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**Expression of Love:
φιλέω and ἀγαπάω in John 21:15-17**

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The Gospel according to John (chapter 21, verses 15-17) describes the conversation between Jesus and Peter after Jesus was risen from the dead and came to dine with his disciples. Let us read the passage carefully:

<p>¹⁵ So when they had dined, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou Me more than these?" He said unto Him, "Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He said unto him, "Feed My lambs."</p>	<p>¹⁵ Ὅτε οὖν ἠρίστησαν λέγει τῷ Σίμωνι Πέτρῳ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων; λέγει αὐτῷ· ναὶ κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε. λέγει αὐτῷ· βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου.</p>
<p>¹⁶ He said to him again the second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou Me?" He said unto Him, "Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He said unto him, "Feed My sheep."</p>	<p>¹⁶ λέγει αὐτῷ πάλιν δεύτερον· Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με; λέγει αὐτῷ· ναὶ κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε. λέγει αὐτῷ· ποιμῶμαι τὰ προβάτια μου.</p>
<p>¹⁷ He said unto him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou Me?" Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, "Lovest thou Me?" And he said unto Him, "Lord, Thou...knowest all things. Thou...knowest that I love Thee." Jesus said unto him, "Feed My sheep."</p>	<p>¹⁷ λέγει αὐτῷ τὸ τρίτον· Σίμων Ἰωάννου, φιλεῖς με; ἐλπιήθη ὁ Πέτρος ὅτι εἶπεν αὐτῷ τὸ τρίτον· φιλεῖς με; καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· κύριε, πάντα σὺ οἶδας, σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε. λέγει αὐτῷ Ἰησοῦς· βόσκει τὰ προβάτια μου.</p>

Thus, three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves Him. Three times Peter gives a positive answer. Three times after getting Peter's answer, Jesus asks him to take care of His flock.

A literary device John uses in this dialogue is the three-folded structure: the same situation is repeated three times. We all are well aware of this literary device. We remember it from our favorite childhood readings - the fairy tales. We have learned by heart since then that in order to reach the desired goal a main hero of a story had to repeat his deeds three times, and only after the third time would his dreams come true. This literary device was actively used in other genres as well. We find it in *Lives of saints*, for instance, or in epic literature. No matter who and where used this device, its function is always the same — to emphasize the importance of an action described. Hence, John's use of the three-folded structure has to immediately attract our attention to the dialogue.

If we turn to the Greek original of the Gospel according to John, we discover that the situation is much more complex. While repeating Jesus' questions and Peter's answers, John used a whole variety of synonyms, that is words with similar (but not the same!) meaning. Why did he do it? Did he do it just for stylistic purposes and had John, by using different words with similar meaning, merely wanted to embellish his prose? Or did he deliberately choose his words? If so, if his choice of words was deliberate, then our task is to try to understand what he wanted to say to his readers.

1.

We shall begin with a more plausible pair of synonyms. "Feed My lambs (or sheep)" said Jesus to Peter and repeated his request three times. In all three instances Jesus rephrased His request one way or another:

Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου (verse 15)

Ποιμαίνε τὰ πρόβατά μου (verse 16)

Βόσκει τὰ πρόβατά μου (verse 17).

The verb *βόσκω* means 'to feed, to nourish' → metaphorically 'to take care, to support'. The noun *τὸ ἀρνίον* is the diminutive of *ἀρήν* 'ram', hence *τὸ ἀρνίον* is 'a little lamb'. This word is used in the Gospels only by John, but his use of it (cf. first and foremost, Rev. 5:6, 8, 12; 6:1, 16; 7:9-10, 14, 17 etc.) shows that *τὸ ἀρνίον* meant for him an image of Christ. Let us read Rev. 5:6: "And I beheld, and lo, in the midst of the throne and the four living beings, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth." 'Little lambs' of verse 15 are those who, like Christ, will sacrifice themselves for the sake of mankind.

Τὸ προβάτιον of verse 16 is a diminutive of *τὸ πρόβατον*, used in verse 17, it means 'little sheep'. While the word *τὸ προβάτιον* occurs only once in the entire New Testament, the word *τὸ πρόβατον* is used throughout all books of the New Testament, but most frequently by Matthew and John.

If you look at the examples I provided, you will notice that in most cases the word *τὸ πρόβατον* is used together with the verb *ποιμαίνω* and its derivative *ὁ ποιμήν, ἐνος*. The verb *ποιμαίνω* means 'to herd, to guide, to govern'; *ὁ ποιμήν, ἐνος*, 'a herdsman' → metaphorically 'a shepherd, pastor, teacher, leader'. Jesus's phrase immediately brings to mind, on the one hand, Prophet Zacharias's line (13:7) *πατάξατε τοὺς ποιμένας, καὶ ἐκπάσατε τὰ πρόβατα*, 'smite the shepherds, and draw out the sheep', and, on the other, the idea of the relationship between a shepherd and his lost and found sheep that recognize the shepherd's voice, a topic most important for John. Jesus, thus, asks Peter to herd (to guide, to govern) those little sheep that a good shepherd found and brought back to light on his own shoulders and who, in their turn, learn how to recognize his voice. Jesus asks Peter to guide his followers. John has used a diminutive here (a very rare word) and has done it, perhaps, in order to express Christ's tender love toward his followers, his little sheep. Finally, in verse 17 Jesus once again repeats the verb *βόσκω*, 'to feed, to nourish', 'to take care, to support' and uses the word *τὸ πρόβατον*. *Τὸ πρόβατον* is a general term for 'all four-footed animals' and, as a development of this general meaning, 'animals for

sacrifice'; metaphorically, however, this word means 'simple, naive, inexperienced, ignorant, lazy people'. Jesus asks Peter to take care of the mankind.

To summarize, according to John's verses 15-17 Jesus first asks Peter to take care (physically *and* metaphysically) of those who will sacrifice themselves for His sake, the Apostles, his little lambs; he then asks Peter to guide his followers, his little sheep, who because of fear and lack of leadership might be dispersed; finally, he asks him to take care of all mankind, of those ignorant, naive, lazy and dull people, his sheep, who do not know the Truth yet.

2.

The second pair of synonyms is used by John in verse 17. Upset by Jesus asking him for a third time whether he loves Him, Peter answers "Lord, **Thou knowest** all things. **Thou knowest** that I **love** Thee." The Greek original reads as follows: Κύριε, πάντα σὺ οἶδας, σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε.

Once again, we observe that John deliberately collides words that have similar but slightly different meanings. In his first and second answers Peter used the expression σὺ οἶδας (< *εἶδω). In his third answer, Peter used this verb and its synonym γινώσκεις (< γινώσκω). What is the difference between these two verbs? The form οἶδας expresses an idea of a complete intuitive knowledge, the spiritual ability to penetrate the essence of things through the mind eye. The form γινώσκεις describes the knowledge acquired through the experience, that is, it means 'to learn (things)'. The same collision of meanings John used two more times: (1) in chapter 8, verse 55: καὶ οὐκ ἐγνώκατε αὐτόν, ἐγὼ δὲ οἶδα αὐτόν. κὰν εἶπω ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα αὐτόν, ἔσομαι ὅμοιος ὑμῖν ψεύστης: ἀλλὰ οἶδα αὐτόν καὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ τηρῶ, "yet ye have not known him (ἐγνώκατε 'you have not yet learned about him'); but I know him (οἶδα, 'I see'): and if I should say, I know him not, I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him, and keep his saying"; and (2) in chapter 13, verse 7: ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ὁ ἐγὼ ποιῶ σὺ οὐκ οἶδας ἄρτι, γνώση δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα, "Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now (οὐκ οἶδας 'do not see'); but thou shalt know (γνώση 'learn') hereafter."

In his third answer Peter, thus, refers to both natures of Jesus Christ. He says to Jesus: As God you are able to see everything and as a man through your own human experience you know (you learn) that I love you.

3.

Now, when we realize that John's use of synonyms is not a mere stylistic device in order to keep his reader entertained but a careful and deliberate choice, we can turn to the last pair of synonyms he used: the verbs ἀγαπάω and φιλέω. Let us examine our passage once more:

Twice Jesus asked Peter: ἀγαπᾷς με? Peter persistently answers: φιλῶ σε. Only the third time Jesus rephrases his question and uses Peter's verb: φιλεῖς με? Upset by Jesus asking him for the third time φιλεῖς με, Peter answers "You see everything, you know that φιλῶ σε." What did John want to say?

The use of the verb ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in this particular passage attracted the attention of many theologians, linguists and interpreters of the Holy Writ for many years. Some have argued that John had used the verbs ἀγαπάω and φιλέω as synonyms, with no real significant difference in their meanings; they further alleged that there was no semantic distinction between the two verbs and that the author had used them for stylistic purposes only. Yet other scholars do argue for a distinction, especially and precisely in the conversation between Jesus and Peter. Let us examine these scholars' opinions in details.

Some scholars understand ἀγαπάω as a love of intelligence, reason and comprehension, as a love of people united by mutual ideas. From that point of view, ἀγαπάω far surpasses φιλέω, that is understood as a love of mere personal affection or liking where no intelligence or high purpose is involved. They believe that ἀγαπάω in the Gospels generally indicates a love that is deep-seated, thorough-going, intelligent and purposeful, a love in which the entire personality (not only emotions, but also the mind and the will) plays a prominent role. Φιλέω, on the contrary, indicates the spontaneous natural affection which is based first and foremost on emotions. Hence, ἀγαπάω expresses a higher type of love that is more intellectual rather than emotional, while φιλέω signifies a lower type of love which often lacks or minimizes the intellect or the will.

The others see the situation as absolutely different. They hold φιλέω to be the higher type of love than ἀγαπάω. Studying the Classical Greek, they conclude that ἀγαπάω lacks the idea of warmth and fondness conveyed in φιλέω.

The reason for such debates is that the context of the Gospels simply does not allow us to detect the difference between these two verbs. Indeed, both verbs can be used to express, for instance, Father's love toward his Son (ὁ πατήρ ἀγαπᾷ τὸν υἱόν, 'The Father loveth the Son', John 3:35; ὁ γὰρ πατήρ φιλεῖ τὸν υἱόν, 'For the Father loveth the Son', John 5:20); or Son's love toward his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus (ἡγάπα δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὴν Μάρθαν καὶ τὴν ἀδελφὴν αὐτῆς καὶ τὸν Λάζαρον, John 11:5; Ἴδε πῶς ἐφίλει αὐτόν [Lazarus] John 11:36) and toward his favorite disciple (ὃν ἡγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς, John 13:23, 21:7, 20; ὃν ἐφίλει ὁ Ἰησοῦς, John 20:2).

Like φιλέω, ἀγαπάω also describes affectionate love. Apostle Paul teaches husbands to love their wives (cf. Eph 5:25 [ἀγαπᾶτε], 28 [ἀγαπᾶν], 33 [ἀγαπάτω]; Col. 3:19 [ἀγαπᾶτε]). Emotional is the love of Jesus towards Martha, Mary and Lazarus (ἡγάπα, John 11:5), his love toward people (ἡγάπησεν, John 13:1) and his love toward his favorite disciple (John 13:23, 19:26, 21:7, 21:20). No less emotional is Abraham's love toward his son Isaac (Gen. 22:2), Isaac's love toward his wife Rebecca (Gen. 24:67), Samson's love toward Delilah (Judg 16:15), husband's love toward his wife (Eccl. 9:9) and so on. In all these cases we find the verb ἀγαπάω. Ἀγαπάω can go from heart, from soul or from mind: ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," Mt. 22:37, cf. also Mk. 12:33, Lk. 10:27).

In other words, the contexts of the Old and New Testaments show that the verbs ἀγαπάω and φιλέω were used interchangeably and we cannot determine on the basis of their contexts

what were the differences between the two verbs. The only thing we can say for sure is that the verb ἀγαπάω was used more frequently than the verb φιλέω in the New Testament: ἀγαπάω is used 142 times and φιλέω 25 times.

Is there any evidence that allows us to understand the difference between these verbs? I think there is. But in order to find it we have to turn not to the contexts of the use of these verbs but to their grammatical characteristics.

	to love		to kiss	
present	ἀγαπάω	φιλέω	—	καταφιλέω ¹
continuous past (perfect)	ἠγάπηκα	πεφίληκα	—	*καταπεφίληκα ²
unfinished past (imperfect)	ἠγάπα	ἐφίλει	—	κατεφίλει
finished past (aorist)	ἠγάπησα	—	ἐφίλησα	κατεφίλησα
limited future (future I)	ἀγαπήσω	—	φιλήσω ³	καταφιλήσω

Ἀγαπάω ‘to love’ can be used in all tenses without changing its meaning. Φιλέω ‘to love’ can be used only in tenses that describe non-accomplished actions: the present tense, the continuous past (perfect) and the unfinished past (imperfect). In short, it means ‘to love’ only in those tenses that do not bear in themselves the idea of chronological limits. When φιλέω is used in tenses that describe a fully accomplished action (in the finished past (aorist) or in the limited future (future I)), it changes its meaning radically. It does not mean ‘to love’ anymore, it now means ‘to kiss’ (we may assume that this particular meaning was developed from the more general original one, ‘to experience short-term feeling of (passionate) love expressed through a token of love, that is the kiss’).

The Gospels also use the verb καταφιλέω which means ‘to caress, to cover with kisses’ and can be used in all tenses. Now, let us discuss the difference between these two verbs as well. Καταφιλέω is usually used to describe a peaceful, tender, gentle and warm action. This action lacks any idea of passion, obsession, fervor or ardor. In the Gospels it is used to describe the action of Mary Magdalene who washed Jesus' feet, dried them with her hair and then covered them with tender little kisses. In the Acts (20:37), when apostles realized that they will never see Paul again, weeping they hugged him and covered him with kisses. Forms ἐφίλησα/φιλήσω, on the contrary, describe very passionate, explicit declaration of love through the kiss.

In the Gospels, these forms are used only three times: in Mt. 26:46, Mk. 14:44, and in Lk. 22:47. In all three cases they describe an action of Judas. What Judas did was not just a mere tender kiss. He openly gave Jesus a token of his passionate love. This was the most sincere kiss (at least in the eyes of bystanders). But this kiss did not mean love, it meant betrayal. The depth

¹ It means ‘to caress, to cover with kisses’; see, for instance, Lk. 7:45 καταφιλοῦσά μου τοὺς πόδας (‘kissing my legs’), Lk. 7:38 κατεφίλει τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ (‘kissed his legs’), Acts 20:37 κατεφίλουν αὐτὸν ‘kissed him’.

² A very rare form attested only four times in Classical and Byzantine Greek.

³ We find these forms in the Old Testament: ἐφίλησα (Job 31:27, ‘I kissed’), ἐφίλησεν (Gen. 27:27, 29:11, 29:13, 33:4, 48:10, 50:1; Ex 18:7; Prov. 7:13, ‘he kissed’), φίλησον (Gen. 27:26 ‘kiss (me)’), φίλησάτω (Song 1:2 ‘(let him) kiss’); φιλήσω (Song 8:1 ‘I will kiss’), φιλήσουσιν (Prov. 24:26 ‘(they) will kiss’) and in the New Testament: in Lk. 22:47 (φιλήσαι, ‘to kiss’), in Mt. 26:48 and in Mk. 14:44 (ὃν ἂν φιλήσω ‘whomsoever I shall kiss’).

of Judas's betrayal, the level of his hypocrisy is expressed in the Gospels with a minimum of artistic devices, by means of just one, but a very strong word.

To summarize: the study of grammatical characteristics of two verbs shows that they indeed are different. The verb ἀγαπάω describes love as **an action** that can begin and stop at any chronological point. The verb φιλέω describes love as a state. Once happened, it lasts forever.

Semantic differences of synonyms ἀγαπάω and φιλέω become apparent only in the contexts in which these synonyms are deliberately put into collision. A conversation between Jesus and Peter is exactly such a collision. Taking into account the grammatical characteristics of the two verbs, we can now propose the following interpretation of this famous dialogue.

Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" using the neutral verb ἀγαπάω. Peter chooses as a response the semantically marked verb that describes a love that has no time limits, striving thereby to emphasize the continuous and eternal nature of his love: "I love you forever", he answers. Wishing to be sure that Peter's choice is conscious, Jesus asks his question a second time, using the same neutral verb: "Do you love me?" Peter repeats his answer: "I love you forever." Now Jesus is absolutely sure that Peter's choice is mindful, and he rephrases his question. He finally uses the verb of Peter, a verb that because of its grammatical characteristics can be used only to express everlasting love. Accepting Peter's word, Jesus thus accepts Peter's declaration of his eternal and unchanging love.

Let us now come back to the passage and reinterpret it once again keeping in mind everything that was said:

When they had dined, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon, **Do you love me?**" He answered, "Yes, Lord; You know that I **love** you **forever.**" He said to him, "**Take care of those [little lambs] who will sacrifice themselves for me.**"

He asked him again the second time, "Simon, **do you love me?**" He answered, "Yes, Lord; You know that I **love** you **forever.**" He said to him, "**Guide those [little sheep] who were lost and whom I found.**"

He asked him the third time, "Simon, **do you love me forever?**" Peter was grieved because he asked him the third time, "**Do you love me forever?**" And he answered, "Lord, as God you see everything, and as a human being you learned that I love you forever." Jesus said unto him, "**Take care of all the people.**"