

Friendship with God: The Christian Call to Divine Intimacy

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Abraham gehöre zu den Suchern und Autodidakten, aber darum sei er
Freund Gottes genannt worden ¹

—Erik Peterson

THE BOOK OF EXODUS contains a brief passage that expresses the unique intimacy that the Lord accorded to Moses during the people's sojourn in the desert. "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face" (Exod 33:11a). To explain this face-to-face colloquy, the text offers a comparison that employs the Hebrew word *rēa'*. The Lord spoke to Moses the way "a man speaks to his *rēa'*" (Exod 33:11b). What does this Hebrew word mean in this context? The first to confront this question were the Jewish scholars in Alexandria who, in the third century BC, undertook the task of translating the first five books of the Old Testament into Greek, a project that became the foundation of the translation subsequently known as the Septuagint (LXX).² Their

¹ Erik Peterson, "Der Gottesfreund: Beiträge zur Geschichte eines religiösen Terminus," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 42 (1923): 173–74: "Abraham belonged to the seekers and autodidacts, but that is why he was called friend of God." Peterson is paraphrasing Clement of Alexandria, who is himself drawing on ideas found in Philo of Alexandria. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are my own. "I dedicate this essay to Reinhard Hütter, whose reflections on friendship with God in his recent monograph, *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019) have inspired its contents.

² The translation of the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah) was undertaken at Alexandria in the early part of the third century before the birth of Christ,

translation of this passage will influence how subsequent biblical authors and early Church Fathers portray the call to divine intimacy. Specifically, the Alexandrian translators began the tradition of describing divine intimacy as a type of friendship with God. In what follows, we shall study features of this scriptural account of divine friendship and consider some of the implications of this account for our understanding of the Christian life.

Moses, the Friend of the Lord

When one looks at the Torah as a whole, one discovers that *rēa* ‘most often signifies “neighbor” or even just a generic “other.”³ As such, the Alexandrian translators regularly translate *rēa* ‘as *plēsion*, the Greek equivalent of “neighbor.”⁴ In several places, however, a more specific sense of *rēa* ‘seems to be intended. For example, the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar begins with a description of Judah pitching his tent “near a certain Adullamite named Hirah” (Gen 38:1). In this context, the description of Hirah as Judah’s *rēa* ‘seems at first to pose no difficulty. Judah has pitched his tent next to Hirah, and thus, Hirah is his neighbor. The text, however, contains two added features. First, the narrator describes Hirah as Judah’s

probably around 280 BC. The *Letter of Aristeas* (written sometime either in the third or second century BC) affirms that the translation was undertaken by order of Ptolemy II and at the urging of the librarian of Alexandria. To this end, the author claims that Ptolemy sent him on a mission to the high priest in Jerusalem, asking him to send seventy-two translators (six from each tribe) to undertake the work. Whatever the historical accuracy of this account may be, it is certain that these five books, which the translators will call the Pentateuch (the “five scrolls”) were the first to be translated and would become the model for the subsequent translations of the other books of the Old Testament as well as for the language of the deuterocanonical books that would subsequently be written in Greek. Together the collection would come to be known as the *Septuagint* (the seventy) and abbreviated using the Roman numerals for that number: LXX. See: Gilles Dorival, “La traduction de la Torah en grec,” in *La Bible d’Alexandrie: le Pentateuque* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 31–41; Marguerite Harl, “Le rôle du grec dans la diffusion de la Bible,” in *La Bible d’Alexandrie: le Pentateuque* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 5–12; Natalio Fernández Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 2000); James K. Aitken, “Introduction,” in *The T&T Clark Companion to the Septuagint*, ed. James K. Aitken (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–12.

³ See, for example, Exod 20:16 (“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor [*rēa*]”), Lev 19:18 (“You shall love your neighbor [*rēa*] as yourself”), and Gen 11:3 (“They said to one another [*rēa*], ‘Come, let us make bricks’”).

⁴ For example, the Alexandrian translators use *plēsion* to translate all three quotations cited in the preceding note (Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* [Louvain: Peeters, 2009], 565–66).

rēa ' in a pastoral context: Judah "went up to Timnah for the shearing of his sheep in company with his *rēa* ' Hirah the Adullamite" (Gen 38:12). Second, it is to Hirah that Judah entrusts the delicate mission of paying his debt (a young goat) to the woman he assumes to be a temple prostitute (the disguised Tamar) and of retrieving from her his signet and staff: "Judah sent the kid by his *rēa* ' the Adullamite to recover the pledge from the woman" (Gen 38:20). This mission requires discretion and once again has a pastoral element: the transportation of a live goat. The relationship between Judah and Hirah, therefore, seems richer and more complex than the generic term "neighbor" conveys. This is perhaps because what it means to be a neighbor in the pastoral context of nomadic shepherds implies a complex set of relationships and mutual expectations that are not implied of neighbors in the urban context of great cities such as Alexandria. Stated in another way, a native Hebrew speaker of that period would recognize that in this context *rēa* ' conveys a richer and older relationship. At its root, *rēa* ' seems to signify *the one guarding sheep next to you*.⁵ Those who have experience tending flocks in tandem know that this is no easy task. To maintain two flocks peacefully next to each other—to find pasture and water and to defend the flocks from predators—requires a high level of cooperation, support and trust not conveyed by the Greek word *plēsion* or the English word "neighbor." Not surprisingly, therefore, the Alexandrian translators chose a different word to translate these two occurrences of *rēa* '. They chose the word *poimēn*: shepherd.⁶ Hirah is Judah's neighboring shepherd.

In describing Moses's relationship to the Lord, Exodus also employs the term *rēa* ' in a pastoral context. It is after spending many years tending the flocks of his father-in-law,⁷ that the Lord calls Moses to liberate his

⁵ Since the root meaning of *rēa* ' remains uncertain, there is no scholarly consensus on this point. For the best survey of the evidence, see Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1253–55.

⁶ The Latin Vulgate translates *rēa* ' in the first instance (Gen 38:12) as *opilio gregis* or "shepherd of the flock," while it translates *rēa* ' in the second instance (Gen 38:20) with the synonym *pastor*. For more on the Septuagint's use of *poimēn*, see Muraoka, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 571.

⁷ Stephen, in his discourse before the high priest and the Sanhedrin, affirms that Moses spent the first forty years of his life in Egypt, then spent the next forty years tending the flocks of his father-in-law (Acts 7:23, 30). The name of Moses's father-in-law is also significant. Although he is most frequently referred to as Jethro, he is first introduced to the reader as "Reuel" (*rə 'ū 'ēl*), a name that literally means "*rēa* ' of God" (Exod 2:18). Moses thus spent forty years tending the sheep of God's shepherd, before being called by the Lord to shepherd his people.

people from slavery in Egypt and to shepherd them as they travel through the desert. Exodus delineates explicitly what this relationship entails. The Lord entrusts Moses with specific tasks and promises to be there with him. As with shepherds and flocks the world over, there are disputes about food and water, and about how to deal with the stubborn stupidity of the flock.⁸ There is even a classic back-and-forth concerning the ownership of the flock and thus concerning who ultimately has responsibility for it.⁹ Throughout their discussions, however, the Lord is clearly the master of the trade, while Moses is the apprentice shepherd. Moses, for example, begs the Lord to show him his ways (Exod 33:13), while the Lord promises to be with Moses to help him shepherd his people (33:14). In portraying this apprenticeship, Exodus repeats two themes: knowledge and favor. Moses desires to know the Lord (and to see his glory), while the Lord knows Moses by name and reveals his own name to him.¹⁰ This knowledge and help, however, are the result of the free gift of the Lord's favor. When Exodus affirms, therefore, that "the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his *rēa*" (33:11), it was affirming an intimate apprenticeship in the task of shepherding the Lord's people.

These features of apprenticeship and intimacy seem to have led the Alexandrian scholars to conclude that "shepherd," like "neighbor," would be an inadequate translation of *rēa* as applied to Moses. As a result, they take the extraordinary measure of translating *rēa* as *philos*, the standard Greek word for friend, a word they avoid throughout their translation of the Pentateuch.¹¹ There were good reasons for avoiding this term in relation to God. Aristotle, for example, expressing the classical Greek view, denied the possibility of humans becoming the friends of God.¹² He affirmed that all forms of friendship (*philia*) require a certain relative equality

⁸ See Exod 15:22–27; 16:2–35; 17:1–7.

⁹ See Exod 32:7–14, where, in discussing how to respond to the people's infidelity, Moses and the Lord tussle over whose people they are and who brought them out of Egypt.

¹⁰ Exod 3:13–14; 33:18–19. The Lord affirms that he knows Moses by name (Exod 33:12, 17); this is significant, because we never learn his name. "Moses" is the name given to the child by Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:10). The child had spent three months hidden by his family before being placed in the Nile. Would he not have received a Hebrew name during that time? Then, when he returned to his family to be nursed by his mother, what did they call him? Would he not have had a Hebrew name? This, however, we never learn. See Robert Duke, "Moses' Hebrew Name: The Evidence of the *Vision of Amram*," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 14 (2007): 35.

¹¹ The Alexandrian translators employ the term *philos* only twice in the Pentateuch (Exod 33:11 and Deut 13:7), and both times they use it to translate *rēa*.

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] 8.7.1158b33–36, 1159a3–5.

and are based on some communion of life (*koinōnia*). Since, however, the distance between God and humans is too great, no communion of life is possible and thus neither is friendship possible between humans and God.¹³ Aristotle applied this same reasoning concerning the relationship between a king and his subjects. The distance was too great between them for friendship to exist.¹⁴

But after the conquests of Alexander the Great and the social transformations that these occasioned, Hellenistic authors began to apply the terms *philos* and *philia* in new ways. First, writers began to describe royal officials in the service of kings such as Ptolemy as “friends of the king” (*philoï tou basileōs*). Specifically, Hellenistic authors applied the term to describe those court officials who both acted as counselors to the king and helped him administer the kingdom, often exercising substantial executive authority. The friends of the king counseled him candidly and helped him govern.¹⁵ Second, the new philosophical schools that emerged during this period also employed the language of friendship to describe students’ relationship to their teachers.¹⁶ The disciples of a philosopher were his friends because they were all the friends of wisdom. Lastly, pagan authors of the Hellenistic period began to portray certain humans as having become the friends of the gods. Indeed, some philosophers began to portray friendship with God or the gods as one of the goals of true philosophy.¹⁷ Moreover, the Greek ideal of friendship, as articulated by Aristotle, remained the model even for friendships existing between kings and their servants or philosophers and their disciples: friendship was viewed as entailing a

¹³ See David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 167–70.

¹⁴ *NE* 8.7.1159a1.

¹⁵ See Ivana Savalli-Lestrade, “Friends of the King,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner (London: Blackwell, 2013), 2765–67, and more completely, Savalli-Lestrade, *Les philoi royaux dans L’Asie hellénistique* (Geneva: Droz, 1998). See also Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 95–108.

¹⁶ See Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 108–15.

¹⁷ In his groundbreaking and influential study “Der Gottesfreund,” Peterson draws attention to the current of Greek philosophy that asserted the possibility of friendship with God. Konstan, while offering important correctives to this account (*Friendship in the Classical World*, 167–70), provides evidence for the emergence of such views among the Stoics during the Hellenistic period (169). This is something that Konstan had not yet seen in his earlier study (“Problems in the History of Christian Friendship,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 [1996]: 91–97). For more on the Stoic understanding of friendship with God, see Anne Banateanu, *La théorie stoïcienne de l’amitié: essai de reconstruction* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 183–97.

stable relationship of mutual well-wishing that is mutually known and lived through concrete acts that mutually promote the well-being of the friends.¹⁸

These features of Hellenistic friendship are perhaps the reason that the translators of the Pentateuch chose to describe Moses's unique role as the Lord's *rēa* as a form of friendship: "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, the way a man speaks to his friend" (Exod 33:11). The wisdom of this choice becomes apparent from the way it enables Philo of Alexandria subsequently to explain Moses's unique endowments. Philo asserts that the reader need not be surprised that God gave Moses power over the natural elements (to divide the sea or cause water to spring from the rock), because, "if as the proverb says, 'common are the things of friends,' and the prophet is called the friend of God [*philos theou*], then it follows that he would share in God and in his possessions according to what was needful."¹⁹ Thus, Moses, as a friend of God, can heal Miriam of her leprosy and teach others the divine mysteries.²⁰ Moses's status as a friend also helps Philo explain Moses's frank candor (*parrēsia*) in speaking—indeed arguing—with the Lord.²¹ All of this is uniquely possible for Moses, because Moses is a friend of God.²²

¹⁸ NE 8.2.1155b16–56a5. For good introductory accounts of Aristotle's philosophy of friendship, see David Konstan, "Aristotle on Love and Friendship," ΣΧΟΛΗ 2 (2008): 207–12, and Michael Pakaluk, "Friendship," in *Blackwell Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Georgios Anagnostopoulos (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 471–82. See also Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Philo of Alexandria, *De vita Mosis* I 28.156. The proverb (*koina ta philon*) was a commonplace, quoted by both Plato (*Republic* 4.423c–424a; *Phaedrus* 279c; *Laws* 739bc) and Aristotle (NE 9.8.1168b7–8]). Diogenes Laërtius reports that the historian Timaeus of Taormina attributed it to Pythagoras (*Vitae philosophorum* 8.36).

²⁰ Philo of Alexandria, *Legum allegoriae* I 24.76; *De cherubim* 2.14.49.

²¹ Philo of Alexandria, *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 21. For the role of candor (*parrēsia*) in Greek understanding of friendship, see "Introduction," in Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, trans. David Konstan, Diskin Clay, Clarence E. Glad, Johan C. Thom, and James Ware with introduction and annotation (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 1–24.

²² Alain Le Boulluec and Pierre Sandevor note, however, that although the early Greek Fathers follow Philo in celebrating Moses's friendship with God (see especially Clement of Alexandria [*Stromata* IV 3.9.1] and Gregory of Nyssa [*In Canticum Cantorum* 1.2 and *De vita Moysis* 2.219–30]), they subordinate it to Christ. Irenaeus, for example, affirms that it was with the Word that Moses spoke face to face (*Adversus haereses* 4.20.9), while Origen asserts that, although he is a "friend of God," Moses's power comes from Christ—a dependency that he shares

Wisdom and Friendship with God

The Book of Wisdom, a work written in Greek, enlarges this conception of divine friendship by affirming that, “in every generation,” Wisdom “passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and Prophets” (Wis 7:27).²³ Wisdom is a treasure accessible to all who seek her. They attain her, however, by means of a disciplined instruction (*paideia*): “and those who gain this treasure obtain friendship with God to whom the gifts they have from discipline (*paideia*) commend them” (7:14). What is the character of this discipline? This question runs throughout the Book of Wisdom. Some passages convey the impression that Wisdom’s *paideia* refers to the Mosaic law. We read that love of discipline means the “keeping of her laws” (6:18), while the narrator describes “the law” as “divine” (18:9) and as an “imperishable light given to all the world” (18:4). Other passages, however, suggest that this *paideia* corresponds to the ethical teaching of Greek philosophy.²⁴ We read, for example, that Wisdom’s labors “are the virtues, for she teaches temperance, prudence, justice and courage” (8:7).

But a closer inspection reveals that Wisdom’s *paideia* incorporates both the Law and moral philosophy into a more fundamental discipline. The book begins with the imperative call to “love justice” (Wis 1:1). Although this justice (*dikaïosynē*) includes the classical understanding of the virtue of justice that disposes us to do the just,²⁵ it refers more deeply to the Hebrew notion of *ṣādāqāh*, which signifies right relationship with God and is portrayed as walking in his ways.²⁶ Moreover, we learn that this

with Peter, Paul, and the other servants of the Lord (*De principiis* 3.2.5). See *La Bible d’Alexandrie: l’Exode*, trans. Alain Le Boulluec and Pierre Sandevor with introduction and annotation (Paris: Cerf, 1989), 332.

²³ See James K. Aitken, “Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Companion to the Septuagint*, 401–9, and David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 43 (New York: Doubleday, 1979).

²⁴ For the character of Greek *paideia* in Alexandria at this time, see Víctor Alonso Troncoso, “La *Paideia* de los primeros Ptolomeos,” *Habis* 36 (2005): 99–110; Troncoso “*Paideia* und *philia* in der Hofgesellschaft der hellenistischen Zeit,” in *Aspects of Friendship in the Graeco-Roman World: Proceedings of a conference held at the Seminar für Alte Geschichte, Heidelberg, on June, 10–11, 2000*, ed. Michael Peachin (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2001), 81–87. See also Jason M. Zurawski, “Mosaic *Paideia*: The Law of Moses within Philo of Alexandria’s Model of Jewish Education,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 48 (2017): 480–505.

²⁵ Aristotle, *NE* 5.5.1134a1–5.

²⁶ See, for example, the Lord’s description of Abraham: “I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing justice [*ṣādāqāh*] and judgment” (Gen 18:19).

justice is linked to eternal life—"justice is immortal" (1:15)—and even though they die, "the just will live forever" (5:15). Through the gift of the Lord's "grace and mercy," the just live by means of faith and love (3:9),²⁷ in a "hope full of immortality" (3:4), because they have been "saved by Wisdom" (9:18).

The most striking feature of this discipline is that it is Wisdom personified that teaches it. Wisdom, as both a friend of the good (*philagathos*) and a friend of man (*philanthropos*) (Wis 7:23), is an attendant at God's throne (9:4, 10), who goes forth with "the Holy Spirit of instruction [*paideia*]" (1:5) to teach us the way to eternal life. Wisdom's saving discipline occurs in relation to the mysterious "just one" who is rejected by the people: "Let us plot against the just one, because he is obnoxious to us" (12). In verses that the liturgy applies to Christ and which will influence the portrayal of Christ's Passion in the Gospels, the plotters explicitly attack the just one because of his assertion of a filial relationship with God:

He calls blessed the destiny of the just,
and boasts that God is his Father.
Let us see whether his words be true;
let us find out what will happen to him.
For if the just one be the son of God, he will defend him,
and deliver him from the hand of his foes.
With revilement and torture let us put him to the test,
that we may have proof of his gentleness,
and try his patience.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death;
for according to his own words,
God will take care of him. (Wis 2:16b–20)

But the just man subsequently confronts his plotters and leads them to see their errors:

This is he whom once we held as a laughingstock

²⁷ Wisdom's assertion that "the faithful shall abide with him in love [*hoi pistoi en agapē prosmenousin*]" (Wis 3:9b) is taken up by Paul and explicitly centered in Christ, when he affirms that, "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love [*pistis di' agapēs energoumenē*]" (Gal 5:6). Also, Wisdom's reference to understanding truth in the first part of the verse (Wis 3:9a), seems also to influence the Pauline call to "live the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

and as a figure of reproach, fools that we were.
 His life we accounted madness,
 And his death dishonored.
 See how he is accounted among the sons of God;
 How his lot is with the saints. (Wis 5:3–5)

They recognize that instead of following “the way of truth” (Wis 5:6), being ignorant of “the way of the Lord,” they wandered along the paths of falsehood that lead to impassable deserts (5:7).

The narrator then describes Wisdom’s saving action, but in such generic terms that one could read his narration as describing Wisdom’s action in the past. For those who have learned Wisdom’s discipline, however, the narration points forward to the saving events of the long awaited just one: “Wisdom again saved [the world], piloting the just man on frailest wood” (Wis 10:4). Although we might be tempted to see this as an account of Noah in the saving ark, the “again” in the passage—“Wisdom again saved the world”—points us toward the wood of the Cross. In other words, the discipline that leads to friendship with God is the science of the Cross: “Blessed is the wood through which justice comes about” (14:7). Thus, the bronze serpent raised on the pole was only a “sign of salvation” (16:6). Those who turned to it were saved not by what they saw, but by “the Savior of all” (16:7). Indeed, they were cured from the serpent’s venom “by neither herb nor balm” but by the Lord’s “all-healing Word” (16:12).

Although Wisdom’s instruction is the science of the Cross, this instruction is not without its consolations. The Lord, for example, reveals his sweetness and mercy toward his children by nourishing them with the “food of angels,” that is the “bread from heaven . . . containing all delights” and corresponding to all desires (Wis 16:20–21). Thus, the narrator explains that he sought Wisdom because he had discovered that there was “immortality in kinship [*syngeneia*] with Wisdom and pure delight in her friendship [*philia*],” while there was “practical wisdom [*phronēsis*] in communion [*koinōnia*] with her words” (8:17–18). The ultimate fruit of Wisdom’s action in our lives is to establish a glorious kind of “common life with God” (*symbiōsis theou*) (8:3), whereby we participate in his works and in his governance of creation. We should note as well that, as presented in the Book of Wisdom, the science of the Cross is inseparable from the mystery of the Trinity. The just one suffers because of his filial relationship to God the Father, while Wisdom acts in the world in company with the Holy Spirit of instruction. This mystery, affirmed every time a Christian makes the sign of the Cross, is ultimately what renders the discipline of the Cross a source of joy: the Cross becomes the way to communion with the life and love of the Trinity.

Abraham, the Friend of God

The Old Testament embodiment of friendship with God is Abraham. Indeed, Abraham is the only person in the Scriptures explicitly to receive the title “friend of God” (Gk. *philos theou*): “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as justice and he was called the friend of God” (Jas 2:23). James is quoting Genesis (15:6), where the Greek for justice (*dikaïosynē*) is once again translating the Hebrew *ṣādāqāh*, signifying right relationship with God.²⁸ For James, as for the Book of Wisdom, this right relationship is a form of friendship with God: the just are God’s friends. Moreover, as with the Book of Wisdom (Wis 3:9), one lives this friendship by means of the loving trust that is faith. Abraham is just and a friend of God because he believes. What exactly, however, does Abraham believe? In the Gospel of John, Jesus affirms that “Abraham rejoiced to see my day: he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:56). Here again, divine friendship leads to the mystery of the Cross. Just as Job will say, “I know that my redeemer lives, and that at last he will stand upon the earth” (Job 19:25), so too Abraham salutes from afar (Heb 11:13) the living promises he encounters on the mountain. Since Paul will describe Abraham as the father of all who believe (Rom 4:9–25), Abraham’s encounter with the discipline of the Cross merits close attention. Perhaps more than any other Old Testament figure, Abraham reveals what it means to be a friend of God.

But the Abraham story is deeply troubling. Although there are passages in the Abraham cycle that touchingly reveal Abraham’s intimacy with God (Abraham’s meal with the three visitors, the Lord’s revealing of his plans and of his unique promises to Abraham, as well as Abraham’s insistent intercession on behalf of Lot and his family),²⁹ the cycle culminates with the call to sacrifice Isaac. The Lord seems to be calling a father to kill his own son. This is brutal and should provoke anguished questioning on the part of all those who dare to affirm that they share the faith of Abraham. Our post-Christian contemporaries are helpful in this regard, especially those known as the “New Atheists.” For these thinkers, God’s command to Abraham retains its horror.³⁰ As one commentator explains, “to modern

²⁸ See also Rom 4:3 and Gal 3:6.

²⁹ See Gen 15:1–20; 18:1–33. John Chrysostom remarks about the Lord’s decision to reveal to Abraham his plan to destroy Sodom, that God remains with Abraham “as if communing with the just man, like a friend to a friend [*philos philō*] about what he was going to do” (*In Genesim* 42 [PG, 53:387]).

³⁰ For an analysis and assessment of the New Atheist criticisms of the God of the Old Testament, see Paul Copan, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics,” *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008): 7–37.

ears, this is a horrible story: it depicts God as a despotic and capricious sadist.”³¹ Richard Dawkins, for example, sees the command to sacrifice Isaac as “disgraceful” and as a form of “child abuse.”³² It is part of what leads Dawkins to describe the God of Abraham as an “evil monster.”³³ Whatever we may ultimately conclude concerning these criticisms, they point to a fundamental truth: the divine call for Abraham to sacrifice his son poses the central question of our faith: who is this God? Who does the Lord reveal himself to be?

At this point it will be helpful to consider anew the biblical account of what happened. The Lord calls Abraham to take his son Isaac, “whom you love,” and “go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Gen 22:2). Abraham obeys, travelling with Isaac and two servants, until after three days they arrive at the mountain. Upon their arrival, Abraham orders the servants to stay behind, saying, “stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go yonder and worship, and come again to you” (22:5). Abraham then takes the wood for the burnt offering and places it on Isaac, while he takes in hand both the fire and the knife. So equipped, they travel up the mountain together. On route, Isaac perceptively asks about the lamb: “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (22:7). Abraham responds by saying, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (22:8). Then, when they arrive at the place of sacrifice, Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son. It is only when the angel of the Lord intervenes that Abraham desists. The angel tells Abraham not to lay a hand on the boy, saying, “now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (22:12). Abraham subsequently sees a ram caught in a thicket by its horns and offers it instead as a burnt offering to the Lord. The narrator concludes the story by saying that “Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will see,’” adding that people still say that “on the mount of the Lord it shall be seen” (22:1–18).

The first thing to consider in this passage is Abraham’s three-day voyage: those apparently silent and dreadful days, during which Abraham travels with Isaac and the two young men. How could a father not be

³¹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 67. See also Larry Powell and William R. Self, *Holy Murder: Abraham, Isaac, and the Rhetoric of Sacrifice* (New York: University Press of America, 2007): 3–8.

³² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 242.

³³ Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 248. For an even more severe assessment, see Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007), 51, 53, 206–7.

haunted by the words of the Lord during that trip?³⁴ How could he not replay them over and over in his mind as he travelled: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." Abraham's agony must surely have intensified when, on the third day, Isaac asked him about the lamb of sacrifice. Among early Christian authors, Origen was particularly struck by the drama of this event. "Imagine for yourselves how the father's heart must have been wrung when he heard the voice of the lad who was to be sacrificed!"³⁵ Perhaps the best way to attain some glimpse of how anguished and dark Abraham's road of faith may well have been, is by listening to the pain of a father who has lost a son.

The theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, received a call early one morning announcing the death of his oldest son. "For three seconds," he tells us, "I felt the peace of resignation: arms extended, limp son in hand, peacefully offering him to someone—Someone. Then the pain—cold burning pain."³⁶ A pain so intense that Wolterstorff had difficulty doing even the simplest tasks of daily life. A lament had entered his life and determined an aspect of his identity. Part of the pain was experienced as a lost future: "It is so wrong, so profoundly wrong, for a child to die before its parents; . . . our children belong to our future. . . . I lament all that might have been and now will never be."³⁷ Abraham on the human level might well have experienced a similar lament as he thought about the impending death of Isaac.

Wolterstorff, however, as he mourned the loss of his son, also learned something about the character of love: "We took him too much for granted. . . . He was a gift to us for twenty-five years; When the gift was finally snatched away, I realized how great it was. I didn't know how much I loved him until he was gone."³⁸ This insight is the key to understanding what occurs to Abraham's faith as he travels to Moriah. Abraham, by experiencing the impending death of his son, learns how much he loves Isaac. Abraham experiences during those three days the depth of a father's

³⁴ Hegel regarded Abraham as the model and primal hero of alienation: "He was a stranger on earth, a stranger to the soil and to men alike. Among men he always was and remained a foreigner. . . . The whole world Abraham regarded as simply his opposite; if he did not take it to be nullity, he looked on it as sustained by the God who was alien to it" (G. W. F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971], 186–87).

³⁵ Origen, *Homilia in Genesim* 8, no. 6 (PG, 12:206).

³⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 9.

³⁷ Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 16, 22.

³⁸ Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 13.

love for his son. Only then, on the third day, does a revelation begin to occur. Only then does Abraham speak of Isaac returning with him after the sacrifice, and of God supplying the lamb of sacrifice. His love for his son leads him to discover the presence of another greater love, and this love leads to a deeper knowledge of faith. Pope Francis addresses this dynamic in his encyclical on faith, when he affirms that, “love itself brings enlightenment. Faith’s understanding is born when we receive the immense love of God which transforms us inwardly and enables us to see reality with new eyes.”³⁹ That a revelation has indeed occurred becomes clear from the way the inhabitants subsequently describe the mountain of sacrifice. In the Hebrew, the passage literally reads as follows: “it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be seen’” (Gen 22:14). What shall be seen? The Alexandrian translators seem to respond to this question when they point and punctuate the text slightly differently. For them, the passage reads: “On the mount, the Lord shall be seen” (*kurios ōphthē*). What Abraham rejoiced to see and what he saluted from afar were the mysteries of the Trinity and of the Cross. Abraham’s faith is indeed a faith in the resurrection, as the Book of Hebrews affirms,⁴⁰ but it is also a distant and veiled encounter with God’s merciful love for sinful humanity, revealed in the Father’s love for the Son: “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18). His love for Isaac prepared him to discover another Father’s love for his Son, which in turn reveals the depths of God’s love for the world: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16). Just as the serpent in the desert was a sign, so too are Abraham and Isaac and

³⁹ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (2013), §26.

⁴⁰ Heb 11:17–19: “By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name.’ He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol [*en parabolē*].” Hebrews is thus affirming that Abraham was guided by a twofold conviction (that God would be true to his promise to give him descendants through Isaac and that God was asking him to sacrifice Isaac) which led him to a third conviction of faith: that God would raise Isaac from the dead. Abraham’s faith, while beyond reason’s ability to comprehend, is thus not contrary to reason or irrational. Søren Kierkegaard’s celebration of Abraham’s faith, therefore, although elegant and moving, is ultimately inadequate (see Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 6, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983]). Abraham’s greatness does not stem from the irrational or absurd character of his belief, but from its depth as an expression of a loving trust in God’s caring fidelity to his promises.

their journey to the mountain signs of God's triune mystery revealed in the Cross. The events of Calvary are all there in figure: there is the father, and the son carrying the wood of sacrifice, and the mysterious fire that accompanies them in the hand of the father: Father, Son, and Spirit acting through the Cross to save the world from sin and death. To ensure that we understand what is being revealed on Mount Moriah, three things occur here for the very first time in the whole of the Old Testament. First, the Scriptures employ the common Hebrew word for love, *'ahav*, for the first time. It is God who employs it, and he uses it to describe a father's love for his son, a son who is to be sacrificed: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love [*'āhavēta*]" (Gen 22:2). The next two things that happen for the first time are that a father is addressed as "father" and a son is addressed as "son": "And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here am I, son'" (22:7).

Far from revealing a wicked God, therefore, the events on the mountain reveal a God whose love is stronger than sin and death: a love so great that it is willing to send the Son to die for us, so that we may have eternal life by becoming the adopted sons and daughters of God. This revelation is what enables Paul to refer to Abraham as having had the Gospel preached to him beforehand (Gal 3:8). Nevertheless, these events and Abraham's understanding of them are still under a veil. Just as Wolterstorff described his wounded heart as "an unanswered question,"⁴¹ so too, as it stands in the Old Testament, the call to sacrifice Isaac remains an unanswered question.

Divine Friendship in the New Testament

The revelation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Father's only Son provides the answer. As in the Old Testament, this revelation takes place where the New Testament employs the word "love" for the first time. It occurs in Matthew's Gospel at the baptism of Jesus. Matthew employs the very word that the LXX version of Genesis uses to describe Abraham's love for Isaac: *agapētos* or "beloved."⁴² Once again it is God who employs it to describe a father's love for his son: "And behold, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matt 3:17). As Ceslas

⁴¹ Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 68.

⁴² The Alexandrian translators seem to have been working from a slightly different Hebrew version of Genesis 22:2 than is found in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT). Where the MT refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only son" whom he loves, the Septuagint describes Isaac as Abraham's "beloved son" whom he loves (*ton huion ton agapēton, hon ēgapēs*). Thus, in the Septuagint, the first reference to love is not the verb, but the substantive form "beloved."

Spicq notes, “in its eight uses in the Synoptic Gospels, *agapetos* is always and exclusively a description of Jesus as the Son of God.”⁴³ Moreover, in each of the eight cases it is God who speaks, either directly (as here at the baptism), or indirectly (as in the parable of the vineyard, where the landowner sends his beloved son).⁴⁴ From Christ’s baptism to his transfiguration, therefore, from the beginning of Christ’s public ministry to its fulfillment, the Lord is revealing the Father’s love for the Son.

But the New Testament does more than just reveal this love. It also reveals the Christian vocation to participate in it. Specifically, through the sanctifying grace of baptism, we become by adoption what the Son is by nature: we become the adopted sons and daughters of God. Paul affirms: “You have received the spirit of adopted sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15–16).⁴⁵ Although God created humanity in his own image,⁴⁶ through the grace of baptism, he draws humanity more deeply into his triune life, by configuring us “to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29). This is why, as Thomas Aquinas notes, friendship with God has a filial character. It is a friendship between a Father and his adopted sons and daughters:

Since all friendship is based on some kind of communion (for likeness is a cause of love), that friendship is right which exists on account of likeness or communion in the good. Christ thus loved us because we had become like him through the grace of adoption, loving us according to this likeness, he drew us to God: “I loved you with an everlasting charity; and therefore being merciful I drew you” (Jer 31:3).⁴⁷

⁴³ Ceslas Spicq, *Agapè dans le nouveau testament*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gabalda, 1958), 73n1.

⁴⁴ The eight passages are from the Synoptic accounts of the Lord’s baptism (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22) and transfiguration (Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7) and of the parable of wicked tenants (Mark 12:6; Luke 20:13), as well as from Matthew’s application of Isa 42:1 to Jesus (Matt 12:18).

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas describes beautifully the communal and ecclesial character of this adoption in *Super Ioan* 2, lec. 3 (no. 404): “Just as the divinity dwells in Christ’s body by the grace of union, so too does it dwell in the Church by the grace of adoption [sicut in corpore Christi habitat divinitas per gratiam unionis, ita et in Ecclesia per gratiam adoptionis].”

⁴⁶ Gen 1:26–27; 9:6; Wis 2:23; Sir 17:3.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Super Ioan* 15, lec. 3 (no. 1838). See also *De caritate*, a. 2, ad 15. Thomas’s theology of friendship with God is able to respond to Aristotle’s concern that, since there can be no communion of life (*koinōnia*) between humans and God, there can be no friendship, by explaining that God himself establishes the requisite

It was while we were still sinners that Christ began to draw us to himself (Rom 5:8), becoming known as a “friend of publicans and sinners” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). The goal, however, was to lead us from enmity to friendship (Eph 2:16, Jas 4:4). Through the action of his Spirit, he configures us to his image and establishes a communion of life with us. As the Second Letter of Peter affirms, we become “participators in the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). Through this communion, Christ both reveals his secrets and draws us into his life and mission.⁴⁸

Specifically, and as the experience of the Old Testament patriarchs should lead us to expect, Jesus reveals to his disciples both the mystery of the Trinity and that of the Cross. Here again, this twin revelation occurs in the context of divine friendship. In John’s Gospel, for example, it is on the eve of his Passion that Jesus tells his disciples, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). At the beginning of the final discourse, Jesus underlines the mystery of the Trinity and the disciples’ participation in it: he is in the Father and the Father is in him, and they will not leave the disciples orphans, because they will send the Spirit; and Father, Son and

communion (*koinōnia* or *communicatio*) by communicating his divine life to us in the gift of sanctifying grace, “which establishes a certain friendship between God and man” (*Summa contra gentiles* III, ch. 157, no. 3). We should also note that, although Aristotle denies the possibility of friendship between humans and “God” (*theos*), he nevertheless subsequently considers that, if there is something akin to friendship “of men toward the gods [*theoi*],” then this would be analogous to the friendship that “children have toward their parents,” who recognize their parents as the source of all they have: “their birth, their nourishment, and their education” (*NE* 8.12.1162a4).

⁴⁸ One implication of our configuration to Christ is that we cannot understand ourselves apart from Christ. Just as a friend becomes another self (*NE* 9.4.1166a31), in whom we see our own image, so too it is in Christ that we discover who we most deeply are. Ultimately, it is only at the resurrection that we will fully understand who we are in Christ. As Paul affirms, “your life is hidden with Christ in God; when Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:3). Nevertheless, as Paul himself notes, the revelation of Christ—the “image of God” (Col 1:15) and the “mystery of God” in whom “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2–3)—has already begun (Col 1:27), and thus has already begun to reveal our new and true selves: “There is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (Col 3:11). Those who turn away from Christ, by contrast, become an ever-growing mystery to themselves. Turning away from the light, they wander in a growing darkness, divided internally and separated from others.

Spirit will dwell within them.⁴⁹ Moreover, it is by remaining in Christ, like branches on a vine, that the disciples will bear much fruit and bring glory to the Father (John 15:4–5, 8). The disciples also learn that remaining in Christ entails loving as Christ loves.

It is when Jesus mentions love that he shifts to the mystery of the Cross. “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). In John’s Gospel, Jesus’s mission is to reveal the Father’s love for the world in order to lead his people from death to eternal life: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus invites the disciples to participate in this mission. They too are called to reveal the Father’s love. By doing so, however, they will also participate in his Cross: “If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. . . . Remember the word I spoke to you, ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:18–20).

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus similarly prepares his disciples for this outcome, and once again he employs the language of friendship. “I tell you, my friends (*philois mou*), do not be afraid of those who kill the body but after that can do no more” (Luke 12:4). Instead, they are to have confidence in Christ because the Holy Spirit will be with them: “When they take you before assemblies and before rulers and authorities, do not worry about how or what your defense will be or about what you are to say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you should say” (Luke 12:11–12). Jesus returns to this theme on the eve of his Passion.

They will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to assemblies and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name. This will lead you to testimony. Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute. (Luke 21:12–15)

This passage from Luke’s Gospel, in conjunction with the verses that follow, suggests another aspect of divine friendship: its relationship to the virtues. Thus far we have seen that divine friendship entails love. A fuller account would also show that love always accompanies and animates faith

⁴⁹ John 14:10, 16–18, 20, 23, 26; 16:7.

and hope.⁵⁰ Yet what about the other virtues? As we have seen, the Book of Wisdom affirms that Wisdom's discipline teaches the classical virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. Does the New Testament vision of divine friendship also entail cultivating these virtues? Luke's Gospel suggests an answer.

Although "testimony" in the above passage is translating the Greek word *martyrion*, which we often properly translate as "martyrdom," it here signifies more generally the universal call to bear witness to the Gospel. We know this, because Jesus lists martyrdom properly so called (i.e., dying for the faith) as only one of the many disagreeable consequences of proclaiming the Good News: "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name's sake" (Luke 21:16–17). Significantly, Jesus ends by affirming, "by your patient endurance you will gain your lives" (Luke 21:19). The Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus here as employing a Greek moral term to describe a trait of character that his disciples should exhibit, *hypomonē*, which is translated here as "patient endurance." For Aristotle, *hypomonē* is the principle act of the virtue of courage.⁵¹ When we turn to the rest of the New Testament, we discover that patient endurance is at the heart of the Christian life, appearing in several of the New Testament lists of virtues.⁵² The list in Second Peter is most significant, because of its relationship to the language of friendship. As we have seen, friendship presupposes communion of life, the Greek word for which is *koinōnia*. Second Peter prefaces its list of virtues by first referring to God's virtue and to our communion in the divine nature. The term employed here is *koinōnos*, which is an adjectival form of *koinōnia*. Second Peter employs it as a plural noun: we are *koinōnoi* or "participators" of the divine nature. As such, we are called to exhibit certain traits of character:

Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-mastery, and self-mastery with patient endurance, and patient endurance with reverence, and

⁵⁰ See especially Rom 5:1–5 and 1 Cor 13:13.

⁵¹ NE 3.9.1117a32: "It is for enduring the painful that people are called courageous." Aristotle employs here the verbal form of *hypomonē*, which is *hypomenein*.

⁵² The New Testament contains thirteen virtue lists. *Hypomonē* appears in four of them: 2 Cor 6:6; 1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 3:10; and 2 Pet 1:5–7. Paul also frequently celebrates *hypomonē* in his Letter to the Romans (2:7; 5:3–4; 8:25; 15:4–5). Indeed, it could be argued that Rom 5:1–5 is also a virtue list, where Paul places *hypomonē* at the heart of the Christian experience of faith, hope, and charity. See also 1 Thess 1:3.

reverence with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:5–8)

There are several things to note in this passage. First, the list begins with faith and ends with love, as if to say that the Christian life begins with faith and is brought to perfection by love. Second, the goal of these virtues is fruitfulness in Christ. As with the analogy of the vine and the branches in John's Gospel, knowledge of Christ only bears fruit when accompanied by love. Thirdly, the general term "virtue"—which is extraordinarily rare in the New Testament—heads the subsequent list of specific virtues, as if to signify an appositive construction. In contemporary English grammar, we might express this appositive by placing the specific virtues within parentheses. The primary meaning of the sentence would thus be: *Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue and your virtue with love.* Second Peter would then secondarily be delineating the specific virtues that the author has in mind: knowledge (*gnōsis*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), patient endurance (*hypomonē*), reverence (*eusebeia*), and brotherly affection (*philadelphia*).

Although this list of virtues deserves a study of its own, at present we can only note the following.⁵³ The first two virtues concern intellect and will (knowledge and self-mastery) and primarily have the agent himself as their object. The last two virtues, on the other hand, are directed toward others: reverence (which is directed toward God and toward those who represent him: parents, elders, religious and civil authorities) and *philadelphia* (which is a friendship love directed toward our equals, whom we treat as brothers). This leaves patient endurance, the primary act of courage, which Thomas Aquinas will associate with martyrdom.⁵⁴ From the Petrine perspective, therefore, the virtues that flow from our communion with God—the virtues that begin in faith and are animated by charity—dispose us to act rightly toward God, our neighbor, and ourselves, and to be courageous in proclaiming the Gospel: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for the reason for your hope" (1 Pet 3:15). The friends of God are thus those who live the virtues that sustain them in the proclamation of the Good News, even unto death.

⁵³ For more on the catalog of virtues in 2 Peter, see J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 128–58.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 123, a. 6; q. 124, a. 2.

The Shepherd's Friend at the Lakeside

These themes are perhaps nowhere more completely expressed than in the Johannine account of Peter's encounter with the resurrected Jesus at the lakeside. First, the disciples recognize Jesus's identity as the risen Lord only after he helps them in their common activity of catching fish. Just as the Lord helped Moses shepherd his people, the risen Lord helps the disciples in their task as fishermen. Second, Peter's conversation with Jesus takes place over a communal meal, an activity universally recognized as proper to friendship. Third, the character of the love proper to friendship is at the heart of their exchange. Jesus three times asks Peter "do you love me?" By posing this question next to a charcoal fire and by posing it three times, Jesus is doubtless offering Peter the opportunity to undo the three denials he had earlier made before a different charcoal fire in a more sinister setting (John 18:18).⁵⁵ More importantly for our analysis, however, are the Greek verbs that each of them employs during their exchange. In the Johannine account of this encounter, the first two times Jesus poses the question, he employs the common Greek verb for love *agapan* (the verbal form of the noun "*agapē*"), while Peter always responds with *philein* (the Greek verb for friendship love: the love proper to *philia*). Only the third time does Jesus switch and ask the question with the verb *philein*. Many scholars affirm that this change of verbs has no significance. Even St. Augustine holds this view.⁵⁶

But what if this passage harkens back to the first time that *philia* is applied to God? What if John's Gospel is alluding to Moses' encounter with the Lord? The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his *rēa'*, to his shepherd friend. In this case, the exchange acquires new significance. The key element here is the reference to sheep. Jesus is concerned about the flock. Each time Peter affirms his friendship love for Jesus, Jesus refers to the flock: "Feed my lambs"; "Tend my sheep"; "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15–17). From the outset, Peter thinks he is ready to be the Lord's *rēa'*, his shepherd friend. Jesus, however, only proposes this after Peter has twice undone his former denials. What Jesus then offers is a uniquely intimate form of friendship love: the friendship of a shepherd who invites you to help him tend his sheep. Jesus further reveals the culmination of this shared ministry, the Cross: "Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are

⁵⁵ The Greek word for "charcoal fire," *anthrakia*, appears only twice in the entire New Testament: here (John 21:9) and in the courtyard of the high priest (John 18:18), the setting of Peter's three denials.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.7.

old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (John 21:18).

Peter and his successors in the apostolic ministry have a unique way of living this pastoral ministry. Nevertheless, Peter's experience also points to an aspect of divine friendship to which all the baptized are called. Abraham saw this from afar. The Book of Wisdom described what it would entail. Friendship with God offers a divine intimacy by which we both participate in God's triune life and in his saving activity. We do this, however, through an apprenticeship that draws us into in the mystery of Christ's Cross. The Cross is bitter, but does not end in sadness. With Abraham we can rejoice in the filial sacrifice, because it leads to the joy of the resurrection. Like the wood that sweetens the bitter waters of Marah (Exod 15:25), to reveal the Lord's power (Sir 38:5), the Cross leads to the fulfillment of Moses' desire to see the Lord, with whom he spoke, as one speaks to his friend. N.V