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Walter R. Roehrs

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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The Grace of God in the Old Testament

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

III

(Concluded)

AFTER making a rapid survey of the terms that the Old Testament employs to denote the grace of God, we need to say that these words are not the fleeting sound of empty vocables. Nor do they describe an abstraction in the nature of a Platonic idea. They tell what God does to save men from the curse of their separation from Him and to bring them a life in blessed communion with Him. Our next task is, therefore, to trace how the grace of God entered the lives of the Old Testament believers to bring them salvation.

The Old Testament records how God revealed Himself in order to put His grace into operation. Koenig says of the gracious purpose of God's revelation:

By endowing man with the image of God (Gen. 1:26), he was created to God (*auf Gott hin*), as Augustine puts it in superb succinctness: "*Tu nos fecisti ad te.*" Thereby a consonance with God and an eventual reunion with Him is made the supreme purpose of mankind.¹

Oehler stresses the meshing of word and deed in the revelation of God's grace:

And because revelation aims at the restoration of full communion between God and man, it is directed *to the whole of man's life*. It does not complete its work by operating either exclusively or mainly upon man's faculties of knowledge; but constantly advancing, it produces and shapes the communion of God and man, as well by divine witness in word as by manifestations of God in the visible world, the institution of a commonwealth and its regulations, revelations of God within, the sending of the Spirit, and spiritual awakenings; and all this so that a *constant relation exists between the revealing history of salvation and the revealing word*, inasmuch as each divine fact is preceded by the word which discloses the counsel of God (Amos 3:7) now to be completed; and again, the word of God arises from the completed fact, and testifies thereto.²

The same operative and concrete aspect of the revelation of God for the gracious deliverance of man is put thus by Haevernick:

Salvation in the Old Testament does not appear as a mere idea, thought, doctrine, it is at the same time something that is done. Essentially and in principle it is indeed the object of hope. But the latter does not float in mid air, it does not lack actual points of contact in history. It rests on a definite historical basis, it is grounded on a succession of deeds and experiences in life, in history, which can by no means be viewed or explained as the mere result of human activity, it is brought into the most intimate connection with institutions and practices which contribute effectively in enforcing the Spirit and thus form the basis for the doctrine of salvation.³

It can therefore be said that Old Testament history is God's grace *in actu*. The over-all *Tendenz* of the Old Testament records has but one goal; it moves with singleness of purpose toward the establishment of God's Kingdom of Grace among men. It alone among ancient records of events is controlled and unified by a teleological purpose of history. All other accounts of antiquity are stories, but not history (*Geschichten*, but not *Geschichte*). Old Testament history can therefore be said to be stories and accounts written in the future tense. The past has meaning for the future; history faces in the direction of that which is to come. It is advent history. God is not merely recognized as guiding and controlling the events of history and the fate of man. Everything that happens is a part of a projected plan: the design of God's grace to redeem man from the death of God-lessness and to restore him to life with God.

This teleological character of Old Testament history also accounts for the selection of the material in its narrative. Whatever does not serve to illustrate and portray this purpose of God's dealing with man is omitted although the event as such may appear as important or decisive in the annals of human events. This is true even of the history of God's chosen people. Israel does not exist as a nation in order to glorify the seed of Abraham as a people. As soon as Israel wants to be something other than the scaffolding in time of God's gracious salvation, it ceases to have a reason for existence: "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O Children of Israel?" (Amos 9:7.) Israel is to be the structure, built by the "plumbline"

of His design (Amos 7:8), in which His grace tabernacles; and when Israel builds its own mansions, they no longer square with the foundations of God's history and hence must fall: "I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces; therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein" (Amos 6:8). God's chosen people cost Him much: He called them, nurtured them with a mother's care, He literally moved heaven and earth and sea to protect and sustain them; but nothing is too expensive in His economy of grace. Israel must drop out of history when it fails to walk the way that leads to the goal of history: the salvation of mankind.

Because Old Testament history is thus oriented to the future, it tells the story not only of coming events in time, including Good Friday and Easter, but also events beyond history to the *eschaton*, the end. In doing so it remains true to its philosophy of history. In eschatology God's gracious purposes are fully and completely realized. The same holds true of that genre of Old Testament writing that is called apocalyptic. Here the purposes of God are merely laid down somewhat more schematically. Nothing will be able to thwart God in carrying out the establishment of His kingdom. The powers inimical to His plan of history, or anti-Christ, must perish.

We can therefore put it very briefly: Old Testament history is *Heilsgeschichte*, and that can only mean *Gnadengeschichte*, a history of grace.

How did God implement His gracious purpose? By what means did He bring the revelation of His grace to men?

As already intimated, God's deeds of grace in the Old Testament can very well be put into the framework of one word: the covenant. Through the covenant God again established contact with man after man had excluded himself from communion with Him by sin and thus was subject to death. For to be without God is being dead in the absolute sense of the word. Every provision therefore that God makes to reunite man with Him is an essential part of the *Heilsgeschichte*.

We need to remember again at this point that the covenant established a relationship of grace. The covenant could come into existence only because God is gracious. He alone took, and only could take, the initiative in bringing about this *rapprochement*. The

covenant is not a bargained agreement between two equals: the party of the first and the party of the second. We never read therefore that God *and* man established a covenant, but always that God made a covenant *with* man. Although the covenant is an event in history, it is an allegorical term to the extent that it expresses in human concepts how God healed the breach that divides man and Him and lays down the terms on the basis of which communion with God can be renewed. The foundation upon which rests the whole structure of this new Father-son relationship is the gracious condescension of the holy God. He contracted purely out of Fatherly divine goodness and mercy; it was unmotivated love. There was nothing in man to call forth a response of love in God. As a sinner, man was the very opposite of what God loved. And yet God bent down to lift this ugly, putrid creature from his destruction and make him beautiful in His sonship. The term covenant therefore when pressed is not adequate to describe the transaction between God and man if we think of it merely in human terms.

When did God establish this covenant?

In the first promise of His grace after the Fall there is no explicit reference to a covenant relationship. God, indeed, obligates Himself in the promise of the protevangel to deliver man from the power of sin and restore him to life. But no mention is made of stipulations that man is to meet. Man's part is merely the acceptance of this undeserved gift of grace. But from the immediate subsequent history it becomes quite clear that if man is to be a partner and beneficiary of this covenanted grace, God demands from him a total response. Whoever accepts the proffered pardon of sins cannot presume on this grace to love sin; he must demonstrate his belonging to God in godly living. Abel did this; Cain did not.

But beginning with Abraham, the revelation of God's grace is put *expressis verbis* in terms of a covenant. Considerable space is devoted even to describe the ceremony that attended the establishment of this covenant. But again there are no clauses of obligation mentioned that man assumes in this divine pact with the exception of the provision of circumcision. It is Paul who tells us what Abraham's part in this contract was: Abraham believed. Abraham became a signatory to this covenant by taking God's gift of grace and by standing fast without wavering in his reliance on this grace. To

cling in faith to God's grace, however, in this instance also presupposes that man enters into the orbit of God's will. He must disregard the claims of his own flesh to live to himself and his sinful desires; he walks with God. In the history of the patriarchs we see that man keeps the covenant and can claim its gracious provisions only as he gives himself to God in complete trust and submission.

In the Book of Exodus—almost at the beginning of the Old Testament—we have the detailed account how God adopted additional measures to put His *Heilsplan* into execution by means of a covenant. From the time of Moses until the time was fulfilled and the new covenant in the blood of Christ was established which makes the old covenant effective, the Old Testament *Heilsgeschichte* runs in the deep channel of the Sinai covenant.

In understanding and evaluating this covenant it is necessary to emphasize one aspect that is usually disregarded. It has provisions perplexing in the detail of minutiae and almost endless in number. Yet this whole imposing structure rises on the foundation of the faith covenant with Abraham. God reveals Himself to Moses as the "God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" (Ex. 3:6). God sends Moses to his people to tell them: "And I have also established My covenant with them [the patriarchs], to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, wherein they were strangers. And I have also heard the groaning of the Children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant. . . . And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and ye shall know that I am the Lord, your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage; I am the Lord." (Ex. 6:4, 5, 7, 8.) The promise made to Abraham is still in effect. The basis of this agreement is the same grace of God that operated in the covenant of Abraham.⁴

Nevertheless the Sinai covenant is a protracted recital of laws and requirements incumbent on Israel. To these exactions were affixed severe threats of punishment in case of transgression. In view of this heavy yoke of the Law that is thus imposed on Israel, does this covenant still deserve to be called an act of God's grace?

In the first place, the Law indeed has the promise of life attached to it. Jesus sums up all the requirements of the Law and then quotes from the Lawbook of Moses: "This do, and thou shalt live." But since no one is able to meet the demands of the Law: "to love God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and to love thy neighbor as thyself," the Law in reality is not a means of salvation, but can only accuse, curse, condemn, and kindle the wrath of God. It cannot effect a blessed communion with God; it only widens the rift between God and man and exposes man to the full condemnation of death.

This covenant of the Law, however, serves God's plan of salvation. It quickens in man the consciousness of his sin; it tears from under his feet every basis of recognition before God; it compels him to cast himself unreservedly on the mercy of God if he is not to be consumed in God's wrath. In teaching man the way of salvation in the Old Testament, God found it necessary to take this course, the course of almost countless laws, in order to eradicate in man every vestige of self-sufficiency and to extinguish any smoldering spark of self-righteousness. Thus the Law became—and is—the *paidagogos* to Christ. And who will say that man today does not need to learn this lesson from the Old Testament?

Proksch calls attention to the Old Testament sacrifice as a constant reminder of sin. "The sacrifices of reconciliation (*Versoehnungsoffer*), whether it was the burnt offering, sin offering, or guilt offering, had very deep roots which lie in the longing for redemption. As *opus operatum* it was rejected by the Prophets, but as a sacrifice of confession it was retained to the end of the Old Testament religion. It kept alive in Israel the consciousness of its sinfulness in the need of the remission of sins, constantly revived in the cultic procedures of the Temple."⁵

The Sinai covenant also had this "pedagogical" element, that it was a constant demonstration *ad oculos* of the need of substitutionary shedding of blood if access to a gracious God is to be gained. The prescriptions regarding sacrifice demand compliance in all their multiform complexity and detail; they are laws. But they are not the arbitrary demands of God to demonstrate His authority and to display tyrannical power in order to exact obedience. The awakened conscience of the Israelite was to learn that a sacrificial atonement

was necessary to eliminate sin and that God does not cover (*kipper*) sin without the shedding of blood. At the same time it was made abundantly clear that these sacrifices did not automatically effect the removal of sin, yes, that the shedding of the blood of bulls and goats did not suffice to bring about an atonement with God. While the ritual of sacrifice was a visual demonstration of the restoration of God's grace, there is not the slightest hint that the cult possessed magical powers.

Here again we have a feature, and a very fundamental one, in the religion of the Old Testament that sets it apart from every religion of Israel's environment. Fichtner makes this pointed remark: "The people, visited by the wrath of God, are denied those means of averting the wrath which Israel's environment recognized and applied: magical practices to placate God (*Beschwoerung Gottes*)."⁶ And Proksch puts it this way: "When God 'covers' sin (Ps. 65:4; 78:38; cf. Is. 6:7; 22:14; Dan. 9:24), then He no longer regards it, but forgives it. . . . Usually the priest is recognized as the mediator in bringing about this covering, which, of course, is effective only because it rests on God's ordinance; there is not the slightest hint of a magical power of the priest over God. The purpose is reconciliation between God and the nation for whose benefit the priest performs the covering; for the guilt of man is a chasm between God and the nation which cannot be bridged by human power. The means of propitiation is the sacrifice, and above all a burnt sacrifice, the sin sacrifice, and the guilt sacrifice, i. e., the animal sacrifice which entailed the giving up of life."⁷

This would be the place to enlarge on the significance of the Old Testament sacrifice as a type of Christ and then to proceed to trace the golden thread of Messianic promise through the passages of the Old Testament. The blood of Jesus Christ alone is the signature which makes the covenant of the Old Testament an instrument of grace. Without Calvary the covenant of Sinai would indeed be the Law that condemns. This is the incompleteness of the Old Testament that Christ came to fulfill. And this is the hope that the Old Testament holds out and to which it points. But we cannot tarry to develop this big topic. We have tried to restrict ourselves to the means that God employed in bringing His grace into the lives of the Old Testament saints.

IV

But because the Old Testament is incomplete without the New Testament, the grace of God in the Old Testament is said to be lacking also in the perfection of the New Testament. We shall devote a final section of our paper to a brief discussion of this alleged difference.

An inferior quality is ascribed to the grace of God in the Old Testament because the Sinai covenant did not succeed in establishing a full coverage for all sins. It is deficient quantitatively because it expressly expiates only those shortcomings which are committed out of ignorance or weakness or by mistake. Sins against God done with an "uplifted hand" (*jad ramah*), that is, intentional sins in conscious rebellion against God, remain unatoned and are punished by death or expulsion from the people (Num. 15:30, 31). There are violations of the Law, then, for which the covenant makes no propitiatory provision. Condemned and unforgiven, the culprit can only suffer the consequences. Even the rites of the great Day of Atonement did not suffice to redeem him from death.

There can be no gainsaying that such a distinction is made in the Mosaic legislation. A number of considerations, however, must be borne in mind.

It is significant that even the Catholic scholar Heinisch makes the point that this very limitation was to serve as a warning not to overestimate the efficacy of the sacrifice itself. These provisions were to counterbalance the notion that the sacrifice as such was capable of squaring man's account with God and paying the debt.⁸

Furthermore, we must remember that the decree of capital punishment for these offenses was a part of the theocratic legislation; they are at the same time civil or political laws. If such a lawbreaker repented and pleaded for mercy before God in a prayer such as Psalm 51, is it a foregone conclusion that he would have been excluded from God's forgiveness? The "state" indeed inflicted the prescribed punishment for the crime just as a murderer today pays the extreme penalty whether he is penitent or not. There is no evidence to prove that a penitent Old Testament malefactor, even if his sins were as scarlet, could not hope that the gates of Paradise would swing wide to receive him.

For the Old Testament nowhere denies a penitent sinner direct access to the heavenly mercy seat of God which was merely symbolized in gold in the Holiest of Holies. God does not impose any limitations on His forgiving grace in the Old Testament. It is a grace without reservations; it can cope with sins that cry to heaven and entail the death sentence. The history of Israel bears abundant witness that the most wicked criminal could not only implore the grace of God, but could also rely on the gracious assurance: "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (2 Sam. 12:13). The penitential Psalms especially are eloquent evidence that also in the Old Testament it was true that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20). Eichrodt calls attention especially to Psalms 40, 51, and 69 and stresses the certainty of forgiveness also as God's direct gift, without the intervening agency of the rites of sacrifice. "The unlimited grace of God, which is not guaranteed by any earthly act, is steadfastly maintained."⁹ After reviewing several terms that denote God's redemptive activity in the Old Testament, Proksch says: "Also the specific word for forgiveness (*salab*) appears to be related etymologically to the Akkadian *salabu*, 'to sprinkle,' and hence to point to a cultic rite. Yet it is just as characteristic of this verb that it was completely divested of its ritual sense and became the expression of God's untrammelled forgiveness. Thus it becomes the designation of forgiveness of grace in the Prophets and the literature dependent on them although it was also retained in the *Niphal* in the language of the cult."¹⁰

Even the provisions of the covenant contain expressions that point to an all-inclusive forgiveness. According to Lev. 16:30 the Day of Atonement has this significance: "For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you that ye may be clean from *all* your sins before the Lord."

But Old Testament grace is also said to be defective qualitatively. The charge is made that forgiveness in the Old Testament is merely a *paresis*, a pushing aside of sin, but not an *aphesis*, a total removal of sin. But such a differentiation cannot be proved.

In this matter we can again refer to the very recent theology of the Old Testament by Proksch, who says that: "The inexhaustible grace of the covenant God promised the granting of an extraor-

dinary removal of sin (*auszerordentliche Suendentilgung*)."¹¹ Then he proceeds to quote some passages that proclaim this total erasure of sin.

And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:34).

He will turn again, He will have compassion upon us: He will subdue our iniquities; and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

If these and similar passages do not establish a grace of God that does not merely suspend judgment on sin, but goes all the way in removing sin out of sight, then human language simply is not adequate to express any divine truth.

Another defect is said to consist in this, that the Old Testament indeed proclaims God's acts of grace in man's behalf but does not hold out the blessed assurance of a state of grace (*Gnadenstand*). But certainly the meaning and the purpose of the covenant is basically a continuing relationship to God. God pledges unceasing faithfulness. And is not the Old Testament believer told again and again that as a partner in this covenant he can rest assured that its promises accompany him through life to the end? God has obligated Himself by oath to maintain this status: "I will be your God, and ye shall be My people." To be in this covenant relationship to God can therefore only mean the same as being in an unbroken state of grace.

There are other factors that are urged in an attempt at differentiation of the grace of God in the Old Testament from that of the New Testament; but if what has been said is conceded to be correct, then all other objections must likewise vanish.

The question regarding the grace of God is indeed only one of the factors that comes up for consideration in an evaluation of the Old Testament, but it is central and basic. Hence the words of Hans Hellbardt are very much to the point:

The Old Testament is not the "Law" which is succeeded in the New Testament by the Gospel. . . . The covenant was based on a *pactum dei* with His Son in eternity. . . . There are not two

Gospels. There are not two messages heard simultaneously: the one that God is favorably inclined to us because of our moral efforts, the cleanness of our hands, or for the sake of the oxen and goats; the other for the sake of the sacrifice of Christ; in the one instance, because in the exile and many kinds of perils we have "received double of the Lord's hand" for all our sins; in the other, because Jesus made amends for us. If one differentiates thus, then one must let the Jews be what they are and must also surrender the Old Testament to them.¹²

The sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world is God's eternal plan of salvation. Faith in this atonement was counted unto righteousness also before Good Friday. Since no other way of salvation is revealed, there is no other grace of God except in Christ Jesus.

Did the Old Testament believer understand all this? This question deserves a longer answer than we can devote to it here. Permit me, in conclusion, merely to ask you to remember that the Holy Spirit did not begin His ministrations on Pentecost Day. Can anyone today, even though he knows every detail of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, call Him Lord except by the Holy Ghost? Faith, before as well as after Good Friday, is not a human achievement. As He bridged the gap in time before Calvary, so He still must span the centuries that separate us from Good Friday in order to make us the beneficiaries of the Atonement. Emphasizing the work of the Holy Spirit as necessary in the hearts of the ancestors of Christ according to the flesh as well as in us who live in these latter days, Kurt-Dietrich Schmidt says:

He [the Holy Spirit] it is who bridges the gap in time that intervenes between us and the *Christus Incarnatus* and makes salvation a contemporary possession. Thus the question is raised by Luther regarding the present appropriation of the salvation achieved once in past time; here also is Luther's answer to this question: This is the function of the Holy Spirit, to transmit that salvation which exists only in Christ to us who live after the event (*den Nachfahren*).¹³

NOTES

1. Eduard Koenig, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, p. 52.
2. Gust. Fr. Oehler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, p. 25.
3. H. Haevernick, *Vorlesungen ueber die Theologie des Alten Testaments*, p. 114.
4. The relationship of these two covenants to each other is very clearly set forth by P. Peters in articles appearing in the *Theologische Quartalschrift*,

Milwaukee, Wis., October, 1942, pp. 253—282, entitled *Diatheke in the Old and New Testaments*.

5. Otto Proksch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, p. 656.
6. In Kittel's *Woerterbuch*, s. v. ὁργή.
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 559.
8. Paul Heinisch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, tr. William Heidt, p. 208.
9. Walther Eichrodt, *Man in the O. T.*, Tr. by K. and R. Gregor Smith, London, SCM Press, 1951.
10. *Op. cit.*, p. 666.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
12. Hans Hellbardt, *Das Alte Testament und das Evangelium*, Muenchen, 1938, pp. 9 and 30. Although the author does not correctly differentiate Law and Gospel, he stresses the grace of God in Christ Jesus as the only way of salvation, as these brief quotations indicate.
13. Kurt-Dietrich Schmidt, *Luthers Lehre vom Heiligen Geist in Schrift und Bekenntnis*, 1950, p. 150.

St. Louis, Mo.