
Corrections

Unfortunately, the publishers of this volume changed the format of the transcription of Sumerian words and failed to send me the proofs for correction.

To avoid confusion, it should be noted that the transcription of Sumerian words should not be italicised but spaced:

p.41: arḫuš (GÁ X MUNUS)
MUNUS
GÁ

p.42: arḫuš

p.44: dingir arḫuš sù
arḫuš
ama-arḫuš-a-me-en
RAHMA
Muslim and Christian Studies in MERCY

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DIVINE MERCY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
AND IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Dispenser of mercy” (al-Rahmān al-Raḥīm) begins the Qur’an, and with this formula countless Muslims commence their prayers and even the major and minor activities of their daily life. Islam thus most prominently attributes mercy to the one God of the universe, which is a central motif of the (Hebrew) Bible as well¹, the main source of theology for Judaism and Christianity. Mercy had even been attributed to deities of the ancient Near East more than a millennium before the emergence of the biblical writings. Divine mercy is thus a most promising motif in the attempt comparatively to investigate the history of the religions that emerged from the Fertile Crescent². In the following I shall concentrate


on exemplary comparisons between non-biblical and biblical texts from the ancient Near East to outline both continuities and discontinuities in the traditions of the idea of divine mercy. In the end I shall reflect on the potential consequences of the findings for how we should envision the relationship between these ancient religions and monotheistic belief from the perspective of a Christian and, specifically, Roman Catholic theology of revelation.

1. Mercy in the Languages of the Ancient Near East

The semantic range of “mercy” is represented by a rich word-field in classical Hebrew and in other ancient Semitic languages. In the following, however, I shall focus on the root rah, not only because of its special frequency and importance in the Hebrew Bible, but also because it has semantically closely related cognates in other Semitic languages, which makes it especially apt for comparative purposes. The basic meaning of the Hebrew noun rahamim is “womb” (e.g., Gen 20,18). The usage of this noun in the sense of “compassion, mercy” is most probably secondarily derived, associating the womb with the emotions felt by mothers towards their children. The noun is also used in the plural of intensity or abstraction: rahamim.


3 This article is an adapted and slightly revised version of my “Göttliche Barmherzigkeit im Alten Testament und im Alten Testament”, *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 138 (2016) 289-298. I wish to thank my colleagues Werner Mayer and Ivan Hübscher for helpful conversations in preparing this paper. The responsibility for any ideas expressed here is, of course, entirely mine.

4 With H.J. Stoebe, “רַחַם rhm pi. to have mercy”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 (1997) 1225-1230, here 1227-1228, one should consider especially, besides the root rah: hnm qal, “to show favour” (e.g., Exod 53,19; Ps 51,3), with the adjective hamman, “gracious” (e.g., Exod 22,26; Ps 116,5), and the noun hamnay, “favour” (only in Jer 16,13); hml qal, “to spare” (e.g., Exod 2,6; Mal 3,17), with the noun hamlal, “compassion” (Gen 19,16; Isa 63,9; Ezek 16,5); hūs “to be sad, have mercy, spare” (e.g., Ps 72,13; Ezek 5,11); hrm hithpael, “to have compassion” (e.g., Deut 32,36; Ps 135,14), hnm piel, “to comfort” (e.g., Isa 40,1; 66,13; Job 2,11). In addition, cfr. ’nr niph., “to be supplicated” (e.g., Gen 25,21; Isa 19,22).


6 Cfr. P. Dhorme, *L’emploi métaphorique des noms de parties du corps en hébreu et en akkadien*, Paris 1923, 134: “Pour les Hébreux comme pour les Akkadiens, le sein maternel était naturellement le siège de la pitié de la mère pour ses enfants”. Several comparable semantic associations are found in Hebrew (and generally in Semitic languages), such as “nose / wrath”, “heart / courage”, and “throat /
“mercy”. Moreover, the root occurs in the verb raham (“to show mercy”) and in the adjective rahāmū (“merciful”).

In Akkadian, which is of great importance for this comparative study, the cognate with the same basic meanings is rēmu (“womb, mercy”; the ū is lost here), with the adjective rēmēnu, (“merciful”) and the verb rēmu (“to take pity, to have mercy, to show mercy”).8 The root is found with a similar semantic range in other Semitic languages such as Ugaritic, Ugarteć and Aramaic.9

Moreover, and surprisingly so, we find the same semantic structure in the non-Semitic Sumerian as well. Interlinear translations show that the Sumerian word arḫuš corresponds to Akkadian rēmu.10 In addition, one may note that the cuneiform sign for arḫuš (GA X MUNUS)11 has the sign that represents the vagina (MUNUS) inserted into another that originally depicted a covered container (GA)13. The resulting sign may thus well represent the womb. The common Semitic root rḥm and its Sumerian equivalent arḫuš were already attributed in their extended meaning ‘mercy, merciful’ etc., to deities in some of the most ancient preserved literary theological texts, a tradition that continued through more than two millennia in the history of ancient Near Eastern religions14. A few examples of such attributions of mercy to deities will

7 Already Dhomme, Noms, 134, called rahamūm a “pluriel abstrait”. In some specific contexts, however, this plural could be read in the concrete sense of “expressions of mercy” (e.g., Ps 25.6, where the word is found in parallel with hasadim). I am grateful to Felix Körner for making me aware of this possibility in a personal communication.


10 According to J.S. Cooper, “The Return of Ninurta to Nippur. an-gim dîm-ma” (AnOr 52), Rom 1978, p. 131 n.4, it is “difficult to imagine that this same semantic extension [i.e. from “womb” to “mercy”] took place in Sumerian independently of Akkadian influence”.


12 Sign 554 in Deimel, Šumerisches Lexikon II, 4 (1933) 1011-1016.

13 Sign 233 in Deimel, Šumerisches Lexikon II, 2 (1930) 476: “Das Urbild dieses Zeichens ist sicher ein Kasten (oft aus Ton) mit Deckel”.

14 A great number of examples for the application of the motif of mercy to deities in Sumerian and Akkadian texts are provided in CAD R (1999) 257-265. Mercy is attributed to several gods, especially the great ones such as Šamaš, Ninurta, Nabû, or Marduk. Cfr. K. Tallqvist, Akkadische Göttner-epitheta. Mit einem Götterverzeichnis und einer Liste der prädikativen Elemente der sumerischen Götternamen (Studia Orientalia 7), Helsinki 1938, esp. p. 168. On personal names that express a prayer for divine mercy see J.J. Stamml, Die akkadische Namengebung (MVAG 44), Leipzig 1939, 167-168 and CAD R (1999) 262. 264. For West Semitic comparative material see J. Healey, “The Kindly and Mer-
be presented in the following, focusing on the comparison between non-biblical and biblical texts.

2. Destruction and Reconstruction – the Wrath and Mercy of a Deity.

A basic thought pattern in ancient Near Eastern traditions – including the biblical one – is the destruction of cities and temples and their reconstruction interpreted as resulting from the respective wrath and mercy of their gods. The most ancient evidence of this scheme is found in the Sumerian city laments. An illustrative example is the Nippur Lament from the times of King Išme-Dagan of Isin (20th century BCE). The text describes the destruction of the city caused by the wrath of the city god Enlil, who afterwards turns to show mercy: “Now, city, your lord who has had compassion and mercy (arḫus) for you, Father Enlil, lord of all countries, who has commanded that you be restored [...]. What he turned upon you in distress, he himself is removing”\textsuperscript{15}.

The same scheme is found in texts of the first pre-Christian millennium. I shall here quote, as an example, from the inscription on a clay cylinder of the Assyrian King Assarhaddon (reign 681–669 BCE)\textsuperscript{16}:

Esarhaddon, great king, mighty king, king of the world, king of Assyria, governor of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, chosen by the god Marduk [...]. Before my time, the great lord, the god Marduk, became furious with Esagil and Babylon, (and) his heart was full of rage [...]. He made (its) waters sweep destructively across the city and he turned (it) into fallow land. Its gods and goddesses took fright and went up to the heavens. The site of the city was torn out and its foundation platform(s) could not be seen [...]. At the beginning of my kingship, in my first year, when I sat in greatness on (my) royal throne, the merciful (remēnu) god Marduk’s heart was appeased and he became reconciled with the city that had angered (him). I had Esagil and Babylon built anew. I renovated the statues of the great gods (and) had (them) dwell on their seats as an eternal dwelling.


This scheme, attested several times in Assyrian and Babylonian sources\(^\text{17}\), also occurs in the Hebrew Bible. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, one of the greatest catastrophes suffered by biblical Israel\(^\text{18}\), was caused, according to deuteronomistic\(^\text{19}\) and prophetic interpretations of history, by the wrath of Israel’s god YHWH (e.g., Deut 29,27; 2Kgs 24,20; Jer 32,31; 33,5; 42,18; 44,6; Ezek 22,31; cfr. Lam 2,1; Dan 9,16)\(^\text{20}\). But Jerusalem could eventually be restored because of God’s mercy, as Zechariah’s prophecy explicitly states: “O YHWH of hosts, how long will you withhold mercy (rḥm) from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years? [...] Therefore, thus says YHWH, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy (raḥamīm); my house shall be built in it, says YHWH of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem” (Zech 1,12,16). In a very similar context, this motif is found in Ps 102,14-15: “You will rise up and have mercy (rḥm) on Zion, for it is time to favour it; the appointed time has come. For your servants hold its stones dear, and have pity on its dust”. Other texts that connect the postexilic restoration of Israel with divine mercy should be seen in the context of this common ancient Near Eastern tradition as well (cfr., e.g., Deut 30,3; Ezek 39,25)\(^\text{21}\). A bold transformation of this constellation of motifs is presented in the book of Jonah. The prophet Jonah, from the marginal nation of Israel, is called to announce to the great Assyrian city Niniveh its impending destruction (Jonah 3,4), which is understood by its king as an expression of divine wrath (3,9). The city converts and God withholds the announced destruction, thus displaying his “gracious and merciful” character (4,2: ḫannūn wa-raḥām). This theological profession is made by the prophet in an outburst of anger, claiming that he had always known God’s mercy and thus the meaninglessness of his mission. This ironic culmination of


\(^{22}\) On the relationship between Jonah 4,2, Joel 2,13 and Exod 34,6-7 see Scoralick, *Gottes Güte*, 142-144.
the book criticizes an attitude that is unwilling to accept that God’s mercy may extend even to Israel’s arch-enemies. God makes a bush grow for Jonah and a worm kill it to teach the prophet a lesson in why he shows mercy to “that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and so many animals” (4,11). The Book of Jonah is thus a humorous expression of divine mercy conceived in an absolutely universal manner, based on the idea of God’s creation of the universe and humanity as a whole.

3. Divine Mercy in Hymnal Praise and Leniency with Sinners

Mercifulness is attributed in hymnal praise, e.g., by a Sumerian letter to the moon-god Nanna (Uruk, 18th century BCE): “To Nanna, the first son of Enlil [...] to the lord, whose splendour radiates, crown of the world, great lord, who likes to grant life to humans, the compassionate king, the merciful god (dingir arḫuṣ ši...)” [24]. In a Sumerian text from the Akkadian period (late third millennium BCE, frequently copied in the Old Babylonian period), the priestess Enḫeduanna praises the goddess Inanna – despite her violent character as “leopard” and “eagle” – for her mercy: “Mercy (arḫuṣ), compassion, care, to invoke blessings are yours, Inanna, To cause flooding, to open inarable land, to turn darkness into light, yours Inanna, My Lady, I will proclaim your greatness in all lands and your glory!” [25] God’s mercy is praised in biblical Psalms as well: “You, O Lord, are a God merciful (raḥūm) and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ps 85,15). “He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; Yhwh is gracious and merciful (ḥannūn ḫraḥūm)” (Ps 111,4).

Divine mercy is particularly important in the context of leniency towards sinners. The goddess Nungal praises her own mercy to sinful men in a Sumerian text from Nippur (first half 18th century BCE): “Mercy (arḫuṣ) and compassion are mine, I do not frighten anyone..., I am a merciful mother (ama-arḫuṣ-a-me-en)” [26]. A Bab-

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26 For the text and translation see Å.W. Sjöberg, “Nungal in the Ekur”, in *Archiv für Orientforschung* 24 (1973) 19-46, esp. 32-35 (lines 75 and 80). Nungal is called “lady of the Ekur”, literally “lady of the mountain house”. For the interpretation of the text, much depends on the meaning of “Ekur”. It might refer to a palace or to the main temple. M. Civil, “On Mesopotamian Jails and Their Lady Warden”, in M.E. Cohen (ed.), *The Tablet and the Scroll* (FS W. W. Hallo), Bethesda 1993, 72-78, interprets the Ekur as a prison. Nungal would then be the tutelary goddess of the prison, which is seen
ylonian prayer attributes mercy to Marduk in the context of leniency towards sinners: “Your mercy is like a father’s (ki-i a-bi re-mu-uk)”\textsuperscript{27}. The same comparison is found – expressing trust in divine leniency not only towards single persons, but towards the people of Israel as a whole – in Ps 103,12-13: “As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so YHWH has compassion (rhm) for those who fear him”\textsuperscript{28}. David is famously portrayed as praying for divine mercy in his penitential psalm after his sin against Bathsheba: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy (rahamim) blot out my transgressions” (Ps 51,3)\textsuperscript{29}.

4. Marduk’s Mercy in Ludlul bêl nêmeqi – No Mercy in the Book of Job

The sapiential didactic poem Ludlul bêl nêmeqi (“I shall praise the lord of wisdom”) revolves around the wrath and mercy of Babylon’s supreme god Marduk. The text originates from the second half of the second millennium BCE, and it was widely disseminated and known in the first millennium BCE. The poem consists of four tablets of 120 lines each. In the main corpus, the protagonist Šubši-mešrê-Sakkan describes extensively his suffering and then his rescue by Marduk. The text is introduced by a hymn that juxtaposes Marduk’s violent and life-giving, acts in parallelisms, including the motif of mercy: “As heavy as is his hand, his heart is merciful (re-me-ni). As murderous as are his weapons, his intention is life-sustaining”\textsuperscript{30}.

Owing to its theme, Ludlul bêl nêmeqi has been compared to the biblical book of Job\textsuperscript{31}. Regarding the motif of divine mercy, the comparison yields a surprising


\textsuperscript{28} On the combination of mercy and the forgiveness of sins see also Mic 7,19; Dan 9,9.

\textsuperscript{29} On the petition for mercy in Babylonian prayers cfr. W. Mayer, Untersuchungen zur Formensprache der babylonischen “Gebetsbeschwörungen” (StP SM 5), Rome 1976, 225-226.


result: this motif does not occur in the book of Job\textsuperscript{32}. Although this biblical book deals more extensively than any other with the question of the suffering of the righteous – so we might expect a reference to mercy – it is absolutely silent in this regard. Perhaps it seemed unnecessary to the author(s) of Job to speak about mercy since Job is portrayed as free of any guilt, so God has no reason for wrath or for subsequent mercy. God’s reaction to Job’s speeches (Job 38-41) does not respond directly to the issue of his suffering, but is a personally affected, passionate and dramatic response. For Job, the only consolation is found in the immediate encounter with God (Job 42,5). It seems that the book of Job programmatically restrains itself from answering the issue of suffering with motifs from standard theology such as divine mercy.

5. Divine Mercy in a Christian Understanding of Revelation

Although the preceding comparisons are eclectic and exemplary rather than representative and systematic, they may suffice to illustrate that the biblical way of speaking about divine mercy is neither new nor unique to the Bible, but is nourished by streams of tradition that were widespread in the ancient Near East. The motif of divine mercy is a compelling example of such widespread theological traditions, since we have evidence of the common Semitic root *r̥m* and its Sumerian equivalent *arḫuš* applied to gods continuously from the most ancient theological Mesopotamian texts in the third millennium BCE to the Hebrew Bible, which originates from the first pre-Christian millennium\textsuperscript{33}. We find it in similar literary forms such as hymnic praise and in prayer. It occurs in similar constellations of motifs such as divine wrath and mercy related to destruction and restoration, divine leniency with sinners, or the comparison of a god’s mercifulness with a father or a mother. Besides the development of monotheistic thought (starting with Deuteronomy 4 and Deutero-Isaiah in the late 6th century BCE), which necessarily implied a universalization of many theological ideas, what is specific to biblical texts is the quality of complex literary transformations of traditional motifs: for example, the irony in the book of Jonah or the sober silence on mercy in the book of Job.

\textsuperscript{32} Cfr. already H. Spieckermann, “Wrath and Mercy as Crucial Terms of Theological Hermeneutics”, in Kratz / Spieckermann (ed.), *Divine Wrath*, 3-16, esp. p. 11: “The constellation of Job could hardly be more divergent. It is true that the interrelation of God’s wrath and mercy is not addressed directly”.

\textsuperscript{33} One could consider whether the motif of mercy might go back even further in the history of religions. The great importance of the womb in early art (e.g., M. Krebernık et al., “Muttergöttin”, in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 8 [1997] 502-527) clearly relates to fertility, but it could connote divine mercy as well.
Many texts within the Hebrew Bible draw a sharp contrast between the deities of surrounding peoples, who are despised as lifeless idols made of wood, stone and metal, and the God of Israel, portrayed as the living God and creator. Traditional theology has adopted this contrastive and polemical approach, seeing in ancient Near Eastern gods nothing but idols that were to be overcome and, finally, destroyed. If we try to understand, however, the development of biblical religion in unbiased historical terms, we may arrive at a quite different view. YHWH, the god of Israel, was originally one of thousands of gods in the ancient Near East, and even a relatively small and unimportant deity. In the course of the centuries, Israelites and Judeans attributed to this god a great wealth of motifs common to ancient Near Eastern religious traditions, until he emerged as the highest, universal and eventually even the only God of the universe. Biblical theology of mercy evolved from the religious world of the ancient Near East in a double sense: it is rooted in streams of traditions that reach back more than a millennium before the most ancient biblical texts; and, without these traditions, the biblical motif of divine mercy cannot be historically understood. At the same time, this motif was radicalized, universalized and sublimely transformed by biblical authors.

How can we relate such historical observations with a Christian theology of revelation? For the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council has offered a new perspective on other religions that makes it possible to acknowledge positive religious insights in non-Christian traditions. Fundamental in this regard is the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions – Nostra Aetate (1965), in which a key passage reads: “From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense” (Nostra Aetate 2). Such an open-minded perspective on the history of religion can even be found in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: “God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1,3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Rom. 1,19-20)” (Dei Verbum 3). From such a perspective, Christians may have the courage to admit the

34 An example of this attitude is Anton Deimel (1865-1954). Although he was one of the most important assyriologists of his time, he had an entirely negative view of the “many false Babylonian gods”, as can be seen in the preface of his Pantheon Babylonicum, Rome 1950, vii.

35 For a brief overview see T. Römer, L’invention de Dieu, Paris 2014.

36 Yet, systematic reflection on the relationship between the history of religions and revelation is still a desideratum. D. Ansorge, Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit Gottes. Die Dramatik von Vergebung und Versöhnung in bibeltheologischer, theologiegeschichtlicher und philosophiegeschichtlicher Perspektive, Freiburg i. Br. 2009, for example, integrates aspects from the history of religion (54-73), but still thinks that Christian reflection on divine justice and mercy must take its starting point in the ul-
possibility that religious insight from polytheistic religions, which we might call “pre-revelatory”, could have positively influenced the biblical writings, which absorbed and transformed much more ancient religious intuitions.

Divine mercy remained a leitmotif of oriental religions, even in traditions that evolved independently from the Bible\textsuperscript{37}. A potential precursor of the attribution of mercy to God in the Qur’an is the god Baalshamin, the “Lord of heaven”, who is called “merciful” in an inscription\textsuperscript{38}. A temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra was destroyed by the so-called “Islamic State” in 2015. This may be seen as symbolic of the value that we might or might not attribute to the remains of the history of religion.

Such contemporary experience shows that our understanding of revelation has concrete political and ethical implications. The more we (in whatever tradition) emphasize the unique truth expressed by a specific form of revelation, the more easily we may fall prey to the temptation of attitudes that foster our own sense of superiority and contempt for others, attitudes that may even be abused to justify open violence. Those critics who have shown that this phenomenon has occurred in all monotheistic traditions and that monotheistic belief itself should therefore be questioned regarding its aggressive potential\textsuperscript{39}, should not be disregarded too easily.

On the other hand, I believe that the monotheistic conception of God as creator must acknowledge every person as precious in the eyes of God, to whom God desires to reveal himself. This requires an attitude towards every fellow human – regardless of his or her religious affiliation – of trying to learn from the religious perception this unique person may have to share. Such an attitude – which may be found among people of good will in all religious traditions – can be a powerful motivation for encounters fostering peace in the social and political spheres. In religious terms, it expresses the belief in divine mercy that is truly universal.

\textsuperscript{37} Cfr. Healey, \textit{The Kindly and Merciful God}.

\textsuperscript{38} Healey, \textit{The Kindly and Merciful God}, 352.

\textsuperscript{39} Jan Assmann should be mentioned among the serious thinkers who have advanced this argument, since he entered into critical dialogue with theologians and subsequently developed his ideas further. Cfr., esp., his \textit{The Price of Monotheism} (trans. R. Savage), Stanford 2010 (German orig., \textit{Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus}, Munich 2003), and his recent \textit{Exodus: Die Revolution der Alten Welt}, Munich 2015.