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Grace: Contractual or Participatory?

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Abstract

Has grace been typically understood in the history of Christian thought as contractual or participatory? The question is simple enough. However, a reasoned response requires investigation into the complicated amalgam of scriptural and theological teachings on the subject. Only such an approach would avoid the self-serving ways in which appeals to isolated texts have been used in historical controversies on grace.

Some initial indication of what is meant by contractual and participatory understandings of grace, as well as the soteriological implications of these understandings, may provide a helpful

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orientation for the investigation to follow. On the one hand, a contractual understanding of grace assumes two *separate* parties who freely enter into a contract with each other. In this contract, the greater favors the lesser with a gift which does not in any way compromise their respective ontological separateness. And this is so, because the greater gives to the lesser something which is other than the greater's very self. This allows not only for legalistic understandings of grace but also for an understanding of soteriology as the harmonious accord which results from both parties meeting and maintaining all contractual obligations. On the other hand, a participatory understanding of grace assumes two *distinct* parties who enter into a relationship in which the greater freely offers itself completely to the lesser as a gift, which, if freely accepted, ontologically elevates the lesser by allowing it to willingly participate in the reality of the greater according to the nature of the greater. This allows for relational understandings of grace as well as for an understanding of soteriology as an intimate unity so radical that the greater becomes the authentic fulfillment of the lesser – i.e., divinization – without any loss of their ontological distinctiveness.

Introduction

Western Christian understandings of grace belong to a long religious tradition which has as its foundational classic that body of texts which centers on the life and execution of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as on the aftermath of his execution. Those who believe Jesus to be the Christ take this body of texts (the Christian scripture) to be a binding re-presentation of divine revelation in human history. The central theme of these texts consists of a historical back-and-forth between divinity's self-offer as the fulfilling content of human existence and humanity's acceptance or rejection of this offer. The dialogical history of this back-and-forth, it is believed, came to its unsurpassable fullness in the hypostatic union of Creator and creation in Jesus of Nazareth: a union effected by divinity's self-communicating love and Jesus' complete and trusting self-surrender to it. Because this foundational text was written in a remote time and place and handed down to contemporary believers through nearly two thousand years of Christian tradition, it must, and is, interpreted in some fashion, consciously or unconsciously, by anyone who reads it meaningfully today.

Intentionally meaningful interpretations, therefore, cannot avoid being to some extent historical investigations. However, because Christian scripture is primarily *about* proclaiming Jesus to be the Christ and nurturing the faith of disciples, its meaningful interpretation cannot be restricted to historical investigations into the past. Instead, such interpretation must be principally theological (that is, "out of faith, and for faith"[2]). As such, it must be a hermeneutic which is "concerned with the process of drawing an ancient text forward into the present not as a relic of past ages but as the bearer of existential possibilities for the present."[3] According to Christian theology, the fundamental existential possibility which Christian scripture bears for believers is the dynamism of divinity's unconditional self-offer and humanity's faithfulness in response. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger declares that this faithfulness is not belief in "some coherent order of propositions about facts or occurrences which we simply agree to"[4] but belief or trust *in* divinity's constant loving self-offer. This is a "'graciously bestowed' mode of existing"[5] since it is the divine gift (divinity's self-offer) which makes its human acceptance possible. Nonetheless, only the free human acceptance of this gift makes it existentially and historically efficacious.

Although Scripture is the foundational classic of Christianity, it is clearly not the only religious classic of the Christian tradition. The foundational classic is understood in light of its authoritative interpretation by the early Christian thinkers, the decrees of church councils, and religious authorities (in short, as interpretively understood by the teaching authority of the Christian church). In addition, the Christian tradition includes the effects of the works of those gifted theologians who have produced such brilliant interpretations of the soteriological significance of Christian scripture that their works have become theological classics or classical

[2] Martin Heidegger, *The Piety of Thinking*, trans. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 11.

[3] Sandra Schneiders, The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 151.

[4] Heidegger, The Piety of Thinking, 11.

[5] Ibid., 13.

interpretive applications of scripture's saving message. Chief among such theological classics are the letters of Paul (Saul) of Tarsus.

In order to fully determine which of the two understandings of grace, contractual or participatory, represents the more typical trajectory of Christian thinking, consideration should be given to all the religious classics of Christianity mentioned above. Unfortunately, space does not permit such consideration here. This investigation, therefore, will view the matter through the lens of the foundational classic of Christianity. Such an approach has the advantage of not only centering the investigation on that marginal Jew who is essential to Christianity but also of anchoring it in his religious tradition's (i.e., Judaism's) understandings of the relationship between divinity and humanity as well as in Pauline Christology.

The Experience and Language of Grace

The Tanach

Gerhard von Rad claims that "the earliest avowals to Yahweh were historically determined, that is, they connect the name of this God with some statement about an action in history."[6] In probably the earliest and most commonly used of these brief avowals, Yahweh is the God "who brought Israel out of Egypt." von Rad asserts that soon arranged among these cultic invocations were confessional summaries of Yahweh's actions in history and that the most important of these is the one found in Deuteronomy 26.5-9:

> A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

[6] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 121.

Summarized in this confession are the great historical actions attributed to Yahweh[7] from the days of the early Jewish ancestors down to the conquest of Canaan.

Bernard W. Anderson maintains that the primary function of these confessional summaries is not to give an objective account of history but rather to confess a God who acts in history and who is known through these actions. He writes:

> To be sure, the central testimony of the biblical account concerns the revelation of God – but *it is in the concrete affairs and relationships of people that God makes himself known*. No external historical study can demonstrate that the Exodus was an act of God; but to Israel this "political" event was the medium through which God's presence and purpose were disclosed. God's revelation did not come like a bolt out of the blue; it came *through* the crises and affairs of human life and to *persons* who perceived in the events a divine dimension of meaning of which the general public was unaware.[8]

The confession cited from Deuteronomy demonstrates precisely this point. There it is acknowledged that Israel and its history started with a divine initiative during a time of crisis. It asserts that "the God of our fathers…heard our voice...and...brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...." This, of course, raises a fundamental question: What motivates this divine concern? What accounts for this foundational divine act? What, in other words, incites this Yahweh to act redemptively on behalf of Aramean slaves in Egypt, to shape them thereby into a people, and to claim this people as divinity's own?

Edward Schillebeeckx contends that a theological response to this question can be had only through the concept of grace, the meaning of which is indicated by some key Hebrew terms in the Tanach: *hanan* and *hen*; *hesed* and *'emet*.[9] The root (*hnn*) of *hanan* means to be

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[7] These actions are the deliverance from Egypt, the guidance in the wilderness, and the promise to the ancestors. This promise, first made to Abram, renewed to Isaac, Jacob, and affirmed again in the time of Moses, was the promise of land (the 'Promised Land'): "To your descendants I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7).

[8] Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2d ed., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), 19.

[9] It is important to note that in the Septuagint the Greek word *charis* (grace) is used to translate *hen*, whereas *eleos* (mercy) is used to translate *hesed*. What makes this interesting is the fact that, in the Septuagint, the Greek verb *eleein* ('to have [*Footnote continued on next page …*]

gracious, to have mercy on someone. It implies neither condescension towards another nor a dualism between an interior disposition of benevolence and its external expression in acts of good will. It implies instead a turning or an approach to another which, according to Schillebeeckx, "takes the form of a particular action in which good will is expressed in a specific way. Grace (*hanan*) is the kindness expressed by anyone in a gift or a present." [10] The gift itself symbolizes one person's approach to another with outright and complete kindness. This graciousness of *hanan*, Schillebeeckx continues,

> presupposes a lack on the part of the one to whom grace is shown.... Someone who does not have it – or has nothing – is given something by the kindness of another, with the secondary connotation that in this gift the one who does the favor turns to the other with all his heart, a gesture which...[is at least] an implicit response to a crying need, whether or not this need has been explicitly formulated by the person who receives the gift.[11]

What the application of the word *hanan* (culled from the field of human relationships) to Yahweh's approach to human beings emphasizes is the 'sovereign freedom' of Yahweh in grace. In this free divine approach, however, there is not condescension but a heart-felt giving which meets a need, as in the approach of a parent to a child. This leads Schillebeeckx to maintain that, in spite of the inequality between the divine and human partners, throughout the Tanach the situation of *hanan* is characterized by a certain familiarity, a certain "setting out together, mutual knowledge of each other's name, the use of familiar forms of address, God's countenance...turned towards...Israel." [12] Because of this familiarity Yahweh's sovereign freedom is never that of an arbitrary despot but of "a God merciful and gracious" (*rahum wehannun*) (Exod 34:6).

In its emphasis upon the one who performs the act, *hanan* differs from its substantive infinitive *hen*, which means 'favor' in the sense of finding favor in the eyes of a superior. With *hen* attention shifts to

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mercy') is the usual translation of *hanan*. Clearly, the translators caught the connection between *hanan* and *hesed* (See Schillebeeckx, 102).

[10] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroads, 1980), 86.

[11] Ibid., 87.

[12] Ibid., 89.

some quality or disposition which a person possesses, on the basis of which that person finds favor (*hen*) in the eyes of a superior. If *hen* is understood to be itself gratuitous, as when a parent finds a child favorable because she approaches the child with her whole heart, then it complements *hanan*: *hanan* makes its recipient favorable (that is, worthy of being shown *hen*). But when the understanding of *hen* is such that the emphasis falls more upon the quality which a person has, a quality which disposes their superiors favorably towards them, then "*hen* is not the gift of grace which is given in an attitude of *hanan*."[13] When *hen* is understood in this manner, gracious action arising out of sovereign freedom gives way to gracious action as an expected and exacted response to a favorable person. For different historical reasons, this second understanding of *hen* came to play an increasingly influential role in the understanding of the relationship between Yahweh and human beings in post-exilic Judaism, a shift which was accompanied, understandably, by a move towards religious legalism.

Unlike *hanan* and *hen*, *hesed* deals not with one person's (a superior's) approach to another (an inferior) but with the unexpected and unexacted abundance of steadfast love which evokes a response in kind and thus makes mutual interpersonal relationships possible. Like the person showing *hanan* and *hen*, the person showing *hesed* remains central, but the relationship arising out of *hesed* is not at all one-sided. *Hesed* calls forth *hesed*; it gives rise to community. However, Schillebeeckx warns that

> it is very difficult to render *hesed* as an inter-personal relationship in modern terminology. Grace and good will are inadequate. By nature *hesed* is something that happens tangibly in a specific situation and yet goes beyond it; it is connected with devotion towards someone else's *life* and therefore implies the whole person of the subject of the *hesed*. Even if it comes about within given social structures (parents towards children, king towards subjects or between partners in an alliance) it goes beyond the structure of rights and duties. *Hesed* is not just good will which proves itself openly in action, but in formal terms generosity, overwhelming, unexpected kindness which is forgetful of itself, completely open and ready for 'the other'. Similar *hesed*, i.e. surprising *hesed* that goes beyond all duty, may therefore be expected of the receiver of such

[13] Ibid., 91-92.

> *hesed* or loving devotion. *Hesed* is concerned not with mutual relationships but with the *nature* of such relationships: with an abundance of mutual love.[14]

The use of *hesed* to represent the dialogical inter-action between divinity and humanity discloses, on the one hand, the transcendence of Yahweh's approach in sovereign freedom and, on the other, the possible depth of the human response. Yahweh's approach in *hesed* calls for a response in which recipients of divine *hesed* freely and willingly allow it to take effect in them and, therefore, in their historical actions. When such willing cooperation occurs, human recipients are enabled by the divine *hesed* to respond to Yahweh in kind (that is, to respond with a reciprocating *hesed* – Deut 6.5; 10.12; 11.13; 13.4; 30.6). Philip J. King believes the call for such reciprocating *hesed* to be common to "the teachings of the great 8th-cent. prophets – Amos on righteousness, Hosea on steadfast love, Isaiah on faith and obedience"[15] and those teachings to be perfectly summarized in Micah 6.8 where "*hesed* (goodness) is the response made not out of duty but out of love...[and that response] is not an ethic but a way of life."[16] In effect, those who live in the sphere of Yahweh's *hesed* must be prepared to be devoted to others as Yahweh is devoted to them, by allowing their devotion to arise out of Yahweh's. In this way, they fulfill their duties and each other's rights in excess.

That Yahweh's approach to humans in self-forgetful devotion is uncalculated and unconditioned is expressed by the Hebrew word *'emet* (faithfulness). And precisely because the divine *hesed* is not conditioned by merit but is the source of merit, it is that upon which humans can rely. The prophet Hosea goes so far as to claim that in spite of Israel's lack of *'emet* (Hos 4.1) and *hesed* (Hos 6.6) in its response to Yahweh's *hesed*, Yahweh will not respond in kind because of Yahweh's mercy (*rahamim*) (Hos 12.5-9; 14.1-3). But this mercy is not idiotic; it is not without judgment (Amos 2.4-5; 3.13-15;

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[14] Ibid., 94.

[15] Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968), s.v. "Micah," by Philip J. King. Hereafter this work will be cited as JBC.

[16] Ibid.

Micah 2.3-4; 6.9-16). Yahweh will judge human faithlessness (Micah 6.3-6) and its resulting injustice to others (Amos 2.6-8; 4.1; 5.7; 8.4-6; Micah 2.1-2; 6.9-16). Yahweh will judge the human lack of a reciprocating *hesed* (a *hesed* arising out of divine *hesed*) to Yahweh in the love of Yahweh and neighbor. But that judgment entails no withdrawal of *hesed* (as a parent's judgment of a child's wrongdoing should entail no withdrawal of love for the child). And that judgment is no match for Yahweh's *hesed*. This divine judgment only goes to the third or fourth generation whereas Yahweh's *hesed* is for thousands of generations (Exod 34.6-7).

Yahweh's *hesed* was, is, and will always be, therefore, a *hesed we'emet*. Yahweh will not give up on humans (Hos 11.8) but will forgive (Amos 7.2-6; Micah 7.18-20) and so will renew them (Amos 9.13-15; Micah 4.6-8). Thus even the abidingness of the divine *hesed* is unmerited (that is, unconditioned). For this reason it is something upon which humans can rely and build; it is *hesed we'emet*.[17] Schillebeeckx writes:

> When applied to man and God, *'emet* means someone on whose words, acts and love one can rely; someone on whom one can build: reliability with the connotation of truthfulness (from the root *'mn*, giving firmness, security, and therefore also permanence). Because people are unreliable and false, *'emet* is used above all of God.... Therefore mutual faithfulness is an eschatological vision of the future: one day Jerusalem will be called a city of *'emet* (Zech 8.3), a city on which God can rely (for Isa 10.20 this relates to a remnant of Israel).[18]

St. Paul looking back at his prototype of the religious person, Abraham, sees one who trusted in Yahweh's *hesed we'emet*: Yahweh made a promise to Abraham, and Abraham believed that Yahweh does not make promises which Yahweh either cannot or does not keep. This belief of Abraham was neither a bloodless intellectual assent to a set of propositions nor a moral busybodiness in the fulfillment of rules. It was instead a way of life arising out of Yahweh's *hesed we'emet*, a free act of self-defining trust in Yahweh's

[17] Among some of the places in which this formulation occurs are: Gen. 24.27; 32.10; Ex. 34.6; II Sam. 2.6; 15.20; Prov. 3.3; 14.22; 16.6; 20.28. It appears numerously in the Psalms: 25.10; 40.12; 57.3, 10; 85.10; 89.14; 138.2; etc.

[18] Schillebeeckx, 96, 98.

love and faithfulness. And such a response was and is possible because this Yahweh is not the abstract God of philosophers, but a God who approaches in self-offer (in concrete acts of self-forgetful devotion) in the affairs of human life and who asks human beings to rely on this self-offer so that divinity may establish an intimate relationship characterized by 'an abundance of mutual love'. This is "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex 3.6). Anderson writes:

> biblical faith, to the bewilderment of many philosophers, is fundamentally historical in character. Its doctrines are events and historical realities, not abstract values and ideas existing in a timeless realm. The God of Israel is known in history – a particular history – through his relations with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.[19]

In post-exilic Judaism, this understanding of Yahweh's approach (*hanan*) to humans *as hesed we'emet* was challenged by a rival understanding which was strictly legalistic. This latter understanding became, according to Anderson, "one of the major characteristics of post-exilic Judaism."[20] Key to its development was the pivotal role played by the priest Ezra, who about one hundred and thirty years after the Persian king, Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians and allowed the people of Israel to return from their exile in Babylon,[21] was given permission to lead some exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. Anderson notes that "one of the important items in the baggage that Ezra brought from Babylon was a copy of 'the book of the law of Moses' (Neh 8:1)."[22] With this in hand, Ezra conducted a ceremony of

[19] Anderson, 11.

[20] Ibid., 454. Another characteristic, which developed out of Judaism's long association with Persian culture and, therefore, Zorastrianism (this association lasted until 332 B.C. when the Persian Empire was dismantled by Alexander the Great), was dualism. "Yahweh was thought of as opposed by externally active forces of spiritual wickedness. The concept of "idolatry" moves from the heathen gods of Israel's adversaries to cosmic forces or spiritual beings, eternal enemies of God and humanity. Satan, the roving tempter in the book of Job who acts according to God's will, evolves into the Devil of the Gospels and Antichrist of apocalyptic literature. Sheol, the vacuous abode of shades, becomes hell in whose fires those condemned at the judgment at the end of the age would groan in torment" (W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 16).

[21] See *JBC*, vol. 1, 426-427 for a discussion on the dating of Ezra.

[22] Anderson, 452.

covenant renewal in which he read the Pentateuch[23] to the people from "early morning until noon"[24] for several days. Levites, standing at his side, gave a running commentary on the text to the people.

> The climax...came in a solemn act of covenant renewal (Neh. 9) when the people confessed their sins and Ezra, as a covenant mediator, offered a prayer on behalf of the people, ending with the words of covenant renewal (Neh. 9:38). The covenant document was officially signed by the representatives of the people, and all the rest of the people joined with them and took an oath under penalty of a curse "to walk in God's law which was given by Moses the servant of God" (Neh. 10).[25]

The tangled web of the history of Israel from the time of Ezra (400 B.C.E.) to the Roman appointment of Herod as king of Judea (37 B.C.E. - 4 C.E.) gave rise to other competing interpretations of, and attitudes towards, Judaism in Palestine. Each of these was represented by rival social factions. Paul Johnson observes that the social conflicts among these various approaches "were compounded by rival interpretations of the post-Maccabean situation [with the result that] Palestinian Judaism was not a unitary religion but a collection of sects"[26] and parties.[27] Gradually, however, during the time "between the Maccabean period and the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the law [displaced]...the Temple as the central focus of"[28] Palestinian Judaism. This gradual refocusing, which began with Ezra and accelerated after the Maccabean revolt, meant the increasing dominance of the Pharisaical (legalistic) understanding of Judaism at

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[23] For Anderson's justification of his determination that "the book of the law of Moses" was the Pentateuch see *Understanding the Old Testament*, 453.

[24] Anderson, 452.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 14.

[27] Everett Ferguson goes along with modern scholars in distinguishing between 'parties' and 'sects'. He defines 'parties' as "groups that recognize the existence of others from whom they are separated as having a place in the total people" (Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987], 406), e.g., the Pharisees and Sadducees. Whereas he defines 'sects' as "groups claiming an exclusive right to represent the total people and the only ones expecting to receive salvation" (Ferguson, 406), e.g., the Essenes.

[28] Johnson, 18.

the expense of the Sadducean (priestly) understanding.[29] The net result of this refocusing, Paul Johnson argues, was that gradually the God who *did* things in history became simply the God who "laid down the law.... In a sense...the law was God; there was no room for grace and man could save himself only by his good works. His relationship with God, therefore, was a purely legalistic one."[30] Such was the social, political and religious situation into which Jesus was born at Bethlehem in Judea in the last years of Herod's reign. While every Jew accepted the Law (Torah) and the hope of ultimate deliverance, capacity for action was blunted by social strife and sectarian rivalries. The New Testament names Herodians, Sadducees, and Pharisees as rival Jewish groups, while Josephus neglects the Herodians but adds the Essenes.... In the shadows stood the true revolutionaries, the Zealots.[31]

Jesus of Nazareth

Into this troubled and turbulent Jewish-Greco-Roman world, Jesus was born at the end of the rule of Herod the Great. As indicated, the turmoil of his world was fueled, to a large extent, by rival interpretations of, and attitudes towards, Judaism. Albert Nolan believes that it is possible to have some sense of the mature Jesus' religious understanding (that is, his understanding of divinity's approach to human beings and the nature of the relationship which the

[29] Calvin J. Roetzel in second edition of his book, *The Letters of Paul*, argues that the basic practical difference between these two groups centered on the issue of the scope of the application of the laws in Leviticus. He writes: "Unlike the priests who took the laws in Leviticus relating to sacrifice, eating temple food, and cultic preparation to apply *only* to the temple itself and its worship, for the Pharisees, the 'setting for law observance was the field and the kitchen, te bed and the street.' Taking quite literally the command in Exodus 19:6 to be a 'kingdom of priests', the Pharisees attempted to act as if all of the common life was a temple service" (Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 2d ed., [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982], 13). In their attempt to make the common life the place of obedience for the laws of Leviticus, the Pharisees resembled another religious/social group, the Essenes. The notable difference between these two was that the Essenses were monastic, whereas the Pharisees "live[d] among the townfolk, and [were] intensely involved in the workaday world" (Roetzel, 14).

[30] Johnson, 14.

[31] W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 22.

divine approach makes possible) and what he was trying to do in first-century Palestine by looking for evidence of his significant choices. Nolan claims that "if we could find a historically certain incident in which Jesus made a choice between two or more alternatives, we should have a very important clue to the direction of his thinking."[32]

At the beginning of each of the gospels, Jesus is shown to have made a choice between the groups which represented rival interpretations of Judaism: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots. His choice was none of the above. He submitted instead to baptism by the ex-Essene[33] and prophet, John the Baptist (Mt 14.5; Lk 7.24-29). In all probability this meant that he became a follower of John, who, Nolan writes, "…in the midst of these rival religio-political movements and speculations...was one man who stood out as a sign of contradiction. John the Baptist was different precisely because he was a prophet, and indeed, like so many of his predecessors of old, a prophet of doom and destruction."[34]

And John's prophetic message of destruction on account of divinity's anger over Israel's failure to respond in kind to the divine *hesed we'emet* was an appeal to the freedom of each individual in Israel for a *metanoia*, for a change of heart. And this change,

[32] Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 11.

[33] Paul Johnson, relying on evidence provided by the first century AD Jewish historian Josephus, concludes that John the Baptist "was at one time an Essene" (Johnson, 20). Everett Ferguson notes that "Josephus described John's baptism in terms of the Qumran washings" (Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: 1987], 416). Other facts cited to support the belief that John lived at Qumran include: "he was of a priestly family, his parents were old at the time of his birth (Luke 1:7), the Essenes reared orphan children (Josephus, *War* II.viii.2 [120]), and the scene of his activity was the wilderness of Judea (Luke 3:2)" (Ferguson, 416). His break with the Essenes, however, was evident on several fronts. First, "[h]is baptism ceremony, unlike the repeated bathing rites of the Essene, is a once and for all affair.... Secondly, John thought God would intervene, admittedly in wrathful mood, without assistance of the Essene army and its war-plan.... Most important of all, he had broken away from the absolute exclusiveness of the Essenes, teaching that God's special favours were to be offered to the entire Jewish people, not just to the sect. John was not yet a universalist, but was moving in the direction" (Johnson, 20). That is the direction which became Christianity.

[34] Nolan, 14.

according to Luke 3.10-14, concerned neither ritualistic purity nor the payment of taxes to foreigners but an approach to others in which divine *hesed we'emet* is allowed to take effect by being the source, content, and power of that approach.

And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he [John] answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food,[35] let him do likewise." Tax collectors[36] also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" and he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you." Soldiers[37] also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."[38]

John's appeal for a reciprocating *hesed* was addressed not only to the crowd and to the tax collectors and their bodyguards but also to the scribes and Pharisees (Mat 21.32). He even called the Jewish tetrarch, Herod Antipas (Mk 6.18; Lk 3.19) to *metanoia* and, as a consequence, was executed by Herod.

Precisely in addressing his call to all Jews, John demonstrated no interest in founding a sect within Judaism. Divinity's *hesed we'emet* is addressed to all Israel, and everyone in Israel, in their own way, had failed to allow it to take effect in them. As a result, they were unable to respond in kind to divinity. Because of this general failure, divinity's catastrophic judgment is the future of all Israel, a judgment which will coincide with the coming of the Messiah. John therefore called all Israel to a change of heart towards divinity and others, the implication being that those who took his message to heart by undergoing "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk

35 See Lk 6.29; Acts 2.44-45; 4.32-35.

36 These tax collectors were men "who bought...the right to collect taxes...and [were] hated for undue extortion, esp. when a Jew, as such in addition despised for collaboration w. Roman overlords" (Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, vol. 1, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 183).

37 These soldiers "did not belong to the regular troops of Herod Antipas or of the Roman procurator; they rather provided armed support for the tax collectors" (JBC, vol. 2, 128), that is, bodyguards.

38 In Matthew's gospel, John's message is addressed to harlots and tax collectors, who take it to heart (Mt 22.28-32).

1.4) would be spared condemnation in the coming catastrophic judgment. Nolan takes Jesus' submission to baptism by John in the river Jordan to be conclusive proof of his acceptance of John's basic prophecy: Israel is heading for an unprecedented catastrophe. And in choosing to believe this prophecy, Jesus immediately shows himself to be in basic disagreement with all those who reject John and his baptism [Lk 7.30]: the Zealots, Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, scribes and apocalyptic writers. None of these groups would have been willing to believe a prophet who, like the prophets of old, prophesied against all Israel.[39]

The choice to follow the prophet John reveals something of Jesus' understanding of both divinity and divinity's approach to humans. And his understanding echoes the ancient prophetic understanding: divinity, in sovereign freedom, surprisingly and constantly approaches humans, in the concrete historical affairs of their lives, with a heart-felt and self-forgetful devotion which is totally self-invested and which meets their fundamental needs in excess. This divine approach requires a response in which humans freely allow divinity's *hesed we'emet* to effect in them a love of divinity and an approach to others in surprisingly heart-felt and completely self-invested devotion to them (in effect, to love divinity and others out of the divinity's love); the failure to make this kind of response meets with divinity's catastrophic judgment.

Unlike John, however, Jesus's preaching, once he left the Jordan, had at its heart not merely an impending catastrophe, which was to be prepared for by "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1.4), but, more importantly, an impending event through the catastrophe of which divine love would break into the world.[40] This event was to be accepted in joyful faith: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe" (Mk 1.15) the good news. Both John and Jesus confronted their listeners with the need to

[39] Nolan, 17.

[40] An early analogy to the relationship between divine judgment and the kingdom of God is birth-pangs (Mk 13.8; Matt 24.8; Rom 8.18-22. See also Is 13.8; 26.127; Jer 6.24; Hos 13.13; Mi 4.9-10). As birth-pangs is a transition to the child's birth, the suffering of God's judgment is a transition to the glory of the reign of God's love. Only Matthew's gospel suggests that John's preaching also had this tension: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt 3.2).

make a decision in response to divinity's approach (*hanan*). John emphasized the element of judgment in divinity's disruptive approach and fasted; Jesus emphasized the element of unconditional and, therefore, forgiving love in divinity's disruptive approach and feasted (see Mt 11.18-19; Lk 7.33-34; cf.: Mk 2.18-22; Mt 9.14-17; Lk 5.33-35).

The heart of Jesus' proclamation is summarized in the root metaphor 'the kingdom of God'. He disclosed *what* 'the kingdom of God' is in parabolic speech and action and claimed that its *when* is *now*. Walter Kasper maintains that Jews in the time of Jesus were familiar with talk about the kingdom of God and expected its coming. But how this kingdom was understood (and, therefore, expected) differed according to the rival interpretive understandings of Judaism.[41] Nonetheless, for all of these understandings the kingdom represented a hopeful future in which justice would be established on earth (that is, the meaning of history would be fulfilled on earth). Kasper writes that in the ancient Middle East justice was conceived as consisting not primarily in impartial judgments, but in help and protection for the helpless, weak and poor. The coming of the Kingdom of God was expected to be the liberation from unjust rule and the establishment of the justice of God in the world.... [And] its coming coincided with the establishment of the eschatological *shalom*, peace between nations, between individuals, within the individual and in the whole universe.[42]

Kasper observes that in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, human history (and not the soul) is the locus for the human encounter with his Abba. And the substance of this history consists essentially of the dialogical play between the divine *hanan* as *hesed we'emet* and humanity's free response, the back-and-forth between infinite

[41] Commenting on these differences, Walter Kasper in his work, *Jesus the Christ*, writes that "the Pharisees imagined it [the Kingdom] to be the complete fulfillment of the Torah; the Zealots thought of a political theocracy which they thought they would install by force of arms; and the apocalyptics [and the Essenes] looked forward to the coming of the new eon, the new heaven and the new earth" (Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green [New York: Paulist Press, 1977], 72).

[42] Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 73.

freedom's self-offer and finite freedom's response. The future (that is, the fully realized meaning) of this dialogical history is what is meant by the kingdom of God. Kasper warns, however, that this future is not to be understood as transcendence ahead, as *futurum*,[43] but as transcendence upwards, as *adventus*.[44] Kasper concludes:

> For those who have eyes to see the world is both filled with instances of hope and replete with examples of fulfillment. Wherever the New becomes and comes to be, some part of meaning and fulfillment is revealed which alone gives meaning to hope in an ultimate meaning and a universal salvation in history. These signs of salvation are to be found wherever the underivably new comes into being. Wherever new life originates hope breaks forth.[45]

One of the most distinctive features of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was his insistence that its time is at hand: *now* is the time for divinity's coming (*hanan* or *adventus*) in *hesed we'emet*. It is this coming which makes explicit for humans existential possibilities not simply determined by what has gone before. In this way, it provides the human spirit with boundless possibilities. The transformative realization of this graced boundlessness depends, of course, on the free human response of faithfulness or faithlessness. Commenting on the proclamation's call for a timely response, Schillebeeckx asserts

> that we must respond to it in the same way that we respond to the announcement, 'Lunch is ready!' Time is *kairos*, time to undertake something. Time takes us away from one thing and confronts us with another; withdrawing is the presupposition for devoting oneself to something else. This Heideggerian concept of time – which does not analyze time in abstract mass, but rather the time of experience – gives us a clear view of the 'contemporaneity' of present and future in respect of the kingdom of God. 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand' therefore means: now it is time for us to be open towards God's salvation; now we must grasp it. The coming of the kingdom of

[43]As *futurum*, the future is surely open, but it is derived from the past. As such, it offers nothing *more* and *new*. This is a future which history is able to provide for itself, by itself.

[44]As *adventus*, the future is a hope for the underivably new (that is, for grace or the coming of divinity as gift). This is a future which history is unable to provide for itself; this is a future which it must receive as gift from a power not necessarily determined by what has gone before.

[45] Kasper, 57.

> God – the lordship of the God who is concerned for man – is the time to realize salvation: the time of salvation.[46]

This free response to the proclamation of divinity's coming is clearly not an assent to a set of propositions or rules but a concrete act of self-defining trust in (surrender to) the One who approaches. Through this kind of free self-surrender humans are transformed by the divine self-offer. This transformation finds expression in abundant love of divinity in concrete historical acts of love towards others. Where such acts of trust are made, the gospels tell of the power of divinity's *hesed we'emet* breaking forth in miraculous events in history: the kingdom dawns. Pheme Perkins simply states that the kingdom "makes itself felt in persons whose lives are changed."[47] And that by which and in which human lives are changed or transformed becomes completely their own.[48]

The discussion of the relationship between miracles and divinity's *hesed we'emet* must be postponed for the moment in order to discuss a related matter which requires prior consideration, namely, the decision which is implicit in Jesus' proclaiming of the coming of the kingdom of God. This decision has already been touched upon: Jesus' decision to give up John's practice of baptizing people in the Jordan and instead to go and seek out, help and serve the lost sheep of the house of Israel.... The reference here is to a well-defined and unmistakable section of the population. Jesus generally refers to them as the poor and the little ones; the Pharisees refer to the same people as sinners or the rabble who know nothing of the law. Today some might refer to this section of the population as the lower classes; others would call them the oppressed.[49]

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[46] Schillebeeckx, 543.

[47] Pheme Perkins, *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (New York, N.Y./Mahawah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988), 78.

[48] This is a paraphrase of Hans-Georg Gadamer's observation that understanding belongs to the tradition in which it exists and that "that by which and through which one is formed becomes completely one's own" (*Truth and Method*, 11).

[49] Nolan, 21.

Among the lost sheep would have been the poor,[50] who were "totally dependent upon the 'charity'...[that is,] the mercy of others,"[51] and sinners.[52] The written (Torah) and oral (that is, "the tradition of the elders" or the history of the Torah's authoritative interpretations) law were so complicated that the poor, who were illiterate and uneducated (to be educated meant to know the scriptures), did not and could not know what the law required of them. They were the 'crowd' (the *'am ha-ares* or *'am ha-aretz*), "the rabble who know nothing of the law" (Jn 7.49). Consequently, to sin was inevitably their lot in life, which placed them at the mercy of the scribes and Pharisees who, according to Matthew 23.4, made the law an increasingly unbearable burden for all the lost sheep of Israel but who would not lift a finger to help them. The lost were excluded from the synagogues and the Temple; and the poor among them were socially and politically marginalized.

Jesus, who came from a family of skilled peasants (he and his father were probably carpenters in rural Nazareth), when confronted with the suffering of the lost sheep, was moved to approach them with such unexpected, self-forgetful, and heart-felt devotion that he totally identified with them (Mt 25 31-46). And he was moved to do so by *splagchna*.[53] Nolan considers the English word 'compassion' too

[50] The economically poor were beggars (that is, widows, orphans, the disabled, lepers -- these people were unemployable and their relatives either could not or would not take care of them) and unskilled peasants (day-laborers and farm workers).

[51] Nolan, 22-23.

[52] Sinners were those who deviated in any way from the written Torah and oral law (the tradition of the Torah's interpretive applications). Among their number were "those who had sinful or unclean professions: prostitutes, tax collectors (publicans), robbers, herdsmen, usurers, ...gamblers, ...those who did not pay tithes, ...and those who were negligent about the sabbath rest and about ritual cleanliness" (Nolan, 23).

[53] *Splagchna* literally means 'viscera, the inward parts; the seat of feelings'. The gospels give much evidence of Jesus being moved by *splagchna*. "When he saw the crowd, he had compassion (*'esplagchnisthe*) for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9.36, compare Mk 6.34). He had compassion (*splagchnistheis*) on a leper (Mk 1.41), (*splagchnistomai*) on a crowd who had nothing to eat and fed them (Mk 8.2-10), (*'esplagchnisthe*) on a crowd and healed their sick (Mt 14.14), (*splagchnistheis*) on two blind men in Jericho (Mt 20.29-34).

anemic a translation "of the emotion that moved Jesus. The Greek verb *splagchnizomai*...means a movement or impulse that wells up from one's very entrails, a gut reaction." [54] In any event, Jesus' visceral approach to the poor and sinners met a real need. It freed them from their inescapable hellhole of judgment, guilt, suffering, and shame, but only if they actively participated in their liberation by cooperating with his approach. Needless to say, the despairing predicament of the '*am ha-ares* resulted from the prevailing (legalistic) interpretation of divinity's *hanan*. According to this interpretation, divinity's judgment entails the withdrawal of divinity's *hesed*, a withdrawal which had religious and, therefore, social and political ramifications. Thus understood, *hesed* was clearly not *'emet* and, consequently, not unmerited. It was earned by being found favorable (the legalistic reading of *hen*) in divinity's eyes. It was, therefore, not something upon which one could rely, upon which one could build.

Like many in the prophetic tradition, Jesus preached divinity's imminent approach (*hanan*) in *hesed we'emet* (Mk 1.5; Lk 4.14-21), and he called upon his listeners to rely on it totally (Mk 1.15; Mt 13.44-45). This brings us back to the scriptural stories of people who believed him and through their faith were opened to a power greater than mental and physical illnesses (that is, they were healed of physical and mental affliction), a power greater than death itself. According to these stories, Jesus played a pivotal role in miraculous events.

Kasper asserts that although "many of the gospel miracle stories are legendary...a critical historical consideration of the gospel miracle tradition leads to the conclusion that a historical core of the miracle tradition cannot be disputed." [55] In his study of the scriptural descriptions of Jesus' miracles, Kasper finds the term *térata* ('wonders, omens, portents') interpreted by *dunameis* ('acts of power') and *séméia* ('signs'). This leads him to understand miracles as extraordinary signs, unexpected events which provoke amazement and wonder. Attention in this process is not directed at nature and its laws – the concept of a law of nature is alien to the people of the

[54] Nolan, 28.
[55] Kasper, 90-91.

ancient world. A miracle turns people's eyes upwards, towards God. Biblical man does not look at reality as nature, but as creation. To him, all reality is ultimately miraculous."[56]

Thus the issue involved in any miracle is not so much the meaning of this or that isolated event so much as the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole. If reality were ultimately nothing but the cold regularity of laws, the whimsy of chance, or the blindness of fate, then, Kasper concludes,

> no room [would be left] for freedom, or an all-determining freedom which we call God. If we choose the religious interpretation of reality..., the question of miracles becomes the problem of correctly defining the relationship between God and the world. Is God just a kind of world architect who gives the world once-and-for-all laws in accordance with which it now functions? ...does God work uniformly in all events? Or is he the living God of history to whom the Bible testifies: that is, the God who in constantly original ways offers his love to human beings in and through the events of the world? This God uses the laws of nature which he created, and which he therefore wills and respects, and in and through them shows men by means of effective signs that he is near to help and hold them.[57]

The claim involved in miracles is substantially no different from that involved in the notion of divinity unexactedly and unexpectedly approaching humanity (with surprising reliability) in self-forgetful, heart-felt, and devoted love as gift. For the prophetic tradition of

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[56] Ibid., 92.

[57] Ibid., 94. Kasper summarizes his admittedly inadequate discussion of a theology of miracles under four headings: phenomenological, theological, historical, and hermeneutical. Phenomenologically, miracles involve the awesome and unusual, which, by themselves, are polyvalent, but which are given precise definition when accompanied by preaching. Theologically, miracles are personal, divine initiatives involving "a self-communication and claims which show their power by taking symbolic physical form. Historically, this assumption of a physical form always comes about through the action of created secondary causes. A divine intervention in the sense of a directly visible action of God is theological nonsense. Part of the very meaning of the coming of the Kingdom of God is that the revelation of God's divinity frees human beings to be human and the world to be secular. The same is true of miracles. The intensity of creation's independence grows in direct and not inverse ratio to the intensity of God's action" (Kasper, 95). Hermeneutically, only by interpreting an event in light of faith can it be seen as miraculous, that is, an act of God's self-communication and claim. The event does not force this interpretation. The event is, therefore, interpretable in any number of ways.

Judaism, this approach is not at all restricted to an anonymous and interior approach in the depths of the human spirit. It also explicitly occurs in concrete, symbolic ways in human history. When such explicitation occurs, actual things, events, and persons mediate the divine *adventus*. But the divine approach would be reduced to something contingent and conditional, if that which mediates it (the contingent and the conditional) were essentially incapable of bearing the absolute and unconditional. Miracles reveal the essential structure of reality as a whole to be such that, through grace, it can bear the absolute, because, as a whole, it is itself the graced miracle of divine love. Miracles, therefore, are not exceptions to reality so much as revelations of the ultimate structure and meaning of reality *in toto*. As the miracle of divine love, reality as a whole is revealed to be that which comes into being in divinity's loving self-offer, that which has been constitutively oriented to this offer, and that which has been made capable of cooperatively receiving this offer. Consequently, miracles do not undermine the autonomy of creation. On the contrary, as Kasper indicates, "the intensity of creation's independence grows in direct and not inverse ratio to the intensity of God's action."[58]

The final decision by Jesus (to be considered here) which reveals his religious understanding and what he was trying to do concerns his parabolic actions, which included "association with sinners and the ritually impure (Mk 2.16 etc.), his breaking of the Jewish Sabbath commandment (Mk 2.23-28 etc.) and the regulations on purity (Mk 7.1-13, etc.)."[59] The most significant of these, according to Joachim Jeremias, was his table-fellowship with "the outcasts (Luke 19.5 f.) and their reception into his house (Luke 15.1-2) and even into the circle of his disciples (Mark 2.14 par.; Matt. 10.3)." [60] Nolan, commenting on Jesus' table fellowship from the perspective of his guests, declares that "it would be impossible to overestimate the impact these meals must have had upon the poor and the sinners. By accepting them as friends and equals Jesus had taken away their

[58] Kasper, 95.

[59] Ibid., 66.

[60] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 227.

shame, humiliation and guilt."[61] Günther Bornkamm observes that the general practice of table fellowship within Jewish culture is "the closest form of intimacy."[62] As to its meaning for Jesus, Bornkamm surmises that

> Jesus parables show that the fellowship of the table is, as it has been from ancient times, a symbol of the closest fellowship with God, and a picture of that joyful age brought by the Messiah.... So there can be no doubt that Jesus' earthly fellowship with tax collectors and sinners has also a strong connection with his preaching of the coming of the kingdom of God.[63]

Jeremias shares Bornkamm's conclusion. He too interprets Jesus' table fellowship (and his parabolic actions in general) as a symbolic proclamation "that the Messianic Age is here, the Age of forgiveness.... That means that the symbolic actions are kerygmatic actions; they show that Jesus not only proclaimed the message of the parables, but he lived it and embodied it in his own person."[64] So complete was this embodiment that Jesus' parabolic action and his religious message could not be understood independently of his person, and vice versa. In word and in deed, he is the *autobasileia*, the kingdom itself.

Further justification for this interpretation of Jesus' religious understanding and what he was trying to do can be had by considering how he addressed God: '*Abba*' (Mk 14.35-36; Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6) or 'Daddy'. That address is really a shorthanded way of naming the special and intimate character of the relationship established by the divine *hanan* as *hesed we'emet* with him. That *Abba* requires a reciprocating *hesed* in which *Abba* and all others without exception, including one's enemy, are loved freely and whole-heartedly is made clear, Bornkamm believes, in Jesus

> twofold commandment of love[65] [which] is the fulfillment and essence of the entire law (Mt. v. 17; vii. 12).... Clearly the inseparable unity into which Jesus brings them has its reason and meaning not in the similarity of those towards whom this love is directed, but in the nature of this love itself. It is in Jesus' own

[61] Nolan, 39.

[62] Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 80.

[63] Ibid., 81.

[64] Jeremias, 227 & 228-229.

[65] Mk 12.28-34; Mt 22.34-40; Lk 10.25-28; Rom 13.9; Gal 5.14; James 2.8.

> words the renunciation of self-love, the willingness for and the act of surrender there where you actually are, or, which is the same, where your neighbor is, who is waiting for you. In this way and no other God's call comes to us, and in this way the love of God and the love of neighbor becomes one.... In this sense the love of our neighbor is the test of our love of God.[66]

Bornkamm's restriction of the divine call so that it categorically comes to humans only through the neighbor seems a bit gratuitous. Surely it is possible for divinity to symbolically approach and address humans in reality as a whole or in any aspect of reality, if divinity chooses to do so. In any event, reciprocating *hesed* to *Abba* requires a spiritual practice in which there is waiting readiness for the God who can freely call to humans out of the depths of any aspect of reality and, therefore, in the life of one's neighbor. And where the grace of this call meets with humanity's free cooperation, it frees human freedom itself from all that enslaves it, making humans so free that they can be unrestrictedly there for the One who can and does approach them categorically in all reality and transcendentally in the interior depths of the human spirit.

The Rise of the Christ Movement

Jesus of Nazareth, after the death of John the Baptist, appeared in Galilee proclaiming, in parabolic word and deed, a message which was rather unsettling to prevailing interpretations of Judaism in Palestine at that time. The heart of his message was "that God is present, with all his power, in the ordinary and secular events of life."[67] Or, as Schillebeeckx puts it: "The Jesus of the New Testament once again restores God to the sphere of human experience."[68] What is more, Jesus presented a God who approaches, precisely in the ordinary events of everyday life, in a self-offering love which has no preconditions whatsoever and who demands that human beings accept just that. And he "affirmed that the man or woman who accepts this unmerited love of God will be totally transformed by it."[69]

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[66] Bornkamm, 110 & 111.

[67] John C. Dwyer, *Church History: Twenty Centuries of Catholic Christianity* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 15.

[68] Schillebeeckx, 542.

[69] Dwyer, 16.

But even more unsettling than this 'secular' God who is unconditionally near in self-offering as *Abba* was this: those who heard the Nazarean's proclamation were left with at least the impression, and for some with the conviction, that in him they were confronted by one who was 'greater than John the Baptist' (Mt 11.11 – that is, greater than a prophet), 'greater than Jonah' (Mt 12.41), 'greater than Solomon' (Mt 12.42). This experience of excessive superabundance built up into an eschatological claim for some of Jesus' early followers. In him, according to Kasper, they believed themselves to be confronted not just by

> one in the line of prophets, but the eschatological one: the last, definitive, all-transcending prophet. He brings God's final word, his definitive will. He is filled with the Spirit of God (Mk 3.29; Mt 12.28).... When Jesus is seen as a charismatic and a prophet of the last times, that means that the last time has come. The painful period of God's absence is over. God has broken his silence. He lets his voice be heard again. He performs works of power among his people. The time of grace has dawned. But it was a very offputting dawn – quite different from what had been generally expected.[70]

The ancient prophets of Israel had articulated the command for reciprocation implicit in the divine *hesed*, but they had recognized, to repeat a quote from Schillebeeckx, "human *'emet* is a rarity. Therefore mutual faithfulness was an eschatological vision of the future; one day Jerusalem will be called a city of *'emet* (Zech. 8.3), a city on which God can rely."[71] The claim that somehow this expected eschatological future dawns in the parabolic actions, words, and person of the crucified Nazarean must have been quite unsettling indeed to Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, and Essenes alike.

However the Christological claim is formulated, it basically asserts that Jesus relied so absolutely on divinity's surprisingly constant and concrete self-offering in loving devotion to him that it not only met a need but also effected a fitting response from him. Consequently, divinity finds in him a person on whose surprisingly constant and concrete self-offering in loving devotion to divinity and others divinity could rely. Put differently, in him the eschatological future (that is, the *adventus* or kingdom of God) definitively and

[70] Kasper, 69-70.
[71] Schillebeeckx, 98.

irreversibly dawns as a piece of creation becomes the worldly expression of the divine Logos. Or, as Paul Tillich puts it: Jesus surrendered so absolutely to the abysmal ground of being (divinity) that he became totally transparent to it, a transparency which made it possible for him to be "the medium of [divinity's] final revelation."[72] So in Jesus of Nazareth, it is claimed, divinity gains a reliable toehold in human history and in the cosmos.

It is not at all surprising therefore that the divine self-offer in steadfast love and Jesus became so fused for the first Christian theologian, Paul (Saul) of Tarsus, that he experienced Jesus as the unsurpassable culmination of divinity's categorical self-offer in love. This led Paul to "developed a theory and a theology of the relation of Jesus and his message to the Mosaic Law, which rocked the church to its foundation."[73]

His theology neither repeats Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God nor includes much of significance about Jesus' historical life. He does acknowledge that Jesus came for David's line, lived in Palestine, was crucified and raised from the dead. But the starting-point and content of his theology is "Jesus Christ himself and the salvation based on and made available through his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his exaltation as Lord."[74] Jesus the proclaimer becomes in Paul's theology the proclaimed Christ. So while the 'pillars' in Jerusalem (the leaders of the first Palestinian Jewish Christians) regressed in their preaching to "the revivalist doctrine preached by John the Baptist before the mission of Jesus even began,"[75] Paul goes forth preaching a gospel which recognizes 'in Christ Jesus our Lord' God's *hanan* (approach) in *hesed* (love), a love which he finds reliable (*'emet*).

Paul's gospel of faith in the love of divinity made evident in the crucified Christ does not infer that Torah is wrong only that "it cannot

[72] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation: Being and God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 133.

[73] Dwyer, 27.

[74] Günther Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers 1971), 109.

[75] Johnson, 32.

be the medium of salvation in the way that he originally thought."[76] As a consequence of his conversion from Pharisaic Judaism to an alternative interpretation of Judaism (Christianity) and of his subsequent living with Jewish and gentile Christians in the Diaspora, Paul experiences "his new faith based on spiritual absorption into the risen Christ"[77] and the observance of Torah down to the smallest detail as two different paths, although he continues to favor Torah as a moral norm for community life (Rom 3.30-31). It is important to emphasize that Paul did not regard his conversion experience as a movement away from Judaism. He insisted to the end that he remained a Jew who is justified (becomes just) 'apart from works of law' by God's "grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom 3.24-25).

Paul's advocacy of justification or spiritual transformation apart from works of law predictably brought him into conflict with the Jewish authorities and with the official Jewish Christian leadership in Jerusalem, which held that the cultic and dietary laws must be observed.[78] The conflict with the Christian leadership in Jerusalem led to Paul travelling from Antioch to Jerusalem in 49 AD for a meeting with "those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders" (Gal 2:6) (that is, "the surviving followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified about sixteen years before"[79]). At that meeting, according to Paul, the Apostles not only did not compel his Greek Christian companion, Titus, to be circumcised, but when he, Paul,

[76] Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 123.

[77] Ibid., 120.

[78] Paul did not only preach a Torah-free gospel, which placed him in conflict with the Palestinian Jewish Christian leadership, he also preached that through grace a life of faith was not merely a willing participation in the resurrected life of Jesus as if that life were separated from the suffering of his cross. In this latter emphasis of his preaching, he was reacting against the 'enthusiasts'. Against the enthusiasts he emphasized that through faith we receive the Spirit who empowers us to live a life of love. Such a life while still living in bodies subject to death necessarily involves participation in the suffering of the cross of Christ.

[79] Johnson, 3.

stood up to the "false believers" (Gal 2:4)[80] so as to preserve the truth of the gospel which he received not from any human being but "through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12), they said nothing. He claims, furthermore, that they recognized that he was "entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised" (Gal 2:7), which was a tacit acknowledgement that works of the law were not binding for Christians. All of this amounted to what seemed to be a resolution of the conflict in favor of Paul's Torah-free gospel. But there was, in fact, no resolution. As Paul Johnson declares:

> The 'pillars', who had contracted to stand firm against the Jewish 'sham-Christian', in return for financial support, did not do so. When Peter later came to Antioch, he was prepared at first to treat gentile Christians as religious and racial equals and eat his meals with them; but then, when emissaries from James arrived in the city, he 'drew back and began to hold aloof, because he was afraid of the advocates of circumcision'.[81]

Eventually, Peter left Jerusalem and broke with the legalistic wing of Christianity. The principal evidence of this break was his joining Paul in the mission to the Gentiles. Johnson believes, however, that after Paul's

> initial great successes, [he] lost ground steadily. The Jewish Christians had the enormous advantage that they could draw on the resources, in men and money, of the diaspora communities. Moreover, they could rightly claim that they were led by men who had known Jesus personally and received the truth from the source. They included members of Jesus's own family, who took an active part[82]

in the campaign against Paul. His missionary work suffered in the face of this kind of an opposition.

What assured the survival of Paul's interpretation of Judaism (that is, gentile Christianity) and the acceptance of his Torah-free gospel as its standard teaching was the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and its aftermath. Johnson maintains that some in the Jerusalem church became increasingly caught up in the nationalistic revolt against Rome and as they did so the Jerusalem church "lost its

[80] This is how Paul referred to Judaizing Christians who were opposed to the "freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us" [Gal 2:5] to the Law.

[81] Ibid., 5.

[82] Ibid., 41.

Christian significance and the remains of its universalism"[83] for them. Others fled before Rome closed the noose around Jerusalem. Some went to Pella in the Decapolis, others further east and yet others to Egypt. In 91 or 92 AD, the end came for Palestinian and non-Palestinian Jewish Christianity when at a meeting of rabbis in the Judean town of Jamnia, east of Jerusalem, the rabbis (Pharisaic Judaism) banished all Jewish Christians from synagogues. With this act the break between Judaism and Christianity became official and any hope for a Jewish Christianity died.[84] Johnson asserts that as a consequence of this event "the centre of Christian gravity shifted to Rome; and the theological vacuum left by the extinction of the Jerusalem Church was filled by the Pauline system."[85]

Paul's interpretive application of Judaism in light of his experience of the risen Christ was at once threatening to the Jewish world and attractive to the gentile one. Its most obvious threat to Diaspora synagogues was the disturbance of their peace. Paul and other Christian missionaries were charged with introducing rancor into their ranks and with disturbing their services with talk about an apocalyptic end. Alan F. Segal observes that "this was not a misdemeanor...but a crime that in theory risked capital punishment."[86] But the far more serious charge, "given the content of Paul's mission, might have been advocating that Jews give up their ancestral ways, subverting and perverting Torah."[87] With regards to this latter charge of leading Jews astray, Paul faced hostile opposition not only from the Jewish community but also from Jewish Christians who charged Paul with watering down the strict Jewish rules on conversion so as to make becoming a Christian easy. Paul responds (to the Jewish

[83] Johnson, 42.

[84] Elements of Christian-Judaism did survive, especially in Egypt, and flourished in the early church. These descendants of Palestinian Jewish Christianity adopted a rather ascetic life style. Two principal points of their teaching were (1) a 'reduced' Christology (Jesus was the human son of Mary and Joseph) and (2) the bindingness of the law. Needless to say, they rejected Paul's epistles. They became known as the Ebonites ('poor men').

[85] Johnson, 42.

[86] Segal, 270-271.

[87] Ibid., 271.

Christians) in Gal 1.10 that if his intention were still to please people he would not now be a servant of Christ.

The threat of Paul's interpretive understanding of Judaism to Jews and its attraction to gentiles were not unrelated. Having understood the meaning of his experience of the crucified and risen Christ (for the most part) from the gentile Christian communities in which he lived, he came to see that 'works of the law' (*ex ergon nomou*) (Rom 3.20) were not essential to salvation. This led him to articulate and proclaim a gospel which required no religious obligation to observe Torah in order to be reconciled with divinity (that is, a Torah-free gospel). In effect, he advocated a single, new, apocalyptic community within Judaism in which all divisions would be secondary to being united in Christ, a community in which there would be neither Greek nor Jew, female nor male, slave nor free (Gal 3.28; cf. 5.6; 6.15; Rom 3.29-31; 10.12-13). Nowhere does he suggest that Jewish Christians should not observe Torah, but only that observation of Torah should not divide the community of the one and only living God (the body of Christ) into Torah-abiding and Torah-free, into Jew and gentile. However, he does insist that, with the advent of divine grace (*hesed* or *charis*) in Christ, conversion to or spiritual transformation in Christ replaces all other foundations for intimacy with divinity, including carnal, ceremonial Torah. And everyone (Greek and Jew, female and male, slave and free) stands in need of such spiritual transformation, since all are sinners. The single requirement for all, therefore, is conversion to the God revealed in the crucified Christ. This means nothing less than ongoing faithfulness or trust in Christ (that is, becoming a new creation in Christ, a creation which is continuously being transformed by the unveiled glory of the Lord into His likeness "from one degree of glory to another" [2 Cor 3.18]).

Paul's subordination of Torah to a faithfulness which leads to justification (that is, salvation as glorification – willingly participation in the divine life) was the nub of the appeal of his gospel to gentiles. They were not required to fulfill the law as a condition for justification since justification comes "by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3.28). This gospel was most clearly presented in his *Letter to the Romans* and in his *Letter to the Galations.*

Throughout these letters Paul struggles to re-think the Jewish tradition in light of his conversion experience of the unconditional and superabundant grace of divinity in the crucified and risen Christ. Although this experience fundamentally called into question his prior (Pharisaical) understanding of how divinity approaches human beings, he nevertheless sees a continuity between Jesus as the Christ and the Jewish tradition which runs all the way back to the beginning of this tradition in Abraham. He does not, therefore, see himself as breaking with the tradition of his ancestors, as ceasing to be a Jew. Instead, he critically retrieves the tradition by foregrounding it in light of his experience of the grace of Christ. As a consequence, the saving significance of the crucified and risen Christ becomes fused with the tradition of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham becomes, for him, the father of all who have faith, whether or not they are circumcised, keep the dietary laws, or observe Sabbath. Paul becomes convinced that from beginning to end and always divinity's approach is one of grace, a forgiving and self-communicating love which calls for a free response of self-surrender in faith. It is this faith which is reckoned to humans (sinners) as righteousness (that is, as graceful participation in the righteousness of divinity's self-offer in love). Through such participation, love (reciprocal *hesed*) becomes a graced possibility for humanity. And it is this love (the law of the indwelling Spirit of God [Rom 5:5; Rom 8:2]) which is true freedom[88] and which fulfills the whole law in excess; it is the freedom of God.

In his interpretation of grace, Paul never sets it in contrast to creation (as later theology would contrast the supernatural and the natural) but to sin and powerlessness. This means that grace is never set over against freedom. Even when Paul draws a contrast between a gratuitously given justification and attempts at self-justification through personal effort, grace and freedom are never what is being contrasted. The contrast is between the empowerment of human existence under the dominion of grace and its impotence under the dominion of sin. Existing in grace humans know freedom; existing in sin they know impotence and slavery. Paul therefore contrasts freedom and standing under the law (Rom 6.14; Gal 5.1-6). Thus in

[88] This seems to be what Paul has in mind when in Gal 5.1 he writes: "For freedom Christ has set us free."

the experience of grace through faith, human existence is freed in principle from all enslavement "for freedom, righteousness, peace among men and peace with God; for confidence in life; for new creation and the restoration of all things; for joy and happiness; for living and for life in eternal glory; for love and hope; for sanctification."[89]

One of Paul's most significant contributions to the development of the Christian understanding of grace is his interpretation of divinity's *hanan* not merely as a categorical approach (that is, divinity's self-offer in concrete persons, events, and things in the world) but also as a transcendental approach in the interior depths of the human spirit. Paul discusses divinity's transcendental approach as the indwelling of the Spirit of God (Rom 5:5; Rom 8). This marks the beginning of an explicitly triune understanding of grace. First, in Jesus the Christ, the Divine Logos approaches humans in a manner proper to the Logos, namely, categorically in the historical world. According to the prophetic Judeo-Christian tradition, this approach in Jesus as the Christ is not the first categorical approach of the Logos. There is prior evidence of categorical approaches. As a matter of fact, according to Stephen J. Duffy, followers of Paul in the *Letter to the Ephesians* and the *Letter to Colossians* had radicalized this approach. "The Paulinists," Duffy writes, "broaden Paul's vision and present the cosmos itself in all its breadth and depth as an event of grace."[90] Consequently, from its inception the cosmos is understood as divinity's free self-expression (divinity's Logos) *ad extra*. In Jesus the Christ, however, the self-expression *ad extra* becomes definitive and unsurpassable. Next, in the Holy Spirit, divinity approaches humans in a manner proper to the Spirit, namely, transcendentally in the interior depths of humanity's created spirit. This divine indwelling leads Paul to speak of humans as a graced temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16), as children of God (Gal 4:6-7). And, finally, the gift of the indwelling Spirit is "a first installment" (2 Cor 1:22) and "a guarantee" (2 Cor 5:5) of a future glory. When that eschatological event comes to term humans will completely sink into the incomprehensibility of divinity as they immediately see the divine

[89] Schillebeeckx, 513.
[90] Duffy, 40.

mystery face to face. In this eternal moment of glory, the Spirit of the Son in their hearts (Gal 4:6), with their completely cooperation, will joyfully cry out "*Abba*" as they come home.

Conclusion

At the end of this inquiry into 'the complicated amalgam of scriptural and theological teachings' on grace, it is unambiguously clear how grace has been typically understood in the history of Christian thought. What is usually found in the tradition is not a legalistic understanding of grace, not a legally binding contract between divinity and humanity, but a relational understanding of grace as willing participation in divine life. As such, it is characteristically understood as divinity's free offer of itself as a gift, which, if accepted by humans, draws them into the life of divinity so that they are elevated to participate in divinity according to the nature of divinity, which makes 'saved' humanity, according to 2 Peter 1.4, "partakers of the divine nature." The soteriological implication seems obvious enough: salvation entails intimacy with divinity. This intimacy or divinization, which is categorically experienced piecemeal in history, will reach its unsurpassable fullness in glory but always and only through a willing, interdependent mutuality arising out of divinity's *hanan* as *hesed* and the reciprocating *hesed* of humanity's faithfulness, which the divine *hesed* makes possible – the gift being the necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the possibility of its willing acceptance.