

Grace

In the Hebrew Bible the root *khanan* (כָּנַן) and its cognate noun *khen* (כֶּן) are usually translated in English Bibles as ‘grace.’ which is accurate, but it does not carry all the connotations that are present in *khanan*, nor in its Greek counterpart *charis* (χάρις).

The basic meaning of *khanan* is ‘be gracious,’ ‘show favour.’ The reflexive form of the verb means to seek favour for oneself. In all cases the verb applies to personal relationships expressing ideas such as acceptance, kindness, and favour shown through mercy, compassion, generosity (Ps 41:1), graciousness in speech (Prov 15:26). Consequently, one cannot be gracious while being passive and unconnected, or angry and judgmental. Grace only works in relationship as an active and positive expression of respect and goodwill in the one showing favour.

The noun *khen* has two basic meanings ‘grace’ and ‘favour.’ It is most commonly used in the expression, ‘to find favour in someone’s eyes.’ It means more than just approval or common courtesy, and extends to esteem and support. It is associated in ancient Middle Eastern culture with showing one’s face with a bright positive expression. In the familiar blessing of Numbers 6:24-27 graciousness and favour are symbolised by the deliberate and affirming showing of the Lord’s face:

the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *charis*, translated as grace, connotes graciousness, favour, beauty and pleasure, as in, do someone a favour, do something beautiful for someone. *Charis* is often rendered as ‘gift,’ which does not quite convey the idea of an act of favour and graciousness that enhances a relationship. This is because ‘gift’ is quantifiable, grace is not. We see a good example of this in the Hail Mary.

When we say, ‘Hail Mary full of grace’ we are repeating a paraphrase (and not a very good one!) of the Greek in Luke 1:28. The Greek actually reads, ‘Greetings highly favoured one,’ that is, highly graced or gracious one. In the prayer, the word ‘full’ implies quantity, which is misleading, as if Mary were a vessel full of some measurable good thing. It is the quality of Mary’s graciousness and connection with God that is highlighted.

The *Catechism* reference (1131) sadly reflects the theology of grace as a quantity, viz. ‘the graces proper to each sacrament.’ Participating in a sacrament is not a top-up exercise. We don’t ‘*get grace*.’ If we were to emphasise the relational nature of graciousness, then the appropriate analogy is: nourishing, deepening, intensifying a relationship. If I do something beautiful for someone, then I am deepening the love and connection in that relationship, not topping it up with extra gold stars. We need to dispense with transactional attitudes to grace, such as, I do good things: I build up the grace bank account. I do bad things: I drain off the graces and head into the red – simple, but way off target.

Unfortunately, we have inherited the flawed theology of binary left-brain thinking that leads to doing deals with God and counting sins and graces. Thinking laterally with right-brain imagination we can dump all this and savour the beauty and poetry of relational spirituality in union with the divine Artist.

Grace/graciousness in the Hebrew Bible implies respect and a favourable disposition towards the other. More beautiful than fine words or precious stones are human relationships built upon grace. Such grace is freely given and so cannot become the possession of the one to whom it is given. As Jesus points out, being genuinely gracious to our fellow human beings honours the Christ we see in others (Mt 25:40). The same concept is embedded in ancient Hebrew spirituality:

He who oppresses the poor insults his Maker,
but he who is kind to the needy honours him. Prov 14:31

The prayer of one who trusts in divine graciousness:

Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as is your custom toward those who love your name. Psalm 119:132