The noun “pity” occurs only once in the AV of the NT (Matt. 18:33, RV “mercy”), and once in RV (James 5:11). The adjective “pitiful” occurs in AV (James 5:11 and 1 Pet. 3:8, RV “tender-hearted”). The Greek equivalents for these words are ἐλεεῖν (ἐλεαῖν), εὐσπλαγχνος, πολύσπλαγχνος. The word “compassion” is of much more frequent occurrence, being represented in the following 21 passages of the two versions: Matt. 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 18:27, 20:34, Mark 1:41, 5:19 (RV “mercy”), 6:34, 8:2, 9:22, Luke 7:13, 10:33, 15:20, Rom. 9:15, Phil. 2:1 (AV “mercies”), Col. 3:12 (AV “mercies”), Heb. 5:2 (RV “bear gently”), 10:28 (AV “mercy”), 10:34, 1 John 3:17 (AV “bowels”), Jude 22 (RV “mercy”). The adjective form “compassionate” occurs in 1 Pet. 3:8 (AV “having compassion”). The Greek words corresponding to these are σπλαγχνα, σπλαγχνιζοσθαι, οὐκτερεῖν, οὐκτιρμος, ἐλεεῖν (ἐλεαῖν), συμπαθεῖν, μετριοπαθεῖν. It should be noted that the noun σπλαγχνα is found in the original with different translations in the following cases: Luke 1:78 (“tender mercy”), 2 Cor. 6:12 (AV “bowels,” RV “affections”), Phil. 1:8 (AV “bowels,” RV “tender mercies”), Philemon 7, 12, 20 (AV “bowels,” RV “heart”). The noun οὐκτιρμος occurs in Rom. 12:1 (“mercies”), 2 Cor. 1:3 (“mercies”), the adjective οὐκτιρμών in James 5:11 (RV “merciful,” AV “of tender mercy”). ἐλεεῖν and ἐλεός occur numerous times with the standing translation “to have mercy,” “mercy.” συμπαθεῖν occurs in Heb. 4:15 (“to be touched with the feeling of”).

Of these several Greek words μετριοπαθεῖν may be left out of account, since in the one passage where it occurs (Heb. 5:2) it has nothing to do with compassion It signifies literally “to have a medium-emotion.” While this may be in contrast to utter lack of sympathy, the context in our passage compels us to understand it in contrast to excess of indignation against sin. Hence RV has the correct rendering “who can bear gently,” whereas AV, “who can have compassion,” translates the word as if it were equivalent to συμπαθεῖν.

The other words are distinguished in their meaning as follows: σπλαγχνιζοσθαι is from σπλαγχνα = the viscera nobilia of the chest (heart, lungs, liver, spleen). This word denoted in classical Greek the seat of all violent passions, and the passions themselves, but the Hebrew בִּיבָאנ for which the LXX σπλαγχνα is the equivalent, stands only sensu bono for the seat of the tender affections and then for the affections themselves. Both in classical and in biblical Greek, therefore, σπλαγχνα covers more than “compassion.” Tittmann (de Synonymis in Novo Testamento, p. 68) is quite correct in claiming this wider sense for Luke 1:78 and Col. 3:12, where σπλαγχνα is the generic concept, which is more specifically determined by the genitives ἐλεοῦς and οὐκτιρμῶν. We may add Phil. 2:1, where σπλαγχνα and οὐκτιρμος are coordinated (“bowels and mercies”). σπλαγχνα is also used in a general sense in 2 Cor. 6:12, 7:15, Philemon 7, 12, 20. The verb σπλαγχνιζοσθαι seems to be a coinage of the later Greek. It does not even occur in the LXX except in the active form σπλαγχνιζεν in 2 Mac. 6:8 = “to eat the inwards.” Its specific sense in the NT is that of a strong inward movement of sympathetic feeling aroused by the sight of misery. The notion of intentness upon affording relief remains in the background, much more so than in ἐλεεῖν. From this strong emotional coloring of the word is to be explained the fact that in the Gospels it does not occur in the appeals addressed by suffering persons or their friends to Jesus, except in Mark 9:22, where the critical nature of the case necessitates an appeal to the profoundest compassion of Jesus. In ordinary cases the appeal naturally employs the word in which the impulse to help is most clearly connoted, and this is ἐλεεῖν. To express the strength
and inward character of the feeling the English versions often render “to be moved with compassion,”
but neither AV nor RV consistently (cf. the two versions in Matt. 20:34 and Mark 6:34). The verb is
predicated both of God (Jesus) and of man. Its object is not merely physical but also spiritual distress
(cf. Mark 6:34, Matt. 9:36 with 14:14). εἰλεμεν and εἰλεός are distinguished from σπλαγχνίζεσθαι by
the implication of the intent to help. The same difference exists between εἰλεμεν and οὐκέτιρεν, the
latter being the word that in classical Greek comes closest to σπλαγχνίζεσθαι. So far as the element
of feeling is concerned, both σπλαγχνίζεσθαι and οὐκέτιρεν are stronger words than εἰλεμεν.
οὐκέτιρεν is connected with οὐ and οὐκτάς and denotes such sympathetic feeling as seeks expression
in tears and lamentation. On the other hand, εἰλεμεν, being connected with ἱλας, ἱλασκοθάλαι, is
the stronger word, so far as the impulse and readiness to afford relief require expression. A criminal
begs εἰλός of his judge, whereas hopeless suffering can be the object of οὐκτίρμος (cf. Grimm-Thayer,
1890, p. 203). This is, however, a valid distinction between εἰλεμεν and οὐκέτιρεν for classical Greek
only. In biblical Greek it scarcely holds true that οὐκέτιρεν carries no implication of the intent to
help. In the LXX it is not seldom equivalent to εἰλεμεν in this respect (cf. Ps. 102:13, 14). For the NT
οὐκέτιρεν is almost a negligible quantity, the verb occurring only in Rom. 9:15 (= Ex. 33:19). It is

That εἰλός, notwithstanding its strong practical connotation, has none the less a rich ideal content
appears from its frequent equivalence to ὑπαρξία, “loving-kindness.” It is not bare pity aroused by
the sight of misery, but has a background of antecedent love and affection. In this respect it also
differs from οὐκέτιρεν, which in the LXX stands usually for σπλαγχνίζεσθαι. This feature is of importance
soteriologically. Trench (Synonyms of the NT, pp. 166-171) represents the εἰλός as preceding the χάρις
in the movement of the Divine mind towards the sinner, whereas in the order of manifestation
the χάρις would come first. This overlooks the association of εἰλός with τὸ ὑπάρχοντα. The word was not
colorless but had acquired from τὸ ὑπάρχοντα the sense of pity inspired by affection. Inasmuch as the same
element of affection is present in χάρις likewise, the latter also can be said to underlie the εἰλός
(cf. Eph. 2:4: God is rich in εἰλός διὰ τὴν πόλιν ἁγαθοῦν). The order in the epistolary salutations
(χάρις καὶ εἰλός) is therefore not merely the order of manifestation, but also a reflex of the order in
the Divine mind (1 Tim. 1:2, 2 Tim. 1:2, 2 John 3). As in the case of σπλαγχνίζεσθαι so with εἰλεμεν,
the exciting cause can be spiritual distress as well as physical. Heine (Synonymik des neust. Griechisch,
p. 82) observes that εἰλέος cannot have reference to sin. It would be more accurate to say that εἰλός
has no reference to sin as such, but can have reference to sin in its aspect of misery, as is proved by
Matt. 5:7 (εἰλεμένοντα, eschatologically) 18:33 (with parabolic allusion to God’s forgiveness), Rom.
9:15, 16, 18, 11:30, 31, 32, 2 Cor. 4:1, 1 Tim. 1:13, 16, 1 Pet. 2:10. Particularly in the Epistle to the
Hebrews the “sympathy” of Christ has primary reference not to the suffering of believers in itself,
but to the suffering in its moral aspect as exposing to temptation, whence also its first effect is the
shielding from sin or the propitiation of sin: 2:17, 18 (“a merciful . . . high priest to propitiate the
sins of the people”) 4:15, 16 (“that we may obtain mercy and grace”) 5:8, 9 (sympathetic appreciation
of the nature of obedience on Christ’s part for the benefit of those who have to obey). Wherever
εἰλέος is applied to spiritual salvation the aspect of sin as misery inevitably enters into the conception,
and with this the further idea of the unworthiness of the recipient and the gracious character of the
Divine mercy. It is perhaps different, as regards the latter element, in the miracles of the Gospels.
Here the question may be raised, whether the regular translation by “mercy” does not unduly suggest
the moral worthiness of those who were helped, and whether “pity” would not more faithfully
reproduce the associations of the original.