



Series:

From Ego to... ?

Episode:

11. From Ego to... A Love that Learns to Sing?

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We begin by trying to love – sometimes, as with “love your enemies,” against resistance, often without return. Yet something deeper is unfolding quietly. This reflection traces a movement in Jesus’ teaching from willed love to something else, not carried alone.

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A Love That Learns to Sing?

*A half-hidden movement
in Jesus’ teaching*

There is a point in the inner life where effort begins to show its limits. We try to love, to forgive, to remain open, yet much of what we call love is still shaped by strain, by self-consciousness, by the need to hold ourselves together. It is real, but it is not yet free.

Jesus’ command, “Love your enemies,” meets us precisely at this point. It does not remove the strain. It begins within it. Yet it may also point beyond it, toward a form of love that is no longer sustained in the same way.

Part of what is easily missed lies in translation. English – and Maltese in most everyday usage – tends to render different forms of love with a single word, and something of the texture is lost. In the Aramaic tradition preserved in the Peshitta, there are indications – not a rigid system, but a pattern – that may allow a deeper movement to come into view.

The first movement – learning to remain

In Matthew 5:44, the Aramaic wording of the Peshitta uses a form linked to the root 𐤆-ܗ-ܒ, familiar from the Hebrew *ve-ahavta* – “you shall love.” This is the language of covenant, of steadiness, of a love that endures even when it is not returned. It is not primarily a feeling; it is a direction of the will, sustained over time.

Writers such as Neil Douglas-Klotz have drawn attention to the way this kind of love often begins in friction. The difficult person does not disappear; rather, they become the place where one meets one’s own limits. What is revealed there is not an obstacle

Overview:

A Transformational Love-Process

The journey begins with what can be willed: a steady, often unreturned love, especially toward the enemy. It is seed-like – intentional, sometimes effortful, and rooted in the real conditions of our lives.

Over time, this movement opens toward something more spacious. Love becomes less something we sustain and more something we participate in. It is given and received, shared rather than carried alone.

We do not move from failure to perfection. We move from effort into participation, from holding ourselves in love to being held within it. The process involves a love that, in time, ripens becomes capable of being shared; a love that, when it is shared, finds its voice, a voice that is sung, so to speak, by the heavenly choirs.

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In this Series...

Episodes 1–3 – The Ego Unmasked

We began by exploring how the ego forms as a survival structure that narrows our vision of God and ourselves. Transformation begins as the ego loosens its grip and rhythms of silence, surrender, and honesty open space for healing.

Episodes 4–7 – Turning, Silence, Surrender, and Gratitude

The journey then moved more deeply into contemplation. The Inner Turning noticed grace already quietly at work; Centring Prayer opened a space of objectless awareness; and the dramatic crossing described in *Two Nothings and a Bridge* explored the movement from the “First Nothing” of collapse into the “Second Nothing” of grace. Out of that deep silence gratitude gradually re-emerged, as simple thankfulness loosened the ego’s narrative of scarcity and helped the heart rediscover the quiet gifts hidden within ordinary life.

Episode 8 – Are Joy and Sorrow the Same?

Reflecting on Meister Eckhart’s teaching on detachment, this episode explored how the soul grounded in God can inhabit both joy and sorrow without being ruled by either.

Episode 9 – Stages on the Path to God

This episode widened the horizon by comparing Christian and Sufi descriptions of the spiritual journey. Across traditions similar movements appeared – awakening, purification, transformation, union, and compassionate return – suggesting how the path leads beyond ego toward a heart widened by divine love.

Episode 10 – Contemplation: The Hidden Stream within Christian Prayer

We turned more directly to contemplation itself. Beneath the many forms of Christian prayer there flows a quieter stream in which awareness gradually deepens into attentive presence. As prayer grows simpler, the heart begins to recognise the living presence and love of God within.

Episode 11 – From Ego to... Love That Learns to Sing?

We now return to the words of Jesus themselves. Beginning with the demanding call to “love your enemies,” this episode traces a movement from effortful, often unreturned love toward a love that can be shared. What starts as something the self must carry may open, slowly, into participation in a love already given – where the centre of gravity shifts, and love begins to find its voice.

to love, but part of its formation.

Seen in this light, the command to love the enemy is less a demand for emotional transformation than an invitation to remain present, to act without retaliation, and to allow something deeper to begin its work. One learns to stay where one would rather withdraw, and to give without immediate return.

At this stage, love may be steady, even faithful, but it is still largely carried by effort. It has not yet found its full voice.

When the horizon opens

Jesus does not leave the saying where it begins. He continues: “that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good.” The image shifts from effort to radiance, from something we sustain to something that simply shines, and sustains us.

Between these two moments, something begins to change. The small, often hidden, acts of love that do not depend on return begin, over time, to alter the way one stands in relation to others. What was first sustained by intention alone becomes, at least in part, less effortful. One begins to glimpse a different quality of response.

It is here that another cluster of meanings becomes visible in the Aramaic tradition – those associated with the root R-H-M. This root carries the sense of compassion and mercy, but also of a form of care that precedes response. It names a holding that does not wait to be earned, and that is not with-

drawn when it is not returned.

At its deepest level, the root is linked with the image of the womb: a life-giving, sheltering, generative presence. The image of the sun expresses the same quality in another way. It shines without calculation, without preference, without waiting to be met. This is not love as effort, but love as nature.

When love becomes shared

When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he brings together love of God and love of neighbour into a single movement. In the Aramaic tradition of the Peshitta, these are often expressed through language associated with the R-H-M root. This does not establish a strict system, but it does suggest a shift in the quality of love being described.

Here love is no longer primarily outward and unreturned. It has the character of mutuality. It is given and received, recognised and answered, and it unfolds within relationship rather than across a distance that may never be bridged.

The earlier work prepares the ground for this. In learning to love without return, one becomes less dependent on immediate response. Something steadier is formed, and because it is steadier, it can now enter into relationship without collapsing into demand.

At this point, something essential becomes clear: *love can exist if it is not returned, but it cannot sing until it is shared.*



The same movement, seen elsewhere

A similar pattern can be discerned in the writings of Paul the Apostle. In Romans, he speaks of love as something “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” The emphasis falls on reception. Love, in its fullness, is *given*. Yet in 1 Corinthians 13, his description of love unfolds through effortful qualities: patience, kindness, endurance, the refusal to insist on one’s own way. The language is grounded in practice.

The two belong together. What is first practised becomes, over time, something more stable, more given, more deeply rooted.

This same intuition appears in the work of Thomas Aquinas, who distinguishes between the acts of love and the deeper disposition from which they flow. One may act in love before love has become effortless. Indeed, it is through such acts that the person is gradually transformed.

A movement recognised more widely

What we are talking about here is not dependent on linguistic distinctions alone. The movement from effortful love into a love that is received and shared is widely recognised, both in experience and across the spiritual traditions.

In ordinary life, one can see it in small and often hidden ways. At first, love is something we hold together. We choose to remain present, to refrain from retaliation, to act with care even when it is not returned. It is real, but it is carried. Over time, something may begin to shift. The same situations no longer provoke the same degree of inner resistance. One finds oneself responding with less strain, less calculation, less need to defend or secure oneself. What was once sustained by effort becomes, at least in part, more natural.



This pattern has long been recognised in the formation of character. What is first practised deliberately may, through repetition, become more integrated. The person no longer needs to hold the response together in the same way. It begins to arise with a certain ease, even if not perfectly. But I don't think we're talking only about habituation here. It seems to me that the spiritual journey leads to a flow of grace that takes over the journey.

Within the Christian tradition, the same movement is described in another language. One begins by choosing love, often against inclination. But in time, love is no longer experienced as self-generated. It is received, and gradually shared in. What was once effort becomes participation. Across traditions, similar descriptions appear. The details differ, but the pattern is recognisable. The movement is from effort to participation, from holding to being held, from something we do to something we are drawn into.

Seen in this light, the Aramaic nuances illuminate the movement. They allow something already present in experience, and already recognised in the wider tradition, to come into clearer view.

A conversation held in love

Let's look at some actual scriptural words, though scholars debate whether they are important. In John 21, the risen Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" In the Greek text, different words are used one wide, divine, and universal (*agapē*) used by Jesus, and one more narrow (*phileō*) used by Peter and then by Jesus in apparent response to Peter's limitedness. In the Aramaic tradition of the Peshitta, the exchange can be heard as held within a single, wide, framework of love, using words based on the root R-H-M, the root for womb and wide compassion.

This gives the scene a different tone. Jesus is not testing Peter's capacity to reach a higher level. He is addressing him from within a love that has already made space for his failure. The repetition becomes

less an examination than a restoration.

Peter does not need to claim perfection. It is enough that he remains within the exchange, that he does not withdraw. The conversation itself becomes the place where love is renewed and entrusted.

The quiet unfolding

What emerges is not a new doctrine, but a more continuous way of seeing. We can trace a movement that begins within the effort of the self and leads, gradually, beyond it.

The beginning is modest and often difficult. One acts in love where love is not returned. One remains present where one would rather withdraw. This is real love, but it is still closely held, still sustained by effort, still shaped by the need to remain intact.

Gradually, and not by direct control, something shifts. The need to sustain love by effort alone begins to ease, and one finds oneself responding from a place less governed by reaction and self-protection. The other is no longer primarily a reflection of one's own wounds. What once felt like a constant inner mirroring of oneself and of the other person in oneself, begins to lose its hold.

Nothing outwardly dramatic may have changed. Yet inwardly, something has become more spacious, more settled, more alive. Love has not ceased to require faithfulness, but it is no longer carried in the same way.

It is here that the movement becomes visible. What began as something we tried to do becomes something we begin to share in. The centre of gravity shifts. Love is no longer held together by the self alone.

And, in time, quietly and without announcement, it begins to sing.

A Caution

The suggestion that Jesus' teaching traces a movement from *ahabah* to *rahm* should be understood as an interpretive or inspirational lens rather than a fixed doctrine embedded in the language itself. The Aramaic does not compel this reading, but it allows it to be seen with particular vividness.

This way of hearing does not replace the Gospel. It simply allows certain connections to come into view. What matters, in the end, is not the terminology, but the movement it points toward – a love that may begin in effort but does not end there.



Technical Section

1. The Syriac-language Peshitta Bible

Syriac

c – Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic closely related to the Aramaic Jesus himself spoke

Peshitta – The ancient Bible of the Syriac-speaking Christian churches, whose name means simply "the straightforward" or "the common" version in Aramaic. Dating in its New Testament form to around the 4th–5th century, it remains the authoritative scripture of the Assyrian, Chaldean, Maronite, and Syrian Orthodox churches to this day. Because it is written in Syriac many scholars and theologians regard it as preserving traces of the earliest linguistic layer of the Gospel tradition.

2. The Transformational Love-Journey in the Aramaic

The reflections above draw on patterns visible in the Aramaic tradition of the Peshitta. These patterns should not be taken as a rigid lexical system, but they do offer a way of hearing distinctions that are often flattened in translation. What follows gathers the key elements in a more explicit form.

Ahabah (root א-ח-ב) This root, shared across Aramaic and Hebrew, is the source of the familiar *ve-ahavta* in Deuteronomy 6:5 – “you shall love.” In the Peshitta, forms from this root are associated with love understood as commitment, fidelity, and the willing of the good. It is a love that can be sustained without being returned, and that often begins in conditions of difficulty.

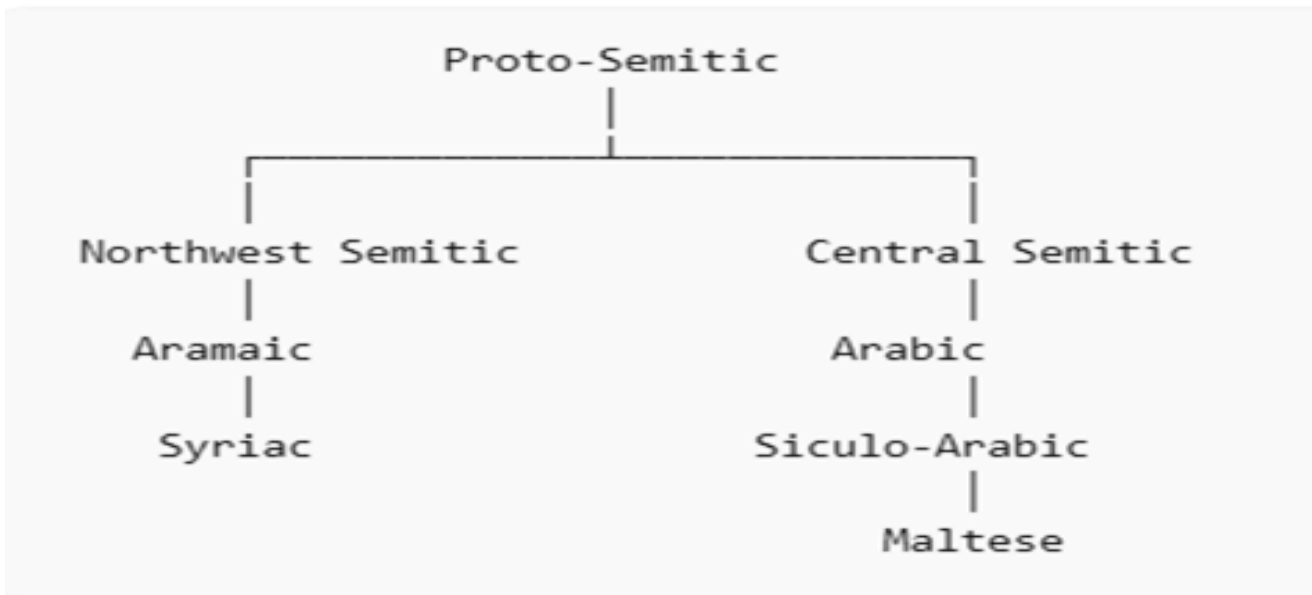
In Matthew 5:44 (“love your enemies”), the use of this root aligns with the sense of a love that must be chosen and enacted. It is not dependent on feel-

ing, nor on reciprocity. It can therefore serve as the starting point of a transformative process – a seed that is planted in real and often resistant circumstances.

Hoba (Syriac) Hoba is the primary Syriac term used in the Peshitta to render the Greek *agapē* across much of the New Testament, including 1 Corinthians 13. It functions as a general term for love in a wide range of contexts. Its presence reminds us that the Aramaic tradition does not operate with a simple two-term system, and that any distinctions must be read with care.

Rahm (root ר-ח-מ) This root carries a range of meanings centred on compassion, mercy, and generative care. It is linked etymologically with the word for “womb,” and therefore suggests a form of love that is prior to merit, sustaining, and life-giving. In Hebrew, the related term *rachamim* is often translated as “tender compassion.” In Arabic, the same root appears in the divine names *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*.

In the Peshitta, this root appears in a number of significant contexts, including the double commandment of love (Matthew 22:37–39) and the dialogue be-



Related Semitic Languages



tween Jesus and Peter in John 21:15–17. Its use in these passages has been read as suggestive of a fuller, more relational or encompassing quality of love, though such readings remain interpretive rather than definitive.

3. Patterns Across Key Gospel Passages

The following table highlights how these roots appear across several key texts. The aim is not to establish a fixed system, but to make visible a pattern that may inform or inspire interpretation.

Verse	Context	Aramaic Root	Character of Love
John 3:16	God loves the world	'-H-B	Outward, initiating, not dependent on return
Matthew 5:44	Love your enemies	'-H-B	Willed, steady, often unreturned
Matthew 22:37–39	Love God and neighbour	R-H-M	Relational, receptive as well as giving
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These distinctions should be held lightly. They do not function as strict categories, but they do open a way of perceiving different tonalities within the language of love.

4. Levels of Expression

It may also be helpful to distinguish between different levels at which these forms of love are expressed. This is not a formal schema, but a way of organising what has already been described.

These are not separate kinds of love, but differ-

ent expressions within a single movement. What begins as effort may become participation; what is first sustained by intention may later be recognised as gift.

5. The Greek Terms, for Comparison

The Greek New Testament uses a different set of distinctions, which do not map directly onto the Aramaic roots but can illuminate similar movements.

Agapē (ἀγάπη) A form of love oriented toward the good of the other, independent of feeling or return. In early Christian usage, it becomes the primary term for divine and commanded love. It often corresponds, in function, to what we have described as the willed and enduring aspect of love.

Philia (φιλία) The love of friendship, affection, and mutual recognition. It is relational and reciprocal, grounded in shared life and familiarity.

In John 21, the Greek text alternates between these terms in the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. The significance of this variation has long been debated. The Peshitta's use of a single root (R-H-M) in the same passage offers a different way of hearing the exchange – less as a movement between levels, more as a conversation held within a single field of love.

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Biblical Passages

The Bible version used is the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition — NRSVCE

Loving the Lord God – Deuteronomy 6:5

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

The Hebrew verb here is from the root א-ה-ב, *ve’ahavta* (אהבת). This places Jesus’ later teaching about love within Israel’s long covenantal tradition.

The Outward Gift of God – John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

In the Peshitta, the verb here is from the Syriac א-ב root rather than the ר-מ root. The verse still clearly presents love as God’s initiating gift: God gives before the world responds. That makes it a fitting foundation for the whole Christian understanding of love, even if the linguistic root here is not the same as in some other passages.

Love Your Enemies – Matthew 5:44

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

The NRSVCE, following the best manuscripts, gives the more concise form. But in the Peshitta, Matthew 5:44 appears in a fuller form: “Love your enemies; bless those who curse you; do good to those who hate you; and pray for those who persecute you.”

God’s Unconditioned Generosity – Matthew 5:45

“So that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

This image of the Father’s sun suggests God’s generosity as prior, overflowing, and indiscriminate. It is a vivid picture of divine love given before any human return.

Perfection – Matthew 5:48

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

In the Peshitta, the key word is *gmire*, from a root that can carry the sense of being complete, mature, or brought to fulfilment. Because of that, some interpreters hear here not a demand for flawlessness but a call to ripeness or wholeness in love. The fruit of love becomes mature and transparent to God’s life.

Jesus on the Most Important Commandments – Matthew 22:37–39

“He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”

In the Peshitta, these commandments use the ר-מ root. This root can carry overtones of deep mercy, compassion, and tender love. One may say that these verses strongly support a vision of love as profound, relational, and God-oriented.

Deep Love as Gift – Romans 5:5

“...and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

This is an important Pauline anchor for the claim that the deepest life of love is finally received by grace, not achieved by effort alone. In the Peshitta, the noun for love here is again from the א-ב root.

Paul’s Hymn to Love – 1 Corinthians 13:4–13

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant

5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues

9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Note: Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 may be read as describing love in its deliberate, persevering form – love practised under strain, and not abandoned when it becomes costly. The verb translated “endures” (*hupomenei* in Greek) suggests steadfastness under trial. From that angle, the movement from the demanding qualities of love in vv. 4–7 to “love never ends” in v. 8 and the final supremacy of love in v. 13 can be heard as resonating with the larger journey of love traced elsewhere in the Gospel tradition. In the Peshitta, the term used here is *hoba* rather than the r-h-m root. This makes the steady use of r-h-m in John 21 especially striking, while still leaving the theological weight of that contrast open to interpretation.

The Risen Jesus Talks to Peter

– John 21:15–17

This is the Peter re-commissioning scene. In the Peshitta, the r-h-m root holds steady throughout, giving the whole exchange a strong tone of deep, merciful love. Peter still bears the wound of his denial, and the risen Jesus meets him there – restoring him, re-commissioning him, and entrusting him with the care of others.

In the Greek text, Jesus uses *agapaō* in the first two questions and *phileō* in the third, while Peter answers with *phileō* throughout. Some readers see in this a gracious accommodation – Jesus meeting Peter at the level Peter can honestly offer. Others caution that John often varies related words stylistically, so the distinction should not be pressed too far. In the Syriac Peshitta, by contrast, the r-h-m root remains constant throughout. This allows the passage to be read as an encounter held within one sustained register of deep, compassionate love from beginning to end.

v.15 – “*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’*”

Greek: Jesus uses *agapaō*; Peter replies with *phileō*. *Peshitta:* the r-□-m root is used.

v.16 – “*A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’*”

Greek: Jesus again uses *agapaō*; Peter again replies with *phileō*. *Peshitta:* the r-h-m root remains unchanged.

v.17 – “*He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’*”

Greek: here Jesus shifts to *phileō*, matching Peter's wording. *Peshitta:* the r-□-m root still holds steady.

In the Greek text, the third question may be heard as a gracious meeting of Peter where he is, though the significance of the word-change is debated. In the Syriac Peshitta, the steady use of the r-□-m root gives the whole encounter a different emphasis: the risen Jesus restores Peter within one unbroken field of deep, merciful love, and then sends him to nurture that same love in others.

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