

## A Compassionate God who punishes the Guilty: Exodus 34:6-7 in the Contemporary Setting

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### Introduction

The whole business of governance is based on the maintenance of justice. Leaders are appointed or elected to effect justice through the power of the law. In most democratic settings, the duties involve the making of the law by the parliament, the interpretation of the law by the judiciary and the implementation of the law by the executive. Through the implementation of the law, the executive arm of government assures the maintenance of justice in the land. In the biblical setting which is based on a theocratic system, the triple function of making law, interpreting the law and executing the law is the prerogative of God who often acts through human agents. The text of Exodus 34:6-7 explains that God's mode of maintaining justice is through compassion and punishment in the face of the law. How do these two work? An adequate answer helps to explain the behaviour or *modus operandi* of God in the whole biblical literature.

This paper addresses this compassionate mode of divine justice and how it applies to human governance in the contemporary setting. The methodology is the historical critical approach which looks at the text from its historical context as well as its literary structure. In other words, the text is analysed both diachronically and synchronically.

### The Text of Exodus 34:6-7

The first difficulty one encounters in the interpretation of the text of Exod 34:6-7 is to establish the proper translation of the text. The Hebrew terms used in the text lend themselves to various senses in English. This accounts for the diversity in translations as shown in some of the major versions as shown below. The present analysis gives preference to the translation of the *NRS* (*New Revised Standard Version*) without, of course, deemphasizing the other translations. The analysis explains the various senses of the relevant Hebrew terms.

***NRS Exodus 34:6-7*** The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

***NKJ Exodus 34:6-7*** And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, <sup>7</sup> "keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

***NJB Exodus 34:6-7*** Then Yahweh passed before him and called out, 'Yahweh, Yahweh, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, <sup>7</sup> maintaining his faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin, yet letting nothing go unchecked, and punishing the parent's fault in the children and in the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation!'

**NAB Exodus 34:6-7** <sup>6</sup> Thus the LORD passed before him and cried out, "The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity, <sup>7</sup> continuing his kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but punishing children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for their fathers' wickedness!"

### The Text in its Literary Context

The text of Exod 34:6-7 is part of the larger text of chapters 32-34 which narrate a version of YHWH's covenant with Israel. Its literary relationship with the other covenant account in 19-24 is very complex.<sup>1</sup> According to F. Crüsemann, if literary criticism is relevant anywhere, it is in this context.<sup>2</sup> The present form of Exodus 19-24 is meant to be read in harmony with chapters 32-34, but the relationship between the two accounts remains very complex, given that the final form is a fusion of the Horeb tradition with Priestly and Deuteronomistic materials. One current of opinion considers the mention of the "ten words" in 34:28 as the original locus of the concept of Decalogue,<sup>3</sup> suggesting that this account is probably the older version.

Some interpreters, however, see the whole of 24-34 as a literary unity. J. Blenkinsopp argues along this line as he considers 19-34 as a coherent unit. He argues:

First, I take Exodus 19-34 to be a relatively coherent and thematically unified narrative rather than a work of bricolage assembled by random accumulation or even by a combination of distinct accounts of the covenant made [19-24] and the covenant broken and remade [32-34]. This result has been made by inserting a basic Deuteronomic account [D] into the Priestly history [P], the later beginning with creation and ending with the setting up of the wilderness sanctuary in the Promised Land [Josh. 18-19].<sup>4</sup>

Crüsemann argues along the same line, and considers the P material in 19-34 as earlier than the *Dtr* redaction. According to him, the basic framework of the account is set by P and the main P materials are in 19:1-2a; 24:15b-18; 25-31.<sup>5</sup> While the text of 32-34 may possibly have originated as an independent account, it is meant to be read in its present form as a logical continuation of the account in 19-24 as well as that of 25-31.

The text of 34:6-7 is the direct divine answer to the request of Moses in 33:18, "I pray You, show me Your glory!" God answers him there and then, promising to reveal himself: "And He said, 'I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name YHWH before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.'" The message of 34:6-7 is one of the most exalted words of Sacred Scripture, and it is repeated in many other biblical contexts. The message came as a consolation to Moses when he and his people found themselves in a difficult condition, when

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion in J. Blenkinsopp, "Structure and Meaning in the Sinai-Horeb Narrative [Exodus 19-34] ", 109-125.

<sup>2</sup> F. Crüsemann, *Torah. Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law* (Original in German, Augsburg, 1989; Edinburgh 1992), 28.

<sup>3</sup> See D. M. Beegle, "Moses," *ABD* 4, 914.

<sup>4</sup> Blenkinsopp, "Structure and Meaning in the Sinai-Horeb Narrative [Exodus 19-34] ", 111, also 109-125.

<sup>5</sup> See Crüsemann, *Torah. Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law*, 28, 47-48.

they were carrying the burden of guilt and the fear of near divine abandonment. Israel had transgressed the covenant of 19-24 through the making of the golden calf.

### **Historical and Literary Setting of the Text**

Two questions of interest may be posed here: When did this text originate? Why was the text written? The first question addresses the date and socio-historical circumstances that produced the text while the second addresses the function of the text in the context. The text originated within the exilic context when the people found themselves in a situation similar to the one projected in Exodus 32-34. The exile was seen as a deserved divine punishment for the breaking of the covenant. Israel was now carrying the burden of divine abandonment. The text of Exod 34:6-7 gives new hope to the exiles assuring them that the ancestral God, YHWH, is a God of compassion despite the fact that he punishes the guilty. The people had suffered enough for their sins and now they are looking up to the mercy of God which comes readily through prophets like Deutero-Isaiah. The text of Isa 54:7 caps it all: "For a brief moment I forsook you, But with great compassion I will gather you." The exilic text of Hosea 6:1-2 has a similar ring: "Come, let us return to YHWH. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. <sup>2</sup> He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him."

### **Structure of the Text**

v. 6a – the passing of YHWH

v. 6b – YHWH's Compassionate identity: merciful, gracious, longsuffering, kindhearted, dependable (faithful)

v. 7a – God of Mercy: kind and forgiving

v. 7b – God of Justice: punishing the guilty

### **Analysis of the Text**

The text presents interesting challenges to the exegete. How does God's compassion work when the guilty is still given the maximum punishment? What is really meant by God being compassionate or merciful? The analysis of the language of the text may provide some answers.

*v. 6a – the passing of YHWH*

– "YHWH passed before him and called out": The passing of YHWH before Moses is expressed in a physical way but Moses is prevented from seeing God. He can only hear the voice calling out. God can be heard but cannot be seen by the human being. The word is the unique medium of divine-human encounter.

*v. 6b – YHWH's Compassionate identity*

The compassionate identity of YHWH is expressed with such epithets as merciful, gracious, longsuffering, kindhearted, dependable (faithful).

### **YHWH**

The first content of the proclamation is the disclosure of God's name as YHWH. The double mention of the name is very significant. This is another formal revelation of the divine name after its first revelation to Moses in Exod 3:14, where the name YHWH is understood in terms

of God's dynamic presence in history as he intervenes to save his people. As Stephen Binz describes it, "It does not express God as static and unchanging being, as western theology has often interpreted the name. Rather, it expresses the fact that the divine saving presence is always the result of God's freely-willed initiative. There are no limits to God's freedom to be present wherever and whenever God wills."<sup>6</sup>

All the attributes given to the name in Exod 34:6-7 express the divine acts in history. God is known, principally through his acts in the lives of his people and creation. The present text contains the most elaborate explication of the meaning of the divine name in the Bible. The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Rosh. Hash. 17b*) interprets the text as containing thirteen divine attributes. The enumeration is not very clear, but Michael P. Knowles identifies this mode of arriving at the thirteen attributes: "the God of Israel is [1] YHWH [the One who simply is, unconstrainable and self-sufficient]; [2] YHWH [repeated for emphasis]; [3] God who is [4] compassionate; [5] gracious; [6] slow to anger; [7] abundant in showing steadfast love and [8] truth [or faithfulness]; [9] preserving steadfast love for thousands of generations; [10] forgiving with respect to iniquity, [11] to transgression, and [12] to sin; yet [13] by no means clearing the guilty."<sup>7</sup>

*God, compassionate and gracious (El rahûm w<sup>e</sup>hannûn)*

The first attribute of this God identified as YHWH is the quality of being *rahûm*. This word is translated either as compassionate or merciful. But what does it really mean? The word *rahûm* is the adjectival form of the noun *rahamim* (compassion), both of which are etymologically linked to the Hebrew noun *rehem*, which means "womb". From this etymological derivation, many interpreters see the Hebrew *rahûm* as expressing the maternal instinct of love for the child which can be referred to as "womb-love". Thus the idea of God being compassionate expresses the type of affection a mother shows towards her children. It is a feeling awakened by the sense of a natural bond, and it is usually expressed by the superior towards the inferior.<sup>8</sup> God's compassion is a feeling of love linked to his natural bond with his children or people. This is well captured in Isa 49:14-15, "Zion was saying, 'YHWH has abandoned me, the Lord has forgotten me.' <sup>15</sup> Can a woman forget her baby at the breast, show no compassion for the child she has borne? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you."

The attribute of *rahûm* is intrinsically linked to another adjective *hannûn*, meaning "gracious". It is derived from the Hebrew verb *hanan* (be gracious) and noun *hen* ("grace, favour"). The form *hanan* is attested about sixty times in the Hebrew Bible, and it expresses the show of an unmerited gift, a gratuitous show of benevolence.<sup>9</sup> Mostly, God is presented as the benevolent giver of this gift to human beings who are in need.<sup>10</sup> Both adjectival qualities of "compassionate" (*rahûm*) and "gracious" (*hannûn*) are attributed to God here one who shows free benevolence to those in need. The gratuitousness of this divine gesture is well captured in the divine promise to Moses in Exod 33:19: "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name YHWH before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." This promise is what is actually

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<sup>6</sup> Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> M. P. Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name. The God of Sinai in Our Midst* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 40.

<sup>8</sup> See L. J. Coppes, "*raham*," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:841.

<sup>9</sup> See E. A. Heath, "Grace," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 372.

<sup>10</sup> See Heath, "Grace", 372.

fulfilled in 34:6-7. The emphasis in the use of the term “gracious” is benevolent response to one who has a need or a lack.

### *Slow to anger, rich in mercy and truth*

The next attribute of God in this text is that of being “slow to anger” (*'erek 'appayîm*), also rendered as “longsuffering” (NKJ). The fact of being slow to anger raises the question of God being angry. The text is saying that God’s compassionate nature makes him to be slow in showing anger, but this also implies that God can be angry. But, theologically, Can anger be attributed to God? Studies on the word show that the term, “anger”, with God as subject, occurs 518 times in the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> It is clear, then, that the idea of God getting angry is affirmed in many biblical texts, but its real meaning is rather problematic. A theological understanding of God as goodness and merciful often makes the idea of God’s anger or God’s wrath a theological problem. It is a fact that many people live with the burden that they are literally victims of God’s anger or divine wrath. The belief is both biblical and contemporary.

For instance, in Num 32:13, one reads, “So the YHWH’s anger (*'ap*) burned against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the LORD was destroyed.” Israel’s exilic catastrophe is biblically attributed to God’s anger. This is affirmed in many texts, one of which runs thus: “For through the anger of YHWH this came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence” (2 Kgs 24:20; Jer 52:3). Despite all these, many Old Testament biblical texts affirm that God is slow to anger and abounding in mercy and loving-kindness (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3). But if God’s mercy is so abundant and his love without end, as the Scriptures unanimously affirm, how does one explain the anger?

This problem has continued to be discussed by scholars from the early Church theologians to the present times. Most interpreters see the attribution of the emotion of anger to God as anthropopathism, that is, the use of what is specifically human emotion or pathos to describe God. The Old Testament writers are said to have presented God in a way that makes him very much involved in human affairs different from the philosophical presuppositions caused by later Greek philosophy.<sup>12</sup> In spite of this explanation, it remains unresolved whether anger can be attributed to God ontologically, that is, as his essential attribute.

### *Rich in loving-kindness and truth*

The two significant terms are lovingkindness (*hesed*) and truth (*'emet*). The word *hesed* has diverse translations among Bible translators. While many translate it as mercy, many others render it with such other terms as “lovingkindness” (NAS, NAU), “steadfast love” (NRS), “goodness” (NKJ), “love” (NIB, NIV), “faithful love” (NJB). Interestingly, none of these major versions renders *hesed* here as “mercy”. The term, however, is a fluid one and captures nuances in diverse contexts. The Greek Bible, the Septuagint (LXX) regularly renders it as *eleos* (mercy, compassion). This has influenced many modern translations to render it as mercy. But what does *hesed* really mean in the Hebrew context? It expresses an act of kindness or goodwill shown to another because of a freely chosen commitment to help even when the beneficiary does not deserve it.

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<sup>11</sup> See Bruce Baloian, “Anger,” *NIDOTTE* 4, 380.

<sup>12</sup> See Gary A. Herion, “Wrath of God,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 989-996.

The related word *'emet*, truth, expresses God's dependability and faithfulness to commitments. The combination of the two terms *hesed* and *'emet* ("grace and truth") is also found in the New Testament, in the Prologue of John's Gospel: "for the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth ((h` ca,rij kai. h` avlh,qeia)) came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Here it has the sense of God's enduring love, his enduring fidelity to covenantal favours.<sup>13</sup>

v. 7 – "keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

*v. 7a – God of Mercy: Kind and forgiving*

The idea of a God of compassion and *hesed* is concretized in the fact that he forgives offences. Three kinds of offences mentioned here are *'āwôn* (iniquity, guilt), *pesha'* (rebellion or transgression) and *ḥaṭā'* (failure or error). The three terms can be used as synonyms in some context, but each has its specific sense. The noun *'āwôn* expresses the sense of iniquity or guilt. It connotes the idea of perverting the way, twisting the right path, bending the path. In its expression of sin, there is the idea of perverting, distorting, making crooked or twisting the path indicated by God, bending God's law or will, deviating from the way of God. The term *pesha'* expresses the sense of rebellion against God or transgression of his command. The most frequently used of these terms is *ḥaṭā'*, and it has the basic sense of "missing the mark", missing the goal of one's action. In relation to God, it has the sense of failing to do God's will, going against God's word or command. The verb expresses an action that is against the expected standards. All these kinds of offences are subject to God's gracious disposition towards his people, as he forgives all.

*v. 7b – God justice: punishing the guilty*

There is the problem of reconciling the idea in v. 7a that God is kind and forgiving with the idea in v. 7b that the same God by no means clears the guilty: "yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." This text presents the crux of the matter. One then wonders what the forgiveness means. If the guilty is punished, who then is forgiven? The justice of God demands that the guilty should not go unpunished. The question is then, Does God really forgive the guilty? Even the text goes on in saying that God visits the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. This is, no doubt, a difficult text. Can understand it in the sense that the effect of sin remains after forgiveness or that the unrepentant gets punished?

## **Synthesis**

This text of Exod 34:6-7 has been the focus of many scholarly debates on the real sense of divine forgiveness and punishment. The problem is sometimes linked to the issue of divine justice. As Knowles comments, "Still, the problem with forgiveness is that it frequently creates the appearance of injustice. Much as the guilty are likely to favor leniency, their victims may be understandably less enthusiastic."<sup>14</sup>

The problem of reconciling God's mercy with his justice is not new. The Jewish Rabbinic literature confronted the issue from diverse angles. According to Abraham Cohen, "There is scarcely a passage which refers to His capacity as Judge which does not also allude to His

<sup>13</sup> See Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 338.

<sup>14</sup> Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 190.

attribute of compassion.”<sup>15</sup> Generally the Rabbinic literature tried to resolve the two attributes of justice and mercy within the two divine names ELOHIM and YHWH. According to the great rabbis, the divine name ELOHIM expresses the divine attribute of justice while the name, the Tetragrammaton YHWH, expresses the divine attribute of mercy (*Genesis Rabbah* XXXIII, 3).

### **Reading Exodus 34:6-7 in the Contemporary Setting**

The text of Exod 34:6 is among the biblical texts with which Pope Francis begins his discourse in the *Bull of Indiction* of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which he gave on 11 April, 2015. According to the Pope, God gave his name to Moses in Exod 34:6 as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” In the light of this text, particularly, and other related texts, the Pope presents mercy as the real meaning of God’s name, and this is abundantly revealed in the person of Jesus Christ who is presented as the face of the father’s mercy, the *Misericordiae Vultus*. This Exodus becomes pivotal in understanding and explaining the modus operandi of God in contemporary human history.

The text of Exod 34:6 presents God’s name as mercy but also balances this mercy with justice in 34:7. Thus it is not just mercy all the way, but mercy combined with justice. This is the interesting aspect of God’s character. One way in which God shows his attribute of mercy is in punishing the guilty, which is an act of justice. Even though he is slow to anger, he does not let the guilty go unpunished.

People are regularly faced with this dilemma in ethical discourses today. In the universal call for mercy and compassion, should the guilty be allowed to go unpunished? Does the regime of mercy imply the enthronement of a culture of impunity? These are questions of justice. The contemporary judicial system speaks of tempering justice with mercy. It is also the case that often the guilty goes free while the innocent is made to suffer. More agonizing is the fact that sometimes the innocent ones are discouraged in continuing in their righteous ways as they see the wicked and guilty go free or even get rewarded. Sometimes, God is even accused of not intervening quickly to punish the guilty and rescue the innocent.

The text of Exod 34:6-7 makes it clear that the guilty must suffer for the guilt but the punishment can at the end of the day be tempered with mercy. In this way, the text remains a point of reference in the search for new approaches to the penal processes in the Church and society.

### **Conclusion**

The text of Exod 34:6-7 is, no doubt, a difficult text to interpret, but it gives a balanced picture of God’s attributes of compassion and justice. He forgives out of compassion but he also punishes in order to maintain justice. The punishment is, however, meted out with compassion. Israel’s historical experiences convinced her that it was both a recipient of divine mercy and divine justice. Her sufferings are interpreted as just punishments for her transgressions of the covenant with YHWH. The biblical text is full of stories of divine punishments that end with the experience of divine mercy. This is the beauty of the biblical story, and that makes a story of salvation. The text of Hos 6:1-2 captures it, “Come, let us return to YHWH. He has rent us and he will heal us; he has struck us and he will bind up our wounds; after two days he will revive us, on the third day he will raise us up and we shall live in his presence.”

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<sup>15</sup> A. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud. The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 17.