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"More Than These?" John 21:15

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Abstract

In John 21:15 Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Who or what are "these"? This brief article deals with the three possible referents and recommends one as correct.

The interview between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-19 has been much discussed, and too often misinterpreted. The aspect that is most often dealt with is the two verbs for love, ἀγαπάω and φιλέω. I dealt with this aspect in my article, "Love in the New Testament" in *Notes on Translation* 14.1 (2000), pp. 49–53, and I believe I have given the correct interpretation.

The other question in this passage is the referent of the pronoun τούτων, which is a genitive of comparison, translated 'than these'.

The resurrected Jesus has appeared on the beach near where Peter and others of his chosen disciples are fishing. Jesus calls them to a breakfast he has prepared. Following breakfast, Jesus begins a conversation with Peter.[1] It is interesting, by the way, that here Jesus addresses Peter as "Simon, son of John." Is this significant?

Jesus inquires, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Immediately we are involved in an interpretive problem: what is the comparison that is being made? What or who are 'these'?

In Greek grammar there are two principal constructions to express a comparison; one construction is to write the conjunction ἤ 'than' and place the second element of the comparison in the same case as the first element. The second construction is to place the second element of the comparison in the genitive case (without ἤ 'than') regardless of the case of the first element.

John uses the latter construction; he writes, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων "Do you love me more than these?" This is unfortunate for us, since with this construction there are three possible referents for "these." If John had used the construction with ἤ 'than', the referent would have been clear. He could have used the masculine nominative plural οὗτοι, writing ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον ἢ οὗτοι 'Do you love me more than these (other disciples love me)?' He could have used the masculine accusative plural τούτους, writing ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον ἢ τούτους 'Do you love me more than (you love) these (other disciples)?' Or he could have used the neuter accusative plural ταῦτα, writing ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον ἢ ταῦτα 'Do you love me more than (you love) these things (your fishing nets and equipment)?'

Let's consider these three possibilities. Incidentally, there is no consensus among the commentaries on this passage, but I believe it is possible to come to a reasonably certain conclusion.

In the first interpretation suggested above, "Do you love me more than these (other disciples love me)?", I believe Jesus would have been asking Peter to make an invidious comparison, and he would have been asking something that Peter could not have known. Only Jesus knew the degree of love that the disciples had for him. This question also does not appear relevant to what Jesus had in mind for Peter. Furthermore, if this were the meaning of the question, it could at least have been expressed more clearly (even with the genitive of comparison) if John had added the emphatic σύ 'you': ἀγαπᾷς με σὺ πλέον τούτων "Do *you*

[1] This conversation is presumably carried on in Aramaic. However, the evangelical view is that the Greek biblical text properly represents the meaning of the conversation.

love me more than these (other disciples love me)?", thus indicating that Jesus was comparing Peter with someone or something else. I therefore reject this interpretation.

I believe that the second interpretation suggested above, "Do you love me more than (you love) these (other disciples)?" is also unlikely. Of course, Jesus had taught that his followers must love him more than they loved anyone else, but this teaching refers primarily to family and the common endearing human relationships. It is not likely that Peter's friendship with his fellow disciples was so strong that it might have drawn him away from his devotion to Jesus. Again, if this were the meaning of the question, it could at least have been expressed more clearly (even with the genitive of comparison) if John had written the emphatic ἐμέ 'me' instead of the unemphatic με: ἀγαπᾷς ἐμὲ πλέον τούτων "Do you love *me* more than (you love) these (other disciples)?" I therefore reject this interpretation as well.

I am confident that the third interpretation, "Do you love me more than (you love) these things (your fishing nets and equipment)?" is correct and is the only relevant interpretation of these words. Peter and the others with him were doubtless puzzled about what they should do now that their earthly fellowship with Jesus was unclear. They knew that Jesus was alive again, but they had no directions from him. They needed to do something, so they very naturally turned to their former occupation of fishing. While they were fishing, Jesus appeared to them. Following their breakfast, Jesus very appropriately asked Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than (you love) these things (your fishing nets and equipment)?"—that is, "Are you going back to your former trade or will you continue to follow me?"

Peter strongly affirmed his love and devotion to Jesus, and Jesus gave him an important ministry, as the following verses show.

I do not know why John did not use the grammatical construction here that would have made this point clear. I am confident, however, that the interpretation I have indicated here is correct.