

THE MERCY OF GOD AS THE UNIFYING THEME OF SCRIPTURE

A Paper

Presented to

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Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for BIBST 3203A

by

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March 12, 2007

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Mercy theologically unifies the Bible because God is not only the God of mercy throughout the Testaments, but is mercy himself.¹ With the creation of man by God, each individual deals consistently with his proclaimed character; the Lord God merciful and gracious.² As this paper was coauthored, Jeremy P. Roberts wrote the introduction and Old Testament portions while Steven Kirlin wrote the New Testament and conclusion portions of the paper. Both authors collaborated to write the thesis. The purpose of this paper is to explicate how diverse theological principles are birthed from the unifying theme of Scripture: the mercy of God.

Theological Unity and Diversity in the Old Testament

Theological diversity is evident throughout the Old Testament.³ The Old Testament is a message from the God of Israel about the God of Israel⁴ and shows the mercy of God throughout the text. Despite the presence of diversity throughout the theological realm of the Old Testament, there is a fusing of the diverse theological facets

¹ George W. Kosicki, *Trust and Mercy: The Heart of the Good News* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993), 26.

² John M. Armour, *Mercy: Its Place in the Divine Government* (Boston: Bradley & Woodruff Publishers, 1961), 34.

³ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 35.

⁴ Ibid.

which results in a process of unification. As the purpose of this paper is to explicate how diverse theological principles are birthed from the mercy of God, it is extant to examine the diverse theological facets of the Old Testament as these various facets capture the relationship of God with his creation.⁵ The facets of theological diversity within the Old Testament include: the wrath of God, the parental relationship, and the decisions of God.

The Reality of Mercy Despite God's Wrath

The wrath of God is a theological facet which is evident in Old Testament passages such as Jonah 1:11, Exodus 32:11, and Zechariah 11:17. In Zechariah 11:17 the wrath of God is inflicted upon those who worship idols when it says, "Woe to the worthless shepherd Who leaves the flock! A sword will be on his arm And on his right eye! His arm will be totally withered And his right eye will be blind."⁶ The word the New American Standard Bible translated as "the worthless" is the Hebrew word, "לַיְלִיָּא/ה' יָ" which may also be translated as "insufficient"⁷ or "foolish."⁸ This insufficient shepherd had left his flock and inadequately performed his duties which caused God to inflict his wrath upon this foolish shepherd.

Despite Zechariah 11 describing a sword upon the arm and the right eye of the shepherd, an element of mercy is present throughout this text. God could have punished

⁵ Specifically throughout the Old Testament examination of theological principles in this paper, the term "facets" shall be used to describe the various theological principles within the Old Testament.

⁶ The NASB has been throughout unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Koehler, Ludwig and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 55-56.

⁸ Clifton J. Allen, *Hosea-Malachi*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 7 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 351.

the foolish shepherd by putting him to death, but God mercifully allowed the shepherd to live.

The need for mercy to coincide with the wrath of God is evident in this particular passage because if God did not reflect his mercy upon people whenever an instance necessitated itself, then all mankind would not be granted permission to exist. The account of Zechariah 11:17 shows the difference between the mercy which God gives to his creation and the mercy which humanity interprets through the mercy it shows to each other. The mercy of God is not the same as the mercy of man.⁹

The wrath of God is ultimately used to draw his creation closer to him because he loves his creation. The wrath of God is diversely present within the love of God. God is love as he is eternally self-giving in order to benefit others.¹⁰ Much like a parent disciplines a child because they love the child so does God show his love through wrath upon his creation.

The Merciful Parental Relationship

Throughout the Old Testament, it is not as if God merely does great acts, but there are unique intervals which compile the Old Testament; within the intervals God gives growth and guidance in which he allows his children to be born and proceed to grow up.¹¹ The mother-child relationship present in Psalm 131 is an example of yet another diverse theological facet within the Old Testament which reflects the theological unity of

⁹ Julian Chrosiecowski, *God's Infinite Mercy* (Stockbridge, MA: Bloomsbury Publishing Company, 1959), 17.

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 198.

¹¹ James Limburg, "Old Testament Theology for Ministry: the works of Claus Westermann in English translation," *Word and World* 1 (Spring 1981): 172.

the mercy of God. As David was describing his quieted soul in the latter portion of Psalm 131:2 he said, “Like a weaned child *rests* against his mother, My soul is like a weaned child within me.” Rhetoric such as Psalm 131:2 encourages readers to praise God.¹²

This particular passage describing David’s soul being a weaned child resting against his mother diversely reflects the focus of God being the Father. From the first verse of the Bible, where God created both the heaven and the earth, God is clearly the Father.¹³ God is merciful whether David speaks of his spirit weaning against his mother and in Genesis which reflects God as the Father. This mercy is evident through the merciful nurturing of the mother and the selfless creation by the Father.

The Examples of Mercy through God’s Thought Process

The decision-making process of God reflects his ability and even the reality of the occurrence for God to change his mind regarding a decision he previously has made. An example of this is found in Exodus 32:14, “So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.” God originally decided to harm the idol-worshipping Israelites, but he then changed His mind.

Another example of God changing his mind is in Jonah 3:10 when the latter portion of the verse says, “God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*.” Similarly to Exodus 32:14, God changed his mind regarding a decision previously made.

¹² W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 1990), 96.

¹³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 233.

Despite God changing his mind, this does not take away from his omniscience. God's ability to be omniscient yet change his mind is a diverse theological facet. Since God is omniscient, he never makes a wrong decision due to His knowledge of all things actual and potential.¹⁴ God is repeatedly responsive to his creation.¹⁵ God may make a decision to instill judgment upon part of his creation as he is omniscient, but his mercy allows him to change his mind.

Theological Unity and Diversity in the New Testament

The problem of balancing unity and diversity in Scripture has proven challenging with the advent of the discipline of biblical theology.¹⁶ The New Testament presents challenges in discovering unity among its variety of genres, themes, and writers, but a unifying principle can be located among rich diversity. Gerhard Hasel correctly summarizes unity and diversity in the Testaments: "God as the dynamic, unifying center provides the possibility to describe the rich and variegated theologies."¹⁷

As diverse as the various theologies presented in the Testaments, there is a variety of bearers of God's revelation to man. Kings, warriors, priests, prophets, fisherman, and others all served as interpreters of God, receiving revelation through

¹⁴ Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), 898.

¹⁵ T. Fretheim, *Jonah: Message of Jonah*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1977), 114.

¹⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 349. Osborne discusses the tension between the church's search for unity and the academy's search for the historical Christian religion.

¹⁷ Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 171.

direct communication, miracles, dreams, visions, and other methods.¹⁸ Revelation also involves the history behind the revelation, the community and individuals receiving the revelation, and the biblical text.¹⁹

The theological center unifying all Scripture and its revelation is God's mercy. God has dealt benevolently with mankind from the beginning of man's rebellion (Gen 3), not rendering deserved destruction but providing mercy ultimately through Jesus Christ. God's mercy, closely associated with his grace, involves his compassion, forbearance, and forgiveness presented in the gift of salvation.²⁰ The diverse theological principles of the New Testament are birthed from the unifying theme of all Scripture: the mercy of God.

The Incarnation of Mercy through Christ

If God's mercy was revealed progressively until Christ, Hebrews 1:1-2 provides a framework for God's revelation in history: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His son." The Son is the prophet and interpreter of God *par excellence*, and he is the consummation of the perfect revelation of God's mercy.²¹

¹⁸ Jac. J. Muller, "Progressive Revelation," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (October 1934): 375.

¹⁹ Robert Morgan, "Theology (NT)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6, ed. David Noel Freedman [ABD] (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 474.

²⁰ J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: God, the World, and Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 66.

²¹ Muller, "Progressive Revelation," 376-77.

The incarnation embodies God's forgiveness and compassion towards a rebellious race more than any other redemptive act in history. The Synoptic gospels (Matt 1:21; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 2:11) and John (4:42) provide a unified characterization of Jesus as the Savior and forgiver of sins, although clearly through different perspectives. Jesus' various acts of compassion also serve to emphasize God's mercy. Jesus told the Gerasene demoniac to tell his people "the great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

Unity between the Old and New Testaments can also be seen in the use of the Old Testament in the Synoptic gospels and John. The gospel writers demonstrate profound knowledge and interpretive skill when referencing the Old Testament. While God's full intention was not always understood by the Old Testament authors, the gospel writers were capable of understanding God's revelation in light of the incarnation and the cross.²² The gospels are a historical record of the life of Jesus and a unified preservation of God's greatest redemptive act of mercy in history.

There is also diversity within the gospel accounts, although there is no disunity among the essential accounts of Christ's life and ministry. The writers each use different language in developing theological perspectives that may emphasize one piece of God's mercy in relation to the overarching theme of mercy.²³ Matthew provides insight into the Jewish element of God's mercy. Christ came to "save His people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). God was merciful in sending Christ to Jews. Luke, however, focuses on

²² Darrell L. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142, no. 568 (October-December 1985): 308.

²³ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 350.

Christ as the savior of the world. Thus, Christ is “a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel” (Luke 2:32-33). The Synoptic gospels are instructive on the Kingdom of God, while John provides insight into eternal life. Despite theological diversity, God’s mercy in the incarnation unifies the theme of the Synoptic gospels and John.

The Multiplication of Mercy through the Church

The early church understood itself as the community of God at that point in salvation history and as recipients of God’s promises in the Old Testament.²⁴ This new community of faith understood that because they had received God’s mercy, they were to propagate his mercy to others through the preaching of the Gospel. God chose to reveal his mercy progressively in history and expand his mercy through the faithful witness of the church.²⁵

The church understood the importance of its historical impact in the world. Luke clearly writes the book of Acts strategically to place the growing church on a world stage. The careful historian describes ruling authorities (12:1; 24:1-2) and historical events (11:28) in relation to the church’s mission and expansion. The Gospel and its message of mercy would expand through the church throughout the known world. Bock encourages careful readers to “avoid being insensitive to the historical progress of God’s revelation.”²⁶

²⁴ Goppelt, Leonhard, *Theology of the New Testament: The Variety and Unity of the Apostolic Witness to Christ*, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 146.

²⁵ Muller, "Progressive Revelation," 373.

²⁶ Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Part 2," 313.

The book of Acts and the Epistles demonstrate how the early church understood the Old Testament in light of the revelation of Christ. Peter understood that “the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquires” and “predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Pet 1:10-12). Jesus gave perspective and understanding to the early church’s interpretation of the Old Testament.²⁷ The writings of Paul (Eph 2:4-5), Peter (1 Pet 1:3), and John (2 John 1:3) all demonstrate the early church’s understanding of the importance of mercy as a unifying theme, and offer interpretive connections to Old Testament texts.

The biblical writings of the early church also indicate theological diversity. The first Christians, like the Jewish community, believed that the diversity of the Old Testament could be unified and theological consistency could be found.²⁸ There is clearly a theology of the Spirit’s role in communicating the benefits of Christ to men in the Epistles²⁹, but the role of the Spirit can easily be associated with God’s benevolent and merciful actions towards men. The gift of the Holy Spirit is a great act of mercy and grace (Acts 2:38; Heb 6:4). There is also a theology of the cross and its implications (Gal 3:13), but Christ’s sacrifice also fits well within the paradigm of God’s mercy. The early church, while expounding on a diverse number of theological issues, cohesively propagates God’s mercy through the expansion of the Gospel.

²⁷ Darrell L. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142, no. 567 (July-September 1985): 216-17.

²⁸ John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 28.

²⁹ David Ewert, "The Spirit and the Age to Come," *Direction* 1, no. 1 (January 1972): 10.

The Consummation of Mercy through the *Parousia*

Parousia refers to “the future coming of Jesus Christ in glory at the end of the world as the consummation of the saving actions of God and as the culmination of the eschatological process.”³⁰ The second advent of Christ will be a great act of mercy in that it will fully consummate the relationship between God and his people for eternity. The Old Testament and the New Testament contain eschatological passages regarding this event in history (Isa 35; Dan 7; 1 Thess 5; Rev 21). God’s historical dealing with humanity builds toward this event throughout Scripture, indicating a clear typological relationship between the Old and New Testament.³¹ God will “wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev 7:17) and establish “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). The Old Testament’s predictions will be fulfilled when Christ returns in glory.

Theological diversity can also be found within the *Parousia*. The Spirit of God provides understanding in the relationship between present and future eschatology, a guarantee of an inheritance to come (Eph 1:13-14).³² The Spirit’s role, again, is a gracious gift given by God to his people and ties well with God’s mercy. Paul’s eschatological theology can be summarized by his own words, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ

³⁰ Kreitzer, L. J., "Parousia," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 856.

³¹ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 365.

³² Ewert, "The Spirit and the Age to Come," 16.

Jesus” (Phil 1:6).³³ In all of the diverse aspects and events surrounding Christ’s return, the mercy of God in returning for his people provides unity.

Conclusion

The unity within the New Testament is surrounded by broad diversity.³⁴ While diversity exists, disunity does not. Without unity, the various books comprising the New Testament would not have been widely accepted as canon.³⁵ The Testaments, taken as canon, do not allow critical scholarship or evangelicalism to outweigh the biblical text.³⁶

The Old Testament and the New Testament describe the mercy of God as it was progressively revealed through history. Mercy was incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, multiplied through the work of the church, and will be consummated at the *Parousia*. The diverse theological principles in the New Testament are birthed from the unifying theme of all Scripture: the mercy of God.

³³ George Eldon Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1968), 107.

³⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 374.

³⁵ Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 16.

³⁶ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 361.

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