

GRACE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The developed Christian understanding of grace is primarily dependent on the New Testament. While its roots in the Old Testament are not unimportant, we must recall at the outset that the Old Testament authors did not share our presuppositions or theological insights. We must avoid any attempt to read our later understandings back into the Old Testament material. Furthermore, we must remember that the Old Testament presents no systematic analyses of grace, but rather recounts Yahweh's activity on behalf of his people, their developing understanding of that activity, and their often inadequate or contradictory responses to it. With these caveats in mind, then, let us present a synthesis of the most important elements in the Old Testament theme of grace.

An extensive philological discussion of the Hebrew terms corresponding to Greek *χαρις*, Latin *gratia*, and English "grace" would be inappropriate here.¹ A few summary remarks may be helpful. The word *χαρις* in the LXX normally represents MT *hen*. The latter originally meant "favour", i.e., the gracious attitude of a superior towards an inferior, and this meaning is dominant in the biblical texts. Occasionally however, it is used to refer to the quality in the subject itself which attracts and holds favourable attention, namely "beauty" or "charm".² Both these meanings are present in Greek *χαρις*, though the latter ("outward grace, beauty") is apparently primary.³ The related Hebrew verb *hnn* means "to show favour, be gracious", while the adverb *hinnam* is exactly equivalent to Latin *gratis*. The element of gratuitousness is central to Hebrew *hen*, as it is in our word "grace".

Other Hebrew words, such as *hesed* ("loyalty, fidelity") and *rahamim* ("mercy, tenderness") are normally treated in the more extensive analyses of grace in the Old Testament, but we can omit them here. They are not alternate terms for "grace", but rather component characteristics of Yahweh's gracious activity.

The Hebrew word *hen* has no overt theological character in the Old Testament. It is used in the idiom "to find favour" with respect to any inferior-superior relationship. It can also be used to refer to an objective characteristic, without necessarily implying any special divine inter-

¹ See, e.g., P. Bonnetain, "Grace", *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplement*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1938), cols. 714-759.

² The normal Hebrew idiom is "to find favour" (*ms' hn*) with someone, but we find *twbt hn* "beautiful of favour, i.e., beautiful enough to win favour used to describe a harlot in Nah. 3,4, *hwsg hn bsptwtyk* "grace is poured upon your lips" or "charm flows from your lips"—the latter rendering given by M. Dahood, *Psalms I, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, N.Y., 1966), p. 269) in Ps. 45,3 (*EVV* v. 2), etc.

³ Cp. Greek *Χαρά* ("joy") and *Χαριεις* ("beautiful").

vention.⁴ The related adjective *hannun* ("gracious") is used thirteen times, however, always in reference to God, and all but twice in conjunction with the adjective *raham* ("tenderly loving").⁵ This usage probably originated as an early cultic formula in praise of the God who had decisively intervened in Israel's history.⁶ It provides the keynote for the remainder of our discussion, since the question of grace in the Old Testament is properly the question of Yahweh's gracious acts on behalf of his people, as these were experienced, understood, and responded to by them.

In the covenant-form adopted from ancient near eastern political life to give expression to Israel's understanding of her relationship to Yahweh, the historical prologue presents God's past activity on behalf of Israel as necessarily calling forth a response from the Israelites. Because he has acted on their behalf without having been obliged in any way to do so, they must respond in gratitude or else show themselves rebellious and ungrateful. The divine activity was gracious, and it decisively altered the lives of the Israelites. When they responded in covenant, their nature as a people was profoundly and irrevocably changed. They were Yahweh's people, to whom he had given himself, committed himself, in a special way.

This gracious divine activity that constituted Israel a people and that formed the basis of the covenant was primarily the Exodus event. "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". In Ex. 20,2 and Deut. 5,6 this forms the only introduction and historical prologue for the covenantal obligations expressed in the decalogue.

Very soon, if not immediately, Yahweh's gracious activity on behalf of his people was seen to have begun much earlier. Yahweh had called Abraham for a special task, had promised to be with him, and had promised to give him land and descendants. The birth of Isaac, the rejection of Ishmael, and the subsequent choice of Isaac's younger son

⁴ See the two examples quoted in fn. 2, *supra*.

⁵ *raham whannun* Ex. 34,6; Ps. 86,15; 103,8. *hannun wrham* Joel 2,13; Jon 4,2; Ps. 111,4; 112,4; 145,8; Neh. 9,17,31; 2 Chron. 30,9. *hannun* Ex. 22,26; Ps. 116,5.

⁶ See especially the cultic description of Yahweh the gracious God that is put on Yahweh's own lips in Ex. 34,6-8: "Then Yahweh passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed 'Yahweh, Yahweh. God merciful and gracious. Slow to anger and rich in covenant-loyalty and fidelity. Preserving covenant-loyalty toward the clans. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. But innocence he does not restore (to the guilty). Visiting the iniquity of fathers on sons and upon sons' sons, even upon those of the third and fourth generations.'" For the translation of MT *?lpym* by "clans", see G. E. Mendenhall, "The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 77 (1958), 52-66, where he argues that Hebrew *?lp* refers to a tribal subdivision in early census lists.

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Jacob in preference to the elder Esau were steps in the accomplishment of these promises. Then Joseph, the son of Jacob, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, and this worked out under Yahweh's guidance to provide Jacob and his sons with relief in time of famine:

And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. . . ." (Gen. 45,4-8).

But Joseph said to them, "Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. . . ." (Gen. 50,19-20.)

When the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt turned into a time of oppression, Yahweh again intervened to save them. The entire process of divine activity was utterly gratuitous:

. . . Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. Not because you were more numerous than any other people did Yahweh set his love on you and choose you, for you are fewer than any other people. It is because he loves you and because he is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand and has ransomed you from a house of slaves, from the power of Pharaoh the king of Egypt. (Deut. 7,6-8.)

The benefits which the Israelites would receive if they were faithful to the obligations of the covenant were the fruits of the promises that Yahweh had made to the patriarchs. Since these promises were part of that gracious activity of Yahweh on which the covenant itself was based, and since Yahweh could not prove unreliable or inconsistent, the future reception of the promises was but the continuation or the consequence of what he had already done. In this sense, his gracious activity was more than an event in the past. It was an enduring grace whose effects could be blocked by covenant infidelity on the part of the Israelites, but whose reality for Israel was ever independent of her own activity. Conversely, the curses for breach of covenant were, in large part, nothing more than the loss of those blessings promised and initially granted by Yahweh to his people.

When the Israelites entered into Palestine and settled there, they saw this as Yahweh's fulfilment of the promise he had made to Abraham. The gracious activity of Yahweh was understood as a unity extending from the call of Abraham and the promises made to him, through the patriarchal period and the sojourn in Egypt, to the Exodus and the

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gift of the promised land.⁷ This unity is the central grace-event in the Old Testament. It formed the centre and core of Israel's faith in a gracious God who acted on their behalf for no merits of their own. It was by personal acceptance of this divine initiative and by a life of appropriate response to it that the Israelite was pleasing to God and thereby "graced". While this "life of grace" was not the fulness that was to come to men only in Christ, it was not illusory or non-existent either. The divine activity towards Israel was gracious, not just in the sense that it was unmerited, but also in the sense that to some degree it united the Israelites to Yahweh and made them holy.

Eventually, as we see in Gen. 1,11, the creation of the world and of man, and also the period between the first man and Abraham, were understood as under Yahweh's grace in some way. The creation was good, but man continually showed himself unable to live in it as God intended. The call of Abraham was presented as Yahweh's solution to this problem. Some day, in some way, all the nations of the earth would find blessing in Abraham.⁸ This idea of a universal plan of salvation embracing all men remained more or less dormant in Israelite thought, but it came to the fore strongly in late exilic and post-exilic prophecy.⁹

We should note here that the covenant was also seen as a means by which Yahweh somehow dwelt in the midst of his people. The Deuteronomic theologians spoke of his causing his name to dwell in the sanctuary.¹⁰ For the Priestly writers, however, it was Yahweh's glory (*kabod*) in the Tabernacle or Temple that made him present in Israel's midst to make her holy.¹¹ This is analogous to Christian grace understood as the self-communication of the triune God to the baptised believer to make him holy.

Under the Davidic monarchy, a different theology of the covenant became prominent. Partly to support the permanent character of the monarchy and partly as a consequence of that permanence, strong emphasis was put on the unchanging character of Yahweh's promises to David.¹² These promises and the establishment of the monarchy itself

⁷ See Deut. 6,21-23; 26,5-9; Josh. 24,2-13; and the discussion by G. von Rad in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, tr. by E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York, 1966), pp. 3-8.

⁸ See Gen. 12,3.

⁹ See, e.g., Is. 42,1, 6; 45,22-23; 49,6; 56,3-8; 60,4-7; 66,18-21; Mic. 4,1-4 = Is. 2,2-4.

¹⁰ Hebrew *leshakken shemo sham* in Deut. 12,11; 14,23; 16,2, 6, 11; 26,2; cp. Neh. 1,9.

¹¹ Ex. 40,34-35; cp. Ezek. 10,4, 18-19; 11,23; 43,2, 4. In Ezekiel it is clear that Yahweh's sanctifying presence in the midst of his people is conditioned by their fidelity to the implications of their covenant with him.

¹² 2 Sam. 7,8-16; cp. Ps. 2; 20; 21; 45; 89; 132.

were regarded as further steps in God's gracious activity for Israel. The danger in this new onesided emphasis on Yahweh's fidelity to his promises was the temptation to believe that the promises would be fulfilled no matter what response the Israelites or their king saw fit to make to Yahweh. This could easily lead to indifference and to neglect of the covenant obligations—both specific obligations and the overriding obligation of loving submission and fidelity to Yahweh—on the part of the king and the people.

This is what did in fact happen frequently during the monarchy. The Israelites presumed that Yahweh would fulfill his promises and made no effort to live up to the covenant responsibilities they had assumed. This failure to understand the nature of their relationship to Yahweh and this excessive reliance on Yahweh's fidelity could only lead to the loss of the blessings graciously given them by Yahweh.¹³ In other words, they made divine grace or favour a static thing that could be manipulated at will, and they promptly lost it.

In general, we can say that it was this exclusively narrow concept of the covenant, and the irresponsible behaviour to which it gave rise, against which the prophets fought. The Davidic theology was not the only reason for the loss of covenant loyalty among the Israelites, especially since this theology was never really accepted in the northern kingdom, but it can serve us as a convenient symbol for the general breakdown in the older covenant morality. Furthermore, while we can see many sociological and political factors at work in the gradual disintegration of the northern and southern parts of the divided kingdom, we cannot deny that this disintegration was regarded by the prophets as the well-deserved penalty for Israel's continued covenant infidelity.

We have just seen that the Davidic theology placed excessive stress on the element of fidelity or reliability in Yahweh's gracious activity. While this stress was excessive or one-sided, this does not mean that divine fidelity was not a central element in the covenant. If Yahweh were not faithful to his promises, then the covenant could not exist at all. He was faithful to them, but not in the way suggested by the Davidic theology.

The prophets continually functioned within a covenant context, calling on the people to repent of their transgressions against Yahweh and to return to the practice of loving submission and fidelity toward him. This fidelity and submission would naturally find expression in the observance of the various covenant stipulations. Whenever the people listened to the prophetic preaching and repented of their infi-

¹³ See, e.g., Jer. 7,1-15.

delities, thereby removing the obstacles to the continued operation of the promises in their lives, Yahweh confirmed the promises once again. That is, the promises were never revoked, and Yahweh remained ready to bring them to fruition, although the indifference and irresponsibility and rebelliousness of the Israelites frequently made it impossible for him to do so.

In addition to this ever-present possibility of repentance, the prophetic belief that Yahweh's gracious activity toward Israel would continue in some form found expression in the idea of the remnant to be saved from the destruction that the Israelites were bringing upon themselves.¹⁴ It also found expression in the conviction that Yahweh's saving purpose would be fulfilled at some indeterminate future time rather than at present. As this conviction was stated in more mythic language and as its recognizable ties with history were gradually weakened, the originally realistic prophetic hope gave way to various forms of apocalyptic longing for escape from history.

We shall not attempt to discuss the understanding of Yahweh's gracious activity in the various psalms, except to note that many psalms embody the conviction that Yahweh shows his favour toward individuals, saves them from their misfortunes, and forgives them when they repent of their infidelities toward him. This is primarily a transposition to the individual level of that divine graciousness that operated on behalf of the people as a whole. There are other parts of the Old Testament that we have not considered in this article. Job and Qoheleth in particular show us many difficulties that arose when Israelites of the disaster years (late pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic) attempted to understand their lives and the experiences of the people in terms of the traditional theories that we have outlined, but they do not provide us with any alternative theories of grace in the Old Testament.

In summary, then, Israel understood herself as constituted in existence by Yahweh's gracious activity. This divine intervention on her behalf was totally unmerited, and called forth a response of loving submission and fidelity. Where this response was made, Yahweh's promises and saving purposes could find fruition. Where the people or their leaders lost sight of their primary responsibility to respond, and where they either rebelled against Yahweh or else irresponsibly relied on his fidelity alone, his gracious purposes were impeded and the fruits of the promises went unrealized. Even then, however, Yahweh remained ever gracious and merciful, ever faithful to his promises, ever

¹⁴ See, e.g., Is. 10,20-22.

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ready to communicate his love and favour to those who would accept them. From the standpoint of the New Testament and later Christianity, finally, the divine grace communicated to Israel remained essentially incomplete. It looked forward to and found fulfilment in the more abundant communication of divine favour and divine life that would take place in Jesus Christ.

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