concluded: "All previous results are for the waste basket",

<sup>11</sup> *The Four Loves*. 1960 (*Vier Arten der Liebe*. Benziger, Einsiedeln/Zürich/Köln 1961; *Was man Liebe nennt. Zuneigung, Freundschaft, Eros, Agape*. Brunnen-Verlag, Basel/Gießen 1979).

my hermeneutical conscience reminded me of the chain of earlier scholars who perhaps had failed, and I wondered whether there will be another attempt some ten years later that will fit even better? Perhaps there will be one. In that case, what will happen to my friend's reconstruction? Another even more urgent question is the following: my friend was convinced that the wrong attempts of her predecessors had been caused by the "wrong" ideology of the mindset of the previous academic generations. But what do we know about our own hidden ideologies and mind-sets? Even permanent "Selbstaufklärung" cannot exclude that we are not aware of the presuppositions that lead to our results. We can hardly look beyond our own ideas and results!

#### 4. Modes of Interpretation: Time and Again *ad fontes* or Progress or Change?

What does that mean for the scholarly task of interpretation? Nygren as well as Warnach and many other theologians and Biblical scholars from different denominations aimed at interpreting Agape in a way that should reveal the original sense of what is supposed to be encapsulated in the Greek noun *ἀγάπη*. Each of the authors who published on Agape before and after Nygren had the same intention: to liberate Agape from its Babylonian captivity in all previous publications and to demonstrate the relevance and the power of Agape for Church and society. All of them had the same feeling: nobody so far had exactly understood and described what Agape actually means. All of them had the same hope: to be the only one who would actually succeed in this important task. May the intentions and the hopes be evaluated as touching, as naïve, even as ridiculous in the face of so many earlier attempts – they are most real anyway. At that point, I speak from my own experience, because when I started my own work on Agape, I had the same feeling as Anders Nygren and as Victor Warnach: it was necessary to liberate Agape and to let its colours and its virtue shine again. It is exactly this kind of feeling that moves and stimulates us as scholars to reread, to

reinterpret, to reshape texts, ideas and concepts from the past. Though everybody knows about the deficiencies of the hermeneutical program of *ad fontes* in comparison with the alternative programs of progress or of change I guess that it is always *ad fontes* in a Renaissance sense that fuels our studies. But we cannot escape change. What sets our situation apart from Nygren is the loss of societal and academic confidence in the strength of Christian values irrespective of how learned the values are re-conceptualized. This is the point missed by Jeanrond.

Renowned cultural historian and critic Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), professor for history at the University of Leiden, elaborated on a cultural theory in a post-metaphysical – and that includes a post-Christian – setting already in 1935 – shortly after Nygren's first edition. Huizinga, whom the Gestapo had in their sights since 1933, published a short essay on "In the shadow of tomorrow"<sup>12</sup> where he argued that the divergence between the cultural world before and after World War I were more profound than those previous crises of the late antique migration period, the Reformation or the French Revolution. He observed the loss of common religious ideals of the former cultural periods together with the overwhelming attraction of progress<sup>13</sup> that undermines the former scholarly attitude of respect towards the past in general. Huizinga pointed to the fact that only the future mattered in his days – and even he could not imagine what this should mean only four years later. His overall theory, however, is true also today and especially in the world of ambitious universities. It is with some reasonable doubts that we read that "Lund University educates future knowledge producers, problem solvers and leaders".<sup>14</sup> Anyway Huizinga believed in some kind of progress, and so do we even when we go back *ad fontes* time and again.

<sup>12</sup> "In de schaduwen van morgen", Haarlem 1935. *Deutsch: Kultur- und zeitkritische Schriften*, Paderborn 2014, 13-129.

<sup>13</sup> S. 33, 35f.

<sup>14</sup> Homepage of Lund University.

## 5. A Fresh Perspective on Love in the Sense of Agape

Now it is time to leave Anders Nygren and to turn to present scholarship. The first question that arises in regard to this field is: how can my interpretation of reception history work in contemporary academia? As everyone of you knows, the new magic word in our international science policy is the demand for "cutting edge research". Our German language is less spectacular and limits us to fostering our research under the banner of the rather tedious noun "Spitzenforschung" which openly alludes to the noun "Spitzensport" without being financially even approximately well equipped. During the exciting last year of my writing "Love as Agape" I had a lot of time to deliberate on the question whether what I was doing was cutting edge research or something different – but what? Was it "broad research", our German "Breitenforschung", an extremely unattractive analogy to "Breitensport"? Certainly not! But was it really "cutting edge research"? In some way, I wished it were! I would like to read reviews praising the new monograph as an example of "cutting edge research". Unfortunately nothing of this sort will ever happen. Normally, we Biblical scholars like other persons who read and interpret texts and concepts from the past are not considered to be scholars who succeed in producing something that will be labelled as cutting edge research. This privilege is confined to sciences and to those fields of humanities that work with materials, with experiments or with theories. But nevertheless, though actually it was not cutting edge research, what I could do and what I wanted to do, my aim was for my research to impact on academia.<sup>15</sup>

This may be characteristic for studies in religious, theological or philosophical texts and concepts. I am thinking of the current Aristotlerenaissance that is connected to persons like Martha Nussbaum who convincingly demonstrates in which way Aristotelian concepts may fit in contemporary political and legal discus-

sions.<sup>16</sup> Our interpretations will do best when they respond to related modern problems, theories, concepts and ideas. So, today an interpretation of the concept of Agape should be related to theories on love, sexuality, emotions, especially on empathy, but likewise to alternative or hostile concepts of hate or the necessity of egoism. The dialogue with these concepts sharpens the profile of the Early Christian concept of Agape and demonstrates its reach, its strengths and weaknesses. Whether Christian concepts can work as persuasive as they possibly did in Nygren's time may be questioned. But it is not the interpreter's business either to convince the audience or to fall silent because of a sense of doubt about the success of a fresh interpretation, but simply to try to make the objects of his or her interpretation understood within the contemporary conditions of understanding.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Back to the Babylonian Captivity

I took my point of departure this morning from the metaphor of the Babylonian captivity of Agape, later on I referred to the metaphor of the Sisyphean task, and now I come back to both metaphors at the end of my talk. By interpreting eminent texts, ideas and concepts from the past, we also aim at liberating those concepts from the dust of richly deserved, but nevertheless outdated interpretations, and struggle to prepare a place for our fresh attempts in contemporary discourse, but in the knowledge that our interpretations will be outdated very likely already during our lifetimes, and that our place, like that of our predecessors, will be at best in the reception history of eminent concepts and texts. This job always has to be done in a new way and with a sense of the societal, political and intellectual situation of our present time. Interpretation of texts from the past is best done in intellectual interaction with leading theories of the present day. Insofar, Stanford scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht is right in stating the importance not

<sup>15</sup> For a broader discussion on what cutting edge research could mean also for humanities see the online-forum edge.org.

<sup>16</sup> M. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, New York/Oxford 1999 (cf. Wischmeyer, *Liebe*, 235-240); *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters For Justice*, Cambridge, Mass. et al. 2013.

<sup>17</sup> See Wischmeyer, *Liebe*, 217-254.



so much of the future, but of the category of present time or presence.<sup>18</sup> In our mind and in our scholarly interpretation, the past meets the present. It is a specific academic exercise: again and

again like Sisyphus – though not in the sense of Albert Camus, but of Jacques Monod<sup>19</sup> who chose Sisyphus as a metaphor of what research is about.

### *Summary*

In her article Oda Wischmeyer reconsiders the place of Anders Nygren's opus magnum "Eros and Agape" in the history of research and in the current discussions on the concept of love. She emphasizes the lasting task of re-interpretation of eminent texts from the past under the conditions of the present age.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Präsenz*. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, Berlin 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Monod, *Le hasard et la nécessité. Essai sur la philosophie naturelle de la biologie moderne*, Paris 1970.