
“LEARNING GOD'S MERCY: SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION ACCORDING TO HOS II:8”

“学习上帝的仁慈：根据《何西阿书11：8》 进行灵修转变”

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ABSTRACT

A growing focus on God's mercy and forgiveness emerged in the wake of the recent Pontificates of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Our time with its multiple crises cries for healing, forgiveness, and the experience of God's mercy. In social, political, and global terms, humanity craves for “lasting peace, born of the marriage of justice and mercy” (John Paul II, 2001, no. 15). The experience of God's forgiveness, merciful healing and new life has been expressed many times in the Bible. But, theologically, it has never been formulated as directly as in Hosea 11:8, when God's own heart becomes “turned over”, “converted” following the blaze of his own overwhelming compassion, paving the way for a fundamental spiritual transformation, rooted in forgiveness and mercy, that opens wellsprings of dignity, healing, and new life for all.

Our life is in many ways affected by consequences of wrong decisions, due to idiosyncratic priorities, misguided ideas and values, and unbalanced or even wrongheaded general orientations of “worldviews” and *Zeitgeist*. This happens on a personal level, but also on the grand-scale of (“throw-away”) societies, economics, politics, and powerful systems of media. The dire straits and consequences have to be borne out by millions, unnamed innocents, or, as in the aftermath of the Anthropocene’s violent ecological disasters, by future generations. The biblical cause of wrong decisions and developments is clear: Israel (and humans today) keep running away from God, our true origin, creator, identity, and future, with sad consequences for all. “Where comes this deep-seated conviction that one can realize one’s self somewhere else [than in Yahweh], independent and easier?” (Beck, E., 1987: 38).

Facing the wayward Israelites, the Prophet Hosea dares to declare that God’s heart undergoes a fundamental change, a “spiritual transformation”, a “conversion” of a primordial sort. Prophet Hosea let Yahweh speak: “My mind is turning over inside me. My emotions are agitated all together.” (Hos 11:8, *Anchor Yale Bible*, Vol. 24). Truly, in Hos 11:8 we are able to glimpse “the agony in the mind of God as he searches for some way of evading the response to which he has committed himself in the covenant curses (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28)” (Anderson/Freedman 1980: 588).

The Hebrew verb *HPK* “turning over” is often used “to describe the ‘overthrow’ of the Cities of the Plain” (Anderson/Freedman 1980: 588). But now God’s own heart gets “overthrown”, turned “upside down”, when God speaks about Himself, that “my heart is overthrown against me (לְבַל יִלַּע הַפֶּהַג)” —in German literally

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Facing Israel’s stubborn No to God’s will and plan, the Prophet Hosea records God’s historical response to this reality, the answer from “within” God’s CPU, expressed in a process of divine discernment, reflecting his mindful heart. Earlier on, Sodom and Gomorra have been destroyed, or in contemporary times, “God told me to end the tyranny in Iraq” (George W. Bush, quoted in MacAskill, 2005). In the latter case, the words of the Prophet Isaiah are applicable for sure: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways—oracle of the LORD.” (Isaiah 55:7-8). Hosea 11 can help us to understand the involved challenge deeper and better.

translated: “*Mein Herz stülpt sich um gegen mich / my heart turns itself over and against me*”—as “if the contrary will to save and will to destroy gave Yahweh a mind divided against itself, within the indecisive debate is raging.” (Anderson/Freedman 1980: 588-589).

The German “*Einheitsübersetzung*” (EÜ) translates the significant biblical passage Hos 11:8:

“*Mein Herz wendet sich gegen mich, mein Mitleid lodert auf*” (EÜ)

“My heart turns against me, my compassion blazes up.” (tr. of EÜ by FG)

“My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” (NRSVCE)

לְבַל יִלַּע הַפֶּהַג: (BHS)

“μετεστράφη ἡ καρδία μου ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ, συνεταράχθη ἡ μεταμέλειά μου” (LXX)

Thank God, that his compassion and merciful pity got the upper hand in the Divine process of discernment. The theological message of Hosea is clear: Even when Israel and we go astray, *God's love and compassion abides and stays*. God refrains from revenge and destruction, but aims continually at forgiveness and healing. Alfons Deissler dares to write about the “Conversion of Jahwe towards his first love.” (Deissler, 1985:50, tr. FG).

We know, the real culmination of God's mercy occurred, when the incarnate Word, his only beloved Son, died cruelly and innocently on the Cross, with words of forgiveness on his lips, even fulfilling filial piety and giving birth to a new community: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.” (John 19:26-27). This turn-around changed the world, and continues to transform it in our own times. The cross emerged as the tree of life for all cultures and generations. “The pierced hands are necessary to unbind the merciful hands of the Father.” (Jacques Maritain, quoted in Gomez, 2017:10). The flow of blood and water from his pierced heart nourishes the necessary transformation of all history on its bumpy “road from violence” (Lohfink, 2000). All humanity has to learn from the historical culmination of God's mercy, as all human mercy “is founded and summoned by that of God.” (Alfons Darlapp).

Learning from God's transformative spiritual example in Hos 11:8 and aligning with God's standard of mercy and forgiveness is not merely relevant for theological reflections, but has utmost ethical-practical, social, and political implications. After 9/11 2001, Pope John Paul II unceasingly warned the world to refrain from

feelings of hatred and military actions of revenge. In his famous *World Day of Peace Message 2002*, entitled *No Peace Without Justice – No Justice Without Forgiveness* (published on Dec. 8th 2001, less than 3 months after 9/11), the Pope penned the following prophetic words inspired by the concept of divine mercy:

“Forgiveness is above all a personal choice, a decision of the heart to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil. The measure of such a decision is the love of God who draws us to himself in spite of our sin. It has its perfect exemplar in the forgiveness of Christ, who on the Cross prayed: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).[...] By contrast, the failure to forgive, especially when it serves to prolong conflict, is extremely costly in terms of human development. Resources are used for weapons rather than for development, peace and justice. What sufferings are inflicted on humanity because of the failure to reconcile! What delays in progress because of the failure to forgive! Peace is essential for development, but true peace is made possible only through forgiveness. [...] Forgiveness is not a proposal that can be immediately understood or easily accepted; in many ways it is a paradoxical message. Forgiveness in fact always involves an apparent short-term loss for a real long-term gain. Violence is the exact opposite; opting as it does for an apparent short-term gain, it involves a real and permanent loss. Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage, both in granting it and in accepting it. It may seem in some way to diminish us, but in fact it leads us to a fuller and richer humanity, more radiant with the splendour of the Creator.” (John Paul II, *World Day of Peace Message 2002* (Dec. 8th 2001), nos. 8-10)

It took 20 painful years to learn this lesson in the case of Iraq. But we all are called to “learn God’s mercy” day by day, generation by generation, to join hands and hearts in this fundamental spiritual transformation in view of leaving behind forms of violence, hatred, revenge, and, instead, learning to witness God’s transforming mercy. For Cardinal Walter Kasper, “mercy is the essence off the Gospel and the key to Christian life.” (Kasper, 2017). Mercy is deeply connected with charity, which is the “the form’ of all virtue, their mother and coordinator” (Gomez, 2017: 4), and for the Angelic Doctor, mercy is simply defined as “compassion over the misery of another – *compassion miserae alterius* (STh, II-II, 30, 1 ad 2).” (quoted in Gomez, 2017: 4). At times, mercy entails, and even must include the effective defence of the weakest and those attacked cruelly and unjustly by terrorists or criminal dictators, even with military force, if necessary. This aligns with S. Thomas Aquinas assessment, that a just defence situation has to be strictly assessed under “Consequences of Charity” (S.Th. II-II, q. 40).

How God’s mercy practically works,

a word common in all Semitic languages, which means both “compassion” and “womb”, or “lap” (Simian-Yofre, 2004: 438). In Arabic, “*rahima* means ‘have mercy, have pity, be tenderhearted.’” (Simian-Yofre, 2004: 439). The biblical word רַחַם/*rehem/rāham* denotes the “female genitalia as a whole (uterus, vulva, vagina), above all as the site where human life originates.” (Kronholm, 2004: 455). In most OT texts, the noun רַחַם/*rehem/rāham* refers “to the womb (*uterus/vulva*), where a child develops between conception and birth.” (Kronholm, 2004: 456-457; see also Job 24:20; cf. Isa 49:15). It is theologically significant, however, “that only Yahweh, the merciful Creator, has from the beginning made and formed woman with a womb, which only he is able to open or to shut, just as he continually opens or shuts the heavenly portals of life-giving precipitation and the fertile womb of mother earth.” (Kronholm 2004: 457). As a woman is enabled to give birth to new human life, following the wise Creator’s master plan of life-giving compassion, all humans are in fact called to learn and witness ever deeper in their lives God’s tender mercy, as God’s mercy

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has been realized in the Parable of the Merciful Father (Luke 15), who gives the younger son a second chance, in fact enables for him a new “birth” into a new future. “But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again.” (Luke 15:32). In this context, one revealing word for compassion and mercy in Hebrew is רַחַם/*rehem/rāham*,

has the transformative potential of healing, of “giving birth” to new life, via forgiveness and reconciliation. As mentioned, the peak of this merciful transformation occurred in the incarnation of the Son of God, “through the *tender mercy* of God [διὰ σπλάγχνα ἐλέους θεοῦ ἡμῶν], whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us.” (Luke 1:78). In the Hebrew translation

of the New Testament, for *σπλάγχνα ἐλέους* the words *ברַחֲמֵי חֶסֶד berāḥamē ḥesed* are used, which means literally, “tender mercy” or “life-giving mercy.” (The Hebrew-English New Covenant 2009).

Saints and faithful Christians translated and witnessed this transformative life-giving mercy when following their vocation in a unique historical context. I only mention pioneers such as Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (Thuringia), or Saint John of God, triggering a global transformation of healing, mercy, and literally enabling the birthing of “new life” through their chain of hospitals, new clinical approaches, not to speak of long-term secular follow-up alignments and societal transformations. We should also mention the ecclesial renewals initiated by S. Francis of Assisi or S. Dominic de Guzmán.

Similarly, the conversion and example of S. Ignatius of Loyola and his companions – also as a practical response during a time of enormous ecclesiastical challenges and crises – is a continuation of taking up the burning torch of God’s healing stream of mercy. I am sure this transformation of mercy frames the biography of St. Ignatius, in seeking to discern more deeply God’s loving and healing presence, by finding “God in all things,” dedicating all human efforts to the “greater glory of God”. Ignatian spirituality and reflection nurtures the whole person – body, mind, and soul – to form compassionate “men and women for others,” fostering “turn-arounds” of healing in regard to global justice, peace, and dialogue, offering witness to God’s ongoing and merciful presence and transformation. The Jesuit focus on education ministries implements most significantly the 2nd Spiritual Work of Mercy (“Instructing the Ignorant”), incarnated in a spirit of respectful dialogue, shared learning,

mutual growth, by effectively witnessing God’s transforming mercy *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.



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