chapter ten

“CHARIS” AND “ELEOS”
IN PAUL’S LETTER TO THE ROMANS*

1. Our Grace and Paul’s “Mercy” and “Favour”

Obviously it is impossible to elaborate on Paul’s conception of “grace”, for Paul neither spoke nor wrote English. The theologically rather worn notion of “grace” has of course its own history, even before Western theology’s soteriology was marked by St. Augustine’s notion of gratia.1 Our endeavour is however, to stretch our philological imagination back into the world of the Greek speaking Paul, who often wrote about God’s χάρις and sometimes about his ἔλεος. Though we normally gloss the Greek word χάρις—in those cases where it is an action of God—with “grace” in English, our lexicographers were more articulate: LSJ: “grace or favour felt, whether on the part of the Doer or the Receiver”; LN: “to show kindness to someone, with the implication of graciousness on the part of the one showing such kindness”; BDAG: “a beneficent disposition toward someone, favor, grace, gracious care/help, goodwill”. I suggest we follow suit and use the English word “favour” when referring to χάρις. If we follow the dictionaries, ἔλεος seems to have a slightly different meaning. In the vein of LN, BDAG describes the | meaning of the Greek word with “kindness or concern expressed for someone in need, mercy, compassion, pity, clemency”. LSJ glosses it with “pity, mercy, compassion”. For the moment, I suggest we use the English words

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“pity” or “mercy” when referring to ἐλεος. It is important to note that we are dealing in both cases, viz. χάρις and ἐλεος, with words which can refer to a relation between God and humankind in which God acts towards humans. He bestows “favour” upon or shows “mercy” towards someone. The realms from which Paul took the two notions χάρις and ἐλεος differ considerably and should not be equated. Some clarification is thus needed regarding the source domains Paul took these two notions from to articulate God’s “redeeming” of man through Christ. The notion that God is “merciful” is a cornerstone of Jewish belief. But did Greek gods have “mercy” with humans? Some think that in Paul’s writings χάρις “is such a new word … that it cannot be interpreted in terms of antecedent roots of ideas”, others described Paul’s theology of “grace” without any reference to the use of this terminology in Greek. In the case of χάρις κτλ. one might speak of a Graeco-Roman metaphor. Just a handful of scholars set out to clarify the source domain of Paul’s metaphor of “favour”. A brief review of some useful contributions to this question is to follow.

2. Whence Paul’s Use of χάρις. A Survey of Relevant Research

1913 Gilles P. Wetter set out to clarify the Christian idea of χάρις. Since the beginnings of Christianity, many disparate conceptions of “grace” are unified under the word χάρις in the New Testament itself. Wetter asks what the ancient Greeks associated with the word χάρις, albeit that for him, words are mere instruments to express thoughts. By using χάρις...