

Dialectics of Divine Mercy and Human Repentance in Jeremiah 3:12b-13

Emmanuel O. Nwaoru

Introduction

Hosea employs from the beginning of his prophecy (2:4-25 [E 2-23]) a tripartite literary structure — accusations / complaints (2:4-7)¹, threats / judgment (2:8-15)², redemption / restoration (2:16-25)³ — to depict YHWH's relationship with his people, Israel. The structure is apparently adopted by Jeremiah⁴ and Ezekiel⁵ for the same purpose, particularly in portraying the consequences of Israel's religious and political harlotry against YHWH. However Jeremiah, in the oracle under consideration, moves away from Hosea's tripartite structure, even though he acknowledges that in the face of Israel's infidelity and political manoeuvring, YHWH complains, threatens as well as makes room for restoration. Instead he begins a somewhat catechesis on why Israel should turn back and why YHWH is willing to restore the offender. The reason is summed up in Jer 3:12b, couched as YHWH's self-revelation. The text reads: "For I am merciful". Here YHWH reveals himself as a "merciful" and "gracious" God. This self-revelation serves not only as a motivation but also an encouragement to Israel to turn back to YHWH their God. In this way, Jeremiah evokes anew in his oracle an important biblical tradition or belief, which Israel in its desperation seems in context to have forgotten, namely that YHWH is a "merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod 34:6b). This belief that originates in the context of Israel's unfaithfulness in the Exodus event and, precisely, in the bitter wilderness wandering experience, is one of the most comprehensive characterisations of YHWH by Israel's forefathers. That this article of faith is uniquely presented in a first person speech by YHWH seems to insinuate that Israel's infidelity has made it despondent. It therefore serves as a reminder to Israel of YHWH's unforgettable character and his attitude towards his people.

By choosing to reveal himself this way YHWH opts to heal Israel's unbelief, disloyalty and betrayal. It changes radically the 'standard' literary structure from immediate declaration of guilt and punishment to offering a second chance to the back-sliding Israel. This shift is important, given also the dialectical characterisation of YHWH as both wrathful and compassionate. Such characterisation has left unresolved in the minds of many biblical readers the tension between God's mercy and justice vis-à-vis human repentance. It means that the relationship between divine mercy and human repentance in the face of divine justice remains fluid, dynamic, open to re-interpretation, and largely dependent on the divine "mood". It therefore discountenances any attempt at absolutism in search of which precedes or follows the other, divine mercy or human repentance. Peculiar to the shift in this oracle, therefore, is the fact that it is not asking Israel to turn back or repent as a condition for forgiveness, rather that Israel should take advantage of YHWH's graciousness to turn back. In other words, it is YHWH's mercy that prompts God's people to repentance and not vice versa. For no amount of repentance can guarantee God's forgiveness.

¹ Hos 4:1-8:14.

² See also Hos 9:1-13:16.

³ Cf. Hos 3:1-5; 14:5-9 (4-8).

⁴ Jer 2:1-34; 2:3:19-20 (complaint/accusation) ; 2:35-3:10; 4:5-12; 7; 23:2-9 (threat/judgment) ; 3:11-18; 31; 33 (redemption/restoration); etc.

⁵ See Ezek 16:1-34, 44-58; 23:1-21, 36-49 (complaint/accusation) ; 16:35-43; 23:22-35 (threat/judgment) ; 16:59-63 (redemption/restoration); etc.

Looking at the text of Jer 3:12b-13 in the Year of Mercy, one is challenged to understand better the dialectics of divine mercy and human repentance. The paper is meant to incite all God's people to acquire proper knowledge of and correct attitude to the necessary means (particularly the sacraments) through which they obtain divine mercy. As the study seeks to examine and discuss the opposing ideas embedded in the theme in order to resolve their conflicts, it will adopt a simple exegetical method, paying greater attention to the context and semantics of the text.

1. The Text and Its Literary Scheme

Characterising the protagonists of any literary piece (biblical or extra-biblical) serves as essential structural indicator to the hearer or reader. It gives a directional pattern that must not be ignored, if one is to interpret the text efficiently. That applies to our text, Jer 3:12-13 in its larger context. It reads:

12 Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, 'Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry forever. 13 Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the LORD your God and scattered your favours among strangers under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, says the LORD. (RSV).

The two protagonists, YHWH and Israel, are identified by name in the text. While the name "YHWH" occurs four times, and reinforced in one occasion by the divine name God ("*lôhîm*"), the name "Israel" appears once, indicating that YHWH is not only the chief protagonist, but also in charge of and at the centre of events. No wonder only his voice is heard in the text as he commands the prophet (v. 12a), characterises himself (v. 12b) and the co-protagonist, Israel (v. 12a, 13). The characterisation produces two opposing personalities: Israel whom YHWH depicts as faithless (back-sliding) (v. 12a), rebellious, harlotrous, and disobedient (v. 13), and YHWH who reveals himself as gracious ("I will not look on you in anger"), merciful ("for I am merciful"), and slow to anger ("I will not be angry forever") (v. 12b). To be observed is that the prophet assumes completely the role of YHWH's mouthpiece and not a messenger as he has to deliver the oracle in YHWH's direct speech.

Within the larger context the oracle presents a faithful Husband (3:1) and Master (3:14) in incompatible relation with an unfaithful wife (3:1) / territory (3:12a) and faithless children (3:14; cf. Hos 1-3). A spatial location, "the north", is identified as the primary destination of the prophetic oracle, implicating Israel. Yet Judah that is described as treacherous is not spared from indictment for not learning from Israel's mistakes (religious and political harlotry) (3:11) and YHWH's judgement thereupon (cf. Ezek 23; also Luke 12:48). In sum, the larger section of the oracle shows that Israel has failed to observe the stipulations of the covenant with YHWH. The natural consequence for a "back-sliding" nation or wife, viewed from the point of divine justice, is punishment, total rejection; for a divorced wife is not to be accepted back by the husband (Deut 24:1-4; Jer 3:1), even if she was desirous to return. But YHWH's mercy continues to pursue his people. It is from this background that one will read and understand the text better in its context.

2. Context

Jeremiah 3:12-13 forms an integral part of the larger section (Jer 2-10), identified as a cycle of religious harlotry.⁶ Holladay on his part locates it within 2:1-4:4 entitled, "The Accusation of

⁶ ABD 3: 713.

Harlotry and the Appeal to repent".⁷ Separating the *rîb* (prophetic law-suit) section 2:1-3:5, our text is located precisely in the section of 3:6-4:4, dealing with a call to repentance. Further delimitation shows that Jer 3:12-13 is a unique literary sub-unit flanked by two other sub-units, vv. 6-11 and vv. 14-18, respectively.⁸ Jer 3:11 connects vv. 12-13 to the preceding issues. It holds brief for the northern kingdom for its guilt because it has no nation before it to learn from with regard to the calamity of destruction and pain of exile cf. Jer 31:2-6, 15-22). Verse 14 shifts emphasis from the call to repentance of Israel, the faithless territory (north) (vv. 12-13) to that of faithless *bānîm* tribes [children] (v. 14a) and introduces the theme of restoration and reunification of Israel and Judah, renewal of worship in Zion and replacement of incompetent rulers (vv. 14b-15).⁹ Moreover, the additional issues raised in vv. 14-15 are said to be secondary, given that the rest of the materials in the other sub-units received their final form in King Josiah's period.¹⁰

Whatever, it must be remarked that Israel's faithlessness due to religious and political harlotry and YHWH's appeal for repentance are exposed with as much intensity as the mercy of YHWH in the text. These themes constitute the subject matter of Jer 3:12-13 and therefore of this paper.

3. YHWH the Merciful and Israel the Faithless

Having generally considered the characterisation of YHWH and Israel in the text of Jer 3:12-13 above, it is necessary to look at the personalities of the two protagonists in detail.

3.1 Israel, the Apostate One

YHWH presents Israel first and foremost as *m^ešūbāh yišrā'ēl*. This feminine absolute noun *m^ešūbāh* (apostasy, backsliding, disloyalty, faithlessness) is used in apposition with Israel to depict it. It is also employed as a cognate accusative to strengthen the preceding imperative *šūbāh* that is of its own root, thus intensifying the appeal to Israel to "turn back" to YHWH. As Jeremiah's favourite vocabulary, the prophet employs *m^ešūbāh* in nine out of its twelve occurrences in the Old Testament. He used it most intensively in chapter three to depict Israel (3:6, 8, 11, 12) and in relation to Judah (2:19; 3:22; 5:6; 8:5; 14:7; cf. Ezek 37:33). In apposition, *m^ešūbāh* communicates exactly the endemic character of Israel as "*apostate one*",¹¹ which in the mind of Hosea has become Israel's way of life (11:7) but not irredeemable (14:5[E 4]). Naturally, enduring backsliding or apostasy leads to self destruction and death (Prov 1:32), except for the intervention of YHWH. This is what seems to play out in the text under consideration.

The image of a *rebel* or *transgressor*, deriving from the root *pšc* (to rebel, revolt, transgress), portrays Israel as one who has deserted a loved one (v. 13b; cf. Jer 5:23; 6:28; Hos 7:13). This imagery receives greater emphasis in a chain of two other accusations, harlotry and disobedience (v. 13). Harlotry is metaphorically presented as scattering "your ways [favours] for [among] strangers (*watt^epazz^erî 'et-d^erākayik lazzārîm*) under every green tree (cf. Jer 2:20; 3:6; Hos 4:12-13; Deut 13:2). The use of the verb *pzr* ("to scatter") together with *derek* (way) is not to be understood literally. The verb expresses the idea of Israel's running here and there to

⁷ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 118.

⁸ Alex Varughese, *Jeremiah 1-25: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (NBBC; Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2008), 6. It is important to observe that the sub-units have also been identified in accordance with their literary form, prose vv. 6-10; vv. 15-18 and poetry, vv. 11-14.

⁹ J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Wm.B Eerdmans, 1980), 199.

¹⁰ See John Bright, *Jeremiah* (AB; Garden City, NY: Double Day), 27; also Guy P. Couturier, "Jeremiah", *NIBC* 18: 18.

¹¹ *BDB*, 1000. *TWOT*, 2340 e; William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2000), 218.

zārîm "strangers" i.e. foreign gods¹² or / and foreign nations,¹³ and *derek* carries an unusual sense of "sexual favours".¹⁴ In other words, Israel's act of harlotry has both religious and political connotation; and its use here tarnishes the more Israel's image as a rebel.

The ultimate image of Israel in the text is that of disobedience. That is understandable because in the context of the covenant relationship YHWH interprets Israel's rebelliousness and harlotry as acts of disobedience. It is a refusal to obey YHWH. "And my voice you have not obeyed" - *ûb^eqôlî š^ema^ctem* (v. 13c; cf. Deut 4:30; 1 Sam 8:7). The use of first person pronominal suffix "my voice" draws attention to the emotional content of the saying. Normally, Israel's rebellious, harlotrous, and disobedient characteristics should bear witness at judgement, except YHWH decides otherwise. Since dialectical characterisation marks the attitude of the Deity towards adherents in both biblical and extra-biblical traditions, it is reasonable to imagine that YHWH's decision will depend on the attitude he adopts toward Israel. Hence YHWH's wrath or mercy awaits Israel, even though the two are occasionally found together (Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6; Job 5:18-19; Isa 30:26; 45:7; Hos 6:1).¹⁵

3.2 YHWH, the Merciful

Interestingly, in our text, YHWH chooses to depict himself as *hāsîd*, an adjective that can be understood in three senses.¹⁶ In active sense as one who practises *hesed* (loyalty, steadfast loyalty, kindness, loving kindness, mercy, etc.), i.e. one "whose life is lived in accordance with the principle of *hesed*."¹⁷ It may be used in a passive sense to refer to one who receives *hesed*. It can also be used in a special and unusual stative sense to denote one who is an embodiment of *hesed*. This is the sense *hāsîd* is used in v. 12b to portray the unique characteristic of YHWH. And this divine attribute is affirmed by the psalmist (Ps 145:17). Only in these two texts does *hāsîd* refer to YHWH out of its thirty-two occurrences in the OT. There is no consensus on how to translate the word when it relates to YHWH as is evident in these variant renditions: "merciful" (RSV, NIV, NJB, GNB), "love unfailing" (NEB), "gracious" (J. Bright), etc. Nevertheless, the LXX's *eleēmōn* (merciful, compassionate, sympathetic) in Jer 3:12b as different from *hosios* (devout, pious, holy) in a parallel expression in reference to the psalmist in Ps 86:2) encourages us to adopt the word "merciful" which many scholars consider also most appropriate.

Thus the text reads: *hāsîd 'ānî* - "I am merciful". It is the second of the three graphic statements in Jer 3:12b in which YHWH makes known himself. Syntactically, the emphasis is on *hāsîd* (being) merciful, given its first position, but the pronominal subject *'ānî* is also not without emphasis since YHWH speaks solemnly of himself.¹⁸ The phrase is predicative in form with *'ānî* as subject and *hāsîd* as adjectival predicate, stating something about the subject. The logic of the statement is: Does the predicate truly represent or depict the character / personality of the subject? Or are the values expressed in the predicate found in the subject? Or has the subject the property signified by the predicate?

¹² Jer 2:25; 3:2; Ezek 16:15, 24-25; cf. Deut 32:16; Ps 44:21; 81:10; Isa 43:12.

¹³ Cf. Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea* (ÄAT 41; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 77; also Hos 7:11, 12, 16; and "hiring lovers" in 8:10.

¹⁴ Prov 31:3; TWOT, 0453.0.

¹⁵ See also Lam 3:32; Ps 30:8[E 7]; Isa 45:7; Jer 23:23; Ezek 39:28,

¹⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, Michael Patrick O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (IBHS) (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 5:3.

¹⁷ *NIDOTTE*, 2: 213. It can therefore stand for one who is faithful, devout, godly, holy as well as kind, benevolent, gracious, merciful.

¹⁸ Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1850), §104, 6; also Gen 15:1; 26:24; 28:13; etc.

It must be observed that most of the I AM formulas in OT are nominal, some introducing, as it were, individuals by their names,¹⁹ while others add a participial phrase to the noun.²⁰ A few others share literary composition with our text; here the "I AM" saying is of divine speech and has adjectival predicate (cf. Lev 11:44, 45; Isa 43:15; 44:6). The most outstanding example is Exod 22:26 [E 27] that reads: *kî-hannûn 'ānî* "for I am compassionate". From point of content, the saying is unique. Nowhere else does a Deity qualify himself as *hāsîd* in the OT. But as I have already pointed out this characteristic of YHWH's personality is recognised by the psalmist (Ps 145:17) who in turn appropriates the formula to himself in prayer (Ps 86:2).

While in the *hāsîd 'ānî* statement YHWH reveals his personality and his nature, the other two verbal statements - *lô'-'appîl pānay bākem* "I will not look on you in anger" (v. 12a), *lô' 'ettôr l'cōlām* "I will not be angry forever" (v. 12b) - disclose divine disposition or attitude in action. Semantically, they corroborate, extend and deepen what YHWH means to communicate in his self-revelation and identification. The two phrases, *lô' npl pnh b^e* "not to make countenance fall against", "not to look displeased at"²¹ and *lô' ntr* "not to be angry" can be said to belong to the wide semantic field of YHWH's mercy. The first phrase is unique to YHWH (Jer 3:12a); the second in Jer 3:12b is applied elsewhere to both YHWH (Ps 103:9) and humans (Lev 19:18). Indeed, its usage here answers the question raised in Jer 3:5 whether or not YHWH will be angry forever, which answer is: He will not.

In the semantic field of YHWH's mercy are personal names *Hanniel* (*Hannaniel*) - "God is gracious" - (Num 34:23; 1 Chr 7:39) and *Hananiah* (*Ananias*) - "YHWH is merciful" - (Tobit 5:13); and adjectives of which the two most prominent and frequently used are *rāhûm* "merciful, compassionate"²² and *hannun* "gracious".²³ Other expressions in the OT that express God's merciful attitude include: adjectival phrases - *rab-hesed* (Exod 34:6) or *g^edol-hesed* "great (abounding) in steadfast love" (Ps 145:8), *'erek 'appayim* "slow to anger" (Exod 34:6; Joel 2:13), *hāpēs hesed* "delighting in steadfast love" (Mic 7:18) - participial clauses - *nōtsēr hesed la^alāpîm* "keeping steadfast love" (Exod 34:7), *nōsē'* "forgiving" *‘āwōn* "iniquity", *peša^c* "transgression", *hattā'āh* "sin" (Exod 34:7; cf. Mic 7:18) and *‘ōseh hesed* "showing steadfast love" (Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10; Jer 32:18) - and verbal clauses - *nhm ‘al-hārā'āh* "to repent of evil" (Joel 2:13; cf. Amos 7:3, 6; Jer 18:8; Ps 106:45; Jonah 4:2), *‘br ‘al-peša^c* "to pass over transgression", *lō'-hzq lā^cad 'ap* "not to retain anger" (Mic 7:18), and *kbš ‘āwōn* "to subdue or tread out iniquity", *šlk hattō'wt* "to cast away sins" (Mic 7:19). YHWH is not only known as a compassionate and merciful God as his attributes indicate, but also simply called *‘lō^ah s^elîhôt* "God of forgiveness" (Neh 9:17; cf. Ps 86:5; 130:4; Dan 9:9).

It is important to remark that YHWH's attributes, revealed in passing to Moses in Exod 34:6-7, have become an article of faith that is widely confessed in the OT²⁴ and is known today as *Gnadenformel* "grace Formula".²⁵ There YHWH describes himself as "a God merciful and

¹⁹Examples of the self-introduction formula abound in reference to YHWH: Gen 15:7; 26:24; 28:13; 31:13; 46:3; Exod 3:6, 14; 6:2, 6, 7, 8, 29; 7:5, 17; 8:18; 10:2; 12:12; 14:4, 18; 16:12; 29:46; 1 Kgs 20:13, 28; Isa 46:9; Hos 11:9; 12:10[9]; Isa 46:9; cf. Gen 15:1; 17:1; 35:11; Num 18:20; Isa 43:10, 13, 25; Ezek 44:28; etc., and to humans: Gen 27:19, 32; 41:44; 45:3, 4; Ruth 3:9; cf. Gen 23:4; 24:34; 1 Sam 1:26; 2 Sam 1:8; Jonah 1:9; etc.

²⁰ Exod 31:13; Lev 22:16, 32; Isa 49:26; Jer 17:10; cf. Exod 15:26.

²¹ *BDB*, 658.

²² The word occurs a few times in the OT: Exod 34:6; Deut 4:31; 2 Kgs 13:23; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8; Isa 30:18; Mic 7:19; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2.

²³ Exod 34:6; 2 Chr 30:9; 86:15; Neh 9:31; Ps 111:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Isa 30:18; cf. Isa 30:19.

²⁴ See Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:10; 4:2; Mic 7:18-19; Nah 1:2b, 3a; Mal 1:9a.

²⁵ The term was first established by H. Spieckermann in his work "Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr" in *ZAW* 102 (1990): 1-18; 3. For other relevant materials, see, J. Scharbert, "Formgeschichte und Exegese von Ex 34:6f und seiner Parallelen," *Bib* 38 (1957), 130-150; R.C. Dentan, "The Literary Affinities of Exodus xxxiv 6f," *VT* 13 (1963), 34-51; Jakob Wöhrle, "A Prophetic Reflection on Divine Forgiveness: The Integration of

gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" The context of this formula, coming as part of YHWH's response to Israel's apostasy is striking. It implies that though the sinner or the transgressor has to be disciplined and, if necessary, punished, YHWH's nature makes mercy readily available,²⁶ and refuses to allow judgement or punishment be his final word. It is based on this belief that the grace formula is employed in prayers (cf. Macc 1:24-29; Ps 103:10; 130:3). For, according to Wöhrle, YHWH "turns to the people, saves them from distress and revokes the judgement he has planned to do."²⁷

In the New Testament, mercy is also an inherent and essential characteristic of God. He is called "the Father of mercies" (2 Cor 1:3) and is known to be "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4). He is "compassionate and merciful" (Jas 5:11). God's quality of mercy is essentially transferred to Jesus who is not only called "a merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb 2:17), but also bestows mercy (Heb 4:15-16). In fact, the NT is replete with narratives that portray Jesus in his words and actions as acting out his understanding of the Father as a merciful and compassionate God. Indeed he grants forgiveness to sinners and associates with them without preconditions (1 Tim 1:13, 16).

There are two major theological reasons for relying on YHWH's mercy, firstly, YHWH's nature that is divine not human (Hos 11:9),²⁸ and, secondly, his being creator of humans (Jonah 4:10-11).²⁹ Based on this offenders like David stake their lives on YHWH than anything else (2 Sam 24). Hence divine mercy does not only counteract but also outlive divine wrath (Isa 54:8; Mic 7:18; Lam 3:31-32). The implication is that while both anger and mercy are appropriate divine responses, the latter outlasts the former.³⁰

Apart from biblical tradition, there is overwhelming extra-biblical evidence indicating that mercy and not only wrath belongs to the attributes of the Deity. For instance, the Islamic religion has so believed and propagated the characteristic of Allah as "the Most Gracious" and "the Most Merciful" that the expressions have become a divine epithet. The phrase, "In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful" has to be recited before each Surah (chapter) of the Qur'an except for the ninth on Repentance. It is also used by Muslims in various occasions, especially during daily prayers. In an instructive saying in Surah Zumar (39:53) Allah is called "the Forgiving One", "the Merciful". This fundamental belief among Christians and Muslims is re-echoed in Pope Francis' message to Muslims for the month of Ramadhan and 'Id al-Fitri 1437 H. / 2016 a.d when he said: "We Christians and Muslims, are called to our best to imitate God. He, the Merciful, asks us to be merciful and compassionate towards others, especially those who are in any kind of need. So too he calls us to be forgiving of one another."³¹

From the *Akkadian Prayers to Marduk* one finds the dialectic characteristic of the Babylonian warrior god, Marduk. He is portrayed in an incantation prayer as having both wrath and mercy

theBook of Jonah into the Book of the Twelve" in www.jhsonline.org/cocon/JHS/a109html. Accessed 25/06/2016.

²⁶ ABD 4: 379-380.

²⁷ Jakob Wöhrle, "A Prophetic Reflection," Cf. Gen 19:19; Ps 31:8[E 7], 22[21]; 32:10; 57:4[E 3]; 94:18; 143:12.

²⁸ See Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "'For I am God and not Human' (Hos 11:9): Implications for New Evangelisation in Nigeria," in Anthony Ewherido, et al, eds., *The Bible on Faith and Evangelisation* (Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN) vol. 6; Port Harcourt: CABAN, 2015), 67-88.

²⁹ See Wöhrle, "A Prophetic Reflection".

³⁰ Cf. *NIDOTTE* 2: 213; also Ps 89:3[E 2], 29[28], 34[33]; 103:17; 117:2; 118; 136; 138:5, etc.

³¹ See, <http://faith-matters.org/2016/06/22/pope-franciss-letter-to-muslims-during-ramadhan/> from Pope Francis Conveyed through Cardinal Tauran and sent to British Muslims. Accessed 25/06/2016.

as personal qualities. He is one "whose anger is a deluge, his forgiveness is (that of) a merciful father."³² In worship, the supplicant addresses him as "my compassionate and merciful lord" because "You are merciful, O lord, in difficulties and adversity, you save the weak. [You look] with favour on the tired and weary whose god punished him."³³

One can therefore see that being merciful and gracious is generally accepted to be a fundamental characteristic of the Deity. In Jer 3:12b it is YHWH's self-revelation / self-identification; in every other instance it occurs as adherent's confessional material. It is this literary form that marks out our text among others. The purpose of its uniqueness in relation to repentance and restoration of God's people will be discussed next.

4. Dialectics of Divine Mercy and Human Repentance

The different passages that have been considered so far, especially those that bear the "grace formula", strongly point to an outright forgiveness of YHWH, based on the fact that it belongs to his nature to be merciful and compassionate. The texts also testify that this attitude is long-lasting just as Ps 136 insistently maintains (cf. Ps103:17; 1 Chr 16:34, 41). In that regard his forgiveness is without precondition. The merciful nature of YHWH has led him to literally "change" his mind rather than pass expected judgement on or give appropriate punishment to offenders (Hos 11:1-9). An epic example is YHWH's immediate response to Israel's apostasy with the golden calf. Here YHWH threatened; but the people were spared through Moses' intercession. Interestingly, the amnesty was granted not because of any act of repentance by the people, but by Moses' appealing to YHWH's promise to the patriarchs (Exod 32:7-14). There is no doubt then that God's perpetual covenant with Abraham and his descendants, which emphasis is on his unflinching commitment to Israel, provides the background to the belief in unconditional forgiveness of God. The same is true of the perpetual promise made to David and his lineage (2 Sam 7). Thus most of the biblical narratives that are based on this tradition propagate the idea that YHWH has to forgive whether or not the people "turn back" / repent because he cannot go against himself. Any deviation from this in context may be as a result of redaction.

However, there are also other biblical traditions that hold contrary views on YHWH's unconditional forgiveness. Most of those are based on YHWH's conditional covenant with Israel in which observing constantly the stipulations of the covenant is key to God's committing himself perpetually to the course of his people (Exod 19:5-6; Jer 7:23-28). In other words, YHWH's willingness to forgive is juxtaposed with the willingness of humans to repent or turn back to him. This explains why the pardon granted to the city of Niniveh after Jonah's ministry (Jonah 3) received an immediate reversal in the prophecy of Nahum (1:2-3; 2:1-14[E 1:15-2:13]). The conflicting image of YHWH's mercy and wrath as seen in the prophecy of Nahum sets limits to the divine qualities expressed in the grace formula. It insinuates that repentance is a precondition for divine mercy and forgiveness (cf. Joel 2:12-14; Mal 1:9). The text of 2 Chr 30:9 acknowledges that YHWH is merciful and compassionate and yet "he will not turn away his face from you, if you turn to him" (cf. 2 Chr 7:14; Deut 30:2-3; Sirach 17:29). In fact, Lev 26:40-42 demands that even a confession (*ydh*) be made as prerequisite thus: "But if they confess their iniquity (v. 40a) then I will remember my covenant" (v. 42a). And in the Wisdom of Ben Sira those who remain unrepentant can expect only divine wrath (Sirach 5:5-6; 16:6-12).

³² L.W. King, *Babylonian Magic and Sorcery* (London, 1896), 11.

³³ King, *Babylonian Magic and Sorcery*, 12, 24-25; See Takayoshi Oshima, *Babylonian Prayers to Marduk* (Orientalische Religionen in der Antike, 7; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), particularly the review in *JHS* 12 (2012).

The relationship between divine mercy and divine justice on the one hand and repentance and forgiveness on the other hand has not been easily explicable. Like the OT the New Testament and early Christian writers have to grapple with the dialectics. This is evident in Paul's letter to the Romans. Forgiveness which is believed to be the fruit of divine mercy is inseparably tied to repentance as its precondition, with retributive justice as consequence (Rom 2:4-11). Interestingly, Paul has later to "correct" this view by presenting divine mercy as an unconditional gift of God (Rom 11:28-32). The early Christian document *Hermas* or *Shepherd of Hermas* is also engaged in the debate concerning repentance. It presents the two dialectical views thus: some writers argue against any repentance for the Christian (31:1); others trusted in the mercy of God that is long-lasting (43:4). Although *Hermas* speaks for the possibility of one post-baptismal repentance, he does not specify what happens when a Christian defaults after the first chance. Hence he holds to both "a strict morality with a merciful God" (31:2-7).³⁴

Apart from the limits set by the dialectical characterisation of YHWH, a greater limit seems to have been set by the general belief that the Deity is the judge and guardian of justice in society. The OT does not only believe in this (cf. Gen 18:25), but goes on to see God as the one who established equity and justice (Ps 99:4). Like mercy, justice and righteousness are his very nature and attributes (Ps 97:2; cf. 89:15[E 14]; 99:4). Therefore, these attributes literally compel him to administer justice (judgement) with fairness by punishing the offender (sinner) and rewarding (saving) the righteous innocent.³⁵ From this perspective, divine justice demands that God shows no partiality in his judgement, a concept that evokes the principle of "measure-for-measure" retribution (cf. Jer 18:7-10; Ezek 18:24; 33:18; Sir 11:26; 16:13; 35:15; also Zeph 1:6).

It is therefore obvious that it is not the concept of divine justice *per se* that sets limits to divine mercy, but retributive justice, which must have arisen from sheer human reckoning. This plays out in certain passages already discussed above where the threat of punishment or otherwise repentance is juxtaposed with the merciful attribute of YHWH, most likely, to satisfy divine justice. For that reason not even Moses' powerful intercession was considered strong enough to annul divine judgement (Exod 34:7b; cf. 20:6; Deut 5:10; 7:9-10; Job 10:14). Ironically, in some cases, punishment due to sin is said to have been reserved for the day of punishment (Exod 32:34, 35). Whichever, dialectical characterisation of YHWH makes one imagine him only as a Deity "who is both merciful and merciless, and who forgives and exacts punishment."³⁶

Fortunately, God does not let himself be defined by human category, nor does he allow himself be predicted when and how he forgives or shows mercy (Jonah 1:14). Instead his acts of mercy and forgiveness are always seen as a surprising gift; for he does whatever he wants (Ps 115:3; 135:6; cf. Isa 45:10; Rom 11:33-34), and freely does so because he is not human (Hos 11:1-9). Consequently, a suppliant in distress approaches God from point of his merciful and compassionate qualities (Joel 2:13; Ps 86:15), and returns thanks when answered for the same purpose (Ps 103; cf. Neh 9:17). Even among foreign deities that are generally characterised as capricious, a Babylonian suffering petitioner still believes in Marduk's merciful and compassionate disposition and praises him for it, despite his own wretched condition. This is well-articulated in *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom*, a piece from Babylonian Wisdom literature, which Crenshaw summarises thus: "I will praise the Lord of wisdom ... whose heart is merciful ... whose gentle hand sustains the dying."³⁷

³⁴ See ABD 3: 148.

³⁵ (Cf. Ps 7:7-10 (E 6-11); 9:9 (8); 119:137; 145:17; also Rom 2:6-11; Col 3:25; Eph 6:9..

³⁶ Ehud Ben Zvi, "Jonah 4:11 and the Metaphorical Character of the Book of Jonah "

<http://www.jhsonline.org/cocoon/JHS/a107.html>. Accessed 25/06/2016.

³⁷ James L. Crenshaw, "Job, Book Of" in ABD 3: 858-868; also ANET, 434-437.

Evidently, YHWH's reversal of the fortune of his people is for good (Jer 29:11; Mic 7:18-20).³⁸ And as Rendtorff will put it, "Repeatedly, and in quite different contexts, the Hebrew Bible emphasises that despite everything Israel does, and despite all the punishments that he will visit upon Israel, God will keep to his covenant, remember and not forget it."³⁹ This aspect of OT theology receives great emphasis in Jer 3:12-13.

5. Repentance as Remedy? A Perspective of Jer 3:12-13

The discussion so far has proved that there is no consensus in dealing with the relationship between divine mercy and human repentance. All we can say is that the relationship is dialectical, that is, it is fluid, dynamic, and seeking a re-interpretation to resolve the conflicting views. The sources of conflict could be traceable to the two types of covenants mentioned earlier and / or to the redaction and reinterpretation of the covenant narratives in the course of history. Whatever, YHWH's self-revelation, "*I am merciful*" (Jer 3:12b) among others in Jer 3:12-13 offers a perspective towards resolving the dialectical views found in other biblical and extra-biblical texts. This distinguishes the text from any other and calls for its proper interpretation.

To understand the text therefore attention has to be given not only to the characteristics of YHWH and Israel as done above, but also to the importance of the imperative *šûb* and the role of the two particles *kî* and '*ak* at the beginning of v. 12b and v. 13a respectively. From the context and all that YHWH said about Israel in vv.12-13, it is clear that he knows Israel through and through. He knows that Israel is a *m^ešûbāh*, an embodiment of apostasy, backsliding, disloyalty, faithlessness. Yet he goes on to invite or rather appeal to Israel to "turn", a pun that could in context stand for both repentance in relation to God and uniting again with Judah after political harlotry. Whichever, the initiative comes from YHWH. In order to convince Israel to do so YHWH revealed the best side of his nature, namely "I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful I will not be angry forever" (v. 12b). The role of the causal particle *kî* introducing YHWH's self-revelation must not be taken lightly. Its clause "explains why something happens in terms of cause and effect."⁴⁰ It goes beyond its causal function "because" to offering reasons why Israel should accept the plea to turn back. The main reason is clearly stated: "I am merciful". The other clauses before and after it make sense only because of that essential quality of God. The imperative here must therefore not be understood as a command issued by omnipotent master or overlord to a disloyal servant under pain of punishment. Instead, YHWH in a common parlance is lobbying Israel to accept the invitation to repent because of his own merciful nature. The expression is motivational in character.

The adverbial particle '*ak* (only, just, certainly, etc.) leaves no one in doubt about the meaning and message of the oracle. Although it normally introduces an exceptive or a restrictive clause, the force of the clause serves here as a recommendation (cf. Num 14:9; 1 Kgs 17:13). Rather than give a contrast, or insinuate a precondition for a later action, it expresses the importance of paying attention to what is recommended or previously stated. The '*ak* clause in this context affirms that what is stated is true, namely "Only acknowledge your guilt", or as Holladay will have it, "Just admit your guilt"⁴¹ (v. 13a; cf. Gen 27:13; Judg 10:15). The '*ak* particle is modifying the verb *ydh* "to know"; and it is generally agreed that its force on the verb results in rendering the imperative as "acknowledge," "recognise" (cf. Jer 2:23).

³⁸ See Hos 14:5[E4]; Deut 32:26-27; Ps 78:38; also Isa 48:9; Ezek 20:8-9, 13-14, 21-23

³⁹ Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Trans. David E. Orton; Tools for Biblical Study, 7; Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005), 76; cf. 272, 634, 689.

⁴⁰ Ronald James Williams, John C. Beckman, *Williams Hebrew Syntax* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 533.

⁴¹ W.L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, 19.

The fact that the particle is followed not by *šûb* but by *dêi* sheds light on the meaning of the text. Obviously, YHWH is *not* insisting on turning or repentance in order to accept Israel back. Rather he desires to see Israel do the needful, acknowledge or recognise its guilt. To encourage Israel to make the right choice he reveals all the qualities embedded in his personality. The veracity of the message is strongly affirmed by three confirmatory formulas, *nê'um yhwh* "says the LORD". The first two confirms each YHWH's character, while the third seals YHWH's plea and recommendation to Israel to acknowledge its guilt.

6. Supremacy of (Divine) Mercy and Its Challenge in Context

The conflicting characterisation of God, and the consequent tension between divine mercy and divine justice notwithstanding, the Old Testament theology has always seen the mercifulness of God as the most essential quality of his nature. In relation to humans it can be said to be the most sought after. Divine mercy is not all about forgiving sins and sinners; it has to do with overall attitude of God towards his creatures, humans and non-humans alike. God's merciful disposition to forgive emanates from the fact of his being the creator of all.

The major challenge rests on the question once raised by Shakespeare: "How canst thou hope for mercy rendering none?"⁴² Indeed, forgiving an offender is one of the greatest challenges of our time. But if YHWH is so gracious and merciful to his creatures, it behoves human beings to accept YHWH's view point in our text; that one's offenders be pardoned without preconditions; and that an offender be helped to see the richness of God's mercy and respond accordingly by acknowledging guilt. Moreover, the standard of behaviour that Jesus, the image of the Father, sets on being compassionate and merciful is a great challenge to not only Christians but also to entire humanity. He praises the merciful (Matt 5:7), and makes it a precondition for keeping a good relationship with God (Matt 6:14; 18:33-35). In imitation of God / Jesus, one can say that the most appropriate human response is to be generous and merciful (Luke 6:35-38). For the early Christians, to be merciful is of divine injunction (cf. Luke 6:31-35).⁴³ For that reason, therefore, "a life of generosity and mercy in every respect is the proper response to divine generosity and mercy."⁴⁴ In fact, according to Polycarp, it is specifically demanded of presbyters to be merciful.⁴⁵ Paraphrasing the gospel injunction in another context, he says: "Love those who hate you, and pray for those who curse you, and you will have no enemy".⁴⁶ And this is life of mercy in practice; for it requires a merciful disposition to go against the current in contemporary society. The teaching of Pope Francis summarises it all:

Jesus shows himself to be the instrument of God's mercy; he manifests God's justice by bringing consolation and salvation to all. God did not send his Son to punish sinners and crush the wicked. Rather he came to invite them to conversion, so that they too could turn back to God" We constitute obstacle to people when we have a false image of the Messiah, when we construct our own image of God, which prevents us from experiencing his real presence among us⁴⁷

Conclusion

YHWH has revealed himself as a merciful God and will like all his creatures to see him and relate with him as such. It means that the dialectical characterisation of God and the tension

⁴² See *ISBE*, 5922.

⁴³ See *Didache*, 3,8; 2 *Clem* 4:3

⁴⁴ Hans Dieter Betz, "Sermon on the Mount / Plain," in *ABD* 5: 1106-1112; 1111.

⁴⁵ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 6:1.

⁴⁶ Polycarp, *Phil* 12:13. See *ABD* 5: 1111.

⁴⁷ Pope Francis' Catechesis in General Assembly of September 7, 2016 in Zenit.org. Accessed 08/09/2016.

between his mercy and justice should not constitute an obstacle in approaching God as Father of mercy and his son Jesus as a Merciful High Priest. The text of Jer 3:12-13 calls for a re-assessment of our relationship with God that is often marked and governed by fear. YHWH is not calling for Israel's turning as a precondition for his mercy and forgiveness, which is absolutely free. He is rather encouraging his people to take advantage of YHWH's graciousness to make a new beginning. His merciful personality should dispose those who relate with him to do the barest minimum, namely acknowledge their sinful nature. The challenge is to adopt a merciful and generous life-style in imitation of Jesus who adopted his Father's. It is when the message of Jer 3:12-13 exposed in this paper led to a better understanding of the demands of divine mercy and justice for our society today that one could say it had achieved its purpose.