The Quality of 'Mercy' by Edmund Hill, O.P.

This article is not about mercy, but about 'mercy', the English word. This word is the stock translation in religious texts of the Latin word *misericordia*. My contention is going to be that the quality of 'mercy' is far too strained to stand for *misericordia;* that not only is it an inadequate word to translate the Latin word, it is – more seriously – an insufficient word to convey the full Christian, religious thing. And as this *thing,* as this value is practically at the heart of the Christian gospel, the good news of God to man, the use of an insufficient and hence misleading word to represent it can have very unfortunate consequences indeed. But with these I am not here concerned. My interest is in finding the best English word or words for translating *misericordia* in liturgical texts. And my way of doing this is going to be by putting 'mercy' on trial.

Misericordia, it scarcely needs saying, appears so often in liturgical texts because it appears so often in the Bible. Two other Latin words appear frequently in its company, the related noun *miseratio,* usually in the plural *miserationes,* and the related verb *misereor.* The first weakness of the English 'mercy' is shown by the fact that it does duty, either by itself or in a phrase like 'have mercy', for all three of these Latin words. Why not, since they too are all variations on the same root? But at least they are variations, whereas 'mercy' is not a variation on 'mercy'; and more seriously, in the Bible these three Latin words represent three Greek words (fairly consistently), namely *misericordia/eleos, misereor/eleeo,* and *miserationes/oiktirmoi;* and further these three Greek words represent (fairly consistently) three Hebrew words, respectively *ḥesed, ḥanan,* and *raḥamim*. So the divine revelation on this point was first conveyed by the use of at least three wholly distinct words from three separate roots; reduced in Greek to three distinct words, but from only two separate roots; reduced in Latin to three words from one root; reduced in English to one word. *Prima facie* there is a case for trial.

My first evidence for the prosecution is the Oxford English Dictionary, vol. VI; what does this English word mean? We are told in the section on the word's derivation that it comes ultimately from the Latin *merces,* meaning 'reward or fee', and that

> 'the post-classical uses of *merces* are developed from the specific application of the word to the reward in heaven, which is earned by kindness to those who have no claim and from whom no requital can

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be expected.'

Then come the various meanings of 'mercy' and its uses, of which some are obsolete; so I quote here only those that concern us, either telling in favour of or against our employment of the word in our current work of liturgical translation:

1. Forbearance and compassion shown by one person to another who is *in his power*,[1] and who has no claim to receive kindness; kind and compassionate treatment *in a case where severity is merited or expected*.[1] Phrases;' to have mercy on, take mercy on, show mercy', etc.

A sample illustration from Gibbon: The emperor confessed that if the exercise of justice is the most important duty, the indulgence of mercy is the most exquisite pleasure, of a sovereign.

b. God's pitiful forbearance towards his creatures and forgiveness of their offences.

2. Disposition to forgive or show compassion.

5. The clemency or forbearance of a conqueror or absolute lord. Phrase; 'to be at another's mercy'.

6. In a particularized sense, an act of mercy; especially one vouchsafed by God to his creatures; an event or circumstance calling for special thankfulness; a gift of God, a blessing, 'one's mercies', the good things which one has received from God (e.g. 'We must be thankful for small mercies').

7. Works of mercy: acts of compassion towards suffering fellow creatures.

It will be generally agreed, I think, that sense 1 is the dominant meaning of 'mercy' in our ordinary use of the word. It usually signifies, therefore, a particular kind of forbearance, compassion, or kindness, exercised in a particular kind of context. Gibbon's contrasting of it with 'justice' is still completely typical of our twentieth century usage. The word has a restricted, fairly precisely differentiated, 'strained' meaning, which powerfully controls its use even in religious language in senses 1b, 2, and 6. But here is the question: is that quality or attribute of God which we designate 'mercy' no more than the forbearance, etc. of a judge, a conqueror, or an absolute lord?

Before we answer that, let us see if 'mercy' is the best equivalent for *misericordia* in that it signifies more closely than other English words what is signified by the Latin word. Here is how White and Riddle's Latin Dictionary defines *misericordia*:

tenderheartedness, pity, compassion, mercy.

That means that *misericordia* is a much less precisely differentiated word than 'mercy'. It will only be accurately represented by 'mercy' in certain limited contexts. Even then it will be a much more *feeling* sort of word than 'mercy', always carrying the connotation of the 'sorrowing heart'.

[1] My italics

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This is a connotation that 'mercy' does not have of itself, and can only derive from context; it is perfectly possible to show someone mercy, or to have mercy on him, without feeling the least sorry for him.

The Latin dictionary suggests the same inadequacy of such phrases as 'to have mercy' for translating the verb *misereor*. It is defined as:

to feel pity, to have compassion, to pity, to compassionate.

And the noun *miseratio*, usually translated in religious texts (in the plural) as 'tender mercies', is defined as:

a pitying, pity, compassion, commiseration.

The Greek *eleos* and *eleeo* are given almost exactly the same definitions by Liddell and Scott. But they seem to be words of perhaps slightly less feeling quality than the two Latin words *misericordia* and *misereor*. They are respectively defined as:

pity, mercy, compassion, pity for someone . . .; and,

to have pity on, to show mercy to, to feel pity.

The third Greek word, however, corresponding to Latin *miseratio*, *oiktirmos*, is a strongly feeling word. It is defined as:

pity, compassion, compassionate feelings, mercies (in the NT).

From this it would seem to differ little from *eleos*; but Liddell and Scott seem to be curiously inferior to the Latin dictionary in having a rather limited English vocabulary.

The same is even more true, unfortunately, of the standard Hebrew-English dictionary (Brown, Driver, and Briggs). The reason here is possibly not so much lack of literary imagination as the dominating influence of the AV vocabulary, which is remarkably restricted. So one can go to Brown, Driver, and Briggs for the meaning of Hebrew words, but not rely on them for a satisfactory supply of possible English renderings, a service which the bigger Latin-English lexicons do very happily offer. This rather old Hebrew-English dictionary is supplemented by a Hebrew-German-English lexicon, edited by Koehler and Baumgartner, whose English vocabulary is of the austerest possible brevity, but who have thrown frequent new light on the meaning, especially the secular, non-religious meaning of Hebrew words.

We have, then, three of these to consider, and the first and infinitely the most important, which lies behind the *misericordia* of the Vulgate, is the noun *ḥesed*. BDB gives as its basic meaning 'goodness, kindness', and then distinguishes its uses. The *ḥesed* of man to man can be shown in the special sort of kindness which is mercy, and can include affection; there is occasional, though rare, use of the word of man towards God, man's loving or affectionate piety; and there is the commonest use of it, which is of God towards man – his 'kindness, loving-kindness, in condescending to the needs of his creatures'. KB gives us more insight into what I might call the *point* of the word by defining it as:

the mutual liability of those who are relatives, friends, master and

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servant, or belonging together in any other way, the solidarity, joint liability.

It is that sort of goodness or kindness, then, between man and man – mutual responsibility; and between God and man it is a similar or analogous relationship:

concerning God's relation with his people and individuals; solidarity.

Now this is the reality or value which, one may fairly say, dominates the psalms; and through the psalms dominates the prayers and hymns and praises of the liturgy in the Latin word *misericordia*, giving a very definite weight or solidity to the purely Latin meaning of that word; no longer just the tender feeling of compassion, of a sorrowing heart, but such a feeling grounded in the mutual solidarity of its subject and object. *Misericordia* came to represent *ḥesed* because the Greek translators had already determined the issue by using *eleos* for it. But the most suitable, the almost exact Latin equivalent, I suggest, would be *pietas*, which is the proper bond between parent and child (cf. the 'pious pelican') and secondarily between child and parent (cf. *pius Aeneas*) – the most fundamental of all 'mutual liabilities'. The English word 'kindness' is etymologically the most suitable, because of its connection with 'kin'; it is the proper attitude of two of a kind towards each other. But it has become too general, perhaps too weak a word to be always suitable, though the context can often give it strength. I suggest 'care' as a good equivalent. The phrase 'care and protection' conveys with considerable accuracy what is often meant by the biblical pair *misericordia et veritas*. I think 'mercy' will hardly ever do for *ḥesed*, hence hardly ever for *misericordia* when it is governed by that Hebrew word.

The other two words that concern us are the verb *ḥanan*, represented by *misereor*, and the noun *raḥamim* represented by *miserationes*. The first is defined by our dictionaries as 'to favour, be gracious to'. Of these three Hebrew words it is the least affective; often better translated by the English 'to have mercy' than by the Latin *misereor*, which is a very affective word. It is the prerogative of a superior to a subordinate, but not only of such a superior as a judge, a conqueror, or an absolute lord; and so 'to be gracious to' will usually be preferable to 'to have mercy on'. *Raḥamim* is the most affective of all these words, being connected with a word meaning 'womb'; hence it signifies 'motherly feelings', usually of a pathetic, or rather sympathetic nature; a mother comforting a sick or sorry child. Again, 'mercies' seems singularly inadequate to this sort of context, even when qualified as 'tender mercies'.

So ends the case for the prosecution against 'mercy'. It has not established total guilt, and we should still allow the word an honourable place in liturgical translations. But we have to find it proper and more prominent companions. As the liturgical use of the Latin words is largely governed by their biblical use, our translation of them in liturgical texts

must take into account their translation in English Bibles. Here we must face the fact that we are moving out of an era when there was a standard text, or even a few standard texts, into one of a rich and probably indigestible variety of versions. Whether a new standard English text will ever impose itself on English-speaking Christendom in the manner of the AV, who can say? At least I think such a standard text cannot nowadays be *effectively* imposed by ecclesiastical authority. But standard liturgical texts can, and presumably will, eventually be so imposed and sanctioned. So at this juncture the liturgical translator will probably be making decisions that will affect the biblical translator. All the more need then for him to take the biblical situation into account, and to see how versions up to now have treated this and other problems. I here give evidence from the Douai (Challoner), the Revised Version, Revised Standard Version, and Knox, on how they treat these three terms, *misericordia/hesed; misereor/hanan;* and *miserationes/rahamim*. For the first word, I have taken eight instances from Genesis and Deuteronomy, and 26 from the psalms; for the other two words instances only from the psalms, 20 for *misereor* and 11 for *miserationes*. Here are the tables for each word:

Genesis and Deuteronomy: *misericordia* 8

Douai	RV	RSV	Knox
mercy 5	mercy 3	steadfast love 6	mercy 3
kindness 3	kindness 5	kindness 1	kindness 2
		loyally 1	love & loyalty 1
			lovest 1
			merciful 1

Psalms: *misericordia* 26

Douai	RV	RSV	Knox
mercy 26	mercy 6	mercy 1	mercy 21
	loving kind-ness 20	steadfast love 25	merciful 1
			gracious 1
			goodness 1
			deliverance 1

Psalms: *misereor* 20

Douai	RV	RSV	Knox
have mercy 18	have mercy 12	have mercy 2	have mercy 7
shew mercy 1	be merciful 6	be merciful 1	be merciful 2
be merciful 1	deal graciously 2	deal graciously 1	pity (v) 3
		be gracious 14	have pity 2
		take pity 1	have compas-sion 1
		give liberally 1	? 3
			lend without stint 1
			spare 1

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Psalms: *miserationes* 11

Douai	RV	RSV	Knox
tender mercies 5	tender mercies 10	mercies 7	mercy 3
mercies 4	to be pitied 1	to be pitied 1	pity 4
compassion 1		compassion 3	pity (v) 2
bowels of compassion 1			compassion 2

These tables give us plenty of words to choose from for supplementing 'mercy'. Knox provides us with the most various selection, Douai is clearly the most consistent in its translation. Indeed it is too consistent, and this has provided us with our problem. But there is a virtue in consistency, in finding a stock English equivalent for a word in the original text, and keeping to it if only slight violence is needed to do so – particularly in biblical translation. The RV achieves it with its 'loving-kindness' for *hesed*, and its predominant 'have mercy' and 'tender mercies' for *hanan* and *rahamim*. Its fault, in my opinion, is to confine the word 'lovingkindness' to God's *hesed*, keeping just 'kindness' for man's. This tendency to find special words for God's attributes and actions is one that should be very severely restricted. The Bible does not do it in the original, and we should not do it in translation. Of course everything about God is different; his very being, his knowledge, wisdom, love, justice, goodness, truth, kindness, etc., differ infinitely and incomprehensibly from human being, knowledge, wisdom, love, justice, goodness, truth, kindness, etc. But we can only achieve some inkling of these divine things precisely by using the same words for them as for the corresponding human things. We simply have not got, and cannot really find special words for talking about God in, and if we manage to suggest that we have, then the suggestion is false and misleading.

As the RSV translation suggests, *hesed* is certainly a kind of love, though I do not think that that version has quite chosen the right sort. The Grail Psalter translates simply 'love', but this is too unspecific. However, I think it is probably true that the NT equivalent to the Hebrew *hesed* is the Greek *agape*, 'charity'. Certainly *misericordia/eleos* is comparatively rare in the NT, being as it were overshadowed by this more tremendous word. But because our liturgical texts will often contain words like *caritas, dilectio, amor,* which will have to be translated by 'love', this word will not do by itself for *misericordia/hesed*. I would usually opt for 'lovingkindness' or, introducing a word none of our versions have made use of, 'loving care'. For the other noun, with its stronger emotional tone, 'compassion' or 'pity' or 'tender care', or simply 'tenderness', would be the best words to choose from. Neither for this

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nor for the first noun would 'mercy' ever be the right word – at least if the Latin is considered to be governed remotely by the Hebrew.

It will come into its own in translating the verb *misereor,* with the Hebrew *hanan* often behind it. The phrase 'have mercy' or 'show mercy' will clearly be the best whenever the context shows that we are addressing God primarily as judge – for example in the prayer *Misereatur* that answers the *Confiteor;* also, possibly, in the beatitude, 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy' – at the Judgment, Where the context is more general, as in the *Kyrie,* or the *Gloria,* or the *Agnus Dei,* my feeling is that 'have mercy on us' is too restrictive of the sense. I would prefer the RSV's 'be gracious to us', since it is valuable to make the verbal connexion with the idea of grace. Sometimes, where the context shows or allows that a general appeal for divine help in trouble is being made, I think we can learn from Mgr Knox the use of the phrase 'have pity on us'. In cases where the liturgical use, too, of *misericordia* does not seem to be governed by the word's biblical history, 'pity' (noun) would often, I think, be the best word; certainly the truest to the Latin word's significance as Latin. It has been objected to me, when I have suggested 'pity', that the word carries overtones of contempt, or at the very least of condescension. The Oxford English Dictionary, vol. VII does not really bear out this impression for the *noun* 'pity', but shows how it must have arisen from our common use of the *verb* 'pity'. The noun is defined as:

> A feeling or emotion of tenderness aroused by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, and prompting a desire for its relief; compassion, sympathy.
>
> Phrase: 'to have or take pity'; properly, to conceive or feel pity; usually to show or exercise pity, to be merciful or compassionate.
>
> Illustration from Crabbe:
>
> > The still tears, stealing down that furrowed cheek,
> > Spoke pity plainer than the tongue can speak.

Of the verb, however, it is written:

> To feel pity for . . ., be sorry for. (In modern use sometimes implying slight contempt. cf. 'pitiful' 4, 'pitying'.)

On all that evidence, I submit to the court of English speech that the quality of 'mercy' is much too strained to be able to do full justice to such gracious, familiar, compassionate, kind, fatherly, and loving realities.

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