

ON ST. JOHN XXI. 15-17.

THE passage John xxi. 15-17 is marked in the original by a variety of language which does not appear in the English translation. It runs as follows: "So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou (*ἀγαπᾶς*) Me more than these? He saith unto Him, Yea, Lord; Thou knowest (*οἶδας*) that I love (*φιλῶ*) Thee. He saith unto him, Feed My lambs (*βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου*). He saith to him again the second time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou (*ἀγαπᾶς*) Me? He saith unto Him, Yea, Lord, Thou knowest (*οἶδας*) that I love (*φιλῶ*) Thee. He saith unto him, Feed My sheep (*ποιμαίνει τὰ πρόβατά μου*). He saith unto him the third time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou (*φιλεῖς*) Me? Peter was grieved because He said unto him the third time, Lovest thou (*φιλεῖς*), Me? And he said unto Him, Lord, Thou knowest (*οἶδας*) all *things*; Thou knowest (*γινώσκεις*) that I love (*φιλῶ*) Thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed My sheep (*βόσκει τὰ προβάτά μου*)." Here we have two different Greek words for each of the English words "love," "know," and "feed," and three Greek words for "sheep" or "lambs." Some of the older commentators did not attribute any special significance to these variations in the language. "Promiscue hic usurpavit Johannes ἀγαπᾶν [*diligere*] et φιλεῖν [*amare*]," said Grotius, "ut mox βόσκειν [*pascere*] et ποιμαίνειν [*custodire*]. Neque hic quærendæ sunt subtilitates." And he adds, "Quod de voce βόσκειν (*pascendi*) et ποιμαίνειν (*custodiendi*), idem de vocibus προβάτων (*pecoris*) et ἀρνίων (*agnorum*) intelligendum est: nam et hæc promiscue usurpantur, ut apparet ex collatione locorum, Matth. x. 16. Luc. x. 3." Erasmus and Valla were also of opinion that there was no distinction intended by the change of words. But modern English commentators incline to the view that there is an

important significance in the transition from one word to the other. Alford, for example, says, "The distinction between ἀγαπᾶν and φιλεῖν must not here be lost sight of, nor must we superficially say with Grotius, "Promiscue his usurpavit Johannes ἀγαπᾶν et φιλεῖν, etc." He further urges that βόσκειν and ποιμαίνειν cannot be synonymous, or ἀρνία, πρόβατα, and προβάτια. Importance has also been attached to the distinction between the two words for "knowing." "The first 'knowest' (οἶδας) refers to Christ's supernatural intuition, as in *vv.* 15, 16; the second 'knowest' (γινώσκεις) to his experience and discernment; *Thou recognisest, perceivest, seest, that I love Thee.*"¹

Is it possible for us to decide which of these two is the right method of interpretation, whether that of Erasmus and Grotius on the one hand, or of Dean Alford and Dr. Plummer on the other? Is there any way by which we can determine whether the writer used each of these different words with a distinct reference to its exact meaning, or merely varied his language to avoid the monotonous repetition of the same word? The question is of interest because the answer to it may have a bearing upon other passages as well as on that which is immediately before us. Perhaps it may throw some light upon it if we compare the writer's practice on other occasions in the use of words that are similar but not identical.

While there are some cases in which the writer of the Gospel accurately distinguishes between the meanings of words which are similar but different, as between λούειν and νίπτειν in John xiii. 10, between σύρειν and ἔλκειν in xxi. 6, 8, 11, between δοῦλος and ὑπηρέτης in xviii. 18,² there are also instances in which he uses apparently without distinction words that are not precisely equivalent. There is an example of this in the early part of chapter xxi.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Plummer in *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges.*

² See in each of these cases Trench's *Synonyms of the New Testament.*

The vessel in which the apostles were fishing is first called *πλοῖον* (vv. 3, 6), and then *πλοιάριον* (v. 8). It is remarkable that the same two words are applied in a similar way to the vessels that are mentioned in the sixth chapter. First the word *πλοῖον* is used four times (vv. 17, 19, 21), then *πλοιάριον* three times (vv. 22, 23), and then *πλοῖον* again (v. 24). There can be no doubt that in both of these chapters the two words are applied to the same vessels, or that the words themselves are strictly speaking different in meaning. This looks as if the two words were used simply to avoid monotony, just as we might use the word "ship" and "vessel." Very similar is the way in which the two words *τεκνία* and *παιδιά* are used in the First Epistle of St. John, where in the English versions the sense seems satisfied by the loving words "little children" all through. The writer changes from *τεκνία*, which is used twice (ii. 1, 12), to *παιδιά*, which is also used twice (ii. 13, 18), and then back again to *τεκνία*, which is now repeated five times (ii. 28, iii. 7, 18, iv. 4, v. 21). As further instances of the same apparent indifference or intentional variation in the use of similar words, we may cite the change of the preposition in John i. 45, "Now Philip was of (*ἀπό*) Bethsaida, (*ἐκ*) the city of Andrew and Peter," or in John i. 48, 50, "When thou wast under (*ὑπὸ*) the fig tree, I saw thee. . . . Because I said unto thee, I saw thee underneath (*ὑποκάτω*) the fig tree." Apparently of the same kind is the employment of the words *πράσσειν* and *ποιεῖν* in iii. 20, 21, "For every one that doeth (*πράσσω*) evil, hateth the light. . . . But he that doeth (*ποιῶν*) truth cometh to the light," or of *λέγειν* and *λαλεῖν* in xvi. 18, "What is this that He saith (*λέγει*), A little while? We cannot tell what He saith" (*λαλεῖ*). Different expressions are sometimes introduced where the same thing is evidently intended by both, as in iii. 3, 5, where "see (*ἰδεῖν*) the kingdom of God" is clearly interchangeable with "enter

(εἰσελθεῖν εἰς) the kingdom of God." The difference between the words which describe the position of the beloved disciple in xiii. 23, "leaning on Jesus' bosom" (ἀνακείμενος . . . ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) and those in v. 25, "lying on Jesus' breast" (ἀναπεσὼν . . . ἐπὶ τὸ στῆθος τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) has led some to suppose that a change of posture on his part is indicated by the latter words. But a comparison of the other places where the words here used occur in the Gospel (see vi. 10, 11, xiii. 12) renders it much more probable that we have here only two different ways of describing the same position, that is, another instance of the language being varied without a corresponding variation in the sense being intended.¹

If we turn our attention from the writer's general habit of composition to the particular words used in the passage which we are considering, we are first attracted by the pair ἀγαπᾶν and φιλεῖν. The distinction between those two words is well known, and it is one that we may suppose would attract the especial attention of a Christian writer. But we do not find that this distinction is always observed either in the Fourth Gospel or by the other New Testament writers. On the contrary, the two words are often interchanged. The higher Christian word ἀγαπᾶν is used of loving darkness (John iii. 19), of loving the praise of men (xii. 43), of loving the world (1 John ii. 15), of loving them that love you, even as sinners do (Luke vi. 32), of the Pharisees loving the uppermost seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets (Luke xi. 43, φιλεῖν being used in the corresponding passages, Matt. xxiii. 6, and Luke xx. 46), of loving this present life (2 Tim. iv. 10), and the wages of iniquity (2 Pet. ii. 15); while on the other hand, φιλεῖν is sometimes used where we should certainly expect to find ἀγαπᾶν, if the distinction between the two words was regarded by the writer as in any sense

¹ See the *Westminster Review* for August, 1890, pp. 178, 179.

a necessary one. *Φιλεῖν* is the word used in John v. 20, "The Father loveth the Son" (though see the various readings); in xvi. 27, "The Father loveth (*φιλεῖ*) you, because ye have loved (*πεφιλήκατε*) Me." The disciple whom Jesus loved is once *ὃν ἐφίλει ὁ Ἰησοῦς* (xx. 2), *ἀγαπᾶν* being used twice. *Φιλεῖν* is also used in I Corinthians xvi. 22, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ"; in Titus iii. 15, "Them that love us in the faith"; and in Apocalypse iii. 19, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten."

We quoted above Dr. Plummer's statement of the difference between the meanings of the words *οἶδα* and *γινώσκω*. The former refers, he says, to Christ's supernatural intuition, "Thou knowest all things"; the latter to His experience and discernment, "Thou knowest (*i.e.* seest) that I love Thee." But if this distinction between the words was really present to the mind of the writer of the Gospel, we should naturally expect him to have used *εἰδέσθαι*, not *γινώσκειν* in ii. 24, 25, when he speaks of the knowledge of all men which Jesus possessed. This knowledge of all men would be a matter of divine intuition, not of human experience, as much as the knowledge of all things, of which the text speaks. But in speaking of it the writer twice uses the word *γινώσκειν*: "Jesus did not commit Himself unto them because He knew (*διὰ τὸ γινώσκειν*) all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew (*ἐγίνωσκε*) what was in man."

On the words "Feed My sheep" (or, "lambs") Maldonatus, who takes the same view as Grotius and Erasmus, says that *βόσκειν* and *ποιμαίνειν* mean the same thing, and that the Hebrew word *יָצַר*, which the LXX. translate *ποιμαίνειν*, means "to feed." He says, "*Pascere* esse regere ac gubernare, sed ita regere, tanquam pastorem gregem, nemo nescit, et alibi (on Matt. ii. 6) sæpe docuimus Hebraeorum idioma esse. *Qui regis Israël, intende* (Ps. lxxix. 2), Hebraice est *יָצַר*; *qui pascis*." He also refers to Psalm

lxxvii. 71, 72, where the same Hebrew word is rendered in the LXX. ποιμαίνειν and ἐποίμαεν, in the Vulgate *pascere* and *pavit*, and in the English A.V. and R.V., *feed* and *fed*. See also 2 Samuel vii. 7.

He adds that the words "sheep" and "lambs" mean the same persons, as they do in Matthew x. 16, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," and in Luke x. 3, "I send you forth as lambs among wolves." The only difference is that one is a more tender and affectionate expression than the other. His words are:—

"Agnos esse eos qui in grege, id est in ecclesiâ Christi, essent, dubium non est. Nec subtiliter disputandum, cur agnos potius quam oves appellaverit; quod qui fecerit, videat etiam atque etiam ne doctis hominibus risum præbeat. Satis enim constat eosdem nunc agnos et v. 17 oves appellare. Quod si quidquam discriminis inter oves et agnos est, id non in re sed in voce est; quod quum idem sint, tamen vocabulum agni blandius sit majoremque amorem præ se ferat; magis enim amabiles, quia magis simplices agni quam oves sunt. Quemadmodum, quos Matth. x. 16, *oves* vocat: *Ecce, ego mitto vos, sicut agnos in medio luporum*, Lucas cap. x. 3, *agnos* nominat: *Ecce, ego mitto vos, sicut agnos inter lupos*. Cum ergo Christus fideles suos *agnos* vocat, blandius et majore quâdam amoris significatione eos Petro commendaret quam cum vocat *oves*. Quemadmodum si pater moriens et liberos suos amico commendans diceret: *Commendo tibi meos infantulos*, vehementius, majoreque affectu commendaret, quam si diceret: *commendo tibi filios meos*."

He adds, however, that the preacher may say with Rupert and Theophylact, that the lambs are those who are young in the faith, and the sheep those in whom Christ is more fully formed. But he is to be careful "ne ludat longius."

The following note from Dunwell's useful *Commentary on the Four Gospels* is of importance:—

"It may not be out of place to observe that of the four Greek commentators, St. Chrysostom, St. Cyril, Theophylact, and Euthymius, who have commented at considerable length on vers. 15-17, no one of them has drawn attention to the distinction between *φιλεις* and *ἀγναῖς*, and between *βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία, ποιμαίνει τὰ πρόβατα*, etc., set forth in these

notes. Their silence may arise either from the fact that they were not cognizant of such distinctions, or that they were so well known to their hearers and readers as not to require being pointed out."

It would greatly strengthen the case of those who find a meaning in the change of words, if the alleged meaning was clear and certain. But this is not so. In John xiii. 10, the distinction between *λούειν* and *νίπτειν* is obvious and necessary. And the distinction between *σύρειν* and *ἔλκειν* in xxi. 6, 8, 11, is also pretty certain. But there is no such certainty or agreement as to the significance of Peter's substitution of *φιλεῖν* for *ἀγαπᾶν* in his reply to the question of Jesus. Alford, Bengel, Plummer, Trench and Wordsworth have all different ways of explaining it. There is more agreement as to the twice recurring *βόσκει* and the one *ποιμαίνει*, Trench and Wordsworth both agreeing with Stanley that to feed the flock, to provide them with spiritual nourishment, as distinct from ruling them, is the first and the last thing. But Plummer thinks that "the lambs, which can go no distance, scarcely require guidance, their chief need is food. The sheep require both." Alford can only say, "Perhaps the *feeding of the lambs* was the furnishing the apostolic testimony of the resurrection and facts of the Lord's life on earth to the first converts; the *shepherding* or ruling *the sheep*, the subsequent government of the Church as shown forth in the early part of the Acts; the *feeding of the προβάτια*, the choicest, the loved of the flock, the furnishing the now maturer Church of Christ with the wholesome food of the doctrine contained in His Epistles."¹

It appears then (1) that the writer of the Gospel commonly uses words that are similar but not quite synonymous without regard to the difference between them; (2)

¹ If the reading *ἀρνία* . . . *πρόβατα* . . . *προβάτια* be correct, the resemblance to *τεκνία* (*παιδιά*) . . . *πατέρες* . . . *νεανίσκοι* in 1 John ii. 12-14 is remarkable, and can hardly be undesigned.

that the distinction between ἀγαπᾶν and φιλεῖν is not always observed by the New Testament writers; (3) that the alleged distinction between οἶδα and γινώσκω is not supported by the use of γινώσκω in John ii. 24, 25; (4) that Maldonatus makes out a strong case for denying the distinctions made between "Feed my lambs" and "Shepherd my sheep"; (5) that the Greek commentators, St. Chrysostom, St. Cyril, Theophylact, and Euthymius have never mentioned any of the distinctions upon which so much of the meaning of this interesting passage is supposed to turn; and finally (6) that the alleged distinctions do not yield any definite or satisfactory meaning upon which commentators can be agreed.

Before leaving the subject another passage may be mentioned. The common explanation of the words "Forty and six years was this temple in building" (John ii. 20) supposes that they refer to the interval between the year when Josephus says that Herod began to rebuild the temple and the year in which the words were spoken, the temple being then still incomplete. *If this explanation be correct*, then the word ναός is used for ἱερόν in this passage, because Josephus says distinctly that the building of the ναός was completed by the priests in a year and six months (*Antt.* xv., xi. 6). It was only the outer part, the ἱερόν, that remained unfinished. Josephus himself confuses the two words, using ναός for ἱερόν in this very account of the building of the temple.¹ Trench is in error in supposing that he always observed the distinction between them (*N.T. Synonyms*, p. 12). The Archbishop seems to have made another slip in arguing that ναός is correctly used in Matthew xxvii. 5. He says, "How vividly does it set forth to us the despair and defiance of Judas, that he presses into the ναός itself (Matt. xxvii. 5), into the 'adytum'

¹ περιελάμβανε στοαῖς τὸν ναὸν ἅπαντα (cinxit totum templum porticibus). *Jos., Antt.* xv., xiv. Ed. Weidmanni.

which was set apart for the priests alone, and there casts down before them the accursed price of blood! Those expositors who affirm that here *ναός* stands for *ἱερόν*, should adduce some other passage in which the one is put for the other" (*N.T. Synonyms*, p. 14). He appears to have forgotten for the moment that it was "to the chief priests and elders" (Matt. xxvii. 3), that is, to the Sanhedrim, not to the priests alone that Judas brought the money. The Sanhedrim may have sat in the *ἱερόν*, but not in the *ναός*. Alford is also anxious to maintain the correct use of *ναός* and says "We must conceive him as speaking to them (the priests—and elders?) without, and throwing the money into the *ναός*." But there is only the one merit in this interpretation. On the whole the consideration of these two passages taken along with Josephus's use of *ναός* for *ἱερόν* tends to shake our faith in the axiom that the distinction between the two words is always observed in New Testament Greek.

One cannot help thinking that the minute study of the text of the New Testament in modern times, while it has undoubtedly done much to elucidate the full meaning of the sacred record, has sometimes carried scholars too far in refinement of interpretation. They attribute to the New Testament writers an accuracy of language which the English Translators certainly did not aim at. Is there any reason for so doing?

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