1. Introduction

The aim of this investigation is to come to terms with the use of χάρις (usually translated as “grace”) in Paul within the overarching framework of his soteriology. In order to understand why and how the apostle uses this concept in his intratextual reflections on God’s eschatological act of salvation in Christ, the basic building blocks of his theology need to be identified and related to the different semantic nuances that he attached to χάρις on the surface level of his letters. At the same time, the meanings of χάρις in the Graeco-Roman environment of Paul’s day must be investigated, because this information will serve as the décor, the interpretative framework, for the investigation of Paul’s soteriological understanding of grace.1

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1 This historical construct of χάρις is called for, because communication always functions within the parameters of a social system, with language as an important storehouse and communicative vehicle of the various, socially shared meanings. The ancient Graeco-Roman environment, within which Paul’s texts were produced, infused the written signs in his letters with culturally-specific meanings and patterned them in socially appreciable ways for their intended readers. However, this does not imply that Paul’s understanding of grace will be analysed exclusively in terms of socio-cultural factors, since his internalisation of God’s grace and his own theological reflection on the Christ-event also informed and redefined the influences from his social environment.
2. An Overview of χάρις in the Umwelt of Paul

2.1. Ἐχθρις in the Graeco-Roman World

Paul’s language of χάρις was very much at home in the Eastern Mediterranean world of his day. Various forms of social interaction, which involved an exchange of services and gifts, was (also) verbalised in the language of χάρις (e.g., Sophokles, Aj. 522). These euergetistic interactions between groups or individuals usually inaugurated long-term relations and mutual obligations, as well as clearly defined differentiations of status and power. We could actually speak of a general norm of reciprocity in the Greco-Roman world based on the principle that people were socially obliged to reward those who provided services to them (Cicero, Off. 1.47).

2.1.1. Ἐχθρις As a Verbal Reference to Divine Benefactions and Human Gratitude

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2 One of the seven basic commands associated with the cult of Apollo at Delphi, clearly stated: χάριν ἀποδός (“return a gift”—Syll. III 1268 I, 14). Graeco-Roman reciprocity was determined mainly by benefactors’ search for χάρις καὶ δόξα (Plutarch, Them. 3.2), not by their altruistic gestures of compassion for the poor. In turn, beneficiaries constantly strived to rid themselves of these reciprocal obligations by returning gifts of adequate value (= balanced reciprocity) or more value than the original gifts (= agonistic reciprocity), so as to place their benefactors in their debt once again (cf. Arrian, Epict. diss. II.9.12).