

New Testament Compassion: *From Body towards Theology*

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I. Preliminaries

The Incarnation began it all – enfleshing the Word, giving body to the divine, affirming the human. Theology could not do otherwise, but to build itself up from the most concrete of experiences – from the body.

By way of objectives, this study hopes to present compassion as translative of New Testament concepts, to discuss its meanings in the Judeo-Christian context, and to offers insights into compassion for theology, compassion as theology.

By way of structure and outline of thought, these preliminary remarks will be followed by a presentation of compassion, translating several terms and concepts in the New Testament. Then, such concepts would be situated in the Judeo-Greco-Christian culture to surface its exegetical, historico-critical nuances. Finally, we shall summarize significant points and comments for grounding and furthering this compassionate theological enterprise.

And so, we set sail ...

II. Compassion in Scriptures: *translating concepts*

Compassion is an English word, rendering several terms found in the New Testament.¹

¹ G. Wigram, *The Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament*, 9th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1839, 1970).

1. εσλεέω / εσλεάω [*eleēō / eleaō*]: a verb form found in the Synoptics, in the letters of Paul [Rom. 9,15.18; 11,30ff; 12,8; 1 Co. 7,25; 2 Co. 4,1; Phil. 2,27; 1 Tim. 1,13.16]; and in the Catholic epistles [1 Peter 2,10; Jude 1,22]. Most modern versions render it as “mercy, pity.”

It is what the people seek and beg from Jesus in healing and/or demon-casting, as in Mk 10,47ff // Matt 9,27//20, 30ff // Lk 18,38 [parallel and varied episodes of healing the blind]; Matt 15, 22 [of the Canaanite woman’s daughter]; 17,15 [of the lunatic son]; Lk 17,13 [of the 10 lepers];

It is present in Matthew’s [18,33] parable of the unforgiving servant; and in Luke’s [16,24] parable of the rich man and Lazarus;

It is in the 5th beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount [Matt 5,7].

The verb shares the same root word with the more familiar ἐλεημοσύνη, [*eleēmosynē*] the Greek noun for almsgiving, which is behind the Spanish *limosna*, from which we derive the Filipino *limos*. And, of course, there is the imperative ἐλέησον [*eleēson*] in our penitential liturgies.

It is action predicated of God and humans, bespeaking of attitude and emotion roused by affliction of another; it is benevolent activity towards the less, the poor, the afflicted, the sinner; it is benefaction, gracious action.²

2. A more recognizable word would be the Greek verb συμπαθέω [*sympatheō*] and adjective συμπαθής, [*sympathēs*], which speak of sharing “the same feeling of suffering.” However, this form is only found in the letter to the Hebrews (4,15; 10,34) and in 1 Peter (3,8). A compounded verb form μετριοπαθέω [*metriopatheō*] is found only in Heb 5,2.

3. Next, we find the Greek verb οἰκτίρω / οἰκτεῖρω [*oiktirō / oikteirō*] and its noun-cognate οἰκτίρμος [*oiktirmos*]. The verb is found in Rom 9,15; the noun in Rom 12,1; 2 Cor 1,3; Phil

² Cf. J. Thayer, *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1896, 1999); H. Liddell, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (1940); T. Friberg, B. Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (1994, 2000).

2,1; Col 3,12; Heb 10,28; its adjective form οἰκτίρων [oiktirmōn] is found in Lk 6,36 and Jas 5,11. These words convey a sense of “pity, a feeling of distress through the ills of others.” In the Septuagint, οἰκτιρμός [oiktirmos] (LXX Ps 24,6; LXX Ps 39,12), often rendered the Hebrew/Aramaic verb חָמַם [rhm, חָמַם: (Piel) to have compassion; (Qal) to love] and the intensive plural noun חַמִּימָה [rhm’m], “love, mercy, compassion.”³

4. The most recurrent New Testament word however is the Greek verb σπλαγχνίζομαι [splanchnizomai] found 12 times in the Synoptics. Its root word is the noun σπλάγχνον [splanchnōn], which is found 11 times in the New Testament – twice in the Lukan corpus, once in the Johannine literature, and the rest, in the letters of Paul.

A compounded adjectival form πολύσπλαγχνός [polusplangchnos] “greatly compassionate” is found in James 5,11. Another compounded adjective ευσπλαγχνός [eusplangchnos] “tenderhearted” is attested in Ephesians 4,32 and 1 Peter 3,8.

In the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, there is historical variance as regards the words used. In the Pentateuch, Prophets, and Historical Books, ἐλεέω / ἐλεάω [eleeō / eleaō] was the preferred word, rendering the Hebrew יָחַן [hnn: to show favour, mercy, grace]. However, in the Psalms, Proverbs and the Deutero-canonicals, οἰκτίρω/οἰκτείρω [oiktirō / oikteirō] became widespread. Σπλάγχνον [splanchnon] was relatively frequent in the “Middle Judaic” times, i.e. the inter-testamental period (100 BCE-100 CE).⁴

III. Compassion in Culture: contextualizing meaning

After that spirited concordant exercise in English-Greek-Hebrew Biblical *pretranslation* and *detranslation*, we shall focus

³ F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *The Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1906, 1996); M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 2 vols., (N.Y.: The Judaic Press, 1971, 1996).

⁴ The verb was probably coined in the Jewish dispersion. Cf. J.H. Moulton, G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-Literary Sources* (London, 1914-29).

our discussion on σπλάγχνιζομαι [*splanchnizomai*] as compassion and situate this word in its Judeo-Greco-Christian cultural context, to bring out hidden, forgotten or simply glossed over significations and careful nuances, which could enrich our present-day understanding and appreciation of compassion.

Σπλάγχνον [*splanchnon*] and its plural form σπλάγχνα [*splanchna*] refer to the inward parts, bowels, entrails, intestines, the viscera, the guts, esp. the *viscera thoracis*, i.e. heart, lungs, liver, kidneys.

. And if *splanchna* and *oiktirmos* do indeed translate the Hebrew/Aramaic *reḥem*, *raḥam*, then this physiological sense would also cover the important concept of “womb.”⁵

Thus, we have the concept of biblical compassion, rooted philologically upon literal, internal body parts, located inclusively in the abdominal and thoracic areas – heart, lungs, liver, intestines, bladder, kidneys, womb, etc.

In ancient times, σπλάγχνον [*splanchnon*] belonged to sacrificial vocabulary. The internal organs of sacrificed animals were used in “haruspication” [Latin *haruspicium*], a form of divination, of prognostication, of predicting the future by means of examining animal entrails. By extension of the ritual, in some places, the entrails became part of the sacrificial meal.

Upon the anatomical nuance, ancient Greek poets and writers such as Aeschylus, Pindar, Sophocles,⁶ considered the σπλάγχνον [*splanchnon*], the viscera as the locus of more violent passions and emotions, such as anger and love.

For the ancient Hebrews, however, the viscera were the seat of the more tender affections, kindness, benevolence, and compassion.⁷ Eventually, the body parts became equivalent to the feelings themselves.

⁵ Cf. Brown-Driver-Briggs, *The Hebrew and English Lexicon*; M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim...*

⁶ Liddell, Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*.

⁷ Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*.

The verb form σπλαγχνίζομαι [*splanchnizomai*] is almost exclusively attested in the Synoptics:

The narrative of the feeding of the 5000 is introduced by reference to Jesus' feelings towards the crowd.

Mk 6,34: εἶδεν πολὺν ὄχλον καὶ ἐσπλαγγνίσθη ἐπ' αὐτούς, ὅτι ἦσαν ὡς πρόβατα μὴ ἔχοντα ποιμένα

VUL Mark 6,34: *Iesus... misertus est super eos quia erant sicut oves non habentes pastorem*

NIV Mark 6,34: Jesus... had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

And in the second feeding, that of the 4000, Mark put the word into Jesus' own mouth (8,2): Σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον

VUL Mark 8,2: *misereor super turba*

NIV Mark 8,2: I have compassion for these people;

Following his Markan source, Matthew retained both of these feeding episodes including the depiction of Jesus' compassion towards the multitudes. Matthew went further and set a distinct episode⁸ of Jesus' compassion for the crowd as motivation for his call for "more workers in the vineyard" (Matt 9,36-38): Ἰδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους ἐσπλαγγνίσθη περὶ αὐτῶν, ὅτι ἦσαν ἐσκυλμένοι καὶ ἐρριμμένοι ὡσεὶ πρόβατα μὴ ἔχοντα ποιμένα.

VUL Matthew 9,36: *videns autem turbas misertus est eis quia erant vexati et iacentes sicut oves non habentes pastorem*

NIV Matthew 9,36: When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

In the healing miracle stories, Mark quoted the plea of the father of the possessed boy (Mk 9, 22): σπλαγγνισθεὶς ἐφ' ἡμᾶς

NAB Mark 9:22: "Have compassion on us and help us."

⁸ K. Aland, ed. *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 15th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1963, 1996).

Still in Mark's account, Jesus healed a leper out of compassion (1,41): καὶ σπλαγχνισθεὶς ἐκτείνας τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ ἥψατο καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Θέλω, καθαρίσθητι·

VUL Mark 1,41: *Iesus autem misertus eius extendit manum suam et tangens eum ait illi volo mundare*

NIV Mark 1,41: Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"

Matthew (20,34) reported that Jesus healed the two blind men out of compassion: σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς

VUL Matthew 20, 34: *misertus autem eorum Iesus*

NIV Matthew 20, 34: Jesus had compassion on them

In Luke (7,13), at the sight of the widow from Nain, weeping, Jesus raised her son from the dead: ὁ κύριος ἐσπλαγχνίσθη ἐπ' αὐτῇ

VUL Luke 7,13: *Dominus misericordia motus super ea*

NRS Luke 7,13: he had compassion for her

In Jesus' parables, compassion qualified the moral actions of key characters in the stories.

In Matthew 18,27: The master forgives THE UNGRATEFUL SERVANT's debt out of compassion: σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου

VUL Matthew 18,27: *misertus autem dominus servi illius*

KJV Matthew 18,27: Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion

In Luke 10,33: the GOOD SAMARITAN acts out of compassion. Σαμαρίτης δέ τις ὁδεύων ἦλθεν κατ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἰδὼν ἐσπλαγχνίσθη.

VUL Luke 10,33: *Samaritanus autem quidam iter faciens venit secus eum et videns eum misericordia motus est*

KJV Luke 10,33: But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him

And finally, in Luke 15,20, in the PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON, the father is filled with compassion towards his younger son:

καὶ ἀναστὰς ἦλθεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ. ἔτι δὲ αὐτοῦ μακρὰν ἀπέχοντος εἶδεν αὐτὸν ὁ πατήρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐσπλαγγνίσθη καὶ δραμὼν ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ καὶ κατεφίλησεν αὐτόν.

VUL Luke 15,20: *et surgens venit ad patrem suum cum autem adhuc longe esset vidit illum pater ipsius et misericordia motus est et adcurrrens cecidit supra collum eius et osculatus est illum*

NIV Luke 15,20: But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The senses of the noun form σπλαγγνα [*splanghna*] varied in its New Testament usage, from the literal to the figurative to the theological; nonetheless they all retained “something of the theological force of the synoptic verb form.”⁹

In Acts (1,18), it referred to Judas Iscariot meeting his death with guts literally spilling out (καὶ ἐξεχύθη πάντα τὰ σπλάγγνα αὐτοῦ); but earlier in the Lukan corpus (Luke 1,78), it is part of Zechariah’s *Benedictus*, predicated of God, as reason for the impending divine visitation: διὰ σπλάγγνα ἐλέους θεοῦ ἡμῶν, ἐν οἷς ἐπισκέπεται ἡμᾶς ἀνατολή ἐξ ὕψους.

VUL Luke 1,78: *per viscera misericordiae Dei nostri in quibus visitavit nos oriens ex alto*

NAB Luke 1,78: because of the tender mercy/compassion of our God

In rest of the New Testament, the noun form usages provide us with a surfeit of images and senses. In Paul’s letter to Philemon, it is used figuratively for the “heart”:

Philemon 1:7: χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγγνα τῶν ἀγίων ἀναπέπνυται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

⁹ J. Wray, “A Word Study of Compassion in the New Testament,” in the *Week of Compassion*. <http://www.weekofcompassion.org/index.html>

VUL Philemon 1,7: *gaudium enim magnum habui et consolationem in caritate tua quia viscera sanctorum requieverunt per te frater*

(the KJV has preserved its literal sense) KJV Philemon 1,7:

For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

NRS Philemon 1,7: I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Philemon 1:20b: ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

VUL Philemon 1:20b: *refice viscera mea in Domino*

KJV Philemon 1,20: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

NAB Philemon 1,20: Refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul even called Onesimus, his “viscera, bowels, heart,” in recommending him back to Philemon (1:12): ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα.

VUL Philemon 1:12: *quem remisi tu autem illum id est mea viscera suscipe*

KJV Philemon 1:12: Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

NAB Philemon 1:12: I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

Paul also used *splangchna* to refer to affection, to powerful, deeply-emanating feelings, as in:

2 Corinthians 6,12: οὐ στενοχωρεῖσθε ἐν ἡμῖν, στενοχωρεῖσθε δὲ ἐν τοῖς σπλάγχνοις ὑμῶν.

VUL 2 Cor 6,12: *non angustiamini in nobis angustiamini autem in visceribus vestris*

KJV 2 Cor 6,12: Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels.

NAB 2 Cor 6,12: You are not constrained by us; you are constrained by your own affections.

NJB 2 Cor 6,12: the distress is in your own selves.

2 Corinthians 7,15: καὶ τὰ σπλάγχνα αὐτοῦ περισσotέρως εἰς ὑμᾶς ἐστὶν ἀναμιμνησκομέ νου τὴν πάντων ὑμῶν ὑπακοήν, ὡς μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου ἐδέξασθε αὐτόν.

VUL 2 Cor 7,15: *et viscera eius abundantius in vos sunt reminiscantis omnium vestrum oboedientiam quomodo cum timore et tremore excepistis eum*

KJV 2 Cor 7,15: And his inward affection is more abundant toward you, whilst he remembereth the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling ye received him

NIV 2 Cor 7,15: And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling

Phil 1,8: μάρτυς γάρ μου ὁ θεός ὡς ἐπιποθῶ πάντας ὑμᾶς ἐν σπλάγχνοις Χρι στοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

VUL Phil 1,8: *testis enim mihi est Deus quomodo cupiam omnes vos in visceribus Christi Iesu*

KJV Phil 1,8: For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ

NRS Philippians 1:8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

NJB Phil 1,8: the warm longing of Christ Jesus;

The noun *splangchna* is used in conjunction with *oiktirmos*, as in Paul's exhortation to the Philippians (2,1): Εἴ τις οὖν παρακλήσις ἐν Χριστῷ, εἴ τι παραμύθιον ἀγάπης, εἴ τις κοινωνία πνεύματος, εἴ τις, σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί.

VUL Phil 2,1: *si qua ergo consolatio in Christo si quod solacium caritatis si qua societas spiritus si quid viscera et miserationes*

KJV Phil 2,1: If *there be* therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies

NRS Phil 2,1: If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any com-
passion and sympathy

Splanghna is used with *oiktirmos* as a genitive of quality, as in Colossians 3:12: Ἐνδύσασθε οὖν, ὡς ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ἅγιοι καὶ ἡγαπημένοι, σπλάγγνα οἰκτιρμοῦ χρηστότητα ταπεινοφροσύνην πραύτητα μακροθυμίαν,

VUL Col 3,12: *induite vos ergo sicut electi Dei sancti et dilecti viscera misericordiae benignitatem humilitatem modestiam patientiam*

KJV Col 3,12: Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;

NAB Col 3,12: Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience

The only instance of the noun *splanghna* in Johannine literature (1 John 3,17) deserves special mention. It involves the question of the essential compatibility and complementarity of love of God and love of fellow. Most modern versions would render it as "refusing compassion (NAB)," "having no pity (NIV)," "closing one's heart (NJB)," "refusing help (NRS)." But the Latin Vulgate and the KJV have somehow preserved the literal and graphic force of the original Greek. It is "*clausurit viscera sua*," "shutting/closing one's bowels" against one's fellow. One would call uncharitable action in the Bible as "anal retentive behavior!"¹⁰

1 John 3,17: ὃς δ' ἂν ἔχῃ τὸν βίον τοῦ κόσμου καὶ θεωρῇ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ χρεῖαν ἔχοντα καὶ κλείσῃ τὰ σπλάγγνα αὐτοῦ ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, πῶς ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ μένει ἐν αὐτῷ;

VUL 1 John 3,17: *qui habuerit substantiam mundi et viderit fratrem suum necesse habere et clausurit viscera sua ab eo quomodo caritas Dei manet in eo*

KJV 1 John 3,17: But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

NAB 1 John 3,17: If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?

¹⁰ Wray, "A Word Study of Compassion..."

Thus, we have New Testament compassion rendered in a most physiological manner, a deep-seated emotion towards the affliction and downcast state of another; in reaction, there is movement, the disturbance, the upheaval of internal organs. From such notion, we now have such figures of speech as the "heart bleeding," "heart melting," "heart going out" to a certain someone, "visceral passions," and simply "gut-feelings."

Summaries: *Compassion as theology*

From this survey of words and concepts, of content and context, of biblical and bodily senses, of *physis* and *psyche*, we summarize the following exegetical points, upon which to build meanings for our theological consideration of compassion:

Biblical compassion begins with the body. It involves action/reaction of internal, centrally-located body parts. The importance of such body parts is highlighted by their use in religious sacrifice and divination, in knowing the will of God.

Through language, the body becomes sign, figure for human emotions – strong, deeply-seated passions and affections.

The bodily and emotional action/reaction is externally-provoked. Its cause is affliction, suffering, the undue, unjust, inhuman, lowly, downcast state of another.

The emotion leads to action. Compassion moves from mere feeling to concrete intervention towards, on behalf of the afflicted other.

By analogy, the bodily applies to the spiritual. God who is Spirit is depicted as deeply emotional; the Creator is motivated by creaturely affliction, to intervention, to relief and rescue and redemption.

The compassion of God is most perfectly incarnated in Jesus. The Word-made-human is stirred in the depths of his bowels, distressed by the pains of the world, moved to compassionate engagement and saving action.

For Christians of today, biblical compassion challenges us to be disturbed in our deepest insides, by the suffering of our fellows. The concrete pains of our concrete fellows should literally make

us sick, make us want to throw up. This is not what God meant us to be. This should not be.

Conceptually and figuratively, this bowel movement, this upset of entrails, this gut reaction, this visceral writhing is always already a contraction of womb, of pangs and labor, leading to birthing, the bearing of new life. Thus, biblical compassion invites us into an experience of shared creaturely pain, not as a form of sadism nor masochism, but leading forth into the bringing forth of "an alternative of hope,"¹¹ compassionate action, praxis.

A theology of compassion is to be built upon a biblical affirmation of the bodily. Yet it is an affirmation provoked by the experience of negation, of the presence of suffering, of injustice, of human, creaturely affliction, which is not our original God-given, nor God-intended lot/state. The emotional affirmation is at the same time a moment of birth, of action towards and on behalf of the other, of bringing forth newness, hope, life.

The present-day difficulties are gifted moments for Christian compassion, of theological thought and theological action, of reflecting upon bible and rising up in committed concretization of what we feel in our guts, aghast and against the pains of our fellow human beings, the pains of Christ, and the pains of the least of his brothers and sisters.

Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. □

¹¹ M. McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 11.