

A brief reflection on Mercy from the Biblical point of View
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In April 2015, in the Papal Bull of indiction, “*Misericordiae Vultus*”, Pope Francis declared the days from the 8th of December 2015 to the 20th of November 2016 as a year of mercy. This declaration of God’s mercy is inspired because we live in a world which understands merits and punishment as the product of a causal relationship established by human will and behaviour. This existential fact is incarnated in many laws in such a way that it affects our conception of God and the spirituality that is consequent upon it. Divine mercy which flows from divine grace operates with a different set of logic which we have to appreciate in order to understand the depth of what it expresses. It is one of the most visible concepts in the Bible, both in the Old and in the New Testament.

In the OT, there are at least four prominent vocabularies among many terms that express the idea of mercy; the most commonly used verb is רָחַם (*rhm*) which is used to express the idea of a direct demonstration of mercy by God and is a favorite verb among the prophets in speaking about God’s forgiveness of his people (cf. Isa 13:18; 30:18; 55:7; 60:10; Jer 6:23; 31:20; 33:26; 42:12; 50:42; Ezek 39:25; Hos 14:3; Hab 3:2 etc). It also has important cognate substantives רַחֲמִים and רַחֲמִים which both mean compassion. There is also the word חֶסֶד (*hesed*) which also expresses the idea of mercy and once, in the famous Psalm 23 was used to express kindness (Ps 23:6). However, wisdom literature, especially the Psalmists prefer to use another term חָנַן (*hanan*) which generally invokes God’s mercy within the framework and atmosphere of prayers (cf. Ps 51:1; 57:1; 123:2,3; Job 9:15; Prov 21:10; also cf. Deut 7:2). The word mercy in fact appears to be used a total of 102 times in the OT, with varying nuances and connotations. In most of these passages God is the subject of mercy.

This brief reference to the concordance of the OT words that refer to “mercy” is an attempt to point out the fact that the idea of mercy, especially divine mercy is a central concept of thinking for Biblical authors. This is contrary to the idea proposed by some people, that in the Old Testament, the idea of Divine mercy is not very visible. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, it is actually in the Old Testament, as we have already pointed out, that we see a rich cocktail of vocabularies (in Hebrew) that refer to the idea of mercy (*rhm* – Exod 33:19, *hesed* – Ps 23:6, *raham* – Exod 34:6, *hanan* – Ps 51:1, *tehinah* – Gen 19:16, etc.) and each used quite generously in different literatures. Moreover, the anger of God when emphasized in the OT is in many cases, a point within a cycle which is closed by God’s mercy, visible in the relenting of his anger (Cf. Jg 2:18; 10:16 etc), or sometimes by the promise of the renewal or even an establishment of an entirely New Covenant (Cf. Exod 34:1-10,27; Jer 31:31-32). The etymological significance of some of these terms will be discussed in the subsequent parts of

this reflections in reference to particular texts. The advantage in this approach is to make the presentation of the concepts more engaging and concrete.

In the New Testament, God's mercy was a central part of Christ's teaching where the word "mercy" in its different forms appear a total of 70 times, appearing in 27 verses of the NT, 14 of these verses are in the Gospels (Mt 5:7; 9:27;15:22;17:15; 18:33; 20:30,31; Mk 5:19; 10:47,48; Lk 16:24; 17:13; 18:38,39). The Greek word ἐλεέω (*eleōo*) and its derivative substantive ἔλεος (*ēleos*) are evidently privileged vocabularies in expressing this idea in the NT, where they are used 55 times out of the 70 times that "mercy" is expressed. In fact, the next most frequent vocabularies appear just three times each in the entire NT (οἰκτίρων *oiktiron*, ἐλεάω *eleāo*, οἰκτιρμός *oiktirmōs*). There are however other important Greek words that appear a few times in other significant texts. The principal term ἐλεέω (*eleōo*) basically means – "to be greatly concerned about someone in need", from there comes the idea of compassion, mercy, pity. What this demonstrates is that mercy as expressed by its Greek vocabulary does not refer to a passive divine attitude of soothing His ire when provoked, but rather an active *looking-out-for*, an indication of concern that involves an active feeling of compassion. If this aspect is missed, then one can hardly understand the real semantic depth of this term.

A discussion of a biblical concept is better appreciated when studied within specific texts, no matter how little. A look into a few particular cases in the different blocks of the OT will yield a better understanding of the ramifications and manner of expression of this important concept. In the Pentateuch, though the greatest expression of divine mercy is found mainly in the unfolding of the covenantal alliance of God with the people of Israel as found in the book of Exodus (Exod 32-34), it is nevertheless true that Patriarchal history demonstrates some divine disposition to be merciful. The flood narrative is concluded with a Covenant where God made a promise: "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11). Perhaps it is the book of Exodus that presents a parade example of divine mercy as a gift given within the framework of a relationship; the covenant. In Exodus 32-34, we witness the gravity of an extreme offense and the boundlessness of a mercy that pardons it. Even more important is the process within which it plays out. The deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt displayed a projection of divine power in its most extreme form, where God through countless wonders (Exod 7:14-11:10; Exod 14:1-15:21) delivered his people from bondage. The only thing he required of them was their faithfulness to a covenant that eternally bound them to Him as their God. This requirement was not met but was in fact disregarded in a most cynical manner in the worship of the Golden calf (Exod 32). God was provoked to anger (Exod 32:10) but Moses interceded (Exod 32:11-14) and God relented.

The most significant point in the process of the reestablishment of this covenantal relationship is found in Exodus 34:6-7. Here YHWH spoke in the first person and made a statement on His self-identity; “*The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.*”

The interesting thing about this passage of Exodus is that in just two verses, we find the three of the most commonly used roots that express the idea of mercy in the OT; רחם (*rhm*), חנן (*hanan*), חֶסֶד (*hesed*). Of the three, the noun that expresses mercy in the proper sense here is *rahum* in Exodus 3:6. This noun has a great deal of semantic association with another noun (רְחֵם) *rehem* which can mean a woman’s womb and in Arabic, the word *rahuma* derived from this semitic root, means “soft”. This lexical remark proves important in understanding the idea of divine mercy within a properly identifiable semantic field that speaks of feminine tenderness in the idea of a womb. Perhaps the Arabic is a semantic derivative of this fundamental meaning. Therefore, speaking of divine mercy with this term gives a subtle impression of YHWH with some bit of feminine attributes of tenderness. This tenderness will lead to the reestablishment of the covenant in Exodus 34:1-10, 27 after a storm of his ire has been calmed by Moses’ intercession.

The root רחם (*rhm*) as already stated, is the prophetic books’ favorite in expressing divine mercy. In Jeremiah’s book, the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34) was promised within a block that speaks of the joyful return of the exiles (Jer 31) and the word *rahum* was used here to speak of the pardon God will grant Ephraim in 31:20. However, it is the prophet Jonah that provides an interesting reading for whoever seeks a contrast between the human tendency for vindictive judgement and an unconditional expression of divine love and mercy. Jonah showed a burst of anger when God decided to have mercy on Nineveh after he delivered the prophetic message as instructed by God (Jon 4:2). He questioned God’s disposition for mercy and compassion and like in the passage of Exodus 34:6, Jonah once again expressed God’s identity with these same set of words; רחם (*rhm*), חנן (*hanan*), חֶסֶד (*hesed*) in just one verse (Jon 4:2). His accusation began with, “I know you are...”. This statement is a remark on God’s nature and identity. The only difference between the passage of Exodus and Jonah is that God made this statement of himself in Exodus while in this prophetic book, an embittered prophet, with a good knowledge of God’s nature made it. The idea of God’s judgement and anger is in many cases associated with the idea of his mercy (Exod 34:6-7; Jg 2:18; 10:16) and a look into the OT confirms this. The few examples above serve as an illustrative compass that should guide our evaluation

of the orientation of the OT in the way it speaks about divine nature and disposition.

In the NT, The Gospel of Luke deserves a special attention whenever divine mercy is spoken of because, this Gospel has been described as a Gospel of divine mercy for some very strong reasons. First, the term “mercy” appears with the highest frequency in this Gospel (13 times) in the NT. Moreover, a number of divine mercy parables appear in just this Gospel without any Synoptic parallel. Among them we have the lost coin Lk 15:8-10; the Prodigal Son Lk 15:11-32. We also have other parables with some synoptic parallels like the lost sheep (Lk 15:1-7; Mt 18:10-14;). Divine Mercy is also visible not just in parables but also in some important and moving narratives like the encounter between Jesus and the woman considered a public sinner (Lk 7:36–50, cf. Jn 8:1-11), the Zacchaeus narrative (Lk 19:1-10), again without a synoptic parallel. In the teachings of Christ in the NT, divine love is very tightly bound to Divine mercy and there is no place this is better illustrated than in the parable of the prodigal son of Luke 15, where the father’s boundless love for his son sent the father into an ecstatic joy in simply having the son return to him.

The special thing about Luke is that he speaks of divine mercy and offers some parenetic parables on the imitation of this divine attitude. Commentators do not easily notice that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 has a retrospective value with regard to the macro-narrative of Luke. It is an instruction to imitate God’s goodness and mercy which were already portrayed in the previous chapters. When the rich man was dying of thirst in Hades, he called out to Abraham with the words “have *mercy* on me” (ἐλέησόν με). The mercy he could not show Lazarus while he was alive was thus denied him. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) ended with a question, “who then was his neighbor?”. When the lawyer answered, “the one who showed him *mercy*”; Jesus responded, “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). Already in Luke 6:36, Jesus had instructed his disciples, “be *merciful* just as your father in heaven is *merciful*”. The Greek word translated here (Lk 6:36) is one of the second most frequently used in expressing mercy, the substantive οἰκτίρων *oiktīron*. This term can also be simply translated as *compassion*. In fact, a translation that says “*be compassionate just as your heavenly father is compassionate*” can be considered valid. The mercy Jesus practiced in course of his earthly ministry was thus demanded also of his disciples as an obligation. Mercy in the NT, especially in Luke is intimately linked with the idea of kindness (cf. Lk 10:37: 16:24) which becomes an obligatory virtue that our access to divine mercy demands. When we recall the earlier assertion that mercy is an active psychological process of showing concern, of *looking-out-for*, then we appreciate that the mercy Jesus asks us to practice is something akin to charity and love. It can in fact be said that Biblically, love is impossible without mercy.

Divine mercy is one way in which the theological idea of grace can be concretely understood. We offend God, yet he actively becomes concerned for our welfare, our spiritual welfare. There is no better way to understand a gift freely given (grace) because an offense is supposed to inspire at best, an indifference. Yet the very opposite happens when we sin. God grants his grace and actively awaits our response. The idea of Divine mercy could not have come at a better time because the modern world lives with a set of values that give a lot of premium to merit and to punishment. For many societies, punishment is axiomatic when we fail a rule. This has its merits, but can affect the way we think about God. God himself is also just, but this is a kind of justice realized within the framework of mercy and love. The understanding of divine mercy is not only important in the area of reconciliation with God and our fellow men, but is in fact, decisive for the quality of our spirituality, because an understanding or not, of this concept creates a difference between someone who conceives of God as a rigid tyrant and another who conceives of Him as a loving Father. This year of mercy is a year of renewal of relationship with God and with our fellow men because God's forgiveness obliges us morally to forgive those who offend us (cf. Matt 6:12; Lk 11:4) and to actively love them. May we all walk in the light of God's grace and together reap the fruits this blessed year of Mercy has brought humanity. Amen