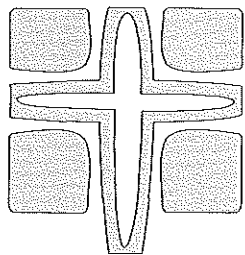


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Spring 1997

Dear Sisters, Associates, and Friends,

In the last few years, I have noticed a change in the language during the rituals for our congregational assemblies and convocations. We are not so scripture oriented as we used to be. We quote from our Constitutions and the joint statements of commitment that are the fruit of much sifting, crafting, and collaborating. We take the words of one another about our direction and our sensing of our values very seriously. They become texts we read aloud and ponder communally, as we invoke the blessing of the Spirit on our deliberations.

From time to time, I wonder how to assess this change. I am a biblicist. I am also a feminist theologian. Shall I voice my concern that we could be losing our biblical frame of reference, and the theological and spiritual consequences of this shift bode ill for us? On the other hand, I believe it is one of the signs of change in the Church that women are finding their own voice, and struggling to distinguish it from "church-speak" which has for two millennia been for all practical purposes "male-speak." Must women distance themselves from "Bible-speak" if they are to attend to and express the language of their own souls? Is this a process that must work itself out before women can return to the canonical Scriptures and take up the ancient words as a grammar that interprets their own experience and communal vision?

In a rhythmic re-appearance of the commitment of the Sisters of Mercy to hold fast to their biblical heritage, this issue of *The MAST Journal* expresses the voice of women as interpreters of the Scriptures. I suppose I share the sentiments of Moses in the desert when the Spirit was given to the seventy elders, and then spontaneously came to rest on two "unauthorized" persons. Joshua, his young aide, wanted to stop Medad and Eldad from prophesying because they didn't have Moses' permission. Moses said, surprisingly, as though casting all permissions and credentialing aside, "Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his Spirit on them all!" (Num. 11:29)

I might paraphrase Moses, "Would that all the women were interpreters of the Scriptures! Would that the Lord might bestow such conviction and competence to them all!"

Sincerely,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R. S. M.
Editor, The MAST Journal



Guest Editor's Note

Judith Schubert, R. S. M.

This issue of MAST presents the opportunity for us to explore a concept that held a special place in the heart of Catherine McAuley, namely the compassion of God. Her witty, heart-filled letters, her gentle care of the marginalized in Irish society, as well as her benevolent attitude towards her Sisters exemplify this divine compassion. In the spirit of Catherine, the title, *Sisters of Mercy*, captures God's compassion at work.

In the constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, article #2 states that we, as followers of Catherine, "commit ourselves to follow Jesus Christ in his compassion for suffering people." It is in this spirit that this issue of *The MAST Journal* addresses Catherine's special legacy through a discussion of the compassion of God as found in scripture.

Joan Nemann's article, "Understanding Catherine's Journey into Compassion," first discusses the connection be-

tween Catherine's spirituality and the biblical understanding of compassion. Joan demonstrates that "Catherine mirrored the actions and presence of the God of compassion." Carol Dempsey provides us with a picture of compassion through the God of creation in the scriptures. She informs us that to be connected to the heart of God, we must have an all-embracing love for the world.

Elaine Wainwright employs the dance metaphor to celebrate a new way of being, thinking, and viewing women in the Bible. She indicates that we, as women of Mercy must continue the dance of our biblical foremothers. If we do not, the matriarchal tradition of the dance of compassion will become a dirge. Mary Ann Getty explores compassion in general and applies that understanding to Paul's experience of the compassion of God. She states that "Paul's identification with others, in weakness as well as strength, was as a vehicle of the

mystery and power of the compassion of God."

The editor's close reading of the Samaritan story in Luke 10:25-37 demonstrates God's compassion in action and attitude. When we function as the Samaritan in the parable, God's compassionate presence can be experienced by others. Sharon Kerrigan's article discusses how the healing traditions in John's Gospel, which parallel the tradition of Asclepius, exemplifies Jesus' compassion and power. She indicates that we all need the compassion of Jesus, the divine physician.

As we ponder the theme of compassion in the lives of our biblical ancestors and the legacy of Catherine McAuley, let us heed the command of Jesus to "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

In a spirit of compassion,

Judith Schubert, RSM

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Understanding Catherine's Journey into Compassion

Joan Nemann, R. S. M.

*If God is compassion,
then our journeying into
compassion is necessarily
our journeying into God
and vice versa. The
deeper we go into God,
the deeper we go into
compassion.*¹

MERCY IS THE SIGNIFICANT element in Catherine's spirituality as she lived it and as she taught it to her sisters. It is the essential element in the spirituality of the Sisters of Mercy. A renewed biblical concept of mercy as compassion provides the framework through which to probe Catherine's understanding of union and charity, the grace of the order and the reciprocity of action and contemplation.² Further, a Trinitarian perspective of God as compassion sheds light on the integration of Catherine's spirituality of mercy.

A Trinitarian perspective of God as compassion sheds light on the integration of Catherine's spirituality of mercy.

While Catherine's writings and teachings speak of piety and sanctity in terms of specific virtues, it is now evident that more insight can be gained into her spirituality by applying the concepts of incarnational spiri-

tuality and a renewed biblical understanding of the derivation of the word mercy. First, a word about incarnational spirituality. This represents a shift from the classical philosophical world view to an evolutionary or historical consciousness which admits of new ways of expressing age-old truths. This shift from a classical consciousness to a historical consciousness provides new theological insights based on spirituality and affects our understanding of Scripture, christology and theological tradition.³ It sheds light on the power of the ordinary to reveal the holy and maintains that the incarnation of the divine into the human Jesus is the mystery which pervades and encompasses all things, and is the grace and foundation of our existence. It is the vision of life in which the entire created order is sacred.

Catherine's practice of the works of mercy, and her frequent references to the "imitation of Jesus" should be seen in this light. Catherine constantly exhorted her followers to the imitation of Jesus so that any-

one reading her letters or instructions quickly realizes that her spirituality was centered in Jesus. The word "imitation" has negative connotations for us today, but in the mystical tradition of the church, the meaning is based on a view of reality in which creation mirrors its creator, the human person is the image of God.⁴ It is this Jesus, the incarnation of God's mercy, who began to heal and to teach, and it was through similar merciful actions that Catherine mirrored the actions and presence of the God of compassion. Jesus as the Mercy of God revealed to us is the focal point of Catherine's spirituality.⁵ Furthermore, identification with Jesus in his mission and profound gratitude for the mercy of God are two major themes of her spiritual teachings and living legacy.⁶

Mercy spirituality, if it is to be a true expression of the one Christian spirituality, must be biblical and Christological. It must be founded on the Word of God, written and incarnate . . . only in the light of that tradition which is biblical and characterized by mercy can we see our spirituality clearly. Catherine McAuley lived in a precritical period of biblical studies. However, as the prophets and saints of old, she could have intuited by grace what we can know more precisely by study . . . what she may not have learned from

biblical scholars, she learned from life—the depth and breadth of mercy.⁷

The biblical roots of the word *mercy* are very helpful in revealing the extent to which Catherine's spirituality of mercy is biblical. The vocabulary in the Scriptures which we refer to as "mercy" is rich and varied. There is no one word in the original languages which encompasses the meaning of mercy as it is understood today. There are a number of words used for mercy, but the two words most often encountered in a brief retrieval of the word mercy from the original Hebrew are *rahamim* and *hesed*.⁸ The first word, *rahamim*, is from the root *rehem* meaning womb or bowels and denotes for the Jews the physical seat of the emotions. It can best be translated as compassion and has to do with the pity of a mother for her helpless child. It means to stoop down to the needy, to show compassion in view of the sufferer's helplessness.

Such compassion is not condescending, but embracing, and is peculiarly perceived as a feminine trait in the Old Testament. As such it is attributed to God as mother, especially when used with another Hebrew word, *ben*, which means graciousness. This tender feeling which is a characteristic of God, should also be a characteristic of all human beings. Further, the Bible sees *rahamim* as essential to brotherly and sisterly love and due especially to the poor. All of these qualities are subsumed in the richer biblical un-

derstanding of the word *mercy*, best translated as compassion.

Throughout her life, Catherine evidenced a tender compassion for the poor and suffering. She also encouraged her sisters to show such tenderness and affection towards each other and towards the poor.

The biblical roots of the word mercy are very helpful in revealing the extent to which Catherine's spirituality of mercy is biblical.

From what has been said about the retrieval of the word *mercy* from the Hebrew words *rehem* and *ben*, it is evident that tenderness is an essential quality of mercy, essential both to the biblical concept and to Catherine's concept of mercy or compassion. Catherine's stooping down to the needy was an embrace in loving mutuality. She was neither stoic nor condescending in her love for those who are poor. And what is extraordinary about this is that Catherine acted in this way during an era permeated with Jansenism.

On the other hand, the second word in our retrieval of the meaning of mercy from the original Hebrew *hesed* signifies the covenantal relationship with God; i.e., a bond which creates community between God and God's people. Such covenant love by definition expresses a loving relationship which requires and promises fidelity and steadfast love. *Hesed* is covenant love; therefore, mercy is covenant love. *Hesed*

indicates a profound attitude of goodness involving an interior as well as exterior commitment. It thus implies fidelity between the two covenanted parties. When linked with the Hebrew word *emet*, it signifies steadfast love. This faithful love is central to the prophet Hosea, but in

Micah it takes on a moral meaning, combining the ideas of love and duty. *Hesed* is to be understood, therefore, as merciful love, that kind of love which unites justice and love. Such love results in communion with God and with one's neighbor.

Micah does not say only that acting justly is Yahweh's will for society, not only that love of neighbor is a person's love for God, he insists that justice and love are inseparably one, that social justice is an act of (merciful) love. Only in such love may one "walk humbly with god," for communion with God is impossible without communion with the neighbor." Merciful love (*hesed*) cannot be separated from justice.⁹

Catherine's life experience shows the depth and breadth of her understanding of mercy as *hesed*. While she never studied the Hebrew text as such, and most likely never heard of the word, her obvious love of her neighbor, shown in her practice of the works of mercy, was permeated with that sense of jus-

tice and love described by *besed*. She demonstrated in her life a marvelous sense of communion with God and with her neighbor.

In the New Testament, the theme of mercy is fully unveiled in the person of Jesus who is God's mercy incarnate. Now, God shows us how to be merciful in his Son who comes not simply to heal our suffering, but to suffer with us. His ministry was one of compassionate response to the needy, yet he

necessary for such an order and for all those who are called to that order, that all may attain to the perfection for which it was designed; hence none can attribute to themselves the success that may attend their exertions because it is the fruit which God intended to produce when He instituted the order and granted the means to propagate it.¹⁰

Catherine's reference here to God's giving the necessary grace both to the order and to

also gave the means to propagate it. Could we infer from this that God will continue to give the means for its propagation, if God wishes it to continue into the future?

Of all the topics on which Catherine wrote and taught, the topic of union and charity is no doubt the most frequent. Paul's discourse on charity (1 Corinthians 13) was a favorite Scripture passage of hers. She never tired of quoting it. Furthermore, it was the basis of her constant exhortations to her sisters to "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

This union and charity, so treasured by Catherine, had its source in her imitation of Christ, in her union with Jesus "... it became and continued to be throughout our tradition a core value, integral to the spirit of mercy."¹¹

When the institute was in its beginnings, for seven years until the draft was approved, the only rule Catherine offered to her sisters was that of union and charity. She urged her sisters to reflect in their love for each other, the love that exists between God as Father and Son. This love was to be mutual and should characterize her religious as "true spouses and servants of Jesus Christ."¹² Such love for each other was to be seen in acts, not merely in words, so that "it may be truly said, there is in us but one heart and one soul in God..."¹³ She also says, "an eminent mark of Mercy is that it attributes a compassionate and gracious character to love."¹⁴ In her instructions to her sisters, Catherine details many aspects of this

She demonstrated in her life a marvelous sense of communion with God and with her neighbor.

does all to "fulfill all justice" (Matt. 3:15).

The application to the spirituality of Catherine described above is clear. Not only was mercy a significant part of her spirituality, but the depth and breadth of mercy—in the biblical perspective—was her spirituality. It becomes evident now that when Catherine spoke about the "grace of the order" she had an intuitive grasp of God's fidelity implied in the covenant relationship of *besed*.

The works of God are all perfect in the order of grace as well as nature. He never calls any person to any state or for any end without giving the means and necessary helps to carry them through all the difficulties of it; and this being sufficiently established, it is not to be doubted that when God institutes a religious order, He gives at the same time the grace that is

the individual is the covenant aspect denoted in the word *besed* from the biblical meaning of mercy. Parties to the covenant are depicted on two levels. The first is the order or congregation itself with which God is both creator and partner; the second is the person who joins the congregation. God is also a partner with that person. Further, any success that may come to the order or its members is the fruit of God's grace and the promise of God, not merely from the efforts of the members. It is small wonder then that Catherine, understanding God's faithfulness in the sense of covenant, trusted so strongly in the providence of God. The greater wonder is, perhaps, that she intuited this biblical aspect so fully and lived out of it so completely. Catherine states unequivocally that God not only instituted the order, but

compassionate and gracious love which was to reflect the divinity. Always this love was grounded in the reality of the human.

Let charity then be our badge of honor, our highest glory, the seal of our election to the dignity of Christ's spouses, and therefore, we must—to use the words of the Apostle, “clothe ourselves, as the elect and beloved of God, with mercy, compassion, kindness, humility, affability, modesty, and patience.” cherishing and maintaining this virtue more by acts than by words.¹⁵

This charity constitutes the unfolding of the mystery of the incarnation and redemption as the person grows in union with self, others and the Triune God. It is a union which is centered in God, a union of loving and being loved, a union whose fabric is faith and hope and love. It is the oneness, the wholeness which constitutes the Christian life.

It is moreover a union which cannot be understood without understanding it as mercy—mercied gift of union from God and from men, opening and fructifying into mercied giving of union, merciful bringing to union.¹⁶

It is quite evident then, that Catherine's concept of union and charity was eminently christological.

This constant contemplation of Christ suffering was the wellspring of compassion for Catherine. Entering into the mystery of the redeeming Jesus was an experience of the depths of God's own compassion. She received in this way love which filled her and impelled her to be love and compassion for others.¹⁷

Another important aspect of mercy and the “grace of the order” is the classic integration of contemplation and action. To understand this, it is helpful to look at the reciprocity not only of action and contemplation, but to relate these to the two great commandments of the Old Testament. Jesus taught that the Law and the Prophets could be summarized in two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40). But, in reality, we are all bound up in the

To emphasize the reciprocity that Catherine experiences, she mentions it at least five times in “The Spirit of the Institute” alone: first, in terms of “our own salvation and that of others”; second, “being separated from the contemplation of Christ” in order to instruct others; third, doing “the spiritual and corporal works of mercy which draw religious from a life of contemplation, so far from separating them from the love of God, unite them much more closely to Him”;

In reality, we are all bound up in the one existence of God. We are one in source and destiny.

one existence of God. We are one in source and destiny. Thus Paul reduces these two commandments to a single commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14). Compassion is the source of unity. Compassion is the uniting energy of action and contemplation.

Compassion heals this wound of dualistic thinking and acting, for it refuses to separate love of God from love of neighbor and experiences both at once . . . Compassion is one energy, divine and human.¹⁸

To devote our lives to the accomplishment of our own salvation and to promote the salvation of others is the end and object of our Order of Mercy. These two works are so linked together by our rule and observances that they reciprocally help each other.¹⁹

fourth, quoting St. Paul: “You are my joy and my crown” (Phil. 4:1), because through you “we draw down on ourselves the mercy and grace of our Lord”; fifth, “rendering ourselves useful to our neighbor and also the advancement of our own salvation.”²⁰

Reciprocity between these apparent opposites was important to Catherine, and the energy which made them reciprocal for her, which united them within her, was compassion. It was this energy which allowed her to experience God in every action, in every work of the moment, in every person she encountered.

In it [The Spirit of the Institute] Catherine insists on the need for a profound spiritual life yet shows that the works of mercy are ways to union with God. Prayer and work

flow together reciprocally: to neglect either for the sake of the other is to separate them and lose our reason for being.²¹

In the image of the dance that Catherine herself used quite frequently, we might say that the flow of this rhythm between action and contemplation was the dance of her life.²²

Surely, we can say of Catherine that she was immersed in the God of mercy, immersed in the sea of compassion.

A Master says, "The highest work that God has ever worked in all creatures is compassion" and this means that God sets the soul in the highest and purest place which it can occupy: in space, in the sea, in a fathomless ocean; and there God works compassion.²³

Meister Eckhart offers further insight into the spirituality of compassion. He notes that "only God is compassionate and so to touch our divine roots is to make contact with compassion."²⁴ According to Eckhart compassion consists of two aspects; first, the interdependence of all creatures within creation; and second, the aspect of justice.

The first side to compassion is mystical; the second is prophetic. Creating justice or compassion constitutes the ultimate act of birthing and creativity since injustice is the ultimate act of violence and dualism. But to create justice one must have experienced oneness and mystical compassion. This oneness is the basis of the creation of all things, for all things were born in compassion and want to return there. Eckhart does not get trapped in the contempla-

tive vs. action dualistic dilemma because his is truly a Trinitarian theology.²⁵

Eckhart's words reflect an understanding of the Trinity in the tradition of St. Bonaventure and the Eastern Fathers of the church. In this tradition, the Trinity is perceived as a dynamism of divine energy and love. The Trinity is the abyss of the divinity. It is not static, but is an eternal flow of energy. In a similar sense D. M. Baillie speaks of this energy of love.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity means that God is love, i.e., that God chooses not to remain self-enclosed, but to reach out graciously to humankind in Son and Spirit . . . The graciousness of the mystery we call God (Father) reaching out to us²⁶ and touching us from the very depths of God's very being . . . They called the mysterious energy that Jesus witnessed to them as love Father. The incarnation of this love in time and space they called Son, and the abiding presence of this love they called Spirit.²⁷

The dynamism of the Trinity is the primordial reality producing differentiation of persons. God as Father/Mother is the fountain-source of divine fecundity. God is creative energy. Out of this boundless fecundity, the Son is generated, expressing himself in the creator's perfect image, the eternal Word. This fecundity issues further in the procession of the Spirit as the mutual love of: Father/Mother and Son, and the gift in whom all good gifts are given. The world, in this tradition, is seen as the overflow and expression of divine fecundity.

For Eckhart, the spiritual journey does not culminate in contemplation, but in compassion. "Contemplation is not a biblical category, but compassion is the very name for YHWH and the presence of God among us."²⁸ It is in this Trinitarian tradition that we can most clearly see how Catherine lived out her call to "be compassionate as the heavenly Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36). It is within this framework that we can readily perceive Catherine's tender pity and compassion for all humankind as the divine energy of compassion present to her world. The word interdependence may not have been in Catherine's vocabulary, yet she grasped to a unique extent the brotherhood and sisterhood of all of creation. In her own way and in her own world, she facilitated their birthing in compassion and their return to compassion.

In Catherine's own spiritual journey of compassion, there was no dualism because all of creation was an expression of the divine fecundity of God; all was a reflection of the Word, God's Son; and all was experienced by her as gift in their mutual love, the Spirit. Gratitude was a large part of her spirituality. She frequently spoke about it and wrote about it.

In fact, one cannot read her letters without getting the distinct impression that there is little in Catherine's life that she takes for granted. Her letters are overflowing with gratitude, and as far as Catherine was concerned, all of life was a manifestation of the presence of God's loving

kindness. This spirit of gratitude—an essential quality of mercy—sees, acknowledges, remembers, appreciates, and receives the tender loving kindness of our God.²⁹

Her letters give much evidence that she had a grateful heart. She received all good gifts from the hands of a gracious God. Her compassion was a reflection of the divine compassion—a compassion of deliberate choice and simple act.³⁰ It was this compassion that gave her such simplicity of heart and focused her whole life. Surely, she would have agreed with Meister Eckhart's summary of the Law, or Torah, as oneness: "God-love and neighborly love are one. But compassion too is a law of oneness and wholeness."³¹

Finally, Meister Eckhart's words eminently sum up Catherine's experience of God and her spirituality of mercy, her spirituality of compassion:

*You may call God love;
You may call God goodness;
but the best name for God is
compassion.*³²



Notes

1. Matthew Fox, Introduction and Commentaries, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1980), 523.
2. Cf. Catherine McAuley, "The Spirit of the Institute" (Hereafter abbreviated SI), as found in Sister Mary Ignatia Neumann, R. S. M. ed. *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc., 1969), 385–391.
3. Catherine Osimo, C. S. C., "Women's Center: Incarnational Spirituality," in *Claiming Our Truth: Reflections on Identity by United States Women Religious*, Nadine Foley, O. P., ed. (Silver Spring, Maryland: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1988), 9–16.
4. Mary Celeste Rouleau, R. S. M., "The Prayer of Mercy: Rhythm of Contemplation and Action" *The Mast Journal* 6 (Spring 1996), 27.
5. Ibid., 24.
6. Ann Marie Caron, R. S. M. "The Pathos of Mercy: Exploring Catherine McAuley's Gospel Charism," *The Mast Journal* 6 (Spring 1996), 44.
7. Sharon Burns, R. S. M., "Mercy Spirituality and the Academic Ministry," *Review for Religious*, vol. 40, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1981): 7, 721.
8. Cf. Burns, "Mercy Spirituality," 723, and Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, Publications Office, U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1981, 56–58.
9. Ibid., 723.
10. McAuley, SI in Neumann, *Letters*, 389.
11. Mary Celeste Rouleau, R. S. M., "The Development of Mercy Tradition: Reflections Borrowed from John Henry Newman" *The Mast Journal* 5 (Spring 1995), 46.
12. Catherine McAuley, *Familiar Instructions of Reverend Mother McAuley*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Vincentian Press, 1927), 107.
13. Ibid.
14. Sister Mary Michael Lappetito, R. S. M., *Our Life Together in Mercy: Towards an Apostolic Spirituality*, (Burlington, Vermont: Mercy Press, 1980), 11.
15. McAuley, *Familiar Instructions*, 107.
16. Sister Eugenia Marie Golden, R. S. M., "Catherine McAuley's Charism of Union: An Imperative" Proceedings from the Meeting of the Federation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, April 10–13, 1969, 19.
17. Janet Ruffing, R. S. M., "Catherine's Spirituality of the Cross" *The Mast Journal* 2 (Spring 1992), 17.
18. Matthew Fox, O. P., *A Spirituality Named Compassion and the Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty and Us* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, Inc., 1979), 33.
19. McAuley, SI in Neumann, *Letters*, 385.
20. Ibid. 387, 389, 390.
21. Rouleau, "The Prayer of Mercy," 26.
22. cf. Ann Marie Caron, "The Pathos of Mercy," 45.
23. Meister Eckhart, "Sermon Thirty-One," in Fox, *Breakthrough*, 441.
24. Fox, *Breakthrough*, 47.
25. Ibid., 46.
26. D. M. Baillie, as quoted in Barbara Fiand, S. N. D., *Embraced by Compassion*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co. 1993), 24–25.
27. Ibid., Fiand, 25.
28. Ibid., Fox, *Breakthrough*, 415.
29. Mary Rose Bumpus, R. S. M., "Open Receptivity to the Mercy of God" *The Mast Journal* 6 (Spring 1996), 58.
30. cf. Fox, *Breakthrough*, 424.
31. Ibid., 538.
32. Fox, *Compassion*, 34.

Compassion: The Embrace of Life

Carol J. Dempsey, O. P.

ONE OF THE MOST consoling, renewing, and transforming words in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures is the word "compassion." Derived from the Hebrew root *rm*, "compassion" is both a divine characteristic and a human sentiment; it is an attitude and a way of life. In the biblical texts, we see that divine compassion embraces not only human beings but also non-human beings. Hence, divine compassion, as we will see, embraces all of life. And this divine, all-inclusive compassionate attitude toward life is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling; it is an attitude that is at the heart of life-sustaining, life-renewing, and life-transforming actions.

Such a divine attitude and the actions that flow from it challenge us in ways that are most uncomfortable. If we are committed to being women and men of hope, then we have no choice but to be women and men of compassion who embrace wholeheartedly the challenge of ethical responsibility, ethical choices, and ethical decision-making that will assure the quality of life for all of creation. In this way, we partake in the vision of the "new covenant."

In this vision of the "new covenant," life is lived interdependently in a wonder-full garden where the forces and the

balance of the natural world are cherished and respected so that ice and cold, frosts and snows, nights and days, lightnings and clouds, mountains and hills, all that grows in the ground, seas and rivers, whales, birds, wild animals and cattle, can bless our God.¹ The wonder-full garden is a place where:

Nation shall not lift up sword
against nation,
neither shall they learn war any
more
but they shall all sit under their
own vines
and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them
afraid (Micah 4:3-4);

where:

the wolf shall live with the lamb
the leopard shall lie down with
the kid
the calf and the lion and the
fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them
(Isa. 11:6);

and where:

steadfast love and faithfulness
will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss
each other (Ps. 85:10).

All this can happen because the earth will be full of the knowledge of God who is a God of compassion.²

Having offered a brief understanding of the word *compassion* and having envisioned with the prophets a picture of what life could look like when compassion is embraced, I will now consider more specifically the

notion of compassion as it relates to God and Jesus as reflected in various biblical passages.

Compassion and Covenant Renewal

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we see that compassion is related to the renewal of covenant. For example, Israel's apostasy is recounted in Exodus 32-34. The story of the building of the golden calf and Moses' and God's anger is a familiar one (Exod. 32:1-9). Moses' intercession on behalf of the idolatrous people is reflective of his compassion for the people.³ Yet, the story shows us that such compassion is associated with confrontation (see Exod. 32:30) and a perceived sense of divine chastisement (Exod. 32:33-35) which, in turn, gives way to divine forgiveness and restoration of covenant between God and the people (see Exod. 33:18-23; 34:6,10-28).

Compassion and Divine Wrath

Divine compassion is also associated with divine wrath. Time and again, the Hebrew Scriptures show us that God becomes indignant with the Israelite people not only on account of their idol worship⁴ but also because of their gross injustices, many of which they com-

mitted against their own people.⁵

And yet, the Scriptures show us that God's wrath is not the final action nor the final word. The prophet Micah shows us that when Israel repents—and by extension, when humankind repents—there is an expression of divine compassion:

"With what shall I come before
YHWH
and bow myself before God on
high?
Shall I come before him with
burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will YHWH be pleased with
thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of
oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my
transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin
of my soul?"
He has told you, O mortal, what
is good;
and what does YHWH require
of you
but to do justice, and to love
kindness
and to walk humbly with your
God? (Micah 6:6–8)

In essence, God does not desire some sort of sacrifice to atone for sin. Rather, what God desires is for one to live a life that is rooted in justice and kindness, and a relationship with the Divine. Such a life will, in fact, be a life of compassion that flows from a humble walk with God where we learn not only who we are and what we must do to live an ethical life wed to compassion, but also who our God is. With the prophet Micah we can then proclaim:

Who is a God like you,
pardoning iniquity
and passing over the
transgression

of the remnant of your
possession?
God does not retain anger
forever
because [God] delights in
showing clemency.
[God] will again have
compassion on us;
[God] will tread our iniquities
under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to
Jacob
and unswerving loyalty to
Abraham,
As you have sworn to our
ancestors
from the days of old (Micah
6:18–20).

Finally, it is the prophet Hosea that provides us with even a closer view into the heart of God:

How can I give you up,
Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O
Israel?
How can I make you like
Admah?
How can I treat you like
Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and
tender (Hos. 11:8).

As with the previously quoted Micah passages, this passage comes after divine displeasure with Israel on account of its transgressions. But what is peculiar here is the fact that unlike the Micah passages where we see divine compassion associated with human repentance, Hos. 11:8 presents us with an expression of divine compassion that is independent of expressed human repentance. Indeed, then, one could view Hos. 11:8 as the window to God's heart wherein lies a compassion for humankind that is independent of any action on

the part of human beings. Hence, in the heart of God is compassion, and; compassion is at the heart of God who is, I suggest, all-heart. To be noted is that l-b, "heart" is the organ central to the Israelite culture. It is upon the Israelites' heart that God finally writes the law.⁶

Divine Compassion toward All of Creation

God's love is not only for humankind but for all of creation as well. This is seen in Psalm 104, particularly in vv. 10–30. In this psalm, the psalmist provides us with a view of God as creator who cares for all of life. It is through the psalmist's portrayal of God as creator, sustainer, and caretaker of creation that we are able to see further God's attribute of compassion.

In vv. 10–13, the psalmist addresses God directly. In vv. 10–12, the psalmist acknowledges God's creative activity in the natural world, and we see how such activity sustains the natural world's creatures:

You make springs gush forth in
the valleys; they flow
between the hills,
giving drink to every wild
animal; the wild asses
quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the
air have their habitation;
they sing among the
branches.

The gushing springs and their streams provide a drink and a suitable habitat for the animals. Even though creation has an intrinsic goodness independent of its utilitarian purposes, the picture that the psalmist creates suggests an interdependence within the natural world . . . "the

earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work" (v. 13).

In vv. 14–23, one sees further that the natural world is a gift not only to people but to the little animals as well, insofar as the natural world helps to sustain both human and non-human life. In v. 14, the psalmist proclaims that God causes the grass to grow for cattle and plants for people to cultivate. Trees that God planted are watered abundantly, and in them the birds build their nests; the stork makes a home in the fir trees (v. 17). The high mountains are for the wild goats, and the rocks are a shelter for the coneys (v. 18). Even the creation of day and night plays an important part in the lives of human and non-human creatures. During the night hours, nocturnal animals come creeping out of the forests (v. 20). When the sun rises, they retreat as people go about their chores until evening (vv. 22–23).

Thus, the psalmist's song presents a portrait of a beautiful relationship that exists among all of creation. Furthermore, in v. 21 one sees that while there seems to be an interdependent relationship within the natural world, ultimately all is dependent on God, creator and sustainer: "The young lions roar for their prey / seeking their food from God" (v. 21). And so, even though the biblical text does not state specifically that God created elements in the natural world to assist human and non-human life and to be a source for sustaining both, one does wonder if in the creative plan of God, God did give thought to what could become

a home for birds, a shelter for the wild goats, etc.

When viewed as a whole, Psalm 104 attests to the creative powers of God whose works of creation become, in many instances, a source of life and protection for other beings that were also created by God. This interdependent, interrelated picture that one sees in Ps. 104:10–30 provides a portrait of a caring, compassionate God who may have known what each element would need for life, and thus, may have designed the world with this in mind while providing all of life with its own intrinsic goodness. It is no wonder then that in Psalm 145 the psalmist can sing:

YHWH is gracious and merciful
slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love.

YHWH is good to all,
and [YHWH's] compassion is
over all that
[YHWH] has made (Ps. 145:8–9).

The Prophets as a Sign of God's Compassion

Having looked at the ancient biblical world briefly, one can say that the biblical texts give us a view of God's compassion from the moment God took into account Cain's situation⁷ to the time when God intervened on behalf of Hagar and Ishmael,⁸ to the days when God heard and acted upon the Israelites' groans because they were being oppressed by the Egyptian pharaoh and taskmasters. The biblical texts also give us a view of various women and men in the ancient world who acted compassionately, as in the

case of the Egyptian pharaoh's daughter who took pity on the Hebrew baby she found in the basket and decided to safeguard it rather than destroy it, which was Pharaoh's order.⁹ Another group of people in the ancient world who are a sign of God's compassion are the prophets.

One of the divinely inspired tasks of the prophets was to upbraid people and nations for their injustices, as in the case of Amos.¹⁰ For the victims of injustice, the prophets' harsh, confronting words directed at the oppressors came as "good news," and as a consolation, for now truly God was acting on their behalf.

However, the very presence of the prophets is not only a sign of hope for the victims of injustice but a summons for the perpetrators of injustice themselves. The prophets urge them to "repent," as seen in Ezek. 18:30–32 where the prophet urges the house of Israel to repent so as not to be destroyed. Hence, God's plan is for life—for universal salvation—and not for death and destruction. The fact that prophets are present in times of social, political, and religious turmoil is a sign of God's compassion for the Israelites, for not only do prophets confront and hold out hope, but they also envision for the people what can be¹¹ while offering them consolation and encouragement.¹²

Thus, when the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah collapsed and the temple was destroyed, it was the prophets' presence among the people that assured them that yes, God was with them. The prophets, then,

are the embodiment of the divine promise that God will never abandon the people or break covenant with them, and they are a sign of God's compassion whose grace rains down on the just and the unjust alike.

Jesus: God's Compassion Incarnated

In the New Testament, the person and deeds of Jesus provide us with a deeper insight into God's compassion and what it means to be people of divine compassion.

While Jesus may be viewed in the wisdom and apocalyptic traditions, I choose to view him from the perspective of the prophetic tradition. It seems to me that the Gospel writers, especially Matthew and Luke, also tend to situate Jesus in the prophetic tradition as well. Both Matthew and Luke feature Jesus proclaiming two certain passages from the Isaian text¹³ that set the tone for Jesus' mission and ministry.

Throughout the Gospel writings, one sees Jesus portrayed as a man who cares deeply about all kinds of people. He heals the blind, consoles the brokenhearted, raises the dead, and has tremendous compassion on the woman accused of adultery. Let's look at John 7:53 – 8:11.

In this passage, we see the scribes and Pharisees bringing Jesus to a woman who was supposedly caught in the act of adultery. The woman's accusers are quick to point out to Jesus that the law of Moses commanded them "to stone such

women" (v. 5). Interestingly so, if one looks at Lev. 20:10–16, one sees that death is the pre-

letter. As with God, Jesus' ultimate word and deed is a word and deed of compassion that

"What is our role in our American society and in our global realities on our planet earth?" The answer is as simple as the question: Our role is to be women and men of compassion.

scribed punishment for both the adulterer and the adulteress. Here, according to John's writing, we see only the woman being brought to task and the scribes and the Pharisees making reference to the law as it affects women only. Curiously, after the scribes and the Pharisees confront Jesus, the gospel writer portrays Jesus as one who, nonchalantly, is able to put things into a broader perspective. He writes on the ground with his finger and confronts the woman's accusers directly: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7). Such a statement dispelled the accusers and left Jesus with the woman who was not condemned by him. Rather, she was set free and told not to sin again.

Jesus' sense of mission and ministry was characterized by his understanding of God as a God of compassion who cared for sinners, in this case a woman. She represented the most vulnerable in Jewish society because of her gender and lack of status. Jesus responded out of his heart and not out of a desire to fulfill the law to its

surpasses the imposition of the letter of the law. Would that all people have the understanding and heart of Jesus whose words and deeds reflect the love that God holds for creation with all its strength, beauty, and fragility. Compassion, then, means living life through the eyes of God which means living life with the eyes of love.

Compassion in a Contemporary Setting

The stories of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures confront us with a simple question: "What is our role in our American society and in our global realities on our planet earth?" The answer is as simple as the question: Our role is to be women and men of compassion who are willing to be prophetic. We must be willing to identify those within creation who are in need of healing and to do something actively to work for the healing and transformation of those attitudes that cause emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual pain.

As women and men of compassion, we are faced with another challenge: to be willing

to roll up our sleeves to work. Either we change or we tear down those structures and systems that are causing oppression. It is no longer enough to have an attitude and lifestyle that bespeaks of our solidarity with the poor and oppressed. The poor and oppressed do not want to be poor and oppressed. What they want is to be liberated from their most vulnerable situation.

And so, to be women and men of compassion is to be women and men of liberation who confront the issues and situations that cause poverty. Then we will be able to bring "good news" to the poor. When we work to transform attitudes, structures, systems, or to let go of that which is no longer workable and is causing oppression, then we will be able to proclaim release to the captives. And we will also be trying to set free those people who are imprisoned by their own debilitating attitudes such as power and control that are often born of pride and insecurity.

When we confront those who do injustice and help them to see that their deeds are causing pain not only to other people but in many instances injury to the natural world and its creatures, perhaps then we will be working for recovery of sight to the blind. And when we work for the whole of the common good that involves all people and all creation, perhaps then we will be helping to let the oppressed go free so that we can all work toward living life interdependently with reverence, the fruit of compassion. And because we are fragile hu-

man beings living in fragile world that is holy, but not yet fully transformed into God, we need to forgive one another as we forgive ourselves because many times, we do not realize what we have really done. If we did, perhaps we would not have done it. To be compassionate is to be women and men of justice, a virtue forever tempered by mercy, all flowing from a loving heart that knows how to let go and forgive. God forgave continually in Israel's history. Jesus forgave his enemies as he hung on a cross, enduring the pain caused by some power-hungry, wrathful people who were encouraged by fickle voices who cried out, "Barabbas" when asked by Pilate who should be released. The heart of compassion is forgiveness.

Conclusion

As we have seen, both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures contain many examples of compassion that is both a divine characteristic and a human sentiment. Both God and Jesus act compassionately as do many of the women and men portrayed in the Bible, be they Egyptian, Israelite, Jewish, or Gentile. By highlighting a few of many examples, I hope these reflections can serve as an invitation to sit with the biblical text and our ancestors who call us to take a humble walk with God so that we will be able to look at life and embrace it as God does with reverence flowing from a love that is all-inclusive and profoundly compassionate.

I close with the words of Ephrem of Syria, who I think

summarizes for us what it means to have a compassionate heart today:

An elder was once asked, "What is a compassionate heart?" He replied: "It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person's eyes overflow with tears owing to the vehemence of the compassion which grips [one's] heart; as a result of [one's] deep mercy [one's] heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation."¹⁴



Notes

1. For the exact passage for this biblical reference, see Dan. 3:52-90.
2. See, e.g., Exod. 22:27; Ps. 103:13; 116:5, etc.
3. See Exod. 32:11-14; 33:12-23.
4. See, e.g., Micah 2:7.
5. See, e.g., Micah 2:1-5; Isa. 2:6-16, etc.
6. See Jer. 31:33.
7. See Gen. 4:13-16.
8. See Gen. 21:8-21.
9. See Exod. 2:1-10.
10. See, e.g., Amos 1-2.
11. See, e.g., Micah 4.
12. See, e.g., Isa. 43:1-13; Jer. 31:31-34; 32:26-44, etc.
13. See Matt. 12:15-21 and Isa. 42:1-4; Luke 4:16-19 and Isa. 61:1-4.
14. *Hymns of Paradise* (Syriac edition: E. Beck in CSCO, vols. 174-75; English translation [with *Commentary on Genesis*, section 2]: trans., S. P. Brock; Crestwood: St. Vladimir, 1990).

The Female Face of Divine Compassion— Dirge or Dance?¹

Elaine Wainwright, R. S. M.

THIS PAPER ORIGINATED IN A remembering of Mercy foremothers and foresisters which opened the conference, "Mercy Alive," held in Canberra, Australia, in April, 1996. The remembering was placed under the banner of a Celtic song of which one verse in particular provides a backdrop to this paper and its task:

My story will not be
forgotten If you re-
member it. (Song of
Fothad Canainne)²

Participants at the conference were invited into a "progressive hermeneutic"³ of divine and human compassion which began with the telling of the stories of women of Mercy from nineteenth-century Ireland who established foundations in Australia. The "progressive hermeneutic" expanded to include the naming of divine compassion as Mother of Mercy, inviting participants into the dance of naming, the dance of the progressive hermeneutic.⁴ This paper continues that "progressive hermeneutic," and continues the dance. It seeks the face of divine compassion in women of mercy from a more ancient story, the biblical tradition. The lens through which I seek to tell or retell the stories of these women is that of the symbol of the dance and its countersign, the dirge.

Dance is an emerging new metaphor which evokes freedom, creativity, and expression of emotion! It is being used among women today to signify a rediscovery of the female body, its movements and its ability to carry meaning. It connotes a world of freedom from shackles, of liberating possibilities, spiraling out toward infinity. A moment's reflection on the symbol, however, brings to

being reencoded continually in our world.

At the beginning of an exploration of the dance of the female face of compassion encountered in the biblical story, it is therefore important to remember that the texts in which the stories of this compassion are embedded are all male-centered or androcentric narratives. The key protagonists are male and the symbolic order

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mind other images. At the time of first preparing this paper, *Pride and Prejudice* was being screened on national television. Dance was a prominent image within that portrayal of life. Men and women had well established roles within an ordered performance. The dance for the couples was initiated by the men who led the women. One possible response to such a production and reflection on this key image might be that we do not live in the era of *Pride and Prejudice*. However, it is clear that our society still carries many traces of that time, but not only traces. There is certainly evidence of social structuring similar to that in the film; it is

constructed is a male-centered order. Cheryl Exum says of such order:

Women are at the boundary of the symbolic order, the border between men and chaos. As borderline figures, women partake of the properties of a border: they are neither inside nor outside. When women are viewed as inside the border, they are seen to have protective qualities . . . When viewed as outside, they are dangerous.⁵

Such a construct of reality, however, does not pertain to the ancient biblical texts only. We ourselves, despite our initial shifts in consciousness and our articulation of new insights, inhabit a world in which the

dominant ideology and constructs still place women on the borderline. The shift in consciousness in its own way also places women on the margin, dangerous to the male-centered symbolic order which still functions so powerfully. We are, in many ways, "women out of our sphere."⁶ I therefore raise the question in the subtitle of this paper: Is the female face of compassion in our tradition (and likewise in our present church and world) dirge or dance? By posing such a question, I wish to stress that in retelling ancient stories from within a patriarchal narrative and from within life realms on the edge of patriarchy, we need to be continually vigilant that our stories, metaphors, and images do not reinscribe the gender politics which favors an androcentric or male-centered ideology in which the image of dance is ordered, controlled, and male initiated.⁷ Awareness of such a danger, however, must not obscure how vital it is for our very survival that we do reclaim our stories, draw on old and new metaphors, and dance the new dance. It is our only hope for new life, for mercy come alive in a new world which we are seeking to shape with other women and men of compassion and mercy.

Women of Dance/ Women of Song

The contemporary intuition to claim or reclaim the image of dance and song, and especially women of dance and women of song, places today's feminists in

a long line of tradition which, no doubt, could be traced back well beyond the emergence of the biblical story. Within that limited tradition of the biblical trajectory, however, the figure of Miriam, the sister of Moses, emerges as "the foundress of a

explicitly that she heard the cry of the child and had compassion on the child, that she was a woman of mercy (Exod. 2:6). In this, she is the human face of divine compassion, of the mother of mercy who hears the cry of her children. Given the

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women's song tradition."⁸ Miriam, in fact frames the story of Israel's liberation (Exod. 1:1 – 15:21) with her complicity in female acts of resistance recounted in Exodus 2, on the one hand, and her participation in female proclamation of the final victory on the other (Exod. 15:20–21). What follows is a brief exploration of the story of this woman of dance and of song.

In the opening chapters of Exodus, the reader encounters five key female characters: Shiphrah and Puah—the Hebrew midwives; Jochebed—the mother of the abandoned child who is not named at this point of the narrative but later in Exod. 6:20; Miriam—the child's sister who is likewise not yet named (cf. Exod. 6:20; 15:20); and the daughter of Pharaoh who subsequently rescues the child. Each woman in her own way defies the cruel and unjust decree of Pharaoh and begins the process of resistance which characterizes the exodus narrative. Of the daughter of Pharaoh, the text states

strong narrative and thematic links between the five women of the opening chapters of Exodus, however, each of these resistant women could be called a woman of compassion. While it might be suggested that these women inhabit the acceptable space for women and women's compassion, that is the care of children,⁹ their activity takes place in the public arena in a way which has public import. This import, the beginning of the process of liberation, is then taken up by the male protagonist, Moses, whom they rescue. The narrative strongly suggests, however, that it is the human resistance to oppression by the five women of compassion which draws forth the divine compassion: "I have observed the misery of my people, and have heard their cry . . . and I have come down to deliver them" (Exod. 3:7–8). And this divine compassion which hears the cry and acts to deliver is most clearly foreshadowed by the hearing and the acting of Pharaoh's daughter, the human face of this compassion.

It is one of these women of compassion, Miriam, who is named and whom the reader encounters at the end of the narrative of liberation:

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

Sing to our God, who has triumphed gloriously
Horse and rider have been thrown into the sea.

(Exod. 15:20-21).

Not only is she named, but she is called "prophet," one who speaks with the divine voice. She leads the women of Israel in the song and the dance of liberation. The women's music-making, dance and song, give voice and give recognition to divine compassion. But, from another perspective, that of the Egyptians, the dance becomes dirge and liberation, annihilation, a continual reminder of the power of perspective. Also, in the patriarchal narrative, the Song of Miriam and the women is overshadowed by that given to Moses in Exod. 15:1-18. This brief reference, however, evokes the world of women, a world in which a public performance role established social ties among women. As Carol Meyers suggests, such ties lead to "greater possibilities for enhanced status."¹⁰ Indeed one of their group, Miriam, is called "prophet," a significant leadership role augmented, as suggested in the text, by the roles of the other women. It leads us to ask today about the potential for prophetic power that exists in the ties which link women of

mercy in local groups, across Australia, the Pacific, and the globe.

But this prophetic woman of song and dance has her voice silenced and her step curtailed. She raises her voice on behalf of another woman, "the Cushite woman whom Moses had married" (Num. 12:1), and questions the absolute male authority of her brother, Moses.¹¹ It must be remembered that she does this together with her brother Aaron but it is Miriam alone who is struck with leprosy. She is put outside the camp for seven days and separated from the company of women. The narrative evokes the God who is on the side of Moses' authoritative leadership and Aaron's presumed innocence. This woman of compassion whose authoritative voice threatened to shift the border-

how might we retell, reclaim the story of Miriam, the prophet of divine compassion, so that her prophetic compassion and that of her female companions may move us toward a new dance and a new song?

Just as the tradition is no stranger to women's dance, song, and prophetic action, so too women's remembering of their sisters as women of song and dance and creative possibility is likewise not new. Another woman of dance and song, the daughter of Jephthah, is remembered each year by her companions, the daughters of Israel (Judg. 11:34-40). Like Miriam, her music and dance combined to celebrate a liberating victory, that of her father Jephthah against the Ammonites. We imagine her voice raised in song and her body

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line of the symbolic order, this "woman out of her sphere" was dangerous and hence needed to be silenced in the narrative. While the narrative is silent at this point about the activity of the group of women among whom she was leader, today's readers are led to ask, did they sing a dirge for Miriam and a lament for themselves? And

moving to the timbrels and the dance. And she is a young woman, a virgin, one who in the symbolic order of patriarchy, is dangerous because she is at the point of transition between father and husband. In the symbolic world of women, she is on the threshold of creative life-giving. This young woman is a two-fold victim of

male violence. The first violence is that of her father's *word*: "whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious . . . shall be offered up by me as a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:31). The second violence is that of *deed*: she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made (Judg. 11:39).

The yearly custom of the daughters of Israel is both a lament and a remembering, as the word play in the text suggests

While the young woman herself submits to the violence of the patriarchal world—"My father, if you have opened your mouth to God, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth"—she is also an agent of female power claiming two months to bewail her virginity. Her dance has become a dirge, her song of rejoicing has become a lament, a lament that her creative, life-giving power is to be cut off. It should be noted that this is a female lament, a lament for the loss of her most creative life possibility, not the male lament of Judg. 11:39 that she has not known man. We might imagine that the yearly custom of the daughters of Israel is both a lament and a remembering, as the word play in the text suggests—a lament which decries in song and in dance the violence against women but also the remember-

ing in story and ritual of women's agency and creative power.¹²

Such lament and remembering is necessary among these women of compassion because in this instance, there is no intervention of divine compassion, no divine command, "Do not lay your hand on the young woman or do anything to her." By contrast in the Isaac story

(Gen. 22:12), the angel ordered Abraham not to harm the child. While the violence of the patriarchal word and deed cuts off her life, the compassionate yearly remembering and celebrating of women, not as victims but agents, in spite of patriarchal violence, enables her memory to live. Her memory, in turn, questions us about our capacity for lament and remembering, key elements it would seem for women of compassion who do not allow further victimization of the victim by their words or their songs but rather remember and retell the life-giving and creative capacities of women cut off by violent words and deeds.

There is in the biblical tradition another woman who remembers, Deborah, the prophet, the "mother in Israel" (Judg. 5:7). She is not presented as mother in the material order

(scholars question the more typical translation of 4:4, as the wife of Lappidoth) but in the symbolic order. She is mother, compassionate and empowered, of those daughters who in the Judges narratives are victimized by patriarchal power.¹³ She is a poet, a woman of song. Her voice is not subverted by the male voice but she sings with Barak (Judges 5). She is a woman of authority, a judge, a woman of flames, enflamed and enflaming others as the name "Lappidoth" suggests (Judg. 4:4–5). She is the warrior woman whose compassion is political and she and her song invite us to explore the largely unfathomed dimensions of the warrior woman. Hers is not the paradigm of patriarchal power as in much of the book of Judges, but according to the model of female power and female compassion. Her dance has not become a dirge nor her song a lament, but they are hidden within the biblical story which exalts male military, political, and familial power and which, as a corollary, narrates the most horrendous violence against women.

Finally in this section, from a narrative whose violence toward women is much more subtle, and directed toward controlling women in the symbolic order, emerges the woman who sings of divine compassion in the language of prophetic and political reversal—Miriam or Mary of Nazareth, the one who knows the favor, the compassion of the Saving/Liberating One (Luke 1:46–55) as did her foresister, Miriam. The song of Mary is a remembering of di-

vine compassion (1:54), that compassion which brings down the powerful and lifts the lowly, fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty (1:51-53). It is a song which recognizes that divine compassion must be played out in the social and political arena.

The Lucan storyteller, however, does not tell a story of this woman of insight living out her vision. Rather, the narrative lens shifts to her son, Jesus who, in this narrative, begins his mission under a similar banner: the release of captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed, and proclaiming good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). As we reclaim Mary, woman of dance and song, woman of divine compassion, we may need to reclaim her dance of compassion that has been obscured by the Lucan narrative. What was the mission of compassion in which she was involved? To what action would such a powerful song of divine compassion have led her? Is she mother of mercy, mother of divine compassion, not only in and through her son, but like that ancient mother, Deborah, through her own engagement in the life of her people? In this way she may become a woman of compassion, a sister in compassion, relieved of the burden of divinity.¹⁴

But those engaged in the dance of mercy are not only women of dance and of song. Elizabeth, another prophetic woman, proclaims the woman of compassion, Mary, blessed among all women (Luke 1:42)

recalling their foremother, Judith and with her the many women whom I will call "Women of Word and Women of Work."

Women of Word/ Women of Work

Judith is a woman of liberation, a savior figure in the biblical narrative. Her story finds its context in the Israelite town of Bethulia under siege at the hands of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army.

will overwhelm them . . .
(Judith 6:1-4)

With their town of Bethulia surrounded, the faith and courage of the people began to fail and they bargained with Uzziah and the other leaders of the town to surrender to the Assyrians rather than to let them die of thirst. In response, Uzziah made a pact with the people that within five days God's mercy would be shown to them but if not, then they would surrender (Judith 7:19-32).

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obscured by the Lucan narrative.*

As we learn in chapter 6 of the book of Judith, however, it is not just a battle of the sword, it is also a battle of the word, the word which can have an effect in deed and bring about what it prophesies. In response to a warning about the power of the God of Israel, Holofernes replies:

Who are you, Achior and you mercenaries of Ephraim, to prophesy among us as you have done today and tell us not to make war against the people of Israel because their God will defend them? What god is there except Nebuchadnezzar? He will send his forces and destroy them from the face of the earth. Their god will not save them; we the king's servants will destroy them . . . They cannot resist the might of our cavalry. We

When Judith hears of the cries of the people and oath of surrender of Uzziah, she assumes authority and summons the leaders of the town. She speaks a message different than that of Uzziah. Like him, she claims authority to interpret the tradition, to speak the prophetic word about God's mercy but it is in a different voice:

Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia. What you have said to the people today is not right; you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you, promising to surrender the town to our enemies unless our God turns and helps us within so many days. Who are you to put God to the test today, and to see yourselves up in the place of God in human affairs? You are putting our God to the test, but

you will never learn anything! You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to search out God, who made all things, and find out God's mind or comprehend God's thought? No, my brothers, do not anger our God, for if God does not choose to help us within these five days, God has the power to protect us within any time, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies. Do not try to bind the purposes of our God, for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading. Therefore, while we wait for God's deliverance, let us call upon God to help us. God will indeed hear our voice if it so pleases.

(Judith 8:11-17)

Judith, too, remembers; she calls to mind the stories of old, retelling those stories to give courage to the leaders and the people (Judith 8:24-27). She is indeed a prophetic interpreter of the tradition for the saving of her people, a woman of word, and it is this that Uzziah affirms:

All that you have said was spoken out of a true heart and there is no one who can deny your words. Today is not the first time your wisdom has been shown, but from the beginning of your life all the people have recognized your understanding, for your heart's disposition is right.

(Judith 8:28-29)

But Judith is not a woman of word alone but also of deed. She works to bring about the liberation of their city by courageously entering the enemy camp, where she kills Holofernes and as a result the Assyrian army flees in panic. Readers

note that Judith does not go alone but takes a female companion with her. Bethulia has been saved and God's mercy made manifest in the action of a woman. As a result, the woman of word and deed takes up a song of praise to the God who liberates (Judith 16), but she does not do this alone. All the women of Israel gather and per-

deed. The biblical tradition identifies her by way of an anachronistic ethnic designation—Canaanite—a designation which functions to marginalize her, to place her outside the border of the symbolic order ethnically, religiously, and gender-wise. As indicated earlier she is, therefore, dangerous to this symbolic order, a "woman

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form a dance in her honor. Together they lead all the people in dance. Judith, like Miriam before her, leads the women while the men follow. Judith is prophet of divine compassion in word and work, in song and dance, the center point of a spiral of compassion into which we are drawn as we explore the spirit of the dance of mercy. Her compassion is expressed in the public arena of political affairs. She speaks the tradition of divine compassion and she enacts its liberating power, not for herself but for the people to whom she belongs. And she, like so many of these women of mercy, is not alone, silenced by the dominant power, but from within a community of performance, a female community, she is enabled to speak, to act, to sing and to dance.

Judith's story evokes that of another woman of word and

out of her sphere." She enters the Matthean gospel story, however, on a mission of mercy, seeking healing for her daughter who is said to be "tormented by a demon" (Matt. 15:22). Exploring this image, we see a woman on a mission of mercy for her daughter, two women forming the beginning of a female genealogy, a genealogy often missing from our classical stories and especially the biblical story, but one which Irigaray says it is essential for women to construct today.¹⁵

And for a young woman to be named as possessed by a demon, what did this mean? Was she perhaps a young woman of spirit, a young woman with a vision, a prophetic gift, one who like her mother crossed the borderlines laid out by the dominant authorities? Was she, like her mother, "out of her sphere"? It

is important for us always to ask who designates the categories, e.g., "mad" and "sane," "possessed" and "free." What we do know, however, is that this marginal woman, Justa in the later Clementine tradition, seeks freedom for her daughter, freedom from all that binds and names her. And in seeking freedom, she cries out for mercy to Jesus, the Jewish healer, the bringer of divine compassion (Matt. 15:22).

In the Matthean rendering of the story, however, Justa is not met with compassion, but with silence. Jesus did not answer her at all (15:23). The disciples beg Jesus to send her away because her cry for mercy is impinging on their world. Justa, however, is a woman of both word and action. She will not be silenced and hence continues her plea, "help me!" (15:25). She will not be sidelined and comes up to Jesus and kneels before him. Even in the face of the insult, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," she turns those same words back on Jesus, "Ah yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs!" Her words and her persistent action bring Jesus to a new realization of the scope of his mission of mercy so that he praises her faith, "Woman, great is your faith." He recognizes in her claim a vision of divine mercy for all who are distanced across borderlines and who seek the face of divine compassion. She is a woman outside the tradition, but she gives voice to it and interprets it to bring divine compassion to fruition. The

women of the Matthean community tell her story in a way that empowers them to free themselves and their daughters from the bonds of a tradition which marginalizes them liturgically and theologically because of their gender. Through their telling of Justa's story, they give her voice and they claim a place for their voice, for their action within the emerging Jewish-Christian community.¹⁶ And it is this voice and this

deeds of mercy. Although we hear little of Tabitha's discipleship, since the story of her resuscitation is incorporated into the Petrine narrative of the first part of the book of Acts in order to enhance the Peter image, we know that she was not alone. We see from the text that she shared the carrying out of her good works, her deeds of mercy, with a company of women, the widows who mourn her death and to whom

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action which is affirmed by the words of Jesus, "Women, great is your faith!" Let it be done for you as you wish. In what ways, therefore, might the dance of Justa be incorporated into the spiral of compassion, the female genealogy which began with the resistance of the women of the exodus, a genealogy which is essential to us to inspirit our new dance?

In order to continue our spiral of compassion, I want to make brief reference to two women of action, women of work who are disciples of the prophet of compassion, Jesus. The first is Tabitha who is the only woman to be called a disciple in the entire Christian corpus of Scripture (Acts 9:36). She is in the same sentence depicted as a weaver of good works (*ergon agathon*), and of

she is presented as alive (Acts 9:39-41). Surely they too ought to be called disciples! Returning again, therefore, to Carol Meyers's understanding that women who have access to social ties with other women have greater possibilities for enhanced status, we might ask how this and other such teams of women might have told the Jesus stories as they worked, worked at their weaving of good works, and hence how they might have shaped the developing tradition. Did they retain and retell the stories of women which have been preserved even though within a patriarchal narrative and with an androcentric bias? And how did they contribute to the life structures of the emerging house churches by their works of compassion, by their vision

of compassion? And how might we reclaim Tabitha and her companions so that their work and their words which were their dance of compassion might not become a dirge?

Even less visible because she is without name and because her story is but two small verses is a woman healed, a woman who is, I believe, presented in at least the Matthean text as explicitly called to discipleship. I will call her Petra. She is presented in the text as the mother-in-law of Peter (Matt. 8:14–15). Her story has been preserved in the Matthean house churches or at least some of those house churches as a call, a vocation story.¹⁷ It parallels that of the call of Matthew in Matt. 9:9. And her discipleship, like that of the women who follow Jesus to the foot of the cross is *diakonia* or service. *Diakonia* was a word of multi-layered meanings in the first century context but as it was developing within the Christian storytelling, it was used to designate the life ministry of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve (Matt. 20:28) and hence also that of the disciples of this prophet of compassionate service. Petra has no words but her work of *diakonia* even though almost invisible in the androcentric or male-centered text, can be incorporated into our spiral of compassion, our emerging female genealogy.

To conclude this second section, attention is directed toward another unnamed woman whom I will call Christa, since she is the anointing one. It is the story of her act of anointing

which is told in the Markan and Matthean texts as Jesus enters into his final struggle with those who would seek to blot out that compassion which overturns positions of power and lifts up the marginalized (see Mark 14:3–9, Matt. 26:6–13). She is a woman of compassion who listens attentively and who recognizes the moment of struggle when compassion meets destructive power. Her passion for justice, the justice Jesus preached in his last great parable—"I was hungry, thirsty, naked and in prison, I was under threat by destructive powers and you ministered to me"—becomes compassion. With healing hands she anoints, she touches. She does a *kalon ergon*, a good work, like the *erga tou Christou*, the deeds of the anointed one recounted in Matt. 11:4–5. There is, one might say in the Matthean text, a dance of deeds of compassion. Her deed is a discipleship deed, to anoint the body of the beloved one, the teacher and to accomplish this she uses her most precious resource, an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment (Matt. 26:7).

The companioning disciples would, however, make her deed a dirge—why this waste! But Jesus affirms Christa and her action—what she has done will be told in memory of her—a commissioning toward female genealogy making, remembering her as well as him. And this remembering of Christa is to be constitutive of the preaching of the gospel. What an extraordinary statement, an extraordinary commission in the midst of the

patriarchy and androcentrism of the shaping of the gospel story. It points to another spirit and also other structures. Women's remembering of Jesus and their remembering of the women of the reign of God movement both during the life of Jesus and beyond his death no doubt shaped this story.¹⁸ They, indeed, were women of word and women of work, and we find traces of their dance of remembering in the biblical text. It is our task to keep alive, to continue the remembering, the bringing to new life in the retelling that they began. If we do this, then their dance cannot become a dirge. It will emerge as a new and powerful movement in which we will be caught up into the future.

The Spiral of Compassion: Word Becomes Work Becomes Song Becomes Dance Becomes . . .

In the journey through this study, I have tried to explore some of the limitations of the dance metaphor as it has been embedded within the biblical tradition and as we might tend to reinscribe it in our storytelling if we are not vigilant. As we have moved with the metaphor, we have also moved beyond it and discovered that the new dance can be seen as a spiral which does not let us rest with one or two dimensions, one or two movements. Rather, the human face of the mother of mercy becomes visible in word

... in work ... in song ... in dance ... and the spiral moves on, acknowledging and dealing with the limitations and opening up to the limitless possibilities. It is this which can inspire a new dance of mercy in our world today and can capture our imagination, our words of storytelling, our works of compassion toward a new future for all in our world, on our planet, in our universe.



Notes

1. Insights for the approach to this paper emerged from a reading of Miriam Peskowitz's contribution to "Roundtable Discussion: What's in a Name? Exploring the Dimensions of What 'Feminist Studies in Religion' Means," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11.1 (1995): 111-115, in which she examines the image of "weaving" which has become a significant image in contemporary feminist theology. She points to the need to reevaluate feminist metaphors and tropes for the possibility of their reenacting elements of their history within patriarchy as well as liberating potential for women. The image of "dance" is likewise one that is being reclaimed but as I explored it, I realized it too needs the critique that
2. See the text of the storytelling, "The Dance Unfolds: Origins and Movements," *Listen* 14.1 (1996): 7.
3. "The Dance Unfolds," 20.
4. See Pat Fox, "The Spirit of the Mercy Dance: Mother of Mercy—a Title Reclaimed for God," *Listen* 14.1 (1996): 25-30.
5. J. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8-2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 86.
6. This phrase was used by Anne McLay in her telling of the Western Australian story, "The Dance Unfolds," 8. It is also the title of her history of the Western Australian congregation, *Women Out of Their Sphere: A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia* (Northbridge, WA: Vanguard Press, 1992).
7. This is the type of warning given by Peskowitz, "What's in a Name?"
8. Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Some Recent Views on the Presentation of the Song of Miriam," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 205.
9. See Exum, "Second Thoughts," 80.
10. Carol Meyers, "Miriam the Musician," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 227.
11. For a fuller treatment of Miriam's story, see Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," *Bible Review* 5 (1989): 14-25, 34.
12. For a discussion of this aspect of the story, see Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 66-68.
13. See Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 206-211, for her analysis of Deborah's role.
14. This phrase is used by Fox, "Mother of Mercy," 26.
15. Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 19.
16. For a more extensive exploration of this story, see my contribution, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *Searching the Scriptures—Volume 2: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 650-654; and "A Voice from the Margin: Reading Matthew 15:21-28 in an Australian Feminist Key," in *Reading from this Place—Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, edited by Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 132-153.
17. For the full explanation of this claim, see Elaine M. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew*, BZNW 60 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991).
18. For an excellent reconstruction of the development of this tradition, see Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 149-181.

The Compassion of God in the Experience of Paul

Mary Ann Getty

Introduction

It is not everyday that reading a dissertation provides a deep spiritual insight. But recently I had just such an experience reading the one on Revelation by Maureen Crossen R. S. M.¹ Maureen develops the notion that revelation as the mystery of God is a fundamental theme in the writings of Karl Rahner. For Rahner, it is the human capacity of transcendence that recognizes the revelation of God as mystery. Transcendence does not mean that we "rise above" worldly matters, but that we experience mystery through worldly matters; for example in the experience of finitude and limitations in ecstasy or sorrow, I experience the "how much more of God" (see Rom. 5:9,

(again, perhaps) from reading Rahner through the eyes of Crossen's dissertation, is that it is in the parable of everyday lives such as our own or that of Paul of Tarsus that little by little, but inevitably, the mystery of God's very being is expressed. We "understand" and therefore reverence the God revealed in our Judeo-Christian tradition in the everyday events of our lives by which we are formed and by which we express our own selves. Our lives are like parables, revelation stories. The parables of the Scriptures are stories of the ordinary permeated with the powerful simplicity of God. All of the parables are not in the gospels. Some are in Paul, even though Paul does not think or speak or write in parables. Rather, in his

strangeness, designed to evoke a response in its audience.² In an article written a few years back for *Interpretation*, J. R. Donahue, S. J. applied Dodd's definition to the Gospel of Mark.³ I propose to do something comparable, in an effort to see how Paul, in his life and work, can be understood as a parable of the compassion of God. In a parable, something we do not know is communicated to us through the medium of something we know. So, for example, we do not know about the Kingdom of God, but Paul lifts the veil on that reality by showing us God at work in his own all-too-human life experience. After we have become comfortable with the analogy, the comparison of the unknown with the known, a parable also presents a "twist," a surprise in its strangeness, which causes us to look deeper; we are encountering mystery here. There is a previously unknown dimension which is the real point of the parable—to bring us beyond the ordinary, to show us the "more" of God. For Paul, this is the compassion of God revealed in the unexpected in Paul's life. This unexpected is understood in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ, especially in the cross of Christ. Let us consider, then, approaching the life and ministry of Paul as a parable of the compassion of God.

One of the deepest truths of revelation, emphasized in the Old and the New Testament, is that the mystery of God is best expressed in the compassion of God.

10, 15, 17), or to use Rahner's expression, the "incomprehensible mystery."

One of the deepest truths of revelation, emphasized in the Old and the New Testament, is that the mystery of God is best expressed in the compassion of God. What I learned

life and mission, Paul is a parable by which we better understand the creative power of the compassion of God.

A parable, to paraphrase the classic definition of C. H. Dodd, is a metaphor or simile, taken from nature or common experience, arresting in its

Compassion is a complex reality, something we have all probably experienced at one time or another, but something difficult to articulate and, sometimes, even to recognize.

I began research for this article by asking around among friends, "What does compassion mean to you?" Some said "sympathy" or a "feeling of pity." One etymologist remembered that the Latin was a compound of *com* (meaning "with") and *patior* (meaning "endure, undergo, suffer"). Thus the dictionary gives the meaning, "sorrow for the sufferings or troubles of another." But something was still missing. A priest colleague wondered aloud about assigning as much positive value to suffering as Christians sometimes are wont to do. "What is so good about suffering? Hitler probably suffered as much as many others," he remarked. Compassion has to be more; it has to involve the desire and probably the capacity to help.

"Mercy" came to mind so I looked that up, too, remembering that it is from the Old French *merces*, meaning "a payment or reward." A further sense is "kindness in excess of what may be expected." Now we seem to be getting somewhere. Compassion connotes a kind of power to be generous and gracious. I thought of the surprising command of Jesus in Luke's account of the Sermon on the Plain: "Be compassionate (or merciful) as your heavenly father is compassionate" (6:36). How could poor mortals be expected to obey such a command? Graciousness does

not seem to come naturally to us. We are limited in that we think almost reflexively of retaliation and revenge: "An eye for an eye," we understand. The instinctual version of the "gold-

and God's compassion by definition has no definition or limit. God's compassion, like other attributes, is open-ended. It is communicated in such events as miracles and parables which are

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en rule" is "Do unto others as we think we have been done to."

Matthew provided us with an image to help us understand Jesus' command to imitate God in compassion. Matthew has Jesus say, "Love your enemies . . . that you may be children of your heavenly Father who makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and unjust . . . so be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matt. 5:45-48). God's compassion is God's perfection. We could substitute the idea of integrity and thus understand Matthew's mini-parable about the sun and the rain to show us that God does not react to us as we deserve. Rather, God has integrity. God's sun shines and God's rain falls, whether people deserve them or not. God is God, the God of compassion. God's actions are not reactions to human merit.

Yet there is at least one fallacy in trying to approach a paper on "the compassion of God" by defining terms. A definition means to "put limits on,"

understood as so many stories of faith. But the compassion of God cannot be reduced to any set terms or formulae. Like love, each person may think she can recognize compassion or that he already knows what compassion is. But there will always be something more because compassion is blessing, grace, an experience of mercy and healing which grows by being shared. The only limits to this topic, then, are the lens through which I choose to view it and my own limitations in expressing it. The lens I have chosen to speak about the compassion of God is the experience of Paul the Apostle; my limitations are everywhere and obvious.

A parable is a comparison, a metaphor or simile, taken from common experience . . .

How did Paul know what compassion was? Paul knew of the compassion of God from his encounter with Christ. We cannot take this seriously enough.

I recently reread an important book on Paul, *Becoming Human Together*, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor which eloquently insists on this basic point.⁴ Murphy-O'Connor notes that

down we all believe that humanity can do what humanity has done . . . Even though we knew it was theoretically possible to reach the moon, a lingering doubt remained until Armstrong actually walked on its surface . . . The fear of

What was different about Paul is that he interpreted and understood all reality in relation to his experience of Jesus Christ.

in approaching reality, we naturally tend to begin with ourselves and proceed from there, evaluating, understanding and interpreting all else in relation to us and our experience. What was different about Paul is that he interpreted and understood all reality in relation to his experience of Jesus Christ. And this made all the difference. Murphy-O'Connor's point is so important that we quote him at length:

(Paul's) understanding of the distinctive characteristic of authentic existence is derived, not from a theoretical approach to human nature, but from his contemplation of an historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth. What (Paul) saw revealed in him became the norm that he used in judging all others.

This point must be emphasized because it is the only evidence we have that the creativity which characterizes authentic existence is *really possible*. Had Jesus not demonstrated such love under the conditions of normal life there would be no guarantee that it was not a utopian illusion, beautiful in theory but impossible in practice. Deep

what might happen to the human body if it ran a mile in four minutes was banished only when Bannister did it. What happened when such breakthroughs were made? A different mental attitude was immediately generated. Individuals were released from the inhibition of the impossible . . . A new energy was released by the demonstration of a higher standard.

To propose as the criterion of authentic humanity a love which continuously reaches out to empower others could be as unrealistic as a suggestion to imitate the exploits of Superman, if we did not know that at least one individual had demonstrated this possibility. Because he lived under the same historical conditions of time and space as we do, the mode of existence displayed by Jesus Christ remains a perpetual challenge to an attainable standard."⁵

Paul knew, then, of the compassion of God from his encounter with Christ experienced as a "call" to become apostle to the Gentiles. Like many other biblical characters, Paul heard this "call" and it changed the course of his life. The notion of call is downright commonplace in the

Bible. Although Luke describes this as a "conversion," Paul does not use this term or this idea. Interpreters emphasize the difference. Luke sees the Damascus event as effecting a "change of heart," a "turn around." This could be confusing to the modern reader who, upon reflecting on her own experience, might understand conversion to involve a certain circumspection and even guilt or regret about what went on before. If a person is "right" in converting, how about her preconversion state? In the instance of Paul, what did he convert from and to what? The language of conversion does not really fit the experience as Paul saw it. Rather, Paul uses the language of Jeremiah to describe what happened to him. Paul says,

[God], who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might preach him to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15-16).

Anyone acquainted with the OT would know that Paul is inspired by the experience Jeremiah describes of his own call:

The word of the Lord came to me thus: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.

(Jer. 1:4-5)

Neither Jeremiah nor Paul linger on the possibilities of self-absorbing thoughts such as regret or guilt for their lives before the call as they might if they had merely experienced a "change of heart" or conversion. Rather, they both attribute

the revelation and its timing to God. According to Paul, what God revealed was "his Son" who makes all the difference in Paul's life.

But seen as a call, Paul's experience strikes us as something ordinary, biblically speaking, and even expected. Paul, after all, was a very religious person. He did not pull any punches when he reviewed his past zeal for the law. Indeed, he had been "blameless" according to the law, so dedicated was he to live it perfectly (Phil. 3:6). He distinguished himself as a zealous persecutor of Jewish-Christians whom he saw as threatening the authority of the law (Gal. 1:13-14). And so it makes good sense that someone like Paul would be chosen as bearer of God's revelation. So far it seems, Paul's story is predictable, expectable. Paul is a likely candidate and is chosen in the regular biblical way.

. . . arresting in its strangeness . . .

It seems reasonable from what we have said so far that if Jesus is the revelation of the compassion of God and God was "seized" by this revelation (1 Cor. 9:16), then Paul would emerge as a warm and compassionate person, the perfect picture of the Franciscan prayer, "Make me an instrument of peace." But this is not the case, as anyone who knows Paul could tell us. The really significant thing about a parable is the "twist," the paradox, the built-in irony where expectations are turned upside down. That twist is designed to stir a reaction of

acceptance or rejection of the piquant teaching of the parable. We have said that Jesus Christ is the center of revelation for Paul, but even here there is a twist. It is not so much the life of Jesus but Jesus' death that reveals to Paul the power of this revelation. The cross that seems to be scandal and folly became for Paul power and wisdom.

This "twist" can be seen also in the way Paul himself experienced and lived the mes-

It is pretty clear from his own writings that Paul was not naturally what we may think of as a "soft and fuzzy, teddy-bear" kind of person who just exuded all kinds of pity for the misery of others. In his pre-Christian days, for example, Paul did not appear all that compassionate about the plight of the persecuted Christians. In fact, he was so fanatically righteous in his religious convictions that he decided, to paraphrase an expres-

It is pretty clear from his own writings that Paul was not naturally what we may think of as a "soft and fuzzy, teddy-bear" kind of person who just exuded all kinds of pity for the misery of others.

sage. What in Paul's life taught him that Jesus is, in the words of Monika Hellwig, the "compassion of God"? The short answer is that Paul learned the compassion of God in the power of God, released and revealed by the death of Jesus, the paradox of the event which Paul refers to as the "cross of Christ." Jesus' death "for us" is the expression of the compassion of God. It is for us, as an early interpreter of Paul points out in his letter to the Colossians, "to fill up in our bodies what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (see Col. 1:24). So how did Paul do this and thus show us how? Paul learned the compassion of God expressed in the cross of Christ, in his personal experience and translated this message in his mission.

sion from the Vietnam War era, to "destroy the Christians in order to save them." Becoming a Christian himself seems not to have changed Paul's sandpaper personality, at least not in the beginning. For instance, Paul fought verbally and publicly with Peter. In addition, Paul seems not to have gotten on all that well with the better-liked Apollos. Even Paul's long friendship with Barnabas does not spare the latter Paul's ire in Antioch. Luke picks up on Paul's reputation for being difficult, reporting that, despite the victory represented by the Jerusalem Council, the second missionary journey is at least momentarily threatened by a clash between Paul and Barnabas over the relatively insignificant issue of whether John Mark should accompany

them. No, "getting along" easily with people was not something that came naturally to Paul. In a word association test, we probably would not connect Paul with compassion.

Paul certainly implies an answer to his rhetorical question to the Galatians about whether he seeks to please God or human beings when he says about those seeking to

Paul's call did not effect a personality change, but that did not mean that Paul did not respond wholeheartedly.

The famous section of the second letter to the Corinthians where Paul catalogs his strengths and weaknesses supports this realization that his understanding of Jesus as the compassion of God did not turn Paul into someone "meek and mild." Paul uses sarcasm to attack those who think that their apostolic credentials are greater than his. Paul compares himself to them saying,

For I think that I am not in anyway inferior to the "super-apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5).

And a little further on Paul continues:

For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, who masquerade as Apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. So it is not strange that his ministers also masquerade as ministers of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.
(2 Cor. 11:13-14)

Paul may insist that he has made himself a "slave" to all in order to win over as many as possible (see 1 Cor. 9:19-27), but he is first of all a slave to Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:10).

"Judaize" the Gentiles, "I hope the knife slips!" (Gal. 5:12; see Phil 3:2).

. . . designed to evoke a response . . .

So Paul's call did not effect a personality change, but that did not mean that Paul did not respond wholeheartedly. Paul was as zealous (maybe we could even say "fanatical") after his conversion as before. His negative personality traits, like his temper and his intolerance at Peter's vacillations, for example, (see Gal. 2:11-14) were not softened but were quite possibly heightened by Paul's call. Now he finally understood that he had a significant role in the mission of the church and he could brook no compromise with that. Indeed, the personality difficulties Paul himself describes are somewhat aggravated by the urgency of the consequences of his encounter with Christ.

So Paul was not by nature "compassionate" or a "soft touch," nor did his calling make him so. But everyone knows that compassion can coexist with righteous indignation. In my search for root meanings I

was reminded that *patior* is a "deponent verb" which everyone will remember is "passive in form, active in meaning." If "suffer" and "undergo" or "endure" seem too passive for Paul, it may be that we have forgotten that "passion" is one of the most active, most personal and engaged forms of human self-expression. We *can* readily relate the root word "passion" to Paul whom we could never accuse of indifference. Paul cared, certainly. He was often angry and urgent; he was by nature passionate. He was probably even opinionated; we might even be able to concede bull-headed. Yet when it counted, when it involved the gospel and was a matter of his mission, Paul was most surely also compassionate. He can identify with the limitations, the foibles, the pain of others. And no one can deny that he had the desire to help; did that include the "power" to help? Again, we examine Paul on Paul, his experience in his own words.

One example is how Paul introduces his attack on the "superapostles," appealing to them to change their attitude and behavior. With moving emotion, Paul says, "Now I myself, Paul, urge you though the gentleness and clemency of Christ . . ." (2 Cor. 10:11). The imprisoned Paul similarly implores the Philippians: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any compassion and mercy . . . complete my joy by being in the same mind . . . that is in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:1-2, 5).

For all of his confidence in his authority and his boldness in the gospel, Paul expresses a

disarming vulnerability to the communities he serves. Again to the Corinthians he says,

About myself I will not boast, except about my weaknesses . . . that I might not become too elated, a thorn of the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2 Cor. 12:5-10)

Paul begs the Corinthians to look beyond his ineloquence and his unimpressive physical presence (2 Cor. 10:10). He urges them to get past the resentment at supposed wrongs (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:23-2:11). Paul insists: "It was out of much affliction and anguish of heart that I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you might be pained but that you might know the abundance of the love I have for you (2:4)."

So compassion is a vital part of Paul's own experience and the experience of receiving

the gospel. God acts out of compassion in revealing Jesus. Most of the Pauline occurrences of terms for compassion and mercy are references to God or Christ. In Rom. 9:15-16, for instance, Paul quotes Exod. 33:19, reminding the Romans of God's words to Moses: "I will show mercy to whom I will. I will take pity on whom I will. So it depends not on a person's will or exertion, but on God's who shows mercy."

God's mercy is shown also in the call of Paul who is "one born out of time," unworthy to be called an apostle, the "least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle" (1 Cor. 15:8-9), but an apostle nonetheless. And God's gracious mercy in Paul's life has not been in vain (see 15:10). Yet, while Greek terms for "mercy" or "compassion" occur throughout Paul's writings, they cannot be called major themes. Nevertheless, compassion and mercy are central to Paul's message to the communities he addresses in his letters. Christians are responsible for expressing compassion as an appropriate response to the suffering of others in keeping with their own experience of God. Disciples are those who have experienced mercy. Paul admonishes the Romans as the basis for the

ethical part of the letter: "I urge you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

God's mercy and compassion empower the Christians to live a life worthy of the gospel.

The same Paul who defends so vigorously his own call, mission and authority, also appears quite ready to overlook and move beyond human frailty both in himself and in others. Thus compassion became for Paul the only appropriate response to the gospel. For example, as Paul contemplates the splendor of his ministry in 2 Corinthians, he finds it necessary to respond to those who pride themselves in being the successors of Moses. Paul recalls the description of Moses' face as he descended the mountain after speaking with God. Returning to the Israelites after his face-to-face encounter, Exodus 34 tells us, Moses had to veil his face so that the passing glory of the reflection would not blind the Israelites! Paul says that if such splendor accompanies the "old covenant" (2 Cor. 3:14), what can we say about the new covenant and its ministers? In short, Paul answers that the surpassing splendor of ministry to the new covenant is not an occasion of pride but one for reflecting on the compassion of God. Paul

Christians are responsible for expressing compassion as an appropriate response to the suffering of others in keeping with their own experience of God.

contextualizes his reflections on Exodus 34 with a consideration of his own ministry experience. Paul asks rhetorically,

Paul learned through his own experience that compassion means trust, courage, and confidence well placed, not in himself but in God.

"Who can be qualified for this?" (2 Cor. 2:16). As "qualifications," Paul then reviews his own inadequacies and failings: he has endured afflictions and persecutions of all kinds. He is carrying around in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in my body" (4:8-10). Paul summarizes these thoughts on the compassion of God by which he is empowered to be a minister of the gospel, saying, "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us" (4:7). And everyone may know the source of this power, we could add.

The imprisoned Paul speaks from the heart in saying to the Philippians:

Of course, some preach Christ from envy and rivalry, others from good will. The latter act out of love, aware that I am here for the defense of the gospel; what difference does it make, as long as in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed? And in that I rejoice (Phil 1:15-18).

We can picture the understandable frustration of the man Paul in prison, helpless and

powerless despite the urgency of the mission he felt responsible for continuing. It would be salutary to picture ourselves in

a comparable situation. We have all at one time or another found ourselves somehow hindered from doing the work we felt compelled to do; laid up by an injury or illness perhaps, sidetracked by the needs of friends or family members, derailed by an unexpected malaise or circumscribed by hostile forces. Consider how completely Paul must have integrated what he learned about the compassion of God to be able to say, "What difference does it make as long as in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed?" (Phil. 1:18). Similarly, after all the ranting and raving earlier in Galatians, Paul comes to the conclusion that "all that matters is that you are created anew" (Gal. 6:15).

It was the compassion of God that led Paul to accept his call to be apostle to the Gentiles. The Pharisee of strict observance could never have come up with this idea on his own. Unless he was grounded in the compassion of God, Paul's testimony to the Corinthians about becoming "all things to all people" would seem like gross hypocrisy (1

Cor. 9:19-25). Paul's identification with others, in weakness as well as strength, was as a vehicle of the mystery and power of the compassion of God. Paul learned through his own experience that compassion means trust, courage, and confidence well placed, not in himself but in God. After all, it is the "compassion of God" which is the stuff of the gospel Paul preached and handed on to us. Paul's life and work represent a sort of "parable," teaching us the compassion of God. Whether we learn the deep meaning of this parable depends on how open we are to the power of the "twist," the unexpected and the strangeness of God's ways which defy all our limits. We ought sometimes to consider the importance of our response—for we ourselves are challenged to be a parable of the compassion of God for others. That's how revelation works.



Notes

1. Maureen Crossen, *Catholic Theology of Revelation and the Hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur*, Duquesne University, Spring, 1997.
2. C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*. London: 1932, p. 16.
3. See "Jesus as the Parable of God in the Gospel of Mark," 1984, pp. 369-386).
4. Jerome Murphy O'Connor's *Becoming Human Together. The Pastoral Anthropology*. A Michael Glazier Book. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

A Reflection of the Compassion of God

Judith Schubert, R. S. M.

THE STORY OF THE GOOD Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) evokes feelings of empathy against cruel mistreatment and indifference from others. Most of all, however, the narrative accentuates the compassion of God as portrayed through the behavior of the Samaritan. Subsequently, it calls the reader to action in the form of loving compassion towards others.

This beloved story appears only in the Gospel of Luke. Therefore, it teaches many Lukan lessons. For example, the parable demonstrates the limitless boundaries of “neighbor,” as well as the need to respond selflessly towards anyone in need. For Luke, God’s mercy cannot be limited to any one religious or ethnic group.

Likewise, this popular story teaches society at large how it is to treat outcasts in its midst. To appreciate how Luke 10:25–37 exemplifies the boundless compassion of God depicted in this story, I shall address four topics in the article: the importance and context of the story of the Good Samaritan in relation to the gospel of Luke; the situation between the Jews and Samaritans of the first century; an analysis of Luke 10:25–37; and, the effect of the parable upon our lives.

The Context of the Story in Luke

Luke places the story of the Good Samaritan at the beginning of Jesus’ long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. In the third gospel, the journey began in Luke 9:51, “And he [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This last journey of Jesus ended in his murder. Luke sets this intense story about a Samaritan and a Jew at the beginning of Jesus’ journey. By doing so he may indeed reflect an immediate concern for the outcasts of society, and perhaps for Jesus himself, who will soon be an outcast.

Throughout the third gospel, Luke portrays Jesus as the reflection of God’s compassion. Jesus preaches forgiveness and calls his followers to transform their hearts, particularly from prejudices against other people who may differ in religion, gender, and heritage. Therefore, when Jesus makes the Samaritan a paradigm for the way one is to act compassionately towards others, he breaks all boundaries of narrow-mindedness towards targeted people in society. How does Jesus do this?

To appreciate the radical stance that Jesus takes in his tale about a Samaritan hero, it is necessary to comprehend the tense and entrenched attitudes

of the Jews about the Samaritans. Recall that the Jews in the time of Jesus considered the Samaritans to be heretical in their beliefs. Thus, they were seen as unfaithful to Jewish traditions.

Samaritans were descendants of intermarriage between Israelites from the former northern kingdom and pagan foreigners. The Assyrians settled these pagan strangers in Samaria to repopulate it after they conquered the region hundreds of years earlier. Therefore, the Jews did not see the Samaritans as true Israelites. Despite this view, the Samaritans believed themselves to be true inheritors of the Mosaic covenant.

Furthermore, some of the religious beliefs of the Samaritans differed from those of Judaism. For instance, while many Jews, especially the Pharisees, held all of the Hebrew Bible (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) to be authoritative, the Samaritans considered only the Torah sacred. Due to their religious disagreements and other tense incidents that occurred throughout the years, the Jews and Samaritans became very divided. By the time of Jesus, Jews had no contact with Samaritans. They looked down upon these so-called heretics with great disdain.

With this brief history of the two groups in mind, let us look carefully at Luke's story.

Analysis of the Parable

The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) contains three parts. The first part (vv. 25–28) parallels Mark 12:28–34 and Matt. 22:34–40 in that both Mark and Matthew also present what may be called the double love commandment, i.e., to love both God and neighbor. The two other parts

lawyer and Jesus' admonition to him.

The story commences when a Jewish lawyer attempts to trick Jesus with a question about salvation: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, who must have sensed that the Pharisee's motive was not sincere, avoids a direct answer. Instead, he responds with another question, namely, "what is written in the Law?" The lawyer, well versed in the Jewish Law, easily responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your

him, "You have given the right answer, do this and you will live" (v. 28). If the lawyer had listened carefully to Jesus, he would have realized that, in this instance, the neighbor is Jesus himself!¹ Thus, in his response, Jesus offers the lawyer a chance to change his hostility so that he may have true life, that is, life from God. However, it appears that the man did not listen to the words of Jesus. Instead, his concern was "to justify himself." Consequently, the lawyer proposes another question to Jesus, namely, "Who is my neighbor?"

From the outset, the reader detects the sharp contrast between the hostile lawyer and the compassionate Jesus. Rather than ignore the suspicious questions of the lawyer, Jesus listens openly to him. Then, he skillfully replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this way Jesus enlightens both the lawyer and the audience on the topics of love and neighbor with one important difference, namely the understanding of who is our neighbor.

Who Is the Neighbor?

When the lawyer asked his last question, he centered on "neighbor" as the object of one's love. Essentially, the lawyer views "neighbor" as the one to whom something is given or done. He defines "neighbor" as the receiver of the action rather than the giver. According to popular Jewish tradition and the *balakab*,² "neighbor" includes every Israelite, but not a non-Israelite, such as a Samaritan or a Gentile.³

If the lawyer had listened carefully to Jesus, he would have realized that, in this instance, the neighbor is Jesus himself!

of the story (Luke 10:30–37) are Luke's creations.

The three parts of Luke's narrative can be recognized in the following verses. Verses 25–28 contain the lawyer's two questions to test Jesus about eternal life, namely, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" and "Who is my neighbor?" Verses 30–35 present the parable of the Good Samaritan itself. This parable functions as Jesus' answer to the lawyer's second question, "Who is my neighbor?" Finally, vv. 36–37 concludes the story. These verses comprise Jesus' question to the lawyer, "Who of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man, who fell into the hands of the robbers?" as well as a response by the

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Here the lawyer quotes two separate commands from the Hebrew Bible, Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18b. The excerpt from Deut. 6:5 about love of God is part of the daily prayer of Jews known as the *Sh'ma* ("Hear, O Lord"). Therefore, these words remain very familiar to any Jewish audience. The second excerpt in Lev. 19:18b about love of neighbor would also be familiar to Jesus' audience.

When Jesus hears the correct answer from the lawyer, he attempts to end the conversation with the mandate to act on these commands. He says to

This limited definition would regard the command of love of neighbor as extending only to fellow Jews. Such beliefs reflect the narrow interpretation that was given to the Law. To break such barriers, Jesus provides a story about a hated enemy who exemplifies the true meaning of "neighbor."

The parable commences in v. 30 with a Jewish man's journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. During the time of Jesus these two cities were Jewish strongholds. Seventeen miles east of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jericho was heavily populated with Priests and Levites. The steep descent from Jerusalem to Jericho was surrounded by desert hills and deep wadis, an ideal hiding place for robbers to ambush travelers.⁴

Such attacks were common occurrences, not only in ancient times but throughout the centuries.⁵ Therefore, it was no surprise to the audience when Jesus stated that robbers left the man for dead. The Jewish victim desperately needed help. On the part of the robbers, it was probably a mere accident that any life remained in the man. The phrase "leaving him half-dead" is essential to the parable. Without touching the man, no passerby would be able to determine the condition of the traveler.

As Jesus continues the story, he reveals to a surprised audience the three possible rescuers who approached the crime scene. The main figures are the three travelers who come upon the wounded man. Here Jesus uses the literary schema of three persons to

make his point. Throughout his gospel, Luke employs this literary format of three characters in other stories. Examples in the gospel include such narratives as the account about Martha and Mary that follows the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:38–

side." They did not touch the victim to investigate his condition. In this instance, while the two religious leaders were a success in Jewish society, they were failures as compassionate neighbors.⁸ Although the first two travelers had the opportu-

The phrase "leaving him half-dead" is essential to the parable. Without touching the man, no passerby would be able to determine the condition of the traveler.

42), the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the narrative of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), etc.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the first two travelers, a Jewish priest and a Levite, held prominent positions in the religious society of Judaism. Priests were divided into different groups and worked in weekly shifts in the temple. They presided over the daily sacrifices, morning and evening prayer, Sabbath and festival rituals in the Jerusalem Temple.⁶ Levites were considered to be a lower class of priestly status. They assisted the priests in that they prepared some offerings, cleaned sacred vessels, and kept the courts of the temple in order.⁷

Thus, the audience would suppose that their religious leaders would certainly come to the aid of this poor victim. Nonetheless, Jesus reports that when they saw the beaten man, they "passed by on the other

nity to demonstrate true hospitality, they declined. Why did they behave this way?

Exploring the Reasons for Avoidance

The notion of being robbed may have been a possible motive to neglect a victim. Another tendered argument presented to solve the merciless behavior of the priest and Levite is based on prescriptions such as those found in Lev. 21:1 or Num. 19:11. These two biblical texts state that contact with the dead rendered an Israelite unclean. If this were the case, both the priest and Levite would be unable to perform their duties at the Temple.

However, Luke's statement in v. 30 that the priest was "going down that road" suggests that he was leaving Jerusalem. Apparently, his sacred duties were finished. In this case, he would be under no obligation to avoid physical

contact with the victim. In some way, then, the argument is rendered suspect.

Moreover, it seems as if the priest left not only the physical place of Jerusalem, but he departs from a spiritual center, a prominent place of holiness as

tan story of dialogue and parable.

After Jesus described the failure of the first two Jewish leaders to assist a fellow Jew in need, he proceeded to describe the third traveler on the road. As the audience listens to Jesus,

The audience's anticipation must have heightened about the third person; someone like themselves would surely save the day

well. The actions of the priest and Levite neither match the integrity of their ministerial positions, nor do they demonstrate a practice of the second great command from Luke 19:18, to "love your neighbor as yourself." What happened in this case?

The behavior of the first two religious men illustrates that a tremendous gap had developed between the meaning of the two sacred mandates and the practice of them. Furthermore, it may have been the case that in the time of Jesus the alliance of the concepts of love of God and love of neighbor had not yet come into practice, even though the two commandments have been already linked theoretically in Jewish writings.⁹ Any development in theology takes time to move from theory to practice.

It is possible, then, that the pragmatic union of these two commands from the Hebrew Bible may have evolved with the teachings of Jesus. In any case, Luke unites the two commandments into one natural setting with this Good Samari-

tan story. Their anticipation must have heightened about the third person in the triad of possible helpers. In their minds the logical "hero" would be a fellow Jewish layperson. Assuredly, such a person would certainly rescue the man, despite the shameful example of the two leaders who left the injured victim to die. Someone like themselves, then, would surely save the day!

Imagine the utter surprise of the audience when Jesus announces that the third traveler, the one to save the helpless man, was not a fellow Jew, but a hated Samaritan! This complete and unexpected turn of events must have shocked the listeners. The audience would never have expected a Samaritan to help an enemy.

Of course, it would be totally different if Jesus would have told the parable with the characters reversed. For example, if the victim were a Samaritan and the rescuer were a Jew, then the audience may have accepted the story as an example of how they are to extend their concept of "neighbor." Consequently, for the audience, this

teaching of Jesus would have been a lesson that enforced their present self-image. However, Jesus does not present the above scenario.

On the contrary, Jesus clearly associated this Samaritan "enemy" with the status of the praiseworthy hero of the story. More importantly, in verse 33 Jesus describes the behavior of this Samaritan in a way that completely contrasts with the two previous religious leaders. Jesus states that when the Samaritan saw the wounded man, he "was filled with compassion" (*esplägchnisthe*).

The Compassionate Enemy

Furthermore, in vv. 34–35 Jesus illustrates how the Samaritan translates his compassion for his so-called "enemy" into action. In naming specific acts, Jesus describes how nothing was too much for the Samaritan when another was in need. In fact, the Samaritan did not see the victim as one whom he was to fear or disdain. On the contrary, the victim's life was threatened and so, the Samaritan, as neighbor, would come to his rescue. In vv. 34–35 Jesus specifically depicts this merciful attitude of the Samaritan.

For instance, the Samaritan stopped and bandaged the man's wounds without fear of any personal ritual contamination. This quick response immediately identifies the type of person the hated enemy is, namely, one filled with compassion towards anyone in need. When we reflect on the situation, we come to realize that

the Samaritan's behavior reflects not only remarkable compassion but also enormous courage. The fact that this traveler even stopped to evaluate the situation put him in grave danger of attack. That he took time to clean, sterilize and bandage the victim's wounds exposed him to peril even more.

Verse 34 continues to picture the compassionate actions of the Samaritan with the description "then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him." Thus, his individual travel was slowed down considerably. Now the Samaritan would have no personal protection in that he would not be able to flee on his animal in case of assault. Rather, he would have to walk down the dangerous road with a wounded and half-dead man. Once again, he was put in a much more vulnerable position against attackers. The Samaritan's first heroic act of compassion, that of stopping to help a stranger, brought about more commitments towards the care of this Jewish victim.

When Jesus explains that the Samaritan "brought him to an inn," he does not mean any Holiday Inn. The ancient inns had no safe atmosphere or daily maid service. In fact, inns were often considered quite dangerous. In such places, people could easily be robbed during the night or have their belongings stolen from them.

Assuredly, the Samaritan knew the situation of the inns and made sure that the wounded man would be well cared for by himself or others. In vv. 34–35, Jesus states twice

that the Samaritan "took care of him" in different ways. The Samaritan spent the first day caring for the man himself, and the next day he richly paid the innkeeper to continue to do so. The biblical text states that he gave the innkeeper two denarii, currency that is the equivalent of two days wages for a laborer.

Many Acts of Compassion

The generosity and compassion of the Samaritan towards the Jewish enemy did not even stop after all his lavish assistance and an overnight stay in the inn. In v. 35b, the Samaritan assures the innkeeper that "when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." With these words, the Samaritan ensures the care and safety of the Jewish victim because he will return in a few days to check on his health. If for no other reason, the innkeeper would carefully monitor this man for the promise of more money. The Samaritan proves to be shrewd in business matters by his offer to pay highly for the man's welfare.

Thus, the Samaritan's kind deeds were multiple. He not only utilized his material goods and finances, but he also devoted a substantial amount of time and energy to the unknown victim. The Samaritan does not act out of a sense of duty. He does not seem to be aware of any obligation. Rather, his inner attitudes of compassion allowed his conduct to exemplify a deep mercy that outshines any mere donation.

For the Samaritan, then, no hardship, sum of money, or amount of precious time would prevent his decision to help another in need.

When Jesus completed the parable, he asked the lawyer, "Which of these three [travelers] was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (v. 36). Here Jesus reverses the original legal question of the lawyer in v. 10:29b, "Who is my neighbor?" He does not place limits on the concept of neighbor as an object of one's obligations. Rather, Jesus uses the topic of neighbor as the subject of the sentence, thereby removing any limits of compassion towards one and all. This transformed definition of neighbor as the one who acts rests neither on the Law of Moses nor on one's religious heritage.

Loving compassion determines the choice of neighbor. In revising the lawyer's understanding of neighbor, Jesus offers an opportunity for this learned religious leader to realize that his original question can be resolved through an open heart. The despised Samaritan possesses the inner light that this Jewish lawyer had not yet found. The intellectual quibble of the lawyer about the Law remains irrelevant if he is not ready to be "neighbor" to any other person.

In reply to Jesus' question in v. 36, namely, "Who do you think was a neighbor to the man?" the lawyer answers "The one who does him mercy (*eleos*)" (v. 37). Notice that in his response he does admit that the traveler acts in a merciful way.

At the same time, however, the lawyer carefully avoids the use of the term "Samaritan" to refer to the merciful donor. To identify the compassionate one as a Samaritan may have been too difficult for the lawyer at the moment.

In any case, when Jesus replies to the lawyer with the words, "Go and do likewise," the lawyer finds himself in a further quandary. Jesus commands this faithful and religious Jew to follow the example of his despised enemy. To be told to act like the Samaritan would be hard to hear. Therefore, this parable proved a very difficult lesson both for the lawyer and the other Jewish listeners. Jesus challenges both their religious and cultural beliefs as well as their attitude towards the outcasts in society.

While Jesus' words may provoke the lawyer, they still offer an opportunity for a change of attitude. The lawyer has the capability to move forward and make the right judgment about future behavior towards people. It is necessary for him to open his heart. One cannot act like a Samaritan with an attitude of smugness. Smugness cancels the opportunity to act like a neighbor to another and for God's presence to be experienced by all.

Conclusion

What then, do we learn from the story of the Good Samaritan? This entire narrative exemplifies Luke's theology—his ideas about who God is and how God wants us to act to-

wards one another in this world. Likewise, the story portrays the Lucan emphasis on "doing." For Luke, words of belief are not sufficient; we must "do" for others both through our attitudes and our actions.

Luke stresses action on the part of a neighbor in phrases such as, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 25); "do this" (v. 28); "do likewise" (v. 37b); and, "the one who does mercy" (v. 37a). The term "neighbor," then, is not a static title. On the contrary, it is closely linked with the concept of "doing." Jesus' concept of neighbor can be defined as "neighborliness," rather than "neighborhood." To be a neighbor to another is to bring that person a gift of hospitality.

Therefore, Jesus' broad concept of "neighbor" opposes the narrow external ideals of the clergy, who substitute law in place of an open heart. With the coming of Jesus, limited external interpretations of what it means to observe the two great commandments of love of God and love of neighbor are destroyed. In the future, only one love is to be found, that of God's love toward all. Subsequently, no separation between the two commandments is possible. The story of the Good Samaritan exemplifies this reality. In this story, Jesus clearly "transmutes law to gospel."¹⁰

Therefore, the command of action "Go and do likewise" in v. 37 summarizes what has been woven throughout the entire narrative, namely, to adopt the Samaritan's approach by

having compassion when one sees another in need. Jesus' imperative applies not just for this instance, but for all times. When one functions as this Samaritan, then, God's compassionate presence can be experienced by all.



Notes

1. L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 172.
2. In Hebrew, the term designates, "the way one walks." This body of Jewish laws is directly absent from the Mosaic Law. Later, this material formed most of the Talmud.
3. G. M. Caird, *The Gospel of Luke* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963), 148.
4. Wadis are dry river beds that function as small brooks or rivers during brief heavy rain storms.
5. See Josephus, *Jewish Wars* IV 8:8; Jerome, *On Jeremiah* I .50.
6. E. Freed, *The New Testament: A Critical Introduction* (Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1986), 26.
7. Ibid., 26
8. R. C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 183.
9. E.g., The commands to love God and love neighbor are already found in *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (T. Iss. 5:1,2; T. Dan), which predate Christianity.
10. Johnson, *Luke*, 175.

The Johannine Healing Tradition

Sign of Jesus' Compassion and Power

Sharon Kerrigan, R. S. M.

HEALTH IS A CONCERN OF all societies. In the Greco-Roman world, people were plagued with paralysis, lameness, and blindness. These infirmities made the people unproductive. Consequently, healing was a central feature of all religions in the Roman empire.¹

Asclepius was the most popular healer within the Mediterranean world. According to an ancient legend, Asclepius was a physician who cured all those who pursued him and was elevated to the status of a deity after his death. He was worshipped in more than five hundred shrines scattered throughout the empire.

Christianity developed within the cultural context of the Greco-Roman world. The Christian missionaries were constantly confronted with Asclepius's omnipresence, and so they began to attribute many of the characteristics of Asclepius to Jesus. As a result, the gospel writers emphasized Jesus' healing ministry. They wrote that he [Jesus] cured the lepers (Matt. 8:1-4), gave sight to the blind (Matt. 9:27-31), and enabled the lame to walk (Luke 5:17-26) . . . He relieved suffering and "cured all who were afflicted" (Matt. 8:16) . . . The life that Jesus came to give was not in fact to end with death. He asserted emphatically "I am the resurrection and the life:

whoever believes in me though he [she] shall die will come to life" (John 11:25-6).²

The evangelists described Jesus as a divine physician who brought life to all people. This article will examine the Johannine healing tradition against the beliefs and practices of the Roman empire in order to elicit the evangelist's message for his community as well as ours.

The Johannine Healing Tradition

The prologue of John's Gospel revealed the author's major motifs. It was here the evangelist

power. Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana (2:1-11). He multiplied the loaves of bread and walked on water (6:1-30). Jesus healed the royal official's son (4:46-54), a paralytic (5:1-18), a blind man (9:1-41) and raised Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45). In this study, I will focus on the three healing stories and the resurrection account.

The Royal Official's Son (John 4:46-54)

Chapter 4 reported Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman (John 4:1-30) and a

Christian missionaries were constantly confronted with Asclepius's omnipresence, and so they began to attribute many of the characteristics of Asclepius to Jesus.

identified Jesus as a preexistent God who became flesh (John 1:1-2, 14). According to John, Jesus was sent by his Father to bring life to the world. This theme was developed through Jesus' signs, passion, death, and resurrection.

In the Book of Signs (John 1-12), John recalled seven great deeds. These signs expressed Jesus' compassion and

royal official (John 4:46-51). In the first story, Jesus encountered a woman in Sychar at Jacob's well. After a lengthy dialogue, Jesus gave the Samaritan woman the gift of living water (John 4:13-15) and told her he was the promised messiah (John 4:25-26). The woman left her water jar and went off to inform the town's people about Jesus (John

4:28–30). Many of the Samaritans believed in Jesus and proclaimed him the savior of the world (John 4:41–42).

The Hellenistic concept of a savior had some of the same characteristics attributed to the messiah. The Romans applied this title to their emperors and gods who preserved their well-

for his son's life (John 4:48–49). Then Jesus announced: "Your son will live," and the man departed for Capernaum (John 4:50). The cure of the royal official's son fostered John's theology. The Jews believed the Lord healed through the prophets. John depicted Jesus as a prophet (John

nature of Sabbath healing (John 5:16–24) and a discourse on life (John 5:24–47). The evangelist said that Jesus went to Jerusalem for a feast. Near the Sheep Gate there was a pool called Bethesda. The pool was surrounded by five covered colonnades where the sick lay (John 5:1–2). One man had been at the pool for thirty-eight years. Seeing the man's condition, Jesus asked him if he wished to become whole (ὅγιής). The man responded:

"I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred up." Then, Jesus commanded: "Rise! Take up your mat and walk." At once the man was made whole.

(John 5:6–9)

Later, Jesus met the man in the temple. He warned him not to sin again or something worse would happen to him (John 5:14). The man reported Jesus to the Jewish authorities who persecuted him (John 5:15–16). Jesus simply said to his censurers, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17).

Archaeological discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries opened up new avenues for interpreting Jesus' healing of the paralytic. Excavators unearthed a Copper Scroll at Qumran along with two pools and five colonnades at Bethesda. These items gave credence to the presence of a pagan healing deity within Palestine in the first century. The Copper Scroll was found in 1952 and confirmed the existence of the adjoining pools at

John's portrait of Jesus as savior of the world provided the backdrop for his healing stories.

being. Caesar Augustus and Asclepius were among those venerated as a savior.³

Like the Romans, the Samaritans professed Jesus to be the savior of the world (John 4:42). In this passage, the evangelist included the definite article. By including the article, the author probably intended to exclude all other saviors. John may have had Augustus and/or Asclepius in mind. Both saviors were worshipped in Samaria.⁴

John's portrait of Jesus as savior of the world provided the backdrop for his healing stories. As savior, Jesus brought his devotees new life. The royal official's son was the first person to experience Jesus' healing powers (John 4:46–54). After two days in Samaria, Jesus returned to Galilee and visited Cana (John 4:43–45). Jesus was approached by a man who begged him to heal his dying son (John 4:46–47). At first, Jesus rebuked the man because he required a sign to believe, but the man continued to plead

4:19) who could heal from a great distance (Cana to Capernaum). Distance healings accentuated the degree of Jesus' miraculous powers (John 4:49–54).

An Epidaurian inscription reported a comparable cure by Asclepius.⁵ The god healed Arata of Lacedaemon. She remained at home while her mother slept in Asclepius' sanctuary at Epidarus. The healing techniques of both deities were similar. Both healed a child from a distance at the request of a parent, and both cured their suppliants by a spoken word. The uniqueness of John's story was the witnessing of the child's cure. This theme was woven into all of John's healing stories.

The Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–18)

The second Johannine story took place at Bethesda (John 5:1–18). This narrative was followed by a discussion on the

Bethesda. The Scroll listed sixty-four places of hidden treasures. The fifty-seventh item mentioned the pools. This text provided the reader with three important pieces of information: (1) the original reading of John 5:2 was Bethesda, (2) the pools were near the Sheep Gate and (3) the text was written between 35 and 65 CE. This data established the existence of the pools between Jesus' ministry and the writing of the fourth gospel (90–100 CE).⁶

An earlier discovery uncovered a votive gift to a deity, the pools and the colonnades. In the nineteenth century, the Pasha of Jerusalem gave Saint Anne's church to the French consul. As the French government began to restore the church, they discovered a marble foot in the debris. The inscription on the foot read: "Pompeia Lucilia dedicate this."⁷ The dedication was a gift from a Roman woman of the second century CE. Subsequent excavations unearthed the pools and the colonnades. Hebrew graffiti were discovered on the southern wall of the south pool by Joachim Jeremias. This evidence proved the pools were pre-Hadrian, and the excavators claimed the area was a pagan sanctuary.⁸

Perhaps the pools were used by temple pilgrims for ritual purification. Since the Romans believed water had curative properties, they attracted a multitude of sick people.⁹ The five colonnades were added to the pools during the Roman era. Charles Talbert and Joachim Jeremias credited the colonnades to Herod's expan-

sion of the temple area (22/20–18 BCE?).¹⁰ The colonnades served as a shelter for the poor.

In addition to the archaeological finds, John incorporated cultic language into his description of the healing process. John employed the word "whole" (ὅγιος) six times in the story of the paralytic (John 5:4, 6, 9, 11, 14 and 15). This

for mat to mean a poor person's bedding.¹² This would fit the setting of the Johannine story since the covered colonnade was constructed to shelter the poor who were sick.

A third influence on the paralytic story was the evangelist's emphasis on water. A water theme connected the Johannine stories. John baptized with water (John 1:26); Jesus turned

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term was associated with Asclepius's daughter Hygieia who was revered as the goddess of health. Making one whole was at the core of the Asclepius healing tradition. The curing of Nicanor was an example of this principle. An inscription found at Epidaurus on Asclepius sanctuary read:

Nicanor, a lame man, while he was sitting awake, a boy snatched his crutch from him and he ran away. But Nicanor got up, pursued him and so he became whole.¹¹

Like Asclepius, the author of the fourth gospel said Jesus made the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda whole. He wrote:

Then, Jesus said to him: "Rise, take up your mat and walk." At once the man was made whole (John 5:8–9).

After becoming whole, the man picked up his mat and walked. Cicero used the Latin equivalency of the Macedonian word

water into wine (John 2:9); Nicodemus was told he must be reborn of water (John 3:3–5); the Samaritan woman was given living water (John 4:10); and the paralytic was granted new life at the pool (John 5:8). For John, water was the source of all life and he used it as a metaphor for Jesus. Both brought health.

Like John, the devotees of Asclepius believed water had healing properties. Water was an essential component of the Asclepius cult. It was used in the purification and healing rituals. Aristides (129–189 CE) spoke about Asclepius' saving waters. He said: "everyone believes and trusts that it [water] flows from a place which is both healthy and the supplier of health, since it rises from the temple and feet of the savior."¹³

Water was significant in both the pagan and Christian traditions. The devotees of As-

clepius and Christ saw water as a vehicle for healing. Like Asclepius, Jesus brought health and wholeness to his devotees through water. The water theme connected the story of the paralytic with the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41).

The Man Born Blind (John 9:1-41)

The third Johannine story involved a blind man. On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples encountered a man

Jesus' directive to go and wash in the pool (John 9:7).

The waters of Siloam symbolized Israel's escape from bondage and were carried in procession to the temple during the Feast of the Tabernacles. The setting of John 7 and 8 was the Feast of the Tabernacles. According to John 9, Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate a feast which may have been the Feast of the Tabernacles. William Davies offered a possible interpretation for the evangelist's inclusion of the miracle at the pool of Siloam. He pro-

Both deities employed dirt and water in the healing process. Both sent their suppliants to wash and both demanded belief in them to bring about a cure. Faith in Jesus linked the Johannine healing stories with his resurrection pericope.

The Resurrection of Lazarus

Stories about raising the dead were plausible in the ancient Mediterranean world. In antiquity, people believed holy or god-like figures could resurrect the dead.¹⁶ Xenophon (430-354 BCE) told the story of Asclepius' resurrecting the dead, and the evangelists made the same claim about Jesus.¹⁷ In the Johannine tradition, Jesus raised Lazarus (John 11:1-45). The resurrecting of Lazarus was the seventh and final sign within the fourth gospel. The number seven symbolized the completion of Jesus' ministry and represented his greatest miracle.

The story began by stating that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was sick. Lazarus's sisters sent word to Jesus about their brother's condition (John 11:1-4). Upon learning of his friend's illness, Jesus assured his disciples that Lazarus's sickness would not lead to his death (John 11:4-6). By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead four days (John 11:17).

When Martha learned that Jesus was coming, she went out to greet him. Jesus entered into a conversation with Martha and Mary about raising the dead. He guaranteed the sisters that their

The Romans believed mud was a curative entity. Aristides said Asclepius prescribed mud to cure his ailments. John stressed that it was not the mud that actually cured the blind man, but obedience to Jesus.

born blind (John 9:1). The miracle was briefly told. Jesus mixed saliva with dirt, placed the mixture on the man's eyes, and ordered him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man obeyed and returned able to see (John 9:6-7). This narrative was followed by a series of dialogues which discussed the origin of the man's blindness and whether or not Jesus had the authority to heal on the Sabbath (John 9:8-41).

The Romans believed mud was a curative entity. Aristides said Asclepius prescribed mud to cure his ailments. John stressed that it was not the mud that actually cured the blind man. It was his obedience to

posed that the new symbol of freedom was Jesus.¹⁴

The Hebrew name Siloam means "to send." This verb is central to John's theology. The Father sent Jesus to bring life to the world. In John 9, Jesus sent the blind man to wash in the sacred waters. The man's faith in the sender brought about his cure.

Like Jesus, Asclepius sent his suppliants to wash. Aristides reported that those who bathed in Asclepius's waters received their sight. Those who drank it regained the breath of life because the god's waters were superior.¹⁵ The healing techniques of Asclepius and Jesus in these instances were similar.

brother would live. Then, Jesus accompanied them to the burial site (John 11:21–34, 38).

Jesus told the mourners to remove the stone, prayed to his Father and called Lazarus out of the tomb (John 11:39–43). Lazarus emerged with his hands and feet bound (John 11:44). Jesus directed the bystanders to remove the linen strips. Some of the mourners believed in Jesus, while others reported him to the Pharisees, who plotted to kill him (John 11:45–57).

In the fourth gospel, Mary and Martha proclaimed Jesus to be their Lord (John 11:21, 32, 34). Martha also identified Jesus as the Son of God (John 11:27). These same titles were attributed to Asclepius. Aristides called Asclepius his Lord, his savior, and his savior god.¹⁸ Both deities brought life to their devotees. This theology provided the background for John's resurrection story.

Scholars have acknowledged the similarities between the Jairus and the Lazarus stories. Both the Synoptic (Mark 5:22–4, 41–43; Matt. 9:18–19, 23–26; Luke 8:40–43, 49–56) and the Johannine (John 11:1–45) resurrection stories stated the person was dead before Jesus arrived (Mark 5:35; John 11:17) and both used the metaphor of sleep for death (Mark 5:39; John 11:11). In both traditions, Jesus called the deceased back to life (Mark 5:41; John 11:43) and ordered a service to be rendered to the person (Mark 5:43; John 11:44).¹⁹

The fourth gospel added four details to the story. The

evangelist said that Lazarus was dead four days (John 11:39). Jesus prayed before raising Lazarus (John 11:41–42). Lazarus emerged from the cave still wearing his grave cloth (John 11:44). The Lord was put to death partly as a consequence of raising the dead (John 11:45–49).

The Jews believed the soul left the body upon death. If the soul did not return in three days, the person was declared dead.²⁰ John stated that Laz-

arus had been dead four days to set forth the magnitude of Jesus' miracle.

Prior to resurrecting Lazarus, Jesus gazed toward heaven and gave thanks to his Father in prayer (John 11:41–42). The Jews believed that extraordinary things happened through the power of God as a result of holy people's intercession, while the Greco-Romans attributed the power to a divine man. Jesus' prayer was one of gratitude to his Father rather than petition (John 11:41). Jesus prayed so that the mourners might know the Father sent him. Their belief would glorify the Father as well as the Son (John 11:42). After praying, Jesus shouted Lazarus out of the cave. He came forth with his hands and feet still

wrapped with strips of linen (John 11:43–44). The evangelist used the words "cave" and "grave cloth" to emphasize the dramatic movement from death to life by the power of Jesus.

In John 11:38, the author stated that Jesus went to the tomb which became a cave. The Jews buried their dead in natural caves. The sealing of a cave with a stone made it a tomb.²¹ However, the Greeks believed caves were special places where

The Jews buried their dead in natural caves. However, the Greeks believed caves were special places where sacred events happened. The Johannine story integrated both traditions.

sacred events happened. For example, according to ancient tradition, Zeus was born in a cave.²² The Johannine story integrated both traditions. Lazarus had been in the tomb four days, but Jesus restored him to life by a command. The event took place at a tomb (death) that became a cave (life). The evangelist expanded upon this theme through the symbolism of the burial cloth (John 11:43–44). The word the evangelist used for the grave cloth had several meanings in antiquity. It meant a bedcloth (Prov. 7:16), a grave cloth (John 11:44; 19:40; 20:5, 7), and a bandage.²³ The Johannine story seemed to combine these traditions.

The Jews used linen strips to bind the hands and feet of

their corpses.²⁴ For John, the linen strips symbolized temporal (grave cloth) and eternal (bandages) life. Lazarus came out of the tomb wearing his grave cloth which implied he would need it again (John 11:44). On the other hand, Jesus left his in the tomb (John 20:1). At a deeper level, the grave cloth symbolized Jesus' power over life and death. The ancient world attributed his power to God. Jesus was accused by the Jews of equating himself with God and so they plotted to kill him (John 10:31–34). John's gospel was the only one that linked Jesus' raising of the dead with his crucifixion. According to a Greek legend, Zeus struck Asclepius with a bolt of lightning because he raised the dead.²⁵ Both savior gods had the power to restore temporal life to their devotees.

In the prologue to the fourth gospel, the evangelist articulated a major distinction between the two savior gods. The evangelist said that Jesus was a preexistent God who became incarnate (John 1:1–2, 14). In contrast, the devotees of Asclepius claimed that their savior was a mortal, elevated to the status of a deity. Both physicians brought health to their suppliants, but only Jesus promised eternal life (John 11:25–26). These distinctions were important to the Johannine community because they confirmed Jesus as the true savior of the world (John 4:42).

Conclusion

Like John's community, our world is plagued by physical

and spiritual infirmities. We, too, need a divine physician. The Johannine stories describe Jesus as a compassionate healer. The evangelist reminds us that our God continues to listen to our prayers (John 4:47–51), comforts us when we are in pain (John 11:21–36), makes us whole (John 5:6–9), grants us health (John 9:6–7), and promises us eternal life (John 11:25–26). Each of these gifts brings new life and leads us to the source of all life—Jesus Christ. This was and is the message of John's healing tradition.



Notes

1. This research was originally part of my Ph.D. dissertation, "The Impact of the Asclepius Cult on the Christian Healing Tradition" (Graduate Theological Foundation, 1997).
2. Health and Health Care: A Pastoral Letter of the American Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference Inc., 1982).
3. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, vol. 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 458; Charles Talbert, *Reading John* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 118.
4. Talbert, *John*, 118.
5. *Inscriptiones Graecae*, Vol. 1, *Asclepius*, no. 21. Transl. E. and L. Edelstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1945).
6. Joachim Jeremias, *The Rediscovery of Bethesda: John 5* (Louisville: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1966), 35–36.
7. *Ibid.*, 25–26.
8. *Ibid.*, 31.
9. Jeremias, *Rediscovery*, 30; Talbert, *John*, 121–122.
10. Jeremias, *Rediscovery*, 33; Talbert, *John*, 121.
11. *Inscriptiones Graecae* IV², 1, nos. 121–122 (no. 16).
12. Cicero *De Divinatione* 2.63, transl. W. A. Falconer, *The Loeb Classical Library*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).
13. Aristides *Orations* 39.6. *The Complete Works*, transl. C. Behr. Vol. 2, *Orations* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).
14. William Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 315.
15. Aristides *Orations* 39.15, 18.
16. John Meir, *A Marginal Jew: Mentor: Message and Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 773.
17. Xenophon *Cynegeticus* 1.6. Transl. E. and L. Edelstein. Vol. 1, *Asclepius*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1945). The gospels recalled three resurrection stories—Jairus's daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus.
18. Aristides *Orations* 50.50 (Lord); 47.1–2 (savior); 39.3 (savior god).
19. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, vol. 2 (New York: Seabury, 1980), 341.
20. George Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 189–90.
21. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955), 334.
22. John Sanford, *Mystical Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 225–226.
23. Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 425; Merrill C. Tenney, *John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), 177, n.51.
24. Barrett, *John*, 336.
25. Xenophon *Cynegeticus* 1.1–6.



Contributors

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Mary Ann Getty, a founder of MAST, holds her S.T.D. from the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium (1975). She considers teaching her vocation and has happily involved herself with other students of the Scriptures since graduating from Carlow College in 1965. Having begun her career teaching first grade, she is revisiting that experience by writing a series of books on Bible stories for children published by The Liturgical Press. The first of the series, *God Speaks to Us in Water Stories*, was published last fall; the second, *God Speaks to Us in Feeding Stories*, is forthcoming, with one more to follow each year. Mary Ann has written numerous articles on the New Testament and several commentaries on Paul's epistles. She is presently working on a volume on Philippians and Philemon for the Sacra Pagina Commentary series. She teaches at St. Vincent's, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in the College and Seminary.

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Elaine Wainwright is a member of the All Hallows' Congregation, Brisbane, Australia. She lectures in biblical studies and feminist theology in the Brisbane College of Theology and has recently been appointed program focus adviser to the newly established Program Focus in Women's Studies in Theology in that college. She has two manuscripts awaiting publication: *Shall We Look for Another? Engendering Reading and the Matthean Jesus* (forthcoming, Orbis); and *New Testament Women, Storytellers' Companion to the Bible* (forthcoming, Abingdon).

Discussion Questions

The Compassion of God in Scripture

1. (Nemann) What does Catherine's "imitation of Jesus" mean to you today, considering Constitutions # 9: "The Word of God opens us to contemplate the Divine Presence in ourselves, in others, and in the universe"?
2. (Dempsey) Who are the persons—in my family, community, country and world—who represent the issues most in need of my compassionate response?
3. (Wainwright) Women in various biblical stories lay claim to empowerment from God and healing from Jesus. How is the metaphor of the dance a description of their initiative and their achievement?
4. (Getty) "The same Paul who defends so vigorously his own call, mission, and authority, also appears quite ready to overlook and move beyond human frailty both in himself and in others." How do women reconcile an attitude of compassion toward others with an assertiveness about their mission and purpose?
5. (Schubert) The behavior of the first two religious figures who saw the injured man and "passed by on the other side" exemplifies a contrast between sacred mandate and praxis. In what situations can you see that the gap could be closed either by yourself or by the community?
6. (Kerrigan) The gospel stories portray Jesus as a divine physician who healed the whole person, body, mind, and spirit. What aspect of your life needs a divine physician?

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MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R. S. M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Julie Upton, R. S. M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. In 1998 CTSA will hold its annual meeting in Ottawa, June 14-17

Members work on a variety of task forces related to their scholarly discipline. Present task forces include: Scripture, healthcare ethics, and spirituality. In addition, the members seek to be of service to the institute by providing a forum for on-going theological education.

Membership dues are \$20 per year, payable to Marie Michele Donnelly, R. S. M., MAST treasurer, Convent of Mercy, 515 Montgomery Ave., Merion Station, PA 19066.

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Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R. S. M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R. S. M., currently serves in that capacity.

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