



SOME WORDS ABOUT...

eroto

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In the New Testament period, there were four Greek words used in the form known as the Petition. They were *axio* used in Routine Petitions, *deomai* used to address persons of authority, *eroto* used between equals, and *parakalo* used to emphasize strong personal appeal (given here as they are usually found).

The third of these verbs has important theological implications for New Testament scholars. When first century writers used *eroto* to say "I request," they indicated that the person asking and the person asked were equals. In the papyri, *eroto* is the verb which brothers and sisters used when writing to each other (P Oxy 744, P Amherst 134, 135) and which friends used when sending out invitations (P Oxy 90, 91).

In the New Testament, the Gospel writers regularly used *eroto* in conversation between Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 16:13; Mark 4:10; Luke 4:38; John 16:5) and between Jesus and other interpreters of the Torah (Matthew 19:17; Luke 20:3; John 18:19). Paul uses *eroto* to address members of the churches as equal partners in the work of Christ (Philippians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 5:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:1—the latter two should not be translated as "we beg" or "we beseech" because Paul would have used *parakalo* if he had meant to give an intensely personal appeal). *Eroto* is the verb which emphasizes the equality of those involved.

Low Fidelity Reproduction

Unfortunately, neither Latin nor English preserved the fourfold distinction among verbs of petition. As a result, we have a low fidelity reproduction of the original. This affects *eroto* especially. The peculiar quality of *eroto* to express equality affects the interpretation of Mark 7:26 and also has profound theological implications in the Gospel of John.

In Mark 7:24-30, the Greek woman, a Syrophenician by birth, comes into the house where Jesus was staying, falls down at his feet, and asks him to heal her little daughter who was possessed by an unclean spirit. Modern translators, impressed by the pathos of the little girl's affliction and perhaps influenced by the oriental action of falling down at Jesus' feet, have translated the verb as saying that she begged Jesus to cast out the demon. Commentaries often play up the deep love the woman had for her daughter that would let her abase herself to a foreigner. In reality, she spoke to him in terms of perfect equality, as the verb *eroto* indicates. No doubt she loved her daughter very much, but her approach to Jesus was no more dramatic than when a modern mother calls a doctor on the telephone and makes an appointment. She was a woman who knew what she wanted and knew how to get it. When she heard that a new healer was in town, she got into his house even though he was trying to avoid people. She then spoke with him as an equal, and when he engaged in repartee, she gave as good as she took. Piety may claim that Jesus was touched by her humility or faith, but the text indicates that he was delighted by her wit.

In the Gospel of John, the use of *eroto* in Jesus' prayers to God is a theological Rosetta stone. It exposes much which we have draped with speculation.

Logos Theme

The Logos theme with which John begins his Gospel has been described by some scholars as a Hymn to the Logos which was written separately and attached to the Gospel as a sort of editor's introduction. The clear statement of the equality of the Logos and God (1:1) and the subsequent identification

of the Logos with Jesus (1:9-14) is considered by them as out of step with the rest of the Gospel. Despite an occasional reiteration of the Equality with God theme (8:58; 10:30; 17:11), some hold that when Jesus affirms his subordination to God, he denies equality (7:17; 8:42; 12:49; 14:10, 31) in a way which contradicts the 1:1-14 expression. And the fact that Jesus prays to God is seen as settling the matter. Yet, the very language which Jesus addresses to God in the Fourth Gospel affirms his equality with God. He uses the verb *eroto*.

In the entire New Testament, no one but Jesus addresses God with the verb *eroto*. This is consistent with the theological structure of John. The affirmation in 1:1-14 that the one God became flesh in Jesus is the *leitmotif* which is sounded every time the relation of Jesus and God is mentioned. The linguistic peculiarity which enabled John to express this motif, in the very language which Jesus used in speaking with the Father, is lost to us. With it is lost not the substance but a nuance of the relationship of Jesus with God. We can still taste the wine, but we cannot smell the bouquet.

The person of God cannot be expressed in theological statements fully, a belief that Christians would hold as valid. But important aspects of the nature of God can be put into words. In the life and teachings of Jesus, God's nature is revealed. The Gospel of John expresses, in the language of its time, the relation of Jesus to humanity and to God. The ideas were clear and coherent and the language was so rich that we often fail to appreciate its precision.

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